

# Cluttered view from summit

The world has far too many summits to climb, argue **Mark Beeson** and **Diane Stone**.

**F**or all the state and federal governments' efforts to drum up enthusiasm, what will the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting be remembered for, other than traffic problems? Much ado about nothing would be high praise.

But CHOGM – Chaps on Government Money to the cynics – is just the most egregious example of a broader syndrome.

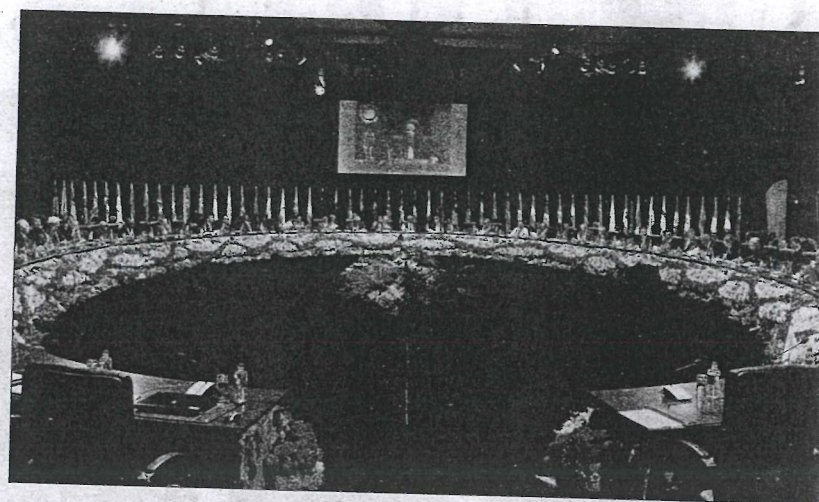
At a time when the world is confronted by an epidemic of economic, environmental, political and economic crises, the institutions of global governance are frequently ineffective.

The reason? There are simply too many organisations with overlapping mandates and competing ambitions. If "global governance" is to actually mean anything, we need to rationalise, prioritise and concentrate the world's institutional firepower.

Yet there is virtually no practical experience of shutting down anachronisms such as CHOGM. In our contemporary age of austerity, a "bonfire of the quangos" might be feasible for national governments pressured to slash public sector budgets. But this cannot be scaled up to the international level. Rare is the international organisation created with a sunset clause.

One of the paradoxes of the Asia-Pacific is that a region often synonymous with feeble and ineffective international institutions actually has a superabundance of them. Whatever the merits of the fashionable Trans-Pacific Partnership, it makes, or ought to make, the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation group redundant.

After all, APEC has allegedly been leading the charge on trade liberalisation for decades, albeit to no discernible effect. If APEC did not exist, would we really need to invent it? More pointedly, could Australia, as APEC's original



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champion, do the "international community" an immense favour by suggesting that it be euthanised?

Let us be clear, we think international institutions are a vital and necessary part of resolving international collective action problems. States have no choice other than to co-operate and co-ordinate their actions if they are to have any hope of confronting the many border-crossing problems that confront us.

The problem is deciding which ones for what purposes.

The East Asia Summit (EAS) has emerged from a crowded field to become the most prominent and promising in Australia's region.

Luckily, perhaps, Kevin Rudd's proposal for (yet another) regional organisation, the Asia-Pacific Community, did not take off.

But it didn't need to: the EAS is essentially the APC by another name. The trick is to get behind it and make sure an organisation that includes all the major regional players, such as the US, India and China, becomes the focus of attention and eliminates

competitors. Smaller countries in the region and elsewhere may thank us. The reality is that the likes of Laos and Cambodia simply don't have the resources and skilled personnel to turn up for the endless talkfests that dot the diplomatic landscape.

Bureaucratic fragmentation and unequal state capacity means many developing countries do not have the resources to implement decisions, let alone attend all meetings. This indirect and unintended outcome of de facto exclusion undermines principles of inclusiveness in international decision making. It is one not resolved by the widening of the G7/8 to the Group of 20.

But the G20 is the other great hope of Australian foreign policy and it's not hard to see why.

Australia gets a seat at a big table and a chance to influence outcomes and actors not normally in its institutional ambit. Whether the G20 can actually overcome the national interests of its most powerful members like the US and China and address critical issues like the imbalances that threaten the

global economy remains moot, but from an Australian perspective this and the EAS offer the prospect of global and regional influence and that's where our diplomatic resources should be concentrated.

International summitry has an essential place in world affairs and we need many of the new structures for co-ordination and co-operation. Yet solutions also beget problems. We need to clear out our institutional junk yard of redundant dialogues or international organisations.

Organisations past their use-by dates clog the system of negotiation, waste valuable resources, and deplete the energy and resources of over-encumbered ministries.

This is a tall order for change. We still do not know how to deal with either system sclerosis or the sacred cows some international bodies have become.

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