The value of the G7: Reflections of a Sherpa

By **Peter M. Boehm**

Peter M. Boehm was appointed to the Canadian Senate in October 2018. He has been ambassador and Deputy Minister for the G7 and G8 Summits. He also continued as the Canadian "sherpa" of several Prime Ministers especially for the Charlevoix Summit in 2018.

The G7 is an informal but prominent part of the global governance landscape. Its members are supposedly united by a set of common values – which explains, for example, why Russia no longer has a seat at the table. The G7 oversees a highly complex apparatus designed to respond to any global issue. The Charlevoix summit and the various meetings surrounding it underscored Canada's ambition to give these mechanisms new impetus and a fresh slant.

politique étrangère

This article will seek to express my profound belief in the utility, and necessity, of the G7 at a time in global history when working together and finding common ground is more important than ever to the strength of liberal democracy and to the survival of the international rules-based order. There are certainly flaws with the G7 process – there is no denying that – but, in my view, based on my three decades of summit experience, its positive impact globally and accrued benefits outweigh any negative factors. Ultimately, the G7 functions quite well as a body of influence, but it may require some adjustments to provide greater relevance in both its approaches to global issues and in its response to citizens' concerns. It is currently under some stress, for reasons that are generally emblematic of the perception of rising global inequality, often fueled by isolationist and nativist elements. Not surprisingly, I will provide a Canadian perspective, with a focus on our 2018 G7 presidency, centered on the Charlevoix Summit. It was at this summit that traditional G7 informality and unscripted interaction reached its peak when leaders, supported by their personal representatives – aka "sherpas" – came together in an animated discussion on the merits of the international rules-based order.

The G7 is a group of substantial influence: its actions can set trends, bring attention and emphasis to international issues, and identify and

work towards potential solutions. It can also act as a multiplier and influencer in other bodies, including the G20, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the OECD, the United Nations, and regional organizations.

A history

Member states of the G7 traditionally share common values central to liberal democracies: respect for the rule of law, faith in the international rules-based order, defense of human rights, and promotion of free and open markets. These core values form the basis of frank and unscripted discussions among leaders, which makes dialogue more productive and honest; in turn, outcomes can be more effective. It is this dialogue that leaders most cherish – despite the almost universal skepticism of first-time participants – and possibly the reason why the G7 summit and its related meetings have stood the test of time.

Since the inception of these summits in 1975, the group – beginning as the G6 and then the G7/8 – has met, without fail, every year. Including the 2018 Charlevoix Summit hosted by Canada – for which I was the Deputy Minister responsible and the sherpa of the Prime Minister – there have been 45 meetings of the world's advanced industrial democracies. Over time, the group has come to reflect a greater emphasis on common values that are not necessarily linked to its collective economic heft, but rather to its ability to influence approaches to global issues and to mobilize work in international institutions and funds for global initiatives. The summits have in turn spawned a veritable cottage industry of related ministerial meetings, specialized working groups and initiative-based gatherings.

When the world's leading liberal democracies, represented by each country's head of state or government, met for the first time, in 1975, at Rambouillet, France, it was as the "Group of 6". This "summit meeting" was the first in a series of annual events where leaders gathered to discuss the complex challenges and opportunities for their respective nations and the larger international community. The six industrial nations that composed the G6 were France, the United States, Britain, Germany, Japan, and Italy. At the next summit, in 1976 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the addition of Canada gave us the G7.

It was thanks in large part to the insistence of then US President Gerald Ford that Canada was included in 1976 (and indefinitely), that Canada has been a proud and contributing member of the G7 for 43 years and

counting. In that time, including the 2018 summit in Charlevoix, Canada has hosted six G7 summits: 1981 in Ottawa-Montebello, 1988 in Toronto, 1995 in Halifax, 2002 in Kananaskis, and 2010 in Muskoka.

In 1977, in London, what was then called the European Community was invited to attend the summit for the first time; its successor, the European Union, has been an important ally ever since. In 1998 in Birmingham, after seven years of various levels of participation from Russia, the G7 became the G8 when Russia participated fully – in all economic and financial matters – for the first time. Russia became a full member of the group when it was announced, in 2002, that it would host the 2006 G8 Summit in St. Petersburg.

