

## Are world summits really necessary?

**The widely forecast disappointment at last week's meeting of the G7 countries in Halifax, Nova Scotia, is simply explained: governments choose to talk about the wrong things, and they are the wrong governments anyway.**

SHOULD the rich countries of the world continue meeting once a year, as they did at Halifax in Nova Scotia last week, when the outcomes of their deliberations appear perennially inconclusive? This is an old problem. The rich countries (called the 'G7' countries, although there are really eight of them, with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia now a regular participant) usually have nothing substantial to say after their annual meetings. Or if they manage to find common ground, they may commit themselves to some common action and, afterwards, discover that they do not have the stomach to carry it through. This year's meeting seems to have been a particular disappointment: the decision that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) should have resources to avoid a repetition of last year's financial crisis in Mexico will be useful (if members of that organization stump up the extra funds), but that could have been agreed at the IMF's own meeting in Washington just a few weeks ago. Otherwise, nothing much appears to have been decided. No wonder many of the participants are grumbling (not for the first time) that their journeys have been unnecessary.

Is that really so? Last week's proceedings show all too clearly that the people who assemble talk about all the wrong things. In advance of Halifax, for example, the United States and Japan had let it be known that they would not spoil the meeting by arguing out their dispute about the bilateral trade in motor-cars; in the event, they appear to have talked about it, but mostly to (or at) each other. Yet this bilateral dispute is potentially a means by which the international trading system, and the new World Trade Organization (the successor to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or GATT), could be permanently undermined, to the general discomfort of the whole world. These are precisely the circumstances, those of a strictly bilateral dispute with serious international repercussions, that should have been firmly on the agenda at Halifax. By what right did the two participants seek to relegate it to the corridors?

By contrast, Bosnia, by all accounts promoted to the Halifax agenda at the urgent insistence of President Jacques Chirac of France, would have been more aptly left aside. The world community, and the G7 subset thereof, has been wringing its hands for four years at the spectacle of an apparently unstoppable conflict in a region that should by now be part of a peaceful Europe. Some useful work has been done by the United Nations forces stationed in the area; the contingency arrangements put in place to deal with a more serious escalation of the conflict may also

yet prove invaluable. But everybody knows there is no chance that the US president will be allowed by a Congress dominated by his political opponents to commit ground forces to peacekeeping in Bosnia while there is no clear strategy for bringing the conflict to an end. Raising the issue at Halifax will not have changed that state of affairs, but may unhelpfully have served to make President Bill Clinton seem less powerful than he is. How does that serve G7's interest?

The other glaring defect of the G7 procedure is its invitation list. Russia originally gatecrashed the club by arguing that its need of financial assistance compelled its presence, and seems to have stayed on the list. But there are conspicuous omissions, of which China is the most conspicuous. At the outset 22 years ago, the rationale for G7 was that its members collectively held the balance of economic power in the world, so that their agreed decisions on matters in and even outside the strictly economic field would probably carry weight with those not invited to the meetings. But China is already a substantial economic power, and is likely quickly to become even stronger. Moreover, China seems to take delight in declining to heed decisions in whose making it has played no part — witness the endless arguments over the details of the transition of Hong Kong from British colony to Chinese province. The present members of G7 would no doubt find a Chinese presence at their meetings uncomfortable, but it is difficult to see how those meetings can be made more effective if China is not eventually asked along. □

## Proliferation and muddle

**One of the most imaginative of overseas initiatives by the United States is needlessly in trouble.**

WHAT is to happen to all the enriched uranium that used to be locked up in nuclear warheads built by the former Soviet Union, and due to be dismantled under international agreements? The obvious danger is that it will find its way into the hands of governments wishing to make nuclear weapons. That danger was clearly apparent four years ago. To its credit, the Bush administration in the United States then hit on a scheme for neutralizing a potentially hair-raising threat: the United States would buy the ex-Soviet uranium, dilute it with non-fissile isotopes and use it as