

United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development

by Brent Wood

Scarborough College of the University of Toronto played host to a very special event in mid-January. An exceptionally keen group of students, known as Scarborough College Student Pugwash, hosted 60 others from Waterloo, Carleton, Trent, Erindale, Western and Guelph for a conference on Population and Development issues. What made the conference even more special was its status as the first step for Canadian university students on the "road to Brazil."

What is the "road to Brazil?"

In June of 1992, an estimated 5,000 delegates and government leaders from nations around the world will meet in Brazil, ostensibly to make decisions that will affect the future of the planet. Issues range from ozone protection and deforestation to the increasing gaps between rich and poor and the worldwide decline in "quality of life". This event, whose preparatory process is already well underway, has been tagged "the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development", or "UNCED" (pronounced "unsaid").

It is hoped that UNCED won't be simply another forum for the rhetoric of middle-aged, overweight diplomats. But it's going to take some work. If the conference and the preparations leading up to it are successful, the nations of the world will have the opportunity to make *binding commitments* on issues of both environmental protection and human equity.

Preparatory meetings for UNCED have stressed the inclusion of *non-governmental groups* (NGO's) in the conference and the events leading up to it, which may be a more important source of optimism for those of us who have become cynical about the possibilities for intergovernmental action and/or cooperation.

Interestingly, Canada has been the leading nation pushing for both youth and NGO participation. Groups who will have their voices heard in the UNCED process include business and industry, trade unions, scientific institutions, women's organizations, religious groups, indigenous peoples' organizations, and youth groups.

Mario Lavoie, a 24-year-old graduate of the International Development Studies Program of Scarborough, is one of the optimists.

"What is really exciting is the involvement of external groups," confirms Lavoie, who is currently employed by the Canadian Youth Foundation in Ottawa. His job is to organize Canadian youth to have their voices heard on the road to Brazil.

Lavoie was at the Pugwash Population and Development Conference to explain the idea behind the UNCED and the process that will lead up to it. In his talk he addressed the all-important question: "Why youth?"

"Because the world of tomorrow is our world," Lavoie said, "we have an interest in affecting the decisions made at the UNCED. We have a stake in seeing that the world goes in the right direction. We all know the major changes have to happen, and the more we

postpone these decisions, the more difficult it will be tomorrow."

Lavoie, while "officially" working for CYF, is the principal spokesperson for the Youth Working Group on Environment and Development, a group of Canadian university students who have

been charged with, and received international support for, the daunting mission of organizing the youth of the entire world for the UNCED.

The Working Group, whose efforts were recently recognized in the Ministry of the Environment's infamous "Green Plan", have an interesting history. They originally met in March of 1990 at an environment and development conference sponsored by the CYF in Montreal. Six members from that group attended a second event in Bergen, Norway. There they found that no other nation had given any serious consideration to organizing youth for the UNCED. Jumping in with both feet, the group made a public commitment for Canadian youth to arrange an international Youth Conference to be held before Brazil. They were backed up on this commitment by UNEP, the United Nations Environment Program.

Back in Canada, the six delegates joined with six more from the earlier conference to form the Working Group, known more affectionately as "the Youth Conspiracy." Their stated objective is to empower youth, in Canada and internationally, to become involved in environment and development issues.

This is where Student Pugwash comes in. The working group has connected with a number of already existing youth organizations, including the Environmental Youth Alliance (EYA), the SAVE Tour (Students for A Viable Environment), and Canadian Student Pugwash, whose Global Change Conference Program began with the Scarborough Conference.

Canadian Student Pugwash is a national organization consisting of Pugwash clubs at campuses across Canada. CSP's function, like Pugwash groups around the world, is to promote the balanced discussion of issues relating to technology and society. The name "Pugwash" comes from a fishing village in Nova Scotia where Albert Einstein and Ber-

trand Russell called for a meeting of the world's leading scientists in 1967. They were concerned then with the threat of nuclear war. Now, our reliance on technology without regard for its effects has brought us a bigger problem. CSP's current project, the

Global Change Conference Program, is made up of four regional conferences, each focused on one of the four areas of "global change": population, energy use, climate change, and loss of biodiversity. How does this connect with the UNCED?

Pugwash will be holding a national conference this coming March. That event will take the ideas and

proposals that student delegates from the regional conferences have come up with and synthesize them into a Canadian university student presentation to the UNCED. The presentation, in the form of a "position paper", will also be submitted to the national and international youth conferences leading up to it. This is the next step on the "road to Brazil"

Lavoie describes a "funnelling" process whereby youth from various sectors — university, high school, native communities, working youth — will participate in "training and empowerment" workshops across the country this coming June and July.

From there, delegates will participate in a national conference in August, where they will draw up a Canadian youth "position paper" on environment and development.

Finally, youth from around the world will be invited to attend an international conference in Costa Rica in March of 1992. There, 250 delegates will prepare a world youth statement on environment and development issues to present to the leaders of the United Nations.

It's a lot to deal with. And it's easy to get the impression that, by the time it gets through, any message Canadian university students might have will be so diluted it won't make any difference to anybody. But experience has shown that, far from breaking down ideas, the cumulative process builds them up. Ideas get shared, they grow, and when people from all over the world get together, their ideas become less myopic and more practical. We realize that this is not just one world, as we are led to believe.

