

Get with it, G8 - admit 'second class' guests

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It was not that long ago that many private clubs had a "ladies' entrance." "Gentlemen" went in the front door and "ladies" were directed to a side door. Of course, there were also those clubs that didn't permit women at all, or only for special occasions. And then there were sometimes separate dining rooms for "the ladies." It seems a long time ago.

At the G8 summit in Italy, we witnessed something similar. Once again, the leaders of key countries, including China and India, were excluded from the main event. Even the nomenclature (the Group of Eight) rubs it in. China and India (and others) are invited in selectively. This must stop. As South Africa's Thabo Mbeki said two years ago, "We can't be put in a situation where we are asked to join in the dessert and miss the main meal." Nonetheless, this practice goes on.

It is time to change the membership rules and the resulting architecture. If we want China and India to co-operate in responding to the international financial crisis and to contribute to reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, they have to be full members of the club and not be treated as second-class citizens.

It is imperative for Canada to have a clear sense of how summits should be reorganized. Canada plays host to the next G8 summit, in Huntsville, Ont., in 2010. It has been widely recognized by many, including Prime Minister Stephen Harper, that the musical-chairs approach followed this year is inadequate. President Barack Obama has indicated that he favours fewer summits with the G8 remaining as the core group, an approach Mr. Harper shares.

The logic and the psychology of this approach must be questioned. The G8 was supposed to be a group of the leading industrialized democracies - the like-minded. So what is Russia doing as a member? Is it more like-minded than others who are not members? Why is the world's largest democracy, India, not included in the core group? Why is China, which has much more economic clout than most G8 members, excluded?

There are several possibilities for the future of summitry. That there will be rationalization is certain. The question is when and how.

One possibility is that the G20 will become *the* summit that matters; in fact, this is arguably already the case. There are, however, problems with the large number of people that were around the London table in April. More than 20 countries were invited to this summit. This set a precedent - and not a good one, if the objective is to have an intimate discussion among leaders.

A second possibility, one advocated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, is that the G8 mutate into a G14 by adding the G5 (China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa), plus Egypt (it being important to have at least one predominantly Muslim country). Italy's Silvio Berlusconi seems to share this view.

A third possibility, perhaps driven by the need to reduce the excessive numbers of Europeans around the table and the desire to limit the total numbers so as to ensure the highest quality discussion, would be to begin with a *tabula rasa*. This has been suggested by Forbes magazine, the Financial Times and a number of researchers in think tanks around the world. Think tanks in the U.S. have also been examining "objective criteria" for summit participation. If a new group were constituted of 10 or fewer, reflecting the contemporary distribution of global power - that is, who actually needs to be at the table to break specific global deadlocks - Canada is not likely to make the cut.

Canada plays host to the next G8 meeting in one year's time. This is a great opportunity. Mr. Harper has already suggested that Canada will not repeat the L'Aquila experience beginning with eight countries, then going to 14, then 17, then inviting in African leaders. Good.

What kind of message would we sending by excluding the G5 countries and Egypt from the inner sanctum? It makes much more sense to have everyone who counts entering through the main door – as full members of the global steering group. The only real issue - and it is a complex one - is whether this is best done at 14 or at 20.

The time has come to enlarge the summit, and Canada should take the lead. As the next G8 host, it is our responsibility to do so. As Canadians, it is vital to safeguard our national interests by developing a co-operative strategy to devise a more inclusive summit structure. We must continue to be at the table where key global decisions are made.

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