

Suppose there was an L20 Big Idea and no one cared?
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By Jeffrey Simpson

Prime Minister Paul Martin's Big Idea will get predictably short shrift at this week's Group of Eight summit, partly because if the Big Idea ever became a full-blown reality, there would be no more G8 summits.

Mr. Martin wants to create a leaders' summit of 20 countries.

At first, he called it the G20; now, it's the L20. The notion is that most of the world's most pressing issues can't be handled effectively in the small confines of either the G8 or the unwieldy one of the United Nations. Something in-between is required, Mr. Martin has argued, as recently as the May/June issue of Foreign Affairs, the U.S. journal of international affairs.

The G8 summit gives heft to the Martin argument. Britain's Tony Blair has put two issues on the table: climate change and aid to Africa. Off to Scotland troop the G8 leaders representing only 13 per cent of the world's population but 46 per cent of the global economy.

It's hard to imagine how to discuss climate change intelligently without the presence of the new big polluters -- China and India among them -- just as it's not quite right to talk about Africa with no African leaders present. But that's the way G8 summits have to work.

The Martin idea for an L20 would include countries from areas of the world not represented in the G8, such as Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Nigeria, China and India. This is the proposed Canadian list. You can bet that, if the L20 idea ever morphed into something real, the battle would be joined about which countries should be included.

Naturally, the proposed new members are keener on the L20 idea than the members of the smaller club. The Big Idea's big problem, however, is one of definition. What would it do? What's the agenda? Can it make commitments, as the G8 has done? Who needs another talking shop? Leaders are busy enough without adding another organized conflagration to their agendas.

The Europeans all mouth nice words because they don't want to offend Canada, but they don't really like the idea. They frankly hope it will wither away -- an idea whose time never came.

The Europeans, who already spend huge amounts of time talking among themselves, can't see the point of a larger group that might be unwieldy, unfocused and, to be blunt,

less Eurocentric. Having four of the original seven G8 countries (Germany, Britain, France and Italy) gives Western Europe a wildly disproportionate amount of clout. Why dilute it?

The Bush administration is lukewarm. It's afraid -- and why not? -- that a bigger group will quickly turn into a bigger forum for knocking the world's only superpower. It's bad enough having the French and Germans in your face; think of adding six or seven more leaders playing to anti-American sentiment back home. This is an administration that prefers "coalitions of the willing" to permanent international structures.

Some support for the L20 idea circulates in the think-tank community of Washington, where mind-stretchers appreciate that world problems might benefit from a wider venue for discussion than the G8. Give the Bush administration a solid proposal for an L20 meeting on a subject of vital interest to the U.S. and maybe, just maybe, official Washington attitudes might change.

Why not, you ask, just ask a couple of other countries such as China and India to join the G8? Why not make it, say, the G10? After all, the original group of five expanded to include Canada and Italy and, more recently, Russia.

Good idea on paper, but the Chinese won't have it. They don't want to be seen as a member of a limited club of rich countries. Ditto for the Indians.

So why not hand the L20 idea over to the Chinese, egg them on to embrace it, figure out a reason for a first meeting, and have them send out the invitations. Canadian diplomats have floated the idea to the Chinese. The agenda? How about pandemics and public health, or terrorism and nuclear weapons?

The L20 Big Idea sometimes looks like an institution in search of a reason to exist. It's only being promoted by Canada, a medium-sized international player. This Big Idea needs more time and focus, and bigger patrons.

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