



● Philip Finkelstein outside the United Nations HQ in New York, asks:

WHO OWNS EARTH? WHAT'S IT WORTH?

IDENTIFYING the ownership and value of natural resources should be undertaken on a global scale, declared Philip Finkelstein in a paper submitted to delegates at the Peoples' Assembly on Oct. 31.

The conference was sponsored at the UN in New York by the United Nations Center for Disarmament. In his paper, Mr. Finkelstein, a professor at Adelphi University, New York, declared that a deeper understanding of the relationship between man and nature would follow from such a project.

In an ideal world, we would all be equal proprietors of the land

and seas, the total value of which would be the measure of man's natural heritage.

In our imperfect world, however, the overwhelming majority of mankind paid the minority for access to life-giving natural resources.

The cause of reform, advocated Mr. Finkelstein, would be