

MOVING MOUNTAINS IN RIO

We should probably not expect very much from June's UN "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro – then again, maybe we'll be surprised.

BY DAVID RUNNALLS

IN JUNE, UP TO SEVENTY-FIVE PRIME MINISTERS AND PRESIDENTS WILL meet in Rio de Janeiro to discuss the fate of the earth. Before you conclude that this is just more alarmist eco-babble, consider the basic question facing the Earth Summit. If we cannot adequately provide for the present population of the planet without placing undue strains on the environment, is it realistic to expect to be able to furnish a decent standard of living for twice as many?

Few would deny that our present population is already putting severe strains on many of the planet's vital systems, yet many of the almost five and a half billion people in the world place relatively small burdens on the environment. More than one and a half billion people live in wretched poverty, garbage dumps, shanty towns or resourceless rural areas. In the last fifteen years, the number of poor people have increased by 81% in Africa, 55% in Asia and more than doubled in Latin America. The United Nations estimates that 500 million people in the Third World are either unemployed or underemployed – equal to the entire work force of the industrialized world. At the same time, the demographers tell us that we cannot escape a doubling of world population to ten billion by the middle of the next century and some place it as high as fourteen billion.

THIS IS PRECISELY THE QUESTION WHICH FACED THE WORLD COMMISSION on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission, after its Chair, the Norwegian Prime Minister). In its ground breaking 1987 report, the Commission pointed out that the earth's economy and its ecology were so closely interlocked that economic policies which ignored that reality were bound for failure. One of the keys to its new, "sustainable development" agenda which has made it so popular is that it appears to be a "win-win" programme. It points toward a world which is more prosperous as well as ecologically more sustainable by merging elements of the traditional environmental agenda with elements of the traditional economic agenda. The result is growth of a radically different kind: growth which is far less energy and raw material intensive, which helps to preserve the world's ecological capital rather than run it down, and which is far more equitably distributed both within and among the nations of the world. Although some are deeply suspicious of such an approach, it has found a good deal of favour with the Canadian public.

Brundtland made the environment into a mainstream economic issue of the same level of importance as job creation, export growth and the like. Recognizing this, the Secretary-General of the Rio meeting, Maurice Strong, decided to raise the ante. Strong persuaded the UN General Assembly that at least part of the meeting should be a heads-of-government summit, bringing together those with real economic power.

Unfortunately, the delegates to the UN General Assembly who laid out the work programme for the Rio conference did not learn the lessons of the Brundtland Report. Instead of planning a conference on sustainable development, they set the conference down the path toward a discussion of environment and development (the official name for the Rio

meeting is the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – UNCED). Inevitably, this has led the delegates to the meetings preparing for the conference back into stale 1970s rhetoric about whether or not environment and development are compatible goals. This in turn has led to a serious North-South split which has crystallized around two separate and largely contradictory agendas.

CANADA'S AGENDA FOR 1992, LIKE THAT OF MOST OF THE NORTHERN DEVELOPED world, is mainly focused on climate change, the loss of biological diversity in the tropics, deforestation, and the health of the oceans. Although global conventions for the first two are currently being negotiated on tracks separate from the 1992 conference, these issues will be at the centre of the Brazil meeting. The 1988 Toronto Conference on the Changing Atmosphere has been succeeded by a series of meetings designed to produce a framework convention on global warming by the time of the Rio Conference, but recent sessions have concluded with little agreement being reached. The US remains adamantly opposed to any targets for the reduction of carbon-dioxide emissions and the critical Japanese delegation has yet to definitively declare itself.

The second convention, on biological diversity, is moving very slowly, the victim of a North-South dispute over the use of genetic material in biotechnology. Many developing countries are unwilling to devote more resources to protecting their vast store of genetic material unless they can derive some benefit from the value of that material to the Northern pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries. At the moment, they receive no financial compensation for genetic material removed from their tropical forests, for example, and used in the development of new drugs.

Canada has also been involved in efforts to begin negotiations on a new international forestry convention. This convention would be concerned with forestry in the temperate regions as well as in the tropics. The convention has been put on hold indefinitely because of the strong opposition of many of the tropical forestry exporting countries, led by Malaysia. It is likely that UNCED will produce only a statement of principles.

THE SOUTHERN AGENDA IS BASED ON THE KNOWLEDGE THAT MOST OF these global problems have been caused, or at least aggravated, by the industrialized countries. The Northern OECD countries contain roughly 20% of the world's population and yet produce 80% of the greenhouse gases which are changing the world's climate. Over 90% of the chlorofluorocarbon gases which are destroying the planet's ozone layer are produced in the developed world. Yet, most of the discussions in the negotiations so far have focused on the developing world, rather than on the steps the North must take to lessen its own impacts in these areas.

The developing countries have feared this programme from the beginning. Although many realize that global environmental change may affect them even more than the industrialized countries, an agenda which is exclusively environmental threatens to divert attention away from their priorities for economic development. Furthermore, many of them feel that an action plan derived from an environmental agenda will hamstring them with new conditions for foreign aid and loans,