

# Environment and development

by Jim MacNeill

*From 1984 to 1987 Jim MacNeill was Secretary General of the World Commission on Environment and Development. That body has now completed its Report and its post-Report information program, and in this article Mr. MacNeill reflects on those three years. Jim MacNeill is now Director of the Environment and Sustainable Development Program at The Institute for Research on Public Policy in Ottawa.*

Is there any way to meet the needs and aspirations of the five billion people now living on planet Earth without compromising the ability of tomorrow's eight to fourteen billion to do the same? Keeping in mind that tomorrow's eight to fourteen billion could arrive within thirty to sixty years, and that 90 percent of them will be born into poor, often desperately poor, families in the Third World?

That, I believe, was the essential question in the collective mind of the United Nations General Assembly when, in 1983, it called for the establishment of a special Commission on Environment and Development. We presented our report to the UN on October 19, 1987, in a special plenary debate. When the debate was scheduled, we did not know that October 19 was to become better known as "Black Monday", the day the New York Stock Exchange dropped by 502 points. That knocked us off the front pages, but it also underscored dramatically our answer to the Assembly's initial question, which was "yes . . . but . . ." the "but" conveying a large number of proposals for fundamental changes in the way we manage the planet.

The General Assembly asked the Commission to take a fresh look at the critical issues of environment and development facing the world through the next century and to bring in some practical recommendations for changes in the way we do business, changes in policies, in institutions and in traditional forms of international cooperation. Recognizing that bureaucracies are not renowned for self-reform, it was agreed that the Commission should be an independent body outside the UN system, but linked to it.

## Getting started

Secretary General Pérez de Cuellar invited Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, then Leader of the Opposition and now Prime Minister of Norway, to be Chairman of the Commission, and Dr. Mansour Khalid, one time foreign minister of the Sudan, to be Vice Chairman. Mrs. Brundtland called me in Paris, where I was Director of Environment for OECD, and asked me to become Secretary General. In consultation with me, she and the Vice Chairman appointed the other members of the Commission. We

were twenty-three in all, from twenty-two different countries, regionally balanced, including all of the major power groups, and with a strong majority from developing countries.

The resolution calling for a special Commission was adopted by consensus, but leaders in many governments had serious reservations and expressed them. Some felt that to support the Commission was to admit that present approaches to managing the environment were flawed. They were right on. Some feared that the Commission would come out with yet another study predicting inevitable doom and bemoaning growth. They were dead wrong. Others feared that an independent Commission would make recommendations they would not want to support but could not oppose without political cost. They are now undecided. Some told me that the mandate was an impossible one and predicted certain failure.

I agreed that the mandate was difficult, but my knowledge of both the crisis unfolding and the opportunities being lost persuaded me that an inquiry was essential. It was also a unique opportunity: the General Assembly was not likely to establish another global inquiry on environment and development before the end of the century. Against all odds, I felt it must succeed.

Before agreeing to accept the Chairman's invitation to become Secretary General, however, I had to persuade myself that there was a fighting chance to achieve a positive result. Following a mission to London in March 1984, I retreated to a quiet hotel for five days to think it through. I had already consulted with colleagues in OECD and with top officials in environment, foreign affairs and many other sectors in more than two dozen countries. To clear my mind, I drafted a report on the key issues confronting the Commission, as I saw them, and on the substance and strategy of the inquiry it should pursue. In the process, I became convinced that, with a bit of luck, a lot of hard work, and about eight million dollars in voluntary contributions, the impossible was doable. After confirming that the concepts in my report would enjoy the Chairman's broad support, I agreed to become Secretary General.

## "Mandate for Change"

I put the report before the Commission at its first full meeting in Geneva in October 1984. Concerning the work program, the essential choice was clear. We could take the easy route and adopt a "standard agenda," basically the traditional list of environmental problems, or we could pioneer an "alternative agenda" integrating development and environment.

Concerning the method of inquiry, the choices were also clear. We should do all of the normal things one would expect of a body — commission expert papers, establish high-level