A new proposal has been made to change Article 39, the decision to open up an area for mining, from consensus to a qualified majority vote. This is absolutely unacceptable to ECO. Consensus on the decision to open up areas for mining in Antarctica guarantees that the necessary safeguards are, as much as possible, taken into account. The proposal would also further undermine the poor balance of power in the Minerals Convention.

Adoption of the proposal would weaken the position of the Commission. The Commission is the representative of the collective interests of the international community. Therefore it is extremely important that all members of the Commission agree to the decision to open up an area for mining.

The balance of power in the Convention must not be further weakened in favour of those countries which would like to mine in Antarctica. It is important that the consensus rule remains as it is.

Proposals such as this highlight a prevalent attitude in the negotiations - that mechanisms which have a high probability of keeping miners out of the Antarctic should be dismantled. This gives the lie to the assertion that the negotiations are intended to be neutral on the question of whether mining occurs. In "official" statements, it is often contended that the Convention provides disincentives to mining. This is even harder to swallow.

The public has a right to know that some of the key players in the negotiations are extremely enthusiastic for explicit rules when it comes to an operator's rights and incentives, and are less inclined to work for a Convention with robust protection mechanisms and disincentives to mining.

No Subsidies for Miners

ECO congratulates those delegations that are supporting clauses in the minerals convention against subsidies and behaviour that is not economically rational. It is difficult to understand why some delegations oppose an anti-subsidies clause in the minerals convention. Surely, in view of the many pious words uttered about protecting the environment, they could not favour subsidies that would encourage minerals activities which otherwise would not be economically rational?

The experience of the US and Canada in the Arctic shows that companies will try to obtain all sorts of both direct and indirect "incentives" to operate in difficult frontier areas. National tax codes provide a typical vehicle for handing out these types of special benefits and inducements. The argument for providing the tax credits often is based on "national security" - a
The protecting of Antarctica?

Henry Kissinger once said New Zealand was a dagger pointed straight at the heart of Antarctica. This statement, dismissing our importance to a world divided between nuclear alliances, should be taken as a reminder that Antarctica matters to us.

It would, however, be hard to draw such a conclusion from the Antarctic Minerals Convention now taking place in Wellington. In what some may see as a typically ambivalent statement, the Foreign Minister, Russell Marshall, said that the negotiations were not designed to open up Antarctica for mining — rather they were designed to ensure that if mining did take place it should do so in a regulated manner designed not to damage the environment.

Nowhere in the world has exploitation done other than damage the environment. Great rainforests have been felled and oil spills have wreaked havoc on the major tanker routes. Evidence of environmental abuse is all about us. If mining is to proceed in Antarctica the world's last haven of pristine natural beauty will be at risk. As Greenpeace's recent check of different base camps on the ice has shown, even scientists fail to clean up after themselves. The international environmental organisation found 47 badly corroded drums of fuel left near the British base on Deception Island by the British Antarctic Survey. The area where the fuel was abandoned is frequented by gentoo penguin, fur seal, sheathbill and other wildlife. Greenpeace also claimed that the Chilean base was using a melt-lake as a rubbish dump and the Chinese at the nearby "Great Wall station" were using a similar method of waste disposal.

It is little wonder that the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition wants mining completely banned in Antarctica. If scientific expeditions cannot be trusted to clean up after themselves mining companies are unlikely to behave any better.

Antarctica's ice-sheets have a controlling influence on ocean circulation patterns, global weather, climate and food production. The area's biological systems are simple and very vulnerable to damage. Nothing that has emerged from the convention suggests that the countries involved are more interested in the unique environmental qualities of Antarctica as opposed to the prospects of extracting the minerals that might be found there.

There is little sign that New Zealand is taking a special interest in protecting the icy splendour of Antarctica — the best hope of protection still lies in the fact that mineral extraction there would be expensive compared with site costs elsewhere. Perhaps by the time extraction costs do become feasible the world will have become better educated about the environmental values at stake in the region.

magic talisman. It usually takes years before the truth is known by the public.

In the case of the US Arctic oil development program, the tax code has been used to provide large subsidies to companies. Some analysts have questioned whether exploitation of Arctic oil would have occurred without subsidies and special credits. In the Antarctic, all member nations of the Antarctic Treaty should be able to agree that, as a fundamental principle, there should be no special inducements that encourage minerals exploration and exploitation.