

My colleague, Lucien Bouchard, has put forward a proposal to the UN for the creation of an International Law of the Air similar to the historic Law of the Sea Treaty. Three months ago Canada hosted an international gathering of legal experts to develop and codify international legal principles to protect the atmosphere.

The Montreal Ozone Conference has been followed this Spring in London by a Ministerial meeting to search for materials that could replace ozone damaging products now in use.

In March Prime Minister Mulroney attended an environmental summit in The Hague where an impressive number of world leaders signalled their intention to make global climate change a first order political problem. These issues will be on the agenda next week at the Francophone Summit in Dakar, the week after that in Paris at the OECD and, in July, at the Economic Summit.

At first glance, it might seem an almost impossible task to achieve the necessary coordinated international responses. There are few precedents for countries agreeing to specific limits on their economic activities for environmental reasons. There are problems in identifying the right international institutions to use, and equipping them with necessary powers. Scientific opinion on the need for action is far from unanimous and the degree of commitment within and among countries differs widely. There is the familiar political problem of a shared general concern not being matched by a willingness of particular regions and sectors to suffer.

These and other concerns affect attitudes in the Third World. These countries tend to regard the greenhouse effect as a problem created by industrialization in developed countries, for which compensation is due. They hold strongly to their sovereignty, and resist, for example, international action affecting control over their tropical forests. In some cases the governments have little control over the use of forests, soil, or water by rural populations or of settlement patterns by urban dwellers. In most cases they are preoccupied by the stresses of poverty, civil strife, and economic insecurity which make environmental concerns seem a distant diversion.

In normal circumstances these impediments would be enough to forestall meaningful action for a long time to come. But these are not normal circumstances, and there is some reason to believe that we can make significant progress internationally.