In 2014, Russia was set to host its second summit, in Sochi. I attended the first and only sherpa meeting for this event in Moscow in February 2014. However, the country's incursion into Crimea resulted in the leaders of the other seven countries meeting on the margins of a Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague in March of that year. It was from that meeting that they issued a declaration affirming Ukraine's sovereignty, and announced their intention to meet as the G7 in Brussels in June on the original dates planned for Sochi. Russia was not expelled outright; the door was left open for a potential readmission of Russia in the future, should it change course on Ukraine. Economic sanctions, a lack of progress on the Minsk agreements, as well as Russian comfort with the status quo (it cited the G20 as a more representative group) has led to five summits without Russia, beginning in 2014. Calls since then for Russia to be invited back to the table initially came from only one G7 leader: President Donald Trump (without prior consultation with other members). In expressing this sentiment, he was followed – on Twitter – by Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. Other countries have come forward over the past two years in private discussions to press for membership in the G7, whether for reasons of geographic and economic balance or more probably for reasons of aggrandizement. Such efforts have not been countenanced; the G20 already accommodates most and has both a different role and methodology.

An informal global governance

The G7 remains an informal group of global governance. Unlike most multilateral international institutions, such as the United Nations, it does not have a charter to guide its work, does not have a common secretariat for coordination, and does not make decisions through voting. Its procedures have developed over time and are not particularly arcane.

Rather, outcomes and communiqués of leaders' and ministerial meetings are based on consensus. While this route is much more practical in a body of seven members (plus the European Union) than in one of 193 as is the case with the United Nations, decision by consensus in even a small group can have its pros and cons.

The pros and cons of consensus

Chief among the benefits of consensus decision-making is the demonstration of one strong voice, with members unified in their identification of priorities and in their commitment to achieving outcomes. It means that, even if there was opposition to an idea, negotiation took place, compromise was offered, and consensus achieved. This process and its outcomes can send a very powerful policy signal to the world. Such was the case with the approach to the global sovereign debt crisis in 2008/9 and the decision to censure Russia through loss of its G8 membership over its incursion into Crimea. Having one voice is especially important now, in an increasingly globalized and fractured world. It is critical that the most vulnerable people and communities – those for whom the G7 can have the biggest impact – have confidence in the group and in its desire to work together to effect real and meaningful change.

Examples of positive outcomes resulting from this consensus approach are far-ranging. They include: the creation in 1989 of the Financial Action Task Force; the Chernobyl Shelter Fund of 1997 (still active); endorsement of the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria in 2001; the 2002 Global Partnership for Education and, in the same year, the African Action Plan and the Global Partnership against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction; the 2009 L'Aquila Global Food Security Initiative, which pledged $22 billion USD to respond to the food security crisis in the 2000s that led in part to the Arab Spring; the 2010 Muskoka Initiative on Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health; in 2014, support for Ukraine, its sovereignty, and its people after Russia's invasion of Crimea; commitments to pledge support for the Paris Agreement on Climate Change in 2015; the Pandemic Emergency Financing Facility of 2016, the impetus for which was the devastating Ebola outbreak in West Africa; and, in 2018 at Charlevoix, developing the Blueprint for Healthy Oceans, Seas and Resilient Coastal Communities, as well as labor issues, including when the Common Vision for the Future of Artificial Intelligence was conceived in the context of preparing for jobs of the future.

As with all things developed in a group environment, agreement by consensus can have its flaws. The single greatest downside of using this method in a body like the G7 is that one uncooperative member can spoil

desired outcomes worked toward and advocated for by the rest. This was the case most recently in Taormina in 2017 and Charlevoix last year when the United States, at the eleventh hour, would not join consensus on climate change, had difficulties with references to protectionism and sustainable development, and questioned – publicly no less – the utility of supporting the international rules-based order. Regarding this last point, the Americans did however agree to demonstrate their support in the communiqué following an impromptu discussion amongst leaders. Attempting to break consensus *ex post facto* following the release of the Charlevoix Summit documents by using Twitter to demonstrate pique directed at the host was also a new, not to mention unwelcome, phenomenon. Another example of an unusual approach dictated by circumstances was the result of the G7 Finance Ministers' Meeting last year where this traditionally like-minded group (at six plus the EU) issued an unprecedented condemnation of the United States for its imposition of steel and aluminum tariffs on the other members of the G7.

