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How to build a better brains-trust
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In major foreign-policy speeches in Washington and Montreal, Prime Minister Paul Martin proposed creating a new group of 20 countries (G20) at the heads-of-government level as the forum of choice for tackling pressing global problems.

Although initial Canadian press reports interpreted this as a veiled retrenchment from Canada's historically strong support for the United Nations, it is better viewed as a way to enlarge the G8 grouping (Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States) by co-opting such major economic players as Australia, China, India, Indonesia, South Africa, South Korea, Mexico and Brazil.

The central challenge of global governance is a double disconnect. First, there's a disconnect between the distribution of hard and soft power in the real world, on the one hand, and the distribution of decision-making authority in the existing intergovernmental institutions on the other.

Secondly, there is a disconnect between the numbers and types of actors playing ever-expanding roles in civil, political and economic affairs within and among nations, and the concentration of decision-making authority in intergovernmental institutions. In turn, this has provoked a double crisis of legitimacy.

Legitimacy is the conceptual rod that connects power to authority, so the circuit is broken when power and decision-making authority diverge. As regards the second disconnect, legitimacy is the conceptual rod that grounds the exercise of power by public authorities in the consent of the people, so the circuit is broken with the growing gulf between the will of the people and the actions of governments.

Even the UN Security Council fails to pass the test of legitimacy on some dimensions, such as constitutional, representational, procedural and performance legitimacy. Western countries are more concerned with performance woes, while developing countries focus more on lack of representation, transparency and accountability.

The G8 fails the tests of legitimacy on representativeness, consistency, transparency and accountability. As the collapsed trade talks at Cancun showed, Brazil, China and India acting in concert in world negotiations form a powerful bloc that can no longer be ignored. Drawing them into a new summit grouping that bridges the North-South divide would serve also to make them more responsible and responsive.

The question is: Can the G8, enlarged into a new G20, provide a solution as a new, important pillar of institutionalized multilateralism? If so, should it be situated within the existing architecture of global governance that comprises the UN system, the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the IMF), the G8 group, the World Economic Forum and the World Social Forum?

The legitimacy of the UN as the universal-global institution is qualified by the drag in its performance and efficiency. As for the G8's performance efficiency, to the extent that it exists, it is qualified by its legitimacy drag with regard to serious lack of representation.

The UN is too large, cumbersome and unwieldy to be efficient, with powerful centrifugal pressures overwhelming collective decision-making prospects. By contrast, the G8 is far too widely perceived as a self-anointed exclusive club of the rich and powerful. As currently constituted, the G20 is restricted to finance ministers.

One of its architects was Paul Martin when he was Canada's finance minister. Not surprisingly, now that he is PM, he wants to explore raising the G20 to heads-of-government level.

A summit-level G20 would be a better forum for framing the issues, outlining choices, making decisions; for setting, even anticipating, the agenda; for framing the rules, including for dispute settlement; for pledging and mobilizing resources; for implementing collective decisions; and for monitoring progress and recommending mid-term corrections and adjustments.

It is worth recalling that some of the crucial decisions regarding Kosovo in 1999 were made at the G8 summit in Bonn, not in the UN Security Council. And East Timor was handled in the informal corridors of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) summit in Auckland. The informality and personalized style of summit meetings among leaders who know and are comfortable with one another cannot be transplanted to the formal forum of the UN as an intergovernmental organization.

As for the composition of the proposed new G20, including members such as China, India and Brazil would be uncontroversial. Others would be marginal cases: Given the history of the past three to seven years, would it be better to have Egypt rather than Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia rather than Indonesia? We can predict tensions between efficiency and representational legitimacy; inclusiveness and intimacy-cum-informality; governmental and civil society representation, etc.

Clearly, there's a need to include those members necessary for achieving the goals of the new grouping. But what about co-opting those who could play the spoiler role or infect others by their collapse?

Here's a final problem. If a summit-level G20 were established, it would also need to guard against becoming a prisoner of its own success. As more and more countries would clamour for admission, the group would be in danger of losing focus. And, bearing in mind what has happened with permanent membership of the UN Security Council, the new group should include mechanisms from the start to identify and jettison countries that have passed their use-by dates in terms of the core criteria of membership.

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