

defence of summitry: Here's what will, or will not, happen when the world's most powerful men gather in the hills of Alberta.

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The leaders of eight leading industrialized democracies begin their annual Summit in Kananaskis, Alta., tomorrow, with Canada as the host. Much ink and many digits (but hopefully not blood) will be used to explain or complain about what is going on. Some will say the G8 is too powerful; some will say it is totally ineffectual. Both cannot be true. What follows is a brief guide to summit mythology.

Myth 1: Summits are a waste of time. Most summits provide an essential catalyst to international action. That is certainly true of the G8. The fact that summits are on the diaries of important political leaders and must be perceived as successes by them and their advisers puts pressure on ministers and bureaucrats alike to reach agreements on contentious, but important, matters such as money-laundering. If last year's G8 summit in Genoa had not picked up on the New Partnership for African Development, and if Prime Minister Jean Chretien had not driven it forward this year, it is highly unlikely there would be the current degree of interest in the African plan.

Myth 2: Summits only produce words (and photos), but no action. This was a concern in the lead-up to the last G7/8 summit that Canada hosted in Halifax in 1995. We started a process among the personal representatives, known as sherpas, when we organized a post-summit meeting to follow up on all of the decisions taken in Halifax. We agreed on a major effort to close the Chernobyl nuclear reactor and make it safe. Ministers and officials are deeply engaged throughout the year to further co-operative activities agreed to at summits.

Myth 3: Governments are wasting money on excessively lavish productions. While the Kananaskis Summit will cost an estimated \$300 million, most of the money will go into security which, unfortunately, is needed because of those who are determined to prevent the meeting from taking place. You can't blame government for this.

Myth 4: There are altogether too many summits. The world is becoming an increasingly interdependent place. That interdependence needs to be managed, both at the regional and the global level. Busy leaders understand this and would not otherwise waste their time attending such meetings.

Some meetings are more important than others, with the G8 at the top. Typically, leaders spend considerable time talking about global challenges such as climate change, the spread of infectious diseases and the globalization of trans-national organized crime. They talk about what needs to be done and how to get things moving. This is no bad thing. They also spend time discussing how the institutions of global governance could be improved, but know that other countries need to be involved before any decisions can be made.

Myth 5: Canada has no influence with the bigger players. As host, Canada has very substantial influence over the setting of the agenda and over which decisions are reached at the G8 summit. There is a deference to the host country. We are good at bringing together a consensus on issues. The leadership Canada has shown this year on Africa is a good example. Statesmanship, friendly persuasion and cajoling all have their place.

Myth 6: Domestic political problems can make leaders lame ducks. On the contrary, the G8 leaders, all of whom are elected and know a lot about political infighting, have a natural sympathy for each other's plight. They become friends as well as colleagues. They use first names. They constitute something of a mutual support system. And the fact they become friends can be of enormous importance, for example in the relationship that developed between former Russian president Boris Yeltsin and then-U.S. president Bill Clinton, and the one that is developing between Russia's Vladimir Putin and the U.S.'s George W. Bush. Those relationships have helped turn the Cold War into a burgeoning partnership.

Myth 7: All is well with civil society. There are many people who have legitimate concerns about the form globalization is taking and believe it needs to be shaped so that more people benefit. They also worry about the impact on the environment. They aren't wrong. People should listen, including governments.

That is not to say that when civil society speaks, it does not also have its problems of transparency, participation and accountability. Unfortunately, there will always be hooligans and anarchists who will need to be stopped and arrested by the police. The problem is that more has not been done to separate them from the much larger numbers who want genuine dialogue or just want to be heard and seen protesting. We do live in democracies, after all.

Myth 8: The leaders are not sufficiently representative and don't respond to change. The eight government heads have no illusion that they speak for anybody other than themselves. They don't pretend to represent anybody other than their own countries. They have a legitimate right to talk to each other. Membership does change and has quite recently, with Russia being effectively a full member for everything but the international financial discussions which, in any event, occur largely at the level of finance ministers.

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