The Charlevoix Summit's big decisions

I will offer a few thoughts about the summit process, the traditional purview of the leaders' sherpas. It is the host leader who carries the responsibility for setting out any signature themes, initiatives and the number of ministerial meetings for the G7 presidential year that will support the summit itself. She or he, on the advice of the sherpa, will assess which ongoing initiatives from previous summits require continued attention by the collective. While attention will inevitably fall on the global issues or flashpoints of the moment, the leader usually draws a policy link between the international and the domestic. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau used this approach in his focus on inclusive economic growth, the future of work and the related impact of artificial intelligence; gender equality and women's empowerment (which he identified as an overarching theme for the Canadian presidency); defending democracy from foreign threats; and establishing a blueprint for healthy oceans. So, in intensifying discussions on economic growth, skills training and gender equality, Trudeau greatly expanded the signature themes from the previous two summits at Taormina in 2017 and Ise Shima in 2016. This also signaled additional discussion on these themes for the sherpas in the preparatory process with a view to developing consensual initiatives and follow-up. The focus on oceans and plastics represented a practical extension of discussions at the last four summits regarding the implementation of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. What had been US ambivalence at Taormina turned to rejection of the Paris Agreement before the end of the year. Accordingly, and with the strategic objective of having the G7 speak with one voice,

Canada advanced proposals on healthy oceans and coastal community resilience, recognizing that the US had also been affected by unusually strong hurricanes.

Discussions among sherpas, and subsequently leaders, regarding the international rules-based order with a focus on global steel production overcapacity and the role of non-market economies was a theme that harkened back to the Elmau Summit in 2016 (when there were different leaders around the table). French President Emmanuel Macron has elected to pursue the economic inequality theme as the leitmotif for the Biarritz Summit in 2019 and has decided to continue the work of the Gender Equality Advisory Council, successfully established during the Canadian presidency, as a central tenet of the French presidency. Which themes the United States will identify, and which initiatives will be continued for its own presidency in 2020, will likely remain an open question for some time.

The arduous path of negotiation

The well-established tradition at G7 summits is the release by leaders of a communiqué, reflecting their conversations but also the initiatives to which they have agreed in the lengthy sherpa negotiation process. This document is designed to demonstrate G7 unity and leadership to the world, to encourage further work domestically on agreed policies and initiatives (respecting some diversity in our democratic systems), and to provide a type of accounting as to which initiatives would be practical and those that might be aspirational, potentially requiring additional work at subsequent summit gatherings or ministerial meetings, G7 or otherwise. The choice for the Canadian summit at Charlevoix was whether to undertake the effort of negotiating a communiqué at all. Given the deep differences on a number of files, including climate change, the international rules-based system, trade protectionism, Iran and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), among others, the concern was that a communiqué could have resulted in a "lowest common denominator" consensual effort that would not have meant much nor passed public muster. An alternative idea was to have the chair issue a summary reflecting the nature of the discussions. It was decided among sherpas, and agreed to by Prime Minister Trudeau as host, that an effort at negotiating a communiqué should be undertaken, with the issuance of a Chair's Summary being a fallback position should the search for consensus prove futile. The Canadians did keep a "back pocket" chair's statement on hand – just in case. After much negotiation, including an all-night session on the eve of and during the first night of the summit, a solidly substantive communiqué (with an expected division on climate change) was agreed to.

However, the Canadian presidency chose to negotiate seven consensual agreements in advance to ensure that, for the host country, important signature initiatives would not receive minor emphasis when compared to a communiqué whose ultimate fate was unknown. These "Charlevoix Commitments" comprised the Charlevoix Commitment on Equality and Economic Growth; the Charlevoix Commitment on Innovative Financing for Development; the Charlevoix Common Vision for the Future of Artificial Intelligence; the Charlevoix Declaration on Quality Education for Girls, Adolescent Girls and Women in Developing Countries; the Charlevoix Commitment to End Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, Abuse and Harassment in Digital Contexts; the Charlevoix Commitment on Defending Democracy from Foreign Threats; and the Charlevoix Blueprint for Healthy Oceans, Seas and Resilient Coastal Communities.

