

# What greenhouse convention?

Norway has been playing host to the first of four UN regional conferences, and has been abuzz with greenhouse talk. But the problem of negotiating what to do about the greenhouse effect is as far from solved as ever.

BERGEN is not usually a busy place, but the past two weeks have been exceptional. One of four regional conferences at ministerial level in preparation for a UN conference in 1992 was preceded by a more general discussion among 150 scientists, with the blessing of such organizations as the Norwegian Research Council and the European Science Foundation. The proceedings appear to have been admirably measured — more so than, for example, the report two years ago of the commission on world environmental problems of which Mrs Gro Harlem Bruntland, lately prime minister of Norway, was the chairman. As usual on these occasions (see page 193), an environmental pressure group did its best to enliven the proceedings by publishing the text of a US embassy document.

The central question last week was the prospect of global warming as a consequence of an excess greenhouse effect. That is as it should be. The conference statement valuably breaks new ground by explaining to its readers why uncertainty (about the timing or magnitude of the effect) is not an excuse for doing nothing, and goes on to advocate the negotiation of a convention to regulate the emission of greenhouse gases. The statement is even enlightened enough to acknowledge that the nature of the problems that must be solved before a convention can stick is partly economic and partly a matter of social equity, national and international. Fine. More of that, and we shall all be the wiser.

So how to negotiate a convention? The essential trick is to persuade everybody that it is needed before anybody knows how it would cramp his style. Of necessity, the participants must be governments. The people sitting round the table will be their representatives. The best that could be done in the next few years (say three) would be an agreement to agree. An agreement to agree on terms made explicit will take longer. Unilateral declarations of economic self-deprivation in the meantime will earn no brownie points. Abuse of the United States for not being in the vanguard of self-abnegation will not merely serve no purpose, it will be counterproductive. (And has China yet been asked?) The Bergen meeting showed that there is plenty that academics can meanwhile do, but they must learn that it is politicians who must eventually sign the convention that they advocate. □

If the agenda is to save the surface of the Earth for posterity, or even merely to rub along until posterity is

smarter than its predecessors, intelligent compromise will be necessary at every step, chiefly between rich and poor. The politics of cataclysmic populism will get us nowhere. □

## Animals at work

Accusations of animal abuse have shocked the British public. But the news should have come from within.

ALREADY demoralized, Britain's biology researchers will find little comfort in last week's allegations by an animal-welfare group that Professor Wilhelm Feldberg has broken the laws on animal experimentation (see page 190). Scientific research in Britain is already enough in the doldrums; the extra opprobrium that could now accrue will not much help good causes. It is especially damaging that the alleged violations should have happened at the Medical Research Council's largest in-house laboratory. The best hope must be that the inquiries promised by the council and the Home Office will reveal that this is an isolated incident.

On an issue so complex ethically, researchers cannot afford to be complacent. The topic is one that excites general concern among the public, for many of whom the unavoidable use of animals in research is their sole knowledge of scientific matters. Britain has already had an unwelcome taste of violence and threats thereof against researchers and their laboratories. The task of winning round opinion will be made more difficult if the impression (however unfounded) gains ground that the provisions of recent legislation can be ignored.

There is no doubt that most researchers take their ethical responsibilities to animals seriously. How can that be demonstrated? It is disturbing that there are individual researchers who dare not say openly that 20 Home Office inspectors for 18,000 licence holders are not enough effectively to police the legislation, or that the inspectors may not be properly qualified. But too much is at stake to rely on the assurance of government inspectors. Laboratories, in their own interests, should look out for themselves — some senior person should supervise all animal experimentation, should be publicly identified and should be empowered to answer public enquiries on all matters arising. Letting the Feldberg case come to light has fortified only the lobbyists. □