

Dr Gordon Smith talks about the June G7/8 Summit in Kananaskis

It is important to understand that the agenda for Kananaskis has effectively already been set, barring a major international crisis. The three main subjects of discussion will be:

- The global war on terrorism
- The need to adopt policies to support renewed growth in the global economy
- Africa

On the war on terrorism, it is likely that there will be a contentious discussion concerning the desire of President Bush to extend that war to those in “the axis of evil” who want to develop weapons of mass destruction. Iraq will be particularly neuralgic.

On Africa, there is a concerted effort to respond to the economic plan put forward by African leaders (NEPAD). This has involved an unprecedented device – the creation of African Personal Representatives by G8 leaders. Although in Canada’s case the APR is also the Personal Representative of the Prime Minister that is not the case for any of the other G8 countries. It remains to be seen how the two preparatory streams of work will be integrated.

When the Halifax Summit took place, the major criticism at the time was that, for all the expense and hoopla, there was not much tangible that happened – in other words some argued Summits were a waste of time and money. Now the major criticism of the Summits is that they do too much that G8 leaders try to run the world in general and international institutions in particular.

Have Summits suddenly become that much more important (for better or for worse, depending on where you are coming from)? This is doubtful. I begin with the premise that in our increasingly interdependent world, we need governance. Indeed we need better governance. We are not going to have anything that could be described global government for a long, long time, if ever. So we need a variety of mechanisms of which the G8 is now one of the most important to manage our interdependence.

One must surely measure Summits by their impact, in other words by what happened which would not have happened had not the Summit occurred. Of course, everything does not happen at the Summit itself. It is the preparatory process that has been critical. By the time leaders come together, most of the tough decisions have been made. But that is not to say that the leaders getting together do not matter. It is the fact that they will meet that forces decisions from the preparatory process. If the meeting was not going to take place, the pressure to arrive at consensus would evaporate.

Perhaps the most important innovation made at Halifax (or actually after Halifax) was the compilation of all the commitments made at the meeting and a systematic follow-up. This resulted in the initiation of post-Summit meetings of Sherpas in the Fall to review progress. This was truly an important innovation, and addressed the critical issue of whether these meetings were just interesting discussions, lots of photos and long, boring communiqués or something more.

It is hard for those who have not had the privilege of “being there” to appreciate the importance of the chemistry being established by these key leaders getting to know each other better. This facilitates an enormously important process of communication amongst leaders. The fact of including Russia – and Canada here played a leading role - was very important to the development of closer relations between that country and the West (including Japan for these purposes in the West). Russia felt less excluded as a result.

Real progress has been made in including other countries in the lead-up. Inviting heads of international institutions has been a positive development. But the talk about reaching out more to civil society has been essentially that – talk. That is too bad as one can anticipate major demonstrations in June this year. Many of those present are really looking for better ways of being heard, of feeling that their point of view matters. It is important that they be heard, if only (and there are other important, positive, reasons) so that when the inevitable confrontations come with those who really just want to break up the meeting, it is clear to all that G8 leaders and those around them were truly open to inputs from that large majority of civil society that is motivated by the desire to make the world a better place

Gordon Smith