Ministerial meetings have proven to be very useful in advancing the agreed G7 agenda. They, in turn, have had their own concluding documents, whether declaration, communiqué or chair's summary. The process for organizing and structuring these meetings falls to senior officials in the appropriate departments or ministries and to the plethora of working groups who provide substantive input to the preparatory negotiations. Under the French presidency, there are some 34 negotiating groups – up slightly from Canada's total last year. These include the sherpas, "sous-sherpas" (usually senior representatives from the ministries of foreign affairs); finance deputies and central bank governors; political directors from Ministries of Affairs; and groups as diverse as the Working Group on Foreign Investment; the G7 and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Sanctions Working Group; the Roma/Lyon Working Group for Fighting International Crime and Terrorism; the Food Security Working Group, and the Health Experts Working Group.

Parallel ministerial meetings

In a significant departure from past practice, Prime Minister Trudeau chose to structure the ministerial meetings in clusters, in keeping with the themes he had laid out. These ministerial meetings would take place in parallel, but with a common session for each cluster. Hence, the ministerial meetings of labor and economic innovation/development were held in Montreal in March of 2018, at which time there was a common session dedicated to the impact of artificial intelligence for jobs of the future. So too, the meetings of foreign affairs and security/interior ministers were held in parallel in Toronto in April, with a common session devoted to returning ISIS fighters, counterterrorism and cybersecurity. When the finance and international development ministers met in Whistler, British Columbia, a week

before the summit, their common session was devoted to new and innovative financing options for international development with a special emphasis on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. Unlike other years, only one set of ministerial meetings took place following the Charlevoix Summit, namely the environment/energy/fisheries/oceans meeting that took place in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in September of 2018.

The policy and practical reasons for this approach were to allow for a substantive discussion and strategic direction on the theme of climate change, ocean plastics, coastal resilience and energy among the G7 leaders, the 12 additional leaders, and four heads of international organizations who had been invited to the second day of the Charlevoix Summit. The Canadian clustering of ministerial meetings, while unusual in terms of the work that bureaucracies would undertake to support the meetings, particularly on cross-over or common issues, succeeded in bringing a more nuanced and interconnected policy approach to the fore. This was a significant and innovative attempt to make G7 discussions more relevant on intersecting policy issues, forcing not only the Canadian bureaucracy to think differently, but those of the other members too. While not easy, this was probably a good thing.

With respect to the summit outreach session, there have been different approaches over the years. Prevalent in the spirit of the summits at Kananaskis (2002) and Gleneagles (2005) has been a focus on Africa. The outreach focus of these and other summits resulted in greater attention devoted to African development issues amongst G7 members, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries, and the key international institutions, particularly the United Nations and the World Bank. This spirit has been ongoing, manifested most recently at the Taormina Summit of 2017, which recognized northern African countries in the context of the Arab Spring and Mediterranean proximity. It was somewhat different in Ise Shima in 2016 when Japan successfully invited Asian leaders into the African mix.

The environment as a major topic

Canada undertook a different approach to the outreach session at Charlevoix, wishing to shape a leaders' discussion around the topic of healthy oceans, seas and resilient coastal communities, with the issuance of an Ocean Plastics Charter. It was felt that such a discussion would have greater relevance by including leaders from several Small Island Developing States (SIDS), hence the invitation to the leaders of

the Marshall Islands, Jamaica, Haiti and Seychelles. Inviting key African countries, namely South Africa, Kenya, Senegal and Rwanda (in its role as African Union chair), ensured that African voices were at the table, particularly in the context of coastal resilience discussions. This would prove prescient, with Kenya hosting the Sustainable Blue Economy Conference in Nairobi in November 2018, with Canada and Japan as co-sponsors. Adding Vietnam and Bangladesh provided an Asian and river delta dimension; Norway represented another engaged voice from the north and Argentina was there through its presidency of the G20. By adding the heads of the international multilateral institutions – the United Nations, IMF, World Bank and OECD – again as has been customary, the prerequisites for appropriate follow-up were in place. The OECD in particular has been helpful in recent years with its studies on economic trends, labor and jobs of the future, as well as its important research on oceans and climate change.

