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Just another lost chance

It is clear that the seven-country economic summit now concluded in Venice was primarily a high-level stage from which the government leaders performed to their respective local audiences or electorates. The passing of another summit represents an opportunity lost to set the Western world on a path to economic recovery.

The summit has, unfortunately, degenerated from its original intention in 1975 when then-French-president Valery Giscard d'Estaing invited the United States president and the Western European leaders to discuss the effects of the oil crisis.

This week, the seven government leaders, including Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, searched for words too inoffensive to be rejected by anyone so as to leave the impression that something concrete had been accomplished by virtue of their unanimity. Indeed, they found those innocuous phrases and were able to turn out hollow platitudes on subjects as far-flung as defence of the Persian Gulf, agricultural subsidies, apartheid, drugs,

AIDS and Third World debt.

But to what end? U.S. President Ronald Reagan showed he had lost his grip on Western economic matters by failing to convince the summit to endorse a hard-nosed statement against protectionism.

Observers also see Reagan's inability to obtain support for a more strongly worded statement condemning Iranian actions in the Persian Gulf as evidence the president's influence is waning.

Mulroney fared somewhat better, at least from a political standpoint. He wanted agreement on the evils of apartheid and farm product subsidies. After much arm-twisting West Germany was convinced to go along with a one-paragraph oral statement on apartheid which was considerably weaker than Mulroney desired.

The prime minister said the statement at least would indicate to South African blacks their plight was not being ignored. Mulroney is correct that it would have been worse to send a signal of silence, but it is hard to see this as an indication that hard-liners in Washington, London and Bonn have adopted Canada's approach.

It did, however, give Mulroney something to take to the next Commonwealth and francophonie conferences and allow him to claim he carries some influence into the court of the Free World leaders.

As for the subsidies issue, they may have agreed on the necessity to call an immediate truce, but the resolution set no implementation dates. Essentially Mulroney came away with just enough to be able to tell Canadian wheat farmers he took their case to the summit and was given a hearing.

The summit has long since grown beyond its original "economic" intent and now acts as a sort of big-league Western security council at which the leaders can discuss a broad expanse of world issues without having to deal with any of what they consider the meddlesome emerging nations.

But as for huge budget deficits that force interest rates up, lagging U.S. exports, stunted economic growth, a world monetary system that rides a never-ending roller coaster and governments in Tokyo and Bonn that refuse to play their fair part in stabilizing the international economy, there was little said and even less accomplished.

The Venice summit must go down in history as a lost chance to right some of the economic wrongs. While hope may spring eternal, there is little reason to be optimistic that next year's summit in Toronto will accomplish more.

With Mulroney likely facing an election soon after, we can expect a lot of political posturing and likely little else.