

The World in Conference

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ONE cannot help but notice a striking development of modern times—and that is the proliferation of international meetings devoted to various problems that are felt to be world-wide. Many of these conferences are under the auspices of the United Nations and many are by other groupings.

Another fact to be noted is that the conferences deal with problems which have become grave and which modern civilisation has failed to solve: world hunger, housing, the use of the high seas, industrial pollution, the spread of nuclear armaments, the maldistribution of the world's wealth, the misuse of the world's resources.

It can no doubt be set down as encouraging that there is at least some recognition of these problems and a willingness to discuss them. But alas, a closer look reveals that very little is settled or solved at these meetings. Very few want to budge from the *status quo*. Those who fear world government can relax—we are very far from it. If anything, there has been an intensification of nationalism—which cannot wholly be viewed with satisfaction.

Another deterrent is that even if a UN conference comes to a conclusion, it has no force of application whatsoever. Any nation is free to ignore it. But even such a conclusion—hardly more than a statement—is hard to come by. Most conferences end with an agreement that the matter should be further discussed via another conference—and sometimes a permanent committee is set up to study it.

A UN World Food Conference in Rome in 1974 reached the remarkable conclusion that "the principal cause of malnutrition is poverty"—but could not get much further. A programme of information for an early-warning system, founded on national interests. "Poor" countries wanted aid from "rich" countries—hardly anything new. We have been that route before and have found that

supplies find their way into the black market and the pockets of the rich.

This raises an embarrassing point usually skirted at these conferences: that the representatives of the "poor" countries are usually members of the ruling class; that the "developing" countries are not always brave new little nations but are very old societies with very entrenched privileged elites; and that the "rich" countries are often newer societies that made their way by allowing a little more freedom and equality of opportunity.

The Habitat conference held this year in Vancouver—on the matter of shelter, one of man's basic needs which modern civilisation has not solved—came up with some handsome statements. We can applaud the conclusion that "the unearned income resulting from the rise in land values . . . must be subject to appropriate capture by public bodies (the community)", even though this was hedged in by ifs and buts, and surrounded by a call for public land planning, which needs to be approached guardedly. With all that, however, the only concrete result was the establishment of an audio-visual information centre.

One of the most ticklish subjects is the Law of the Sea, on which several UN conferences have been held, the most recent one in New York, September 1976. Among the hot topics are the sovereignty limits of nations, fishing rights and the exploration of the seabed for minerals and oil. A few years ago Peru was thought to be extreme in wanting a 200-mile sovereignty limit but this is now being considered as a general rule. No agreement was reached as to how the oceans' mineral resources might be tapped. No doubt each nation and the influential groups within the nations have their own private thoughts on the matter—and very likely the "common good" has little part in these thoughts. Well, at least there was agreement that there should be another con-

ference on the subject.

Among the non-UN conferences is the "North-South dialogue" which has been going on in Paris. (The "North" refers to the developed countries and the "South" to the developing countries.) The chief issue is the bolstering of the South's economic situation by the North. After a year, very little has been settled. As might be expected, all countries are very guarded about "trade concessions." Financial aid to poor countries keeps coming up (or to the rich in the poor countries?).

One non-UN conference that reaches practical conclusions is the periodic meeting of OPEC (Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries). Unfortunately, this is about a rise in oil prices to the rest of the world.

Thus we must sadly concur that "everybody's business is nobody's business" and that groups are still motivated by their own special interests. We must even be disillusioned about one of the supposed benefits of international meetings, that while nations are talking they are not fighting, since we have seen that they can be talking in one part of the world and fighting in another.

Still, the logic of world events has led the nations to talk together about crucial matters. We can only hope that the continuing pressure of these matters will impel the nations to take more constructive and equitable action than has been the case so far—and that we may discover that the common good must be reconciled with individual benefit.

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