



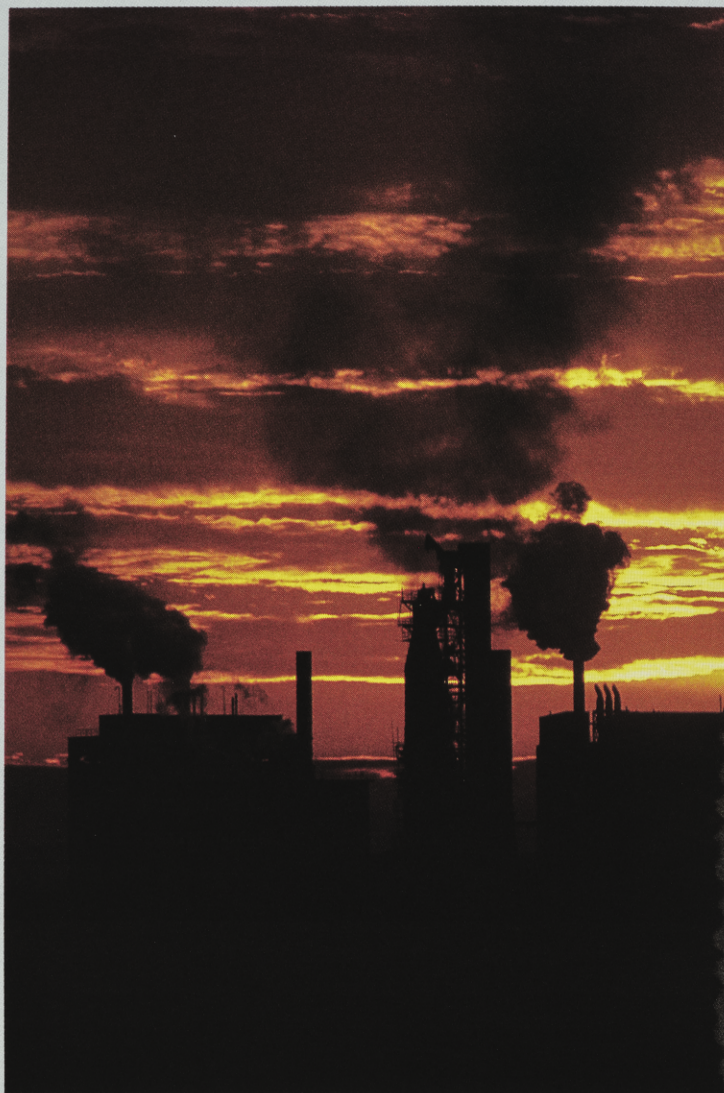
## Rio: tough decisions or giant jamboree?

IT IS GOING to be the biggest conference on environmental issues ever held. For two weeks next month the largest gathering of world leaders ever, and 20,000 to 30,000 officials, lobbyists, observers, media reporters and assorted hangers-on will descend on Rio de Janeiro in the name of saving the planet. It is the so-called Earth Summit.

It started with the United Nations conference on the environment in Stockholm in 1972 and continued with the 1983 World Commission on Environment and Development – better known as the Brundtland commission. The Brundtland commission's report in 1987, *Our Common Future*, stimulated a lot of debate and some action. Governments began to accept that the major environmental problems were global. CFCs released in London contribute to an increase in melanomas in Auckland. Fossil fuels burnt in Christchurch contribute to the warming of Arctic tundra. Forest clearance in Amazonia leads to a rise in sea levels in the Maldives. Global problems require global solutions.

In the aftermath of the Brundtland report the United Nations General Assembly decided to convene an Earth Summit – more formerly known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). This is what is on in Rio in June.

UNCED has a fearsome list of issues which are looking for solutions: loss of biodiversity, global warming, deforestation and the promotion of sustainable development in the less developed countries to name a few. And



*An international agreement on a reduction in the emissions of greenhouse gases will be a major challenge for the Earth Summit.*

that's before they tackle "Agenda 21", a comprehensive plan to transform the world's economy for the next century.

The work of UNCED lies not so much in the Rio extravaganza but in the lead-up process. This has already involved four major international meetings of government officials, non-government organisations and industry to refine the agenda and place concrete proposals before the summit. The most important of these finished last month in New York.

As part of this run-up to the summit there have been negotiations over two major conventions it is hoped will be signed at Rio.

The first of these is a con-

vention on climate change. While initially talk was of a comprehensive convention with substantial commitment to a reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the latest plan has a bottom-line that all the developed nations will stabilise CO<sub>2</sub> levels by the year 2000. This is supported by all members of the OECD except the United States.

The US administration's general lack of interest in UNCED has threatened to make the whole process meaningless. President Bush refuses to be convinced, in an election year, about the reality of global warming. The United States' role as the world's major producer of greenhouse gases with 30 percent of all carbon dioxide

emissions has no doubt influenced his position. The US economy runs on cheap oil and protecting the climate of the planet takes a back seat. This is where the lowest common denominator factor undermines the attempts for a tough agreement. Kuwait and other oil producing countries have also obstructed the climate negotiations.

The second convention planned for Rio is on biodiversity. At one level it is an attempt by western nations to protect the biological heritage of the third world. The latter understandably want some trade off, such as cash grants or a slice of the growing biotechnology industry, before agreeing to any increased protection for their own natural environments.

A third convention on tropical forestry has been dropped because of total lack of agreement on even a framework for negotiation.

Another document under discussion is Agenda 21, an 800-page list of actions to be taken by the world's governments on issues of population, health, poverty, toxic waste, the atmosphere and desertification in the period leading into the next century. The wish-list so far has been costed at over \$1,000 billion. How much of this would be paid by the developed world is a major question. As UNCED Secretary General Maurice Strong points out, "very little of the saving of the world comes cheap or free".

New Zealand's position in the lead up to UNCED has been schizophrenic. We have taken a strong lead on greenhouse emissions with a commitment to cut CO<sub>2</sub> levels by 20 percent by the year 2000. We have also taken a strong international position on the protection of marine mammals and on the exploitation

IVOR EARP-JONES/DAC COMMUNICATE NZ