Hidden in the Mountains

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June 27, 2002

The G8 leaders are a lucky bunch. For two days, each of them has the chance to visit one of the most beautiful places in Canada with twenty-five co-workers of their choice. Other than large numbers of people in uniforms and the occasional photographer, they have approximately 1300 square kilometers of Kananaskis Country to themselves. If a prime minister or president has a few minutes to spare between discussions on the world economy and international terrorism, and a Bush aide hasn't taken him aside to convince him that Arafat must go, he can wander out of the hotel, breathe in the astoundingly fresh air, and enjoy the wonderful views of the Rocky Mountains. There is even a conveniently located golf course in case the summit ends early.

When Jean Chretien, the Canadian prime minister, announced after the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa that Kananaskis would be the site in 2002, the reasons for the choice were clear. Genoa featured massive protest marches and major clashes between police and activists. Organizers had erected a huge wall around the summit site, which became a fortress under siege. Kananaskis Village, a hotel complex tucked in the forest, could keep protesters far away. It would be a different, more successful kind of fortress. And it worked.

On June 26, the first day of the G8 summit, a large group of activists formed a caravan of cars, campers and other vehicles, and headed to Kananaskis. They knew that with twenty-five police and military checkpoints along the road, they would not reach the summit site. Their mission was to make a statement by trying. They never got close.

Earlier that day, a convoy of postal workers tried to deliver a set of messages written by protesters to the G8 leaders. After a long period of negotiation with police at one of the checkpoints, and one arrest, an aide from the Canadian prime minister's office emerged
to talk to the protesters. He accepted the messages, and even thanked the person delivering them for his contribution to democracy. The aide's civility was to be expected; once he walked away from the cameras, he was on the inside, where no one was going to ask difficult questions about letters or protests.

Good manners have also been a theme of the anti-G8 protests. In Calgary, the nearest city to Kananaskis, locals and activists opposed to violence had feared the June 26 snake marches, the only planned protest action where nonviolence was not an explicit part of the agenda. In the end, however, activists gave out pamphlets while blocking traffic and apologized to drivers for the inconvenience.

Activists favouring non-violent tactics are ruling the day. The June 25 'Showdown at the Hoedown' protested the exclusive 'Hoot and Holler' party thrown by the City of Calgary for Calgary-based G8 delegates, the international media, and local business leaders and dignitaries. Anti-G8 activists held their own street party in the parking lot outside the 'Hoot and Holler'. Locals had feared that the two groups would clash, but when two people tried to pull down one of the fences surrounding the official party, other protesters talked them out of it. On June 26, a small group of black-clad protesters surrounded a McDonald's restaurant and chanted 'riot, riot' in front of the police. Other activists chanted 'Don't give the media what they want' until the situation came to nothing.

Other June 26 events were peaceful by their very nature. To protest the death of an activist shot by police in Genoa and highlight that G8 policies resulted in many more deaths around the world, activists held a Di-in, playing dead among styrofoam tombstones with the G8 logo. A G8 Public Picnic featured free food and music. There were concerts, discussion sessions, and a peace vigil. Most peaceful of all was the event organized by the Revolutionary Knitting Circle—a Knit-in.

There is no giant wall, as in Genoa. A small fence and a large number of police protect Calgary's convention centre, where media and Calgary-based G8 delegates are working. On June 26, some protesters created their own wall, writing the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in chalk on the sidewalks around the convention centre.

Meanwhile, the media spent the first day of the summit starved for material. With so little room at Kananaskis Village, most were stuck in Calgary, watching video feeds and waiting for press conferences where leaders reiterated unsurprising positions on the Middle East. Documents agreed to at the summit were available on the Internet, but the most important pact of the day was the 'Cooperative G8 Action on Transport Security'. Most anti-G8 activists were interviewed at least twice.
Kananaskis, then, has successfully kept G8 leaders safely tucked away from their constituents. Far from most reporters, they are also free to define the media spin on the summit. Their remoteness has been frustrating for protesters, and many have kept away; anti-G8 activists in Calgary are approximately 100 times fewer in number than those who had been in Genoa a year before. Many people held protests in their home cities instead. At the June 23 Community Solidarity March in Calgary, one protester summed up the net effect of Kananaskis and its security budget on his shirt: "1/2 billion $ so they don't have to know what we think".

This is the fourth in a series of five articles on the June 26-27, 2002 G8 summit in Kananaskis, Canada. These daily reports are sent from nearby Calgary, the focal point for media activity and anti-G8 meetings and protests.