A Summit of Pride and Influence?
Canada and the Gleneagles G8

Cover Story by John Kirton

Can we really develop Africa, control climate change, stop nuclear proliferation and produce secure, sustainable development for all in the world? The United Nations will take its best shot in September, when the leaders of its almost 200 members assemble in New York to figure out how to meet their currently unattainable Millennium Development Goals. But their success will depend critically on the work of a smaller, more select Summit taking place sooner. On July 6-8 the leaders of the world’s major democracies gather in Gleneagles, Scotland, for their annual Group of Eight (G8) meeting, together with some carefully chosen developing country guests.

How Canada performs at Gleneagles on these issues matters. It could do much to determine the future of global sustainable development and Canada’s influence in protecting its national interests and values.

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The G8 has produced some striking successes since the leaders of France, the United States, Britain, Germany, Japan and Italy gathered for their first summit taking place sooner. On July 6-8 the leaders of the world’s major democracies gather in Gleneagles, Scotland, for their annual Group of Eight (G8) meeting, together with some carefully chosen developing country guests.

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The G8 has produced some striking successes since the leaders of France, the United States, Britain, Germany, Japan and Italy gathered for their first annual encounter in November 1975. Since their first appearance in 1976, Canadian leaders have made an important contribution on issues close to the Canadian soul. North-South dialogue was advanced by Pierre Trudeau as host at Montebello, Quebec, in 1981.

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Highlights of This Issue

Bush will arrive self-confidently sporting the G8’s strongest currency and growth rate, the biggest new electoral victory and the glow of hosting a productive G8 Summit at Sea Island, Georgia, last year. Bolstered by recent triumphs for democracy in Ukraine and Georgia, Bush could well want the G8 to stay focused on his Sea Island crusade of bringing freedom to the broader Middle East. Iran’s nuclear sabre-rattling or more Middle East terrorism might also bring back the divisive ghost of Iraq.

Still, Bush owes one to Blair, Italy’s Berlusconi and Japan’s Koizumi, who also put boots on the ground in Iraq and who are committed to promoting sustainable development. So much of Bush’s Christian evangelical base, which wants to stop genocide in Darfur and the rapacious exploitation of an earth that they feel belongs to God, not man. Bush himself knows that poverty in Africa can breed terrorism against America. He also knows that he needs a coordinated program of international energy conservation to control America’s rising energy insecurity, gas prices, inflationary pressures and current account deficit. While some of his ideologues may dream of turning Saudi leaders, pre-occupied with their own domestic political and national unity distractions, should remember two things. First, Canadians care deeply about Africa, the world’s only other region that has become poorer in the last generation) and climate change, caused by greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Blair has stubbornly stuck with this agenda, set aggressive but achievable objectives, created an influential African Commission to push his case, mounted an intense schedule of lead-up G8 ministerial meetings and bilateral summit visits, and invited the right developing countries, notably China, India, Mexico, Brazil and South Africa, to G8s as guests. The British have also consulted intensively with civil society, in part through the session held by British sherpa, Sir Michael Jay, and Canadian sherpa, Peter Harder, at the Munk Centre on April 8th (see webcast at www.g8.utoronto.ca).

Bush: A potential wild card

Yet if Blair is to succeed, he must bring on board the G8’s leading sustainable development skeptic, American president George W. Bush. cancels the G8 into a secure petro-democracy, as a realist Texas oilman, Bush knows that supply-side solutions lie more in the barrels-in-hand in Canada, Russia, Mexico, and Nigeria, whose leaders are all conveniently assembled at the Gleneagles G8.

An Agenda for Canada

To bring Bush and his G8 friends together politically, Canada should act fast. Canada’s political week. Canadians expect their leaders to deliver at the G8 Summit the global public goods that reflect Canada’s national interests and its distinctive national values of democratic multiculturalism, global environmental protection and nuclear non-proliferation.

To forward these values at Gleneagles, Canada needs better policies than those its International Policy Statement proclaimed. On development, Canada should turn the G8 from fruitless debates about pledging 0.7 percent of GDP to official development assistance at some distant date and toward delivering more money now to support good governance, private sector development and trade liberalization with recipients committed to making international assistance work. It should also offer far more than the “responsibility to protect” principle, backed by 100 or so unarmed Canadian military observers, to stop the genocide in Darfur. On global environmental protection in the post-Kyoto era, Canada should impose an initial one-dollar a ticket “sustainable departure” tax on all international airline passenger flights leaving Canada, and pioneer a new World Environmental Organization to promote sustainable development as an integrated whole. To combat nuclear proliferation, and a now obsolete culture of nuclear deterrence, Canada should support permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council for Japan and Germany, fellow G8 democracies that are the world’s second- and third-ranked powers and that share the anti-nuclear sustainable development values so close to Canadians’ hearts. If the government puts its mind to it, Canada could actually produce, rather than merely proclaim, a foreign policy of pride and influence, with a Gleneagles performance as the first step.

Professor John Kirton is Director of the G8 Research Group, a global network of scholars, students and professionals founded at the Centre for International Studies when Canada hosted the G7 Summit in 1988.