The future of the G8

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With greater participation, a more structured process and energetic follow-through, the G8 could become an increasingly effective centre of global governance

Seventeen years ago, at the first G8 Summit he hosted, Tony Blair introduced the greatest institutional innovation since the G7 was founded in 1975. At Birmingham in 1998, a now democratic Russia was added as a full member. The foreign and finance ministers held their own separate meetings just before the summit, rather than alongside their leaders at the summit itself. The leaders focused on a few specific issues, and freely took up others, in an informal setting all their own. Civil society, in the form of Jubilee 2000, joined them, demanding, successfully, greater debt relief for the poorest countries in the world (Hodges, Kirton, Daniels, 1999).

Since that time, the G8 and global community have faced the Asian-turned-global financial crisis and other dark sides of globalisation; deadly protests at the 2001 Genoa G8 summit; the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on North America, the divisive 2003 Iraq war; and the rapid rise of new powers such as China and India. Yet Blair’s 1998 innovations have remained essentially intact as the model for the Gleneagles Summit this year.

Not surprisingly, the effort to govern a rapidly changing world with such stay-the-course summity has led many to call for a new wave of far-reaching innovations for the G8 to thrive or even survive.

Such calls should be treated with caution, as Blair’s Birmingham model has allowed the G8 summit and system to flourish as an effective centre of global governance. This model provides a firm foundation for the more modest improvements required to strengthen summit performance in the years ahead.

The G8 comes of age

The Birmingham innovations reinforced the G8’s unique character as a concert of all the democratic major powers, where democratically elected leaders are free to address any issue to further the group’s core mission of promoting open democracy, individual liberty and social advance everywhere in the world. Since 1998, the summit has set new records in media and public attention, enabling leaders to use it more thoroughly to manage their political priorities at home. The leaders’ deliberations have expanded to embrace a vast array of subjects, as the summit has become an important source of domestic and global governance alike (Fratanni, Kirton, Rugman, and Savona, 2005).

The summit has set bold new normative directions for the global community, initiating war against Yugoslavia to prevent genocide in Kosovo, and bringing the democratic revolution to Africa and the Middle East. Its specific decisions have grown in ambition and more than doubled in number from an annual average of 54 before Birmingham to 133 since.

These decisions on paper have been delivered in practice, as subsequent compliance by G8 members with their summit commitments has risen to historic highs. The summit has become a great global fundraiser, mobilising US$50 billion in new money for development and security at Kananaskis, Canada in 2002. The summit has developed new institutions for global governance,
through ministerial bodies for energy, labour, health and development, and three dozen official-level bodies to deal with a wide range of concerns. It is not surprising that the summits starting at Birmingham have been awarded the highest grades ever on a sustained basis during the summit’s 30-year life (Bayne, 2005).

Mission and membership
With this proven performance, the summit in the coming years is unlikely to move to a minimalist model, where fewer members and participants deliberate less frequently on fewer subjects, while the real centre of global governance moves elsewhere. Nor is the G8 likely to leap to a maximalist model, in which ever more members, participants, matters and meetings lead the G8 to acquire a formal charter, legal rules of procedure, and an international bureaucracy of its own. Rather, the G8 is likely to continue in middle-of-the-road fashion as an exclusive, flexible concert, driven by the democratically elected leaders of major powers, and designed to engender good governance in the world.

In part this is because virtually all the same leaders have been coming to the summit since 2001 and, despite their policy differences, have grown attached to one another and to their summit club. Even a once sceptical George Bush learned at the Sea Island summit he hosted last year how to make the G8 summit work for America and for him.

The G8’s mission is therefore likely to remain the securing of the global democratic revolution, in the old areas of the former Soviet Union and the newer areas of Africa and the Middle East, now liberated from the Cold War’s harsh confines. Indeed, as host in 2006, Russia is likely to continue to give attention to the Middle East and Africa. Russia will look for creative ways to use its summit to strengthen democracy, liberty and society within Russia, in the Commonwealth of Independent States, and in states along its southern borders through to Afghanistan. The great challenge for future G8s will be to bring the democratic revolution to the many places in mainland Asia where Cold War-style authoritarianism still prevails.

