

Scale down the party

The Venice summit produced the usual motherhood declarations, weasel-worded pledges and reaffirmations of policies.

Matters were made worse by a worse-than-usual logistical circus occasioned by the thousands of officials, security people and journalists there.

Still, the meeting was not a waste of time. It gave the leaders of the seven largest industrial democracies and the European Community a chance to argue and try to reach common positions. And it forced politicians to look beyond their own borders to the international perspective.

There were a few modest reasons for satisfaction. But even those silver linings were not without their grey clouds.

The leaders adopted a cool-headed approach to the Persian Gulf, affirming the principle of freedom of navigation and calling for a negotiated end to the Iran-Iraq war. They rejected apparent American pressure for a more belligerent statement. But they did not promise to stop selling arms to the combatants.

Prime Minister Mulroney could take some pleasure in the statement on agricultural subsidies, which amounted to a reaffirmation of an earlier pledge to refrain from escalating the agricultural trade war. But the apparent difficulty in getting the summit leaders to agree even on that much, and the lack of a time-table for reform, do not bode well.

Mr. Mulroney also could be pleased that he put apartheid on the summit's agenda. But the best he could muster from his colleagues was a bland statement that was not part of any official declaration.

The summit confirmed progress that has been made on the mutual surveillance and co-ordination of national economic policies. And its declaration included recognition of the need to tackle environmental problems, including acid rain. Washington take note.

But many summit declarations were a tired old song. The leaders blasted protectionism and terrorism. They tactfully told Washington to reduce its budget deficit and told Japan and West Germany to stimulate their economies. And they noted the need for various structural economic reforms. No one should expect any major change to result.

The summits originally were relatively informal events. They have evolved into much more complicated gatherings.

Canada should try to make next year's Toronto summit less of a staged circus than Venice was. Summits are not apt to bring salvation, whatever their scale. Still, making them smaller and less formal would build on their strengths.