

By GORDON SMITH
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Why is there such surprise -- or even discomfort -- when an idea whose time has come starts to get attention? Is it because it is a Canadian idea? That seems to be the case judging from recent reaction to Prime Minister Paul Martin's proposal for a group of 20 world leaders to meet periodically to help resolve global challenges. Despite the fact that there has been reported support from European leaders for such a G20, this has often not included the fact that the impetus for this has come primarily from Canada.

The origins of this idea date back to 1999, when Mr. Martin, as finance minister and with the support of then U.S. treasury secretary (and now Harvard president) Lawrence Summers, created a G20 of finance ministers. The purpose was clear: The world needed a forum that included a broader representation than the Group of Seven industrialized countries in which no developing countries participated.

For at least the past five years, Mr. Martin has argued strongly that one of the most serious challenges facing the world was the lack of effective means to manage our growing global interdependence. Developing countries needed to be included, and the benefits of globalization needed to be spread more broadly. Existing international institutions were too slow to act and too difficult to reform. Change required leadership -- from the leaders.

The Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria had already been working on improving global governance -- for example, proposing increased transparency, participation and accountability in international institutions. Almost a year ago, we partnered with the Centre for International Governance Innovation in Waterloo to host a series of meetings on this topic. Mr. Martin participated in three of them, two during his period as Prime Minister.

Support for the idea from around the world has been remarkable. Even senior representatives from China have been encouraging -- and made clear that China was definitely not interested in simply creating a G9 that would include China. Perhaps even more surprising has been the support from a number of leading U.S. commentators.

How does one go about promoting interest in the G20 idea? It is by talking about it -- exactly what the Prime Minister has been doing, most recently in Moscow and Paris. And he is having considerable success, to the point where Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and French President Jacques Chirac indicated in a recent meeting that they support the idea, albeit without mentioning its originator. You know your idea is gaining ground when others assume paternity.

Responding to the Canadian initiative, our two centres are holding a series of meetings around the world to assess its appeal.

There have already been two meetings. One was at Oxford, managed by Ngaire Woods, an expert in international economic relations. It concluded that a G20 summit would not be timely as a means of breaking the deadlock in the Doha round over agricultural trade liberalization. The second was in New York, at the Council on Foreign Relations, and was chaired by climate-change expert David Victor. The conclusion was that a G20 summit on energy and environmental security could be instrumental in launching negotiations aimed at finding an effective successor international regime in 2012 to Kyoto as a way of limiting greenhouse-gas emissions.

Future meetings will examine the challenges of infectious diseases, water issues, the linked threat of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, and international financial crises.

At each meeting, two questions are asked: What is the nature of a deal in which all leaders can say to their citizens that they have done well? Would a G20 at leaders' level help get the world closer to such a solution?

Mr. Martin is right on a number of scores. We need better means of managing our increasing global interdependence. Reform needs a catalyst. Networks of government leaders such as the G20 can help find common ground and promote solutions to some of the world's most intractable problems. China will chair the G20 finance ministers and may well call for a leaders' meeting next fall at the United Nations. The idea has sparked interest and has an increasing number of influential advocates. The G20 leaders' initiative may well become a great Canadian success story. Others may rush to claim authorship; Canadians should know they have written most of the script.

Gordon Smith, a former deputy minister of foreign affairs, is director of the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria, chairman of the International Development Research Centre and co-chair of the Canada Corps.