

What kind of greenhouse treaty?

Events elsewhere should not blind us to the conference begun in Washington this week at which the first steps will be taken towards a treaty to avoid the effects of global change. There is a long way to go.

THERE could hardly have been a worse occasion than the present for the first meeting, in Washington this week, of the negotiators who are meant to produce a global warming treaty in the next sixteen months or so. Many of the governments whose support is essential have other things on their minds. The United States is preoccupied with the Gulf War, the Soviet Union with its own survival as an integral power and many of the other industrialized nations of the world with the signs of financial instability that abound — Britain and the United States are sliding into recession, Germany and Japan are fighting inflation by increasing interest rates. And who can expect Iraqi, Israeli and Saudi Arabian delegates to sit through a conference on global warming in a contemplative frame of mind? So nobody should be disappointed if little seems to happen in the next two weeks. It will be time enough for that if the next year goes by with nothing to report.

The immediate goal is not a treaty, but a framework within which a treaty can be negotiated. The timetable requires that to be done by the time of the conference planned for June next year. Given that it has taken nearly twenty years for the United States and the Soviet Union to fail to reach a bilateral agreement on strategic arms — that is the treaty that will not now be signed in Moscow this month — that has always been a tall order.

Those who ask that the treaty should include specific regulations for the control of greenhouse-gas emissions make it even less likely that a workable treaty could be ready in time. But the practical instrument, a treaty requiring its signatories to agree to act when the need for action has also been agreed, is also the wisest course to follow. The principle of the connection between the accumulation of greenhouse gases and the prospect of climatic change may be widely accepted, but the detailed consequences of climatic change, and the magnitude of their social consequences, can only be guessed at. To suggest otherwise, as greenhouse enthusiasts do, is irresponsible.

That is why close attention should be paid to proposals such as that of David Victor, on page 451 of this issue. Victor's appealing argument has several virtues, of which the chief is that it recognizes that the negotiation of a greenhouse treaty must be a continuing process, not a once and for all business.

Enthusiasm for writing into an instant treaty on global warming restrictions on emissions comparable with those

voluntarily undertaken by the governments of the European Communities may be well-meant, but would at this stage be unhelpful. For the European targets are insufficient to avoid increases of temperature such as those predicted by the numerical models. If the predictions are correct, there will be some chagrin among European voters persuaded that they have done their bit to avert global warming when they are told that even more is expected of them.

That is but one reason why it would be preferable that the international commitment to the abatement of greenhouse gases should be renewed at regular intervals, and in circumstances in which those concerned are made to strike equitable bargains with each other.

Issues of equity are bound to dominate the years ahead, but it would be folly to suppose that these could all be settled in advance. It is not merely that some means will have to be found for compensating developing countries for their avoidance of practices that have made rich countries prosperous, the burning of fossil fuel in particular, but that the rich countries will have legitimate grounds for quarrelling among themselves over issues such as the retail price of gasoline and the credit they are allowed for their dependence on nuclear electric generation. It is difficult enough to see how questions such as these will be resolved if and when the signs of climatic change become more definite than they are at present. Attempting to settle them in advance is a recipe for failure — and for costly error.

That is why the most important part of any framework negotiated in the next few months must be the arrangements made for alerting the signatories of a greenhouse treaty to the steps that next call for action. Victor's notion of a multidisciplinary secretariat based on that which has successfully administered the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) may not be the most compelling in the wake of the collapse of last December's trade negotiations, but that failure lies at politicians' doors. And there are now signs that the talks will resume.

What the greenhouse treaty needs is a body of competence at the analysis of the technical information that accumulates as well as the definition of goals that might realistically be achieved in the hard political world. When it takes much longer than sixteen months to found modest research institutes, the goals the treaty-writers have set themselves are quite breathtaking. □