

**T**HE PROPOSAL that the economic value of natural resources should be shared out on a *global* basis, for the benefit of mankind in general, tends to be dismissed as utopian.

This reaction is mainly designed to evade the issue of the fair allocation of property rights, and it seeks to repress an examination of the basis under which income is distributed.

But the World Administrative Radio Conference in Geneva last month demonstrated that the proposal is not pie-in-the-sky.

For airwaves, to produce sound and vision on people's radios and TV sets, are created by the combined efforts of brainpower and technology. *But they would not physically exist but for the demand of consumers.*

Now, under competitive conditions, the value of broadcasting exceeds the income returned to the employed capital and labour. Thus, pure economic rent is created as a direct result of consumer demand and the possibility of harnessing a dimension of nature – space – to transmit sound and vision. Economic rent is therefore directly attributed to space.

**W**HO IS ENTITLED to own that rent? Surely not individuals or companies? They are rewarded for their inputs, and can expect no more.

Surely not governments? They do not create space, and in any event airwaves transcend national boundaries.

Broadcasting frequencies are a limited resource, and the demand for them from commercial firms exceeds the supply. But there are also geopolitical implications which were at the centre of the Geneva conference.

At present, the Big Powers – Britain through the BBC's External Services, the USA through the Voice of America, and the USSR through Radio Moscow – dominate the short wave and other forms of long distance communication. This is complicated by the fact that satellites are soon to make it easy for one nation to beam TV programmes onto the

# Geopolitics, the air waves & 'utopia'

**Fred Harrison  
proposes a  
solution for  
the Radio  
Conference  
in Geneva**

sets of people across the world.

Third World countries want some of the frequencies reserved for them NOW even though they do not yet possess the technology to use them. This hardly seems an equitable way to use a scarce resource – by keeping it idle, denying others who could make good use of it.

The solution is simple. Those who wish to monopolise space should pay a competitive price for the privilege!

**T**HE RENTAL value should go into a common purse, to be used according to priorities established by the international community. And that must principally mean for the benefit of the hungry masses in the Third World.

Then, when the governments of the developing countries – or their private sector broadcasting companies – wish to rule some of the airwaves, they can do so. Providing they, in turn, pay the price for the right to do so: rent, paid into the common purse from which they had benefitted when in need.

But this solution does not just

deal with problems linked to the Third World. There is also a serious imminent problem within the West.

The British, for example, do not view with enthusiasm the prospect of TV advertising being creamed off by a commercial station beaming programmes from Luxembourg. The Irish are no less pleased with the prospect of UK channels being available throughout the Republic.

The issue of national sovereignty is used as a smokescreen to conceal the reality: the substance of the dispute is money.

Established economic principles enable us to resolve the issue in an ethical way. Viewers should be free to take whatever programmes they find pleasing; and the broadcasters – wherever they are territorially located – should be rewarded or penalised according to whether they meet the wishes of audiences.

National governments, for their part, have no moral right to intercept the airwaves by claiming exclusive rights to portions of space... any more than they have exclusive rights to tracts of the ocean's beds.

But if nations cannot claim proprietorial rights to space, commercial companies certainly do not have any right to the economic value of that aspect of nature.

Furthermore, nor should the audiences be granted the benefit of economic rent (by, for example, resolving the distribution problem by not charging them rent). For space belongs to all of us, including those who choose not to tune into the airwaves!

The solution is for the broadcasters to pay rent to the international community. No-one, then, secures unfair financial advantage, or wields undue political influence. And no-one distorts the demands of consumers.

And a source of finance is established to meet those needs of the world which transcend the isolated problems of individuals or of nations, but which are truly international in character and are therefore the responsibility of us all.