The discussions between the G7 leaders (minus President Trump who had left for his summit with North Korea in Singapore), the additional 12 outreach session leaders and the heads of the multilateral institutions provided support to the G7 work undertaken to establish an Ocean Plastics Charter. The United States and Japan were unable to sign on to the charter at Charlevoix; the latter because of insufficient time to consult with its industry regarding quotas and targets; the former because of internal disagreements in its interagency processes and perhaps some ideological differences on substance. Still, the Ocean Plastics Charter managed to emphasize lifecycle management of plastics in the economy, the need for sustainable lifestyles and education, the promotion of research, innovation and new technologies, and acceleration of the 2015 G7 Leaders' Action Plan to Combat Marine Litter through the Regional Seas Programs, as agreed at the Elmau Summit. The stage was therefore set for the last ministerial cluster of meetings under the Canadian presidency, which brought together ministers of the environment, energy and, where appropriate, fisheries and oceans in Halifax in September 2018. The Ocean Plastics Charter was extended to other countries, initiatives on earth observation and ocean plastics were launched, and new funds were mobilized. Many large private-sector entities joined in. All delegations contributed to creative discussions, and while there was not unanimity on all initiatives, the ongoing work for the French presidency was set out and Canada concluded its last events with a substantive success, regardless of any uncertainties that may have remained from the denouement of the Charlevoix Summit itself.

A substantive success with the Ocean Plastics Charter

G7 summits are often associated with funding or pledging initiatives, and Charlevoix was no exception. Although Prime Minister Trudeau was careful earlier in Canada's presidency not to establish initiative-related funds, given both global donor fatigue and the risk of falling short on potential commitments, he did remain open to calling for pledges in response to an organic identification of need that might emerge during the summit negotiating process. In keeping with the overarching summit theme of gender equality and, as a result of sustained consultation efforts in G7 capitals, an investment of $3.8 billion USD to reduce barriers to quality education for women and girls in conflict and crisis situations was announced. The target had been $1.3 billion USD, but a commitment from the World Bank did much to make this investment the single largest ever for education for the world's most vulnerable women and girls. In a related move, the international development finance institutions of the G7 countries joined together to mobilize another $3 billion USD by 2020 towards initiatives that would provide women in developing countries with access to leadership opportunities, quality employment, finance and enterprise support. The latter would be through the "2x Challenge", designed to provide funds and private capital to support women in business. To round out the Canadian presidency, the Halifax ministerial meetings resulted in $200 million USD in new funding for ocean plastics removal, coastal community resilience and other initiatives designed to mitigate the impact of climate change.

An objective of the Canadian presidency was the wish to demystify the G7 and its activities through active consultations with civil society and enhanced social media activity. Adding to consultative efforts undertaken by Italy, Japan and Germany during their most recent presidencies, Canada broadened the scope of consultation into all ministerial and sherpa meetings, supported the seven engagement groups (Labor 7, Business 7, Youth 7, Women 7, Science 7, Think Tank 7 and Civil Society 7) at their meetings, and above all ensured that members of the Gender Equality Advisory Council were present at meetings, and indeed heard at the summit itself. Policy papers related to the individual themes were posted on various social media platforms, with comments being solicited on a global scale. Suggestions and comments poured in from individuals, other governments, academic institutions and think tanks, and, of course, trolls. This unprecedented level of engagement over the year with both traditional and social media resulted in some three million Twitter impressions and 268 million website impressions, of which 14.8 million were made during the Charlevoix Summit itself. Although there were some demonstrations, civil unrest was not a feature of the summit and so

did not dominate the global public narrative. Media tended to focus on the substantive discussions and outcomes, particularly where there was dissonance.

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At the time of writing, France is well into its G7 presidency, having successfully hosted a series of ministerial meetings and continued the work of the Gender Equality Advisory Council. It has also issued a series of ministerial declarations emanating from the foreign ministers' meeting in Saint-Malo and the interior/security ministers' meeting in Paris. Products range from the foreign ministers' Dinard Declaration on Women, Peace and Security, the Dinard Declaration to Combat Illicit Trafficking in the Sahel Region, a declaration on cyber norms, and an important declaration on the international rules-based order, with particular support for the United Nations. Interior/security ministers have addressed human trafficking and illegal migration, internet extremism, return of terrorist fighters and their families, and environmental crime.

These subjects, with more to come, fit the classic G7 pattern: identification by the host presidency of relevant global issues requiring solutions as addressed by like-minded partners, building on work that has come before. This approach has been a formula for some success, and of course many challenges since 1975, but the G7 process is unique in terms of the breadth of themes and issues addressed as well as the creativity required for proposed solutions. As we approach the discussions that will take place in Biarritz, it remains this former sherpa's sincere wish that the rationale for bringing together this important group on an annual basis be remembered and sustained. The world requires it.

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