

# An L-20 would rise above stale debate

Paul Martin's idea of a leaders' group of 20 nations would complement, not compete, with the UN

By Peter Harder

**W**hen the United Nations was founded in San Francisco in 1945, instantaneous communication meant unreliable international telephone calls or a telegram. Speedy transportation came through cramped, tortoise-like DC-3s and international travel was not undertaken lightly. The General Assembly was marked by the schedules of large passenger steamers arriving in New York harbour, with delegates staying in New York for months at a time. The "golden age of diplomacy" relied mostly on the talents of those on the spot, and not on impulses from capitals. Most leaders rarely communicated directly with each other except during visits.

While much has changed in 60 years, the UN's dilatory working patterns have by and large remained the same, but with a membership nearly four times larger and an ideological North-South divide characterizing many General Assembly debates. The Security Council remains a crucible for collective security, but it has suffered a crisis of confidence since it deadlocked over Iraq in March 2003.

Indeed, the sense that the UN is aging not always gracefully, and is failing to pull together constructively the critical issues of development, human rights and security, led to the creation of a High-Level Panel by Secretary-General Kofi Annan in the fall of 2003 to examine a range of threats to humanity and how the UN might better respond. Capitals — particularly leaders and foreign ministers — will need to play a greater role than usual in shaping the Millennium-plus-Five Summit in September if it is to live up to its potential, implementing much of the panel's report and advancing key development goals articulated in 2000.

The General Assembly remains an important body as an umbrella under which important treaties are negotiated. UN programs and agencies often do impressive work carried out in adverse circum-

stances. But the momentum to tackle newly topical issues rarely comes from within the UN. The UN's capacity to help build international consensus on ambitious objectives generally needs to be stimulated from without, including by civil society.

This is where a relationship exists between Canada's strong commitment to the UN and Prime Minister Paul Martin's advocacy of a leader-level grouping of 20 or so countries, from North and South. This group would tackle issues too global for the industrialized G-8 to address alone.

Such key challenges include better preparation for health pandemics (avian flu, AIDS) and improved management of energy resources including in the fight against climate change, notably in booming economies such as India and China as well as in the industrialized world. Other issues, such as terrorism, can also only be tackled credibly by leaders working together.

Prime Minister Martin's inspiration for the idea dates back to his service as finance minister during the international financial upheavals of the late 1990s when he led ministers from North and South (in a Group of 20 formation on the margins of the World Bank) in stabilizing the global financial system. Facing a steep challenge, the Group of 20 performed well.

The UN's near-universal membership of 191 countries confers significant legitimacy but an L-20 — representing roughly 85 per cent of the world's population and providing a stimulus for action on emerging issues — would offer focus and coherence on key challenges.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair commendably recognized the need to include key leaders from developing countries in G-8 discussions this year, but these countries attended as guests. The G-8 demonstrated once again its usefulness at the Gleneagles summit, particularly on issues related to African development. But it is

time for countries of the North and South to move to a footing of equality in discussing important issues.

Thus, the L-20 aims neither to replace the G-8 nor supplant the UN. Rather, it aims to bring together leading countries of North and South to address new challenges and stimulate action by other existing decision-making bodies.

The High-Level Panel report, in fact, made just such a recommendation: "There still remains a need for a body that brings together key developed and developing countries to address the critical interlinkages between trade, finance, the environment, the handling of pandemic diseases, and economic and social development. To be effective, such a body must operate at the level of national leaders."

Mr. Martin, citing the report in an article in the May/June 2005 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, wrote that the "issues identified by the panel are ones that would be best addressed first by the L-20, which could then stimulate action in more universal bodies with established charters and responsibilities. Because an atmosphere of informality is central to the success of the L-20, it could work alongside the UN and other major international institutions rather than be linked to any of them."

This, in sum, is how an L-20 could contribute to reinvigorating the UN and ensuring that it rises above the stale debates that characterize so much of the work of its deliberative bodies. There is a significant need to address effectively the challenges that threaten citizens the world over. Canada will be raising the issues that would form the substantive core of such an L-20 at and on the margins of the UN Summit in September, in keeping with its long tradition of seeking to spark multilateral innovation.

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