Lavoie suggests one very important quality that youth often have that is usually lost among the diplomats who usually negotiate these things. That quality is idealism.

Idealism can be very important in negotiations, says Lavoie.

"It can be a disadvantage as well as an advantage," Lavoie admits. "Sometimes we lack the technical expertise to negotiate on the same level as more experienced people. But we *can* create a perspective. We can issue a moral challenge to them. We can remind them of the relevance of their decisions for future generations."

Lavoie expects there to be 20-25 youths at the Brazil conference itself. He admits it's a gamble. But he is optimistic that there is power in the idealism and enthusiasm of youth. Enough power to pressure the governments of all nations to move toward the positions suggested by youth and away from traditional bargaining positions.

He relates a story of a 17-year-old girl who was in attendance at a recent European Conference where the world's leaders were determining the future of CFC's. In the middle of the conference, she stood up and voiced her concern over the delegates' constant bickering and the steady flow of short-term solutions being proposed. "My future is within your brackets," she said. "Brackets," notes Lavoie, "contain those parts of a resolution that are considered contentious by the negotiators."

"That had an effect," Lavoie said. "The delegates approached the rest of the conference in a different mood."

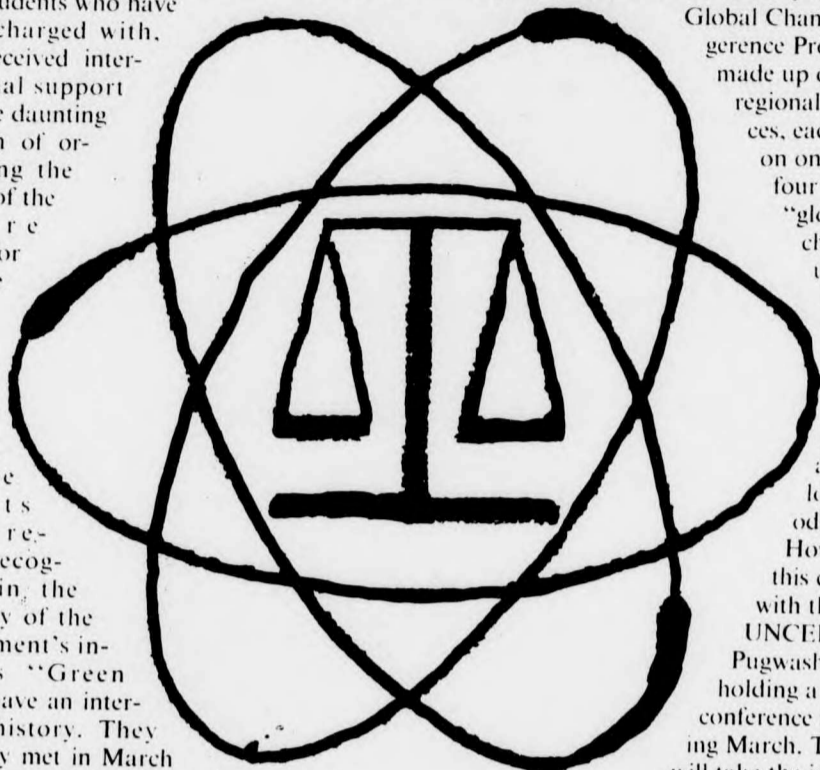
Lavoie encourages interested students to get involved in the process *now* by participating in groups such as Pugwash, or by contacting the Youth Foundation in Ottawa.

He gestures at the large television set in the Scarborough residence center where dozens of students have been gathered all weekend, watching reports from the Gulf.

"The resources being wasted there are incredible," he remarks with a shake of his head. "The amount they spend in *one day* could pay for worldwide environmental programs."

Canadians, as a wealthy people, are allowed the luxury of contemplating such things as the Gulf war and environmental deterioration as much as we like. And it's easy to moralize about others when you're not going hungry yourself. For most of the world, environmental concerns are a distant second priority list to simple survival. Canadian university students, as one of the tiny percentage of the world that is both wealthy and educated, have a clear moral responsibility to the rest of the world. Now, we have a practical one as well, to the youth, worldwide, who will inherit the environmental problems beginning to brew among us.

The message of the Gulf war is clear. The more we postpone our decisions the more difficult it will be tomorrow. For info on how to get involved call Canadian Student Pugwash: (613) 234-3622 or the Canadian Youth Foundation (613) 761-9206.



VROOM!

Read our York transportation feature by Ed Drass. Coming soon in March.

SUMMER JOBS

NOW INTERVIEWING FOR CAMP STAFF POSITIONS

Group Counsellors, Swim Staff, Unit Heads Also
Activity Specialists in Crafts, Dance, Pottery, Photography, Computers, Riding, Woodcraft, Farm Animals, Gymnastics, Camp Shows.

"For the Best Summer of Your Life"

ESTABLISHED IN 1966

GREEN ACRES DAY CAMP

70 acre country setting in Markham
Daily transportation to camp is provided.
For an interview appointment call:
887-1400 Weekdays 9 to 5

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
American Studies Committee Lecture Series:

FINAL LECTURE IN THE SERIES

American Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War

Gabriel Kolko

Department of History, York University

Monday, March 4, 1991

4:00 to 6:00 p.m.

George Ignatieff Theatre

Larkin Building

15 Devonshire Place, Trinity College