Summit For NOTHING?

The Rio Earth Summit: blighted by a recalcitrant US? Peter Colley disagrees. He thinks the Summit outcome was better than the mass media’s instincts suggested.

So many world leaders and so little action. Thus the jaundiced response of many environmentalists to the outcomes of the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in June. The US in particular has been condemned for diluting the Climate Change Convention and refusing to sign the Biodiversity Convention.

It would be convenient to believe that the environment and environmentalists have lost out at Rio because of the intransigence of the US. Unfortunately, blaming the Americans fails to recognise the role that the US has played on behalf of other countries at the Summit. It also fails to examine the deep confusion amongst environmentalists and governments on how environmental problems should be addressed. Are the ‘polluter-pays principle’ and market forces the solution, or is there a requirement for new concepts of community and government responsibility?

In addition to the 35,000 and equal numbers of soldiers protecting them from the ravening hordes of Rio’s sprawling slums, there were no less than 8,000 journalists covering events. Never have so many been sent to cover so much and had so little to say. Unable to comprehend the two years of tortuous negotiations that have produced some admittedly impenetrable documents, and unable to summarise the immense variety of interests present in the 150 national delegations (not to mention the thousands of non-governmental organisations) the media have neatly condensed the Summit into a ‘US versus the Rest’ scenario.

Australia’s presence at the Summit was muted. Three ministers were sent, but not the prime minister. It would seem that the environment is not what it once was in terms of the survival of governments; Mr Keating decided that it
wasn’t going to be much of a vote winner to take a week out to give a six-minute speech in Rio. This is indicative of the overall handling of environmental issues by the Keating government; the work is continuing, but it is no longer the high priority that it was under Hawke. Further evidence of this new low-key approach can be seen in the government’s pedestrian progress in developing its Ecologically Sustainable Development Strategy and National Greenhouse Response Strategy.

Attending the Summit in place of Paul Keating, Environment Minister Ros Kelly was under firm Cabinet instructions to tread a tightly defined line. On the issue of climate change, every public utterance of the minister has mentioned both Australia’s commitment to reducing emissions and the caveat that the precondition for any expensive moves in that direction will be international consensus.

Nevertheless, Australia has commanded a fair degree of respect at the Summit, as well as in the processes leading up to it, as an ‘honest broker’. Australia is recognised as a developed country in outlook and in living standards, but also as an economy heavily reliant on trade in natural resources in the same way that many Third World countries are. In funding research on greenhouse, on the economic impacts of greenhouse solutions and in pioneering strategies to protect endangered species, Australia is perceived as more genuine about the environment than most.

Australia and Canada were the only two nations in the world to include non-governmental organisations in their official delegation: representatives of the Business Council, environmental groups, foreign aid organisations and the ACTU all attended. The ACTU had a fairly lonely experience at Rio; very few trade unions attended, and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions pulled out due to perceived marginalisation of unions by the Summit process.

The US has been singled out as the villain of Rio for its failure to sign the biodiversity convention—yet this simplistic account conveniently hides a multitude of sins on the part of other nations. The USA has some of the most rigorous environmental regulations in the world. Its Clean Air Act is ahead of similar efforts by the European Community (and the rest of the world). EC grandstanding on carbon dioxide emissions from energy use should be weighed against their opposition to action to reduce other greenhouse gases. Their position at Rio had a lot to do with maximising their current trade advantage in energy efficient products and protecting their heavily subsidised agriculture (which produces a lot of greenhouse gases).

The EC position remains unchanged, despite the mountain of evidence that the dumping of subsidised agricultural products on world markets by the EC has done more to contribute to deforestation, desertification, soil degradation and subsequent species loss, than any global warming thus far. Even more bizarre is the spectacle of Japan emerging as an environmental saviour; it is rumoured to have allocated up to $US7 billion per year to the $US125 billion
price tag attached to Agenda 21, the Summit's aid package for the Third World environment. The nation that resists the phasing out of whaling, uses driftnetting extensively, is a major market for the products of endangered species and has an aggressive program of nuclear power development could only appear as an environmental benefactor within the consciousness-altering confines of a large international conference. Japan's position on foreign aid is linked more to its aspirations on the global political stage than to saving the world.

Similarly, most developing nations (with the notable exception of the Association of Small Island States, who are scared of drowning under rising sea levels) have been loath to make any commitment to reducing emissions growth or to conserving their natural resources. With some moral, but no ecological, justification they have argued for their right to develop, and have chosen to concentrate on concrete issues of water supply and industry creation, rather than the relatively abstract notion of potential global warming.

In this context, everybody has been happy for the US to carry the can for inaction on the environment. America's willingness to play this role could actually be seen as confirming its emerging hegemonic role in the post-USSR New World Order, rather than signalling its marginalisation.

Perhaps these strange twists can only occur because of the dominance of money and development rather than the environment at the Summit. Although the Summit will produce four major documents (see box), for the most part the debate has replicated the traditional fight over funding between the industrialised North and the developing South that occurs in most United Nations forums.

The hope that the North might double its foreign aid programs to $US125 billion in a time of global recession is desirable, possible necessary, but definitely not politically feasible. For Australia, doubling foreign aid would require finding a further $A1 billion within a federal budget of about $A110 billion. (The much vaunted One Nation statement involved a total additional expenditure to the budget of just $2.3 billion. The Liberal Party's Fightback! package promises to cut foreign aid further but it is hard to see any government providing such funds. The people of the South don't vote in Australian elections.

The fight over aid funds has hidden the more fundamental debate over property rights and alternative paths to environmentally sustainable development. This is the background to the US refusal to sign the Biodiversity Convention. The US wasn't prepared to endorse a vague commitment which could be read as infringing intellectual property rights in biotechnology. Third World countries wanted at least partial ownership rights to products that were developed using biological resources found in their country (e.g. medicines produced from plants); the US wanted ownership of the products of biological research and development to remain with the corporations which carry out the research.

There is a practical concern here about where royalty payments to Third World nations for the use of their biological resources would actually go (to the indigenous owners of such resources, or to funding the lifestyles of the Third World ruling elite?). There is also a more fundamental conflict over how environmental problems should be solved. One point of view is that environmental problems are a result of a lack of specific ownership for many natural resources; we pollute air and water and to sell or assign property rights and rely on the profit-maximising behaviour of the owner to ensure that their asset is not sold cheaply. This approach, strongly promoted by international business organisations and conservative groups, seeks solutions primarily through the fuller use of private property rights and market forces.

The alternative is for national governments to take responsibility for the stewardship of natural resources under their control and to supervise or regulate their conservation and use on a sustainable basis. While allowing for the possibility of more public control over how we use the environment, it also opens up problems of centralised, unresponsive bureaucracy.

Therein lies the dilemma of Rio—one which has been addressed neither by the decision-makers or by the media. The world is becoming a smaller and more crowded place. Economic and social development is going to become increasingly circumscribed by physical limits to the assimilative capacity of the planet. This sits uncomfortably with the triumph of capitalism and the free market over the old socialist model of planned development. Measuring and monitoring resource use, and setting standards or parameters for our interaction with the environment on a long term sustainable basis is not easily reconciled with a notion of small government exercising minimal supervision over a supposedly efficient marketplace.

Those who believe that ecological doom is nigh will be deeply disappointed with the outcomes of Rio. Those who are more optimistic about the possible timeframe for change will take comfort from the fact that governments of the world have at least agreed on the need for change and the direction it should take. As the evidence of environmental problems mount we can expect an acceleration in that direction. The environment issue is not being removed from the global and national political agenda. It is being permanently entrenched.

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