Membership and participation in the summit will and should remain small and selective, and ad hoc participation should follow the subject-specific variable architecture employed since 2001.

The leading candidate to slowly secure full membership is India. As one of the world’s most durable democracies and an emerging major power, India could play a critical role in bringing open democracy based on linguistic and religious diversity to Asia and the world. India will be coming to its third summit in 2005, and should be invited back in future years. In 2006, Russia’s former partners to its south will be the preferred guests, while those in the Middle East who are now democratising also have a strong claim. Such a slowly expanding permanent membership and flexible participation gives the G8 greater legitimacy and effectiveness than the frozen and fixed formulae employed by the United Nations Security Council and the executive boards of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Especially if reinforced by a broader annual gathering of the leaders of the Group of 20 systemically important countries, the G8 could serve as an effective centre of 21st century global governance, particularly if the heavily bureaucratic hard law bodies born in 1944-5 and based on older designs prove unable fundamentally to change (Cooper, English and Thakur, 2005).

Outreach and follow-through
Institutionally, the summit will and should continue to thicken. The financial crisis of 1998 and the terrorist attacks of 2001 prompted the G8 leaders to act collectively by issuing special statements of reassurance. Similar crises could again lead to such collective action, or even to special inter-sessional summits similar to those held in 1985 and 1996. While there are now regular forums for most ministers of G8 governments and G8 meetings that combine different ministers as the need requires, there remains a requirement for ministers of defence and agriculture to hold discrete ministerial meetings of their
own, and for new G8 ministerial bodies that include outsiders to deal with vital issues such as climate change and infectious disease. Official level bodies should be encouraged to proliferate, but with ever greater participation by outside governments, international organisations and civil society experts, and with a more structured process for being directed by, and reporting to, the G8 leaders themselves. And the G8 will and should continue to avoid the heavy burden of managing an international bureaucracy that, even as a small secretariat, would confine and alienate democratically elected leaders from an institution they properly and precisely value as their own.

To enable G8 leaders to act as real leaders, while accommodating the expanding array of outside guests and civil society representatives, the annual summit should be longer. It should include ample time for leaders to be alone together to discuss and decide, informally and spontaneously, anything they want. But as democratic leaders devoted to transparency and accountability, they have a duty to tell their citizens and others what they and others acting for them have discussed and decided. They should therefore continue to expand the lengthy documentation produced at each summit, but in doing so better specify the targets, timetables, implementing agents, reporting mechanisms and resources required to put their wishes into effect.

As an increasingly effective centre of global and domestic governance, uniquely delivered by democratic leaders and devoted to open democracy, the G8 needs to do much more to involve its legislative and judicial branches, media and citizens in its work. The annual meeting of the speakers of G8 parliaments begun in 2002 should be expanded to involve many more legislators at both the federal and regional levels. G8 judiciaries could usefully meet collectively to deal with issues now central to the G8, such as corruption, transnational crime, and civil liberties in a terrorist age.

The media should be encouraged to cover the G8 in detail, not only at the annual summit, but in the work the G8 now does every day of the year. Business, labour, and broadly representative non-governmental organisations should have a more prominent and permanent place in G8 governance, as they do in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the International Labour Organisation, the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation forum, and the regional institutions where G8 members regularly meet. Such civil society stakeholders should come together with professional experts and G8 governors regularly to monitor whether the directions set and decisions taken by the leaders each year are actually being implemented, and to determine what better mechanisms could be devised within a now more open and democratic global society to deliver better global governance for the world as a whole.

www.g8.utoronto.ca

References
Pre-G8 Summit Conference – Development, Sustainability and Finance: the Role of the G8 and the Gleneagles Summit, Kelvin Gallery, University of Glasgow, 29-30 June 2005. For more details go to: www.g8.utoronto.ca/conferences or email g8@utoronto.ca