

# The G20 Debacle: The largest Police Mobilization in Canada's History.

What it Might Have Looked Like Inside the Fence

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Region: [Canada](#)

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Hosting the G20 in Toronto was the first of a series of political gambles by the Conservative Canadian government led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper. At a time when U.S. President Barack Obama, leader of the world's greatest debtor nation, was seeking additional stimulus money and therefore deficit financing (something the previous regime of George W. Bush was no stranger to), Harper's Conservative Finance Minister and delegate to the G20, Jim Flaherty, was advocating austerity. Flaherty, who was Finance Minister for the province of Ontario in the late 1990s, introduced to Canada's biggest and wealthiest province what the poor countries had come to know as neoliberalism - shrinking public finances through tax cuts and spending cuts, privatization of public services, and the ideological use of the fear of 'deficits' to justify it all. No matter that Flaherty left Ontario's finances in an abysmal state, far worse than he found them, with higher deficits and debts. Ontario's "Common Sense Revolution" had accomplished other tasks: it had devastated the public sector and the social safety net, harmed the unions, thrown thousands more people out of their homes to live on the streets. To deal with the resistance generated by the unpopularity of these policies, the government boosted police budgets and police powers, meeting demonstrations with riot police and beatings.

Bodies like the G8 and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) are generally like minded, as they represent the minority of countries that are already wealthy. These countries have an interest in the current order, skewed as it is toward their interests. Until recently, they have had the power to keep things that way. But when what was then called the Asian economic crisis struck in the late 1990s, the wealthy countries let the biggest of the poor countries into a new club, the G20 Finance Ministers meeting. The new body could claim to be more inclusive: with China, India, Indonesia, and Brazil aboard, the G20 had the Finance Ministers of 80% of the world's population and 80% of the world's GDP. But as an informal gathering of Finance Ministers (Labour Ministers started to meet at separate summits years later), without any transparent structure, and whose debates took place away from the public eye, the gatherings were still suspect. Norway's Foreign Minister [recently called](#) the G20 "the greatest setback since World War II," "a grouping without international legitimacy," with "no mandate." The skewed membership and structure hides skewed power relations within the G20, where the G8 countries have far more say in how the world is going to be governed.

Because the lowest common denominator for countries with such vastly different problems and agendas is low indeed, the G20 meetings produce declarations of principle that are mostly platitudes. It is difficult to argue that they have done much, in their 11 years of

existence, to stabilize economies, much less to deal with any of the other issues for which sound thinking about global finance is needed, from food and fuel system problems, development aid and war to environmental degradation and climate change.

This year's declaration features platitudes, certainly, but also signs that Obama's (probably half-hearted) desire for additional stimulus was defeated. The desire for stimulus was echoed by countries like India, whose growth is based on exports to the West and foreign direct investment from the West (which currently takes the form of giving away huge tracts of land and resources to multinationals). But other Western countries, and especially Europe, have to pass the crisis on to their populations or risk losing their position in the global economic hierarchy. This is where Canada's proposals, and Flaherty's proposals in particular, come into play.

What Flaherty called "Common Sense Revolution" in Ontario in the 1990s is called "fiscal consolidation" in the [summit declaration](#). The declaration concedes that "sustaining the recovery is key," but counterposes this with "the importance of sustainable public finances." The enemy, once called "deficits," is now recast, perhaps because environmentalism made it a bad word, as "unsustainable public finances." The magic word "consolidation," which means attacking deficits, occurs 19 times in the 27 page declaration. Consolidation is to be "growth friendly," but it must happen. Canada worked hard to dilute any talk of financial sector regulation, and the declaration's discussion of regulation is unsubstantial - promises of "strong measures to improve transparency and improve regulatory oversight."

Another pillar of the G20 declaration is an absolute commitment to fight protectionism. Although every single member of the club of wealthy countries got there through protectionism, the G20, like the WTO, the IMF, and World Bank, remains wedded to "free trade" doctrine. The G20 countries are applauded for not trying to protect their economies from the crisis through tariffs.

Consolidation and free trade, which serve the western members of the G20 better than its big, poor members, are the substantial commitments of the declaration. Both sets of policies have proven immensely unpopular where they have been imposed. To defend them, like defending the summits, governments have turned to police forces and fear.

Beyond consolidation and free trade, the declaration contains well-intentioned but empty platitudes. A non-exhaustive list:

- Standing with the people of Haiti - while refusing to provide them nearly enough resources to recover from the earthquake, which would take a tiny fraction of what was spent helping the banks through their crisis.
- A commitment to Copenhagen's toothless climate change protocols - for "those of us who have associated ourselves with the Copenhagen Accord." Interestingly, "those of us" so associated look forward to "the outcome of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Group on Climate Change Financing which is, inter alia, exploring innovative financing." Was that an unintentional slip, an admission that any innovative financing will probably have to come from outside the G20?
- A recognition of the need to share "best practices" after the Gulf of Mexico oil

spill – talk of a moratorium on offshore drilling or any other such drastic measures is too much for the G20. A major coastal ecosystem, fishery, and food source can be destroyed; major banks have to be saved.

- \$224-million in development grants for agriculture in Bangladesh, Rwanda, Haiti, Togo, and Sierra Leone. This highly generous sum amounts to about 1/5 of what was spent on security for the summit itself.

Given the bizarre billion-dollar price tag – a price tag that assumes that the citizenry is so boggled by large numbers that it can't smell when something awful is cooking – the declaration cost about \$37-million per page.

The spectacle of these finance ministers meeting to talk about passing on the costs of their economic crises on to their citizens has produced opposition, and large protests, wherever they were held. As the host of the summit, Harper had the choice of where to locate it. The financial capital of the country, Toronto, was a natural choice. But a major city meant a major protest. The city's mayor, David Miller, suggested a contained area frequently used for conferences and meetings, Exhibition Place. Harper opted to hold the meeting in the downtown core, contain it with a multimillion dollar fence, and commence what might have been the largest police mobilization in the country's history.

#### And the View From Outside the Fence

In the weeks leading up to the summit, the media was full of fearmongering. A *Toronto Star* "[Survival Guide](#)" advised staying calm around the police, and explaining to them whatever they wanted. A police official went a step further, in an unusual usurpation of authority by police to tell citizens what to do and where to go: "don't come." Security for such summits had in the past, at the highest level in Pittsburgh, run as high as \$100-million. What was the \$1-billion paying for? Some of it went to new, and lasting, police infrastructure: new water cannons, new sound weapons, new surveillance cameras, an array of nonlethal weapons intended to disrupt protests. The training, communications, and command systems would cost more. The overtime pay for the thousands of out-of-town police would cost still more. But \$1-billion? No one believed there was any credible threat to the safety of the G20 officials. At worst, protesters might have smashed some windows, as they had in some previous global summits like the WTO protest in Montreal in 2005. Could smashed windows, or any conspiracy to smash windows, justify \$1-billion in security expenditure? Could it justify the various changes to the law and emergency police powers that were put in place? The open question represented a political risk for Harper: if the protesters succeeded in capturing the agenda or disrupting the summit, Harper could lose some of his law-and-order reputation. If Harper's police went too far, they might risk a backlash from the public, who have so far been very forgiving of Harper.

In the event, the police forces took no chances, and quite probably took matters into their own hands. When the big march (well over 10,000 by my count, 25,000 by some counts) failed to pass police lines (given that about an equal number of police, 19,000 or 20,000, were deployed), and continued, a group of protesters doubled back before turning south toward the fence. Some of these covered their faces and, after they'd left the big march, smashed windows and police cars. While deep police lines backed by horses had prevented the big march from heading south to the fence, a gap appeared and a group of protesters was somehow allowed to head several blocks south before being stopped. At the

southernmost location, Bay and King, a police car was somehow set on fire, although some eyewitnesses say there were almost no protesters around and also, mysteriously, no uniformed police. The role of police provocateurs in these events might eventually come out in court, to which I will return.

The point here is that at least through a passive decision, and more likely through active provocation, the police helped see to it that windows and police cars were destroyed. [Journalist Joe Wenkoff](#) followed the Black Bloc for 27 blocks without any police presence. A police source told *Toronto Sun* [reporter Joe Warmington](#) that the police had orders to let it happen: “there were guys with equipment to do the job, all standing around looking at each other in disbelief.”

Almost no one was arrested during the smashing. Before the demonstration took place, police seized activists and organizers in raids – some of whom are still being held at detention centres. The (Saturday, June 26) night after the afternoon demonstration and the day after (Sunday, June 27), however, police rounded up hundreds of people – some 1,000 in total (which means \$1-million security expenditure per arrested protester). Curiously, police had announced prior to the summit that they expected to arrest 1,000. Did they simply keep arresting until they met their numbers? Given the “catch and release” policy they followed (100 of the 1000 are still in detention, and many of those released have given shocking testimonies of abuse by police, outdoor cages, open toilets, denial of feminine products to prisoners) it seems likely.

People on Toronto streets reported seeing police operations that had no relationship to any protest or anything going on: riot police shuffling about, horse charges, rapid deployment from one part of the city to another, temporary closures of areas and sweeping up of random people into mass arrests. It looked to me like Harper’s people were flexing their muscles, testing the public stomach, seeing how far they could ride over people’s rights and liberties. Accompanying the show of muscle was a public relations effort – placing the burden of justifying the \$1-billion security expenditure on some smashed windows and police cars (with damages probably in the tens of thousands).

Something of a public backlash did emerge. On [Monday afternoon](#), 2600 people (by my count) protested the police response [outside headquarters](#). Among the slogans: “No more cops on overtime, protesting is not a crime.” The same police who had been so abusive the day before were relatively quiet. Protesters didn’t see any riot gear, the bike police didn’t push people with their bikes as they often do at protests, and the horses stayed largely out of sight a block away.

Important questions remain about the dozens that remain in detention. Will the government pursue charges and seek jail sentences for protesters? If some of those who smashed windows were entrapped by provocateurs, will the evidence emerge in trial? Will the public allow the state to persecute protesters when the police role was so pernicious? And the question that, unfortunately, is likely to get lost in the details: since these summits are destructive when they are not useless, are they worth spending hundreds of millions of dollars, shutting down cities, destroying civil liberties? •

*Justin Podur is a Toronto-based [writer](#).*

Toronto Call: No More Police State Tactics

[Below is a statement](#) that you are being asked to sign. We believe it is urgent to get as many signatures on a call for a public inquiry. We believe it is possible to shift the terms to debate, and to shine a spotlight on the abusive police practices during the G8/G20. But we need your help to do that.

Please sign on and circulate the call widely to friends, colleagues, allies and networks who might be willing to sign.

Email [TheTorontoCall@gmail.com](mailto:TheTorontoCall@gmail.com) with your name, affiliation and which category you prefer to be placed in (trade unionists, faculty, students, community activists, legal workers, teachers, cultural workers, arrested and detained).

....statement available on [rabble.ca](http://rabble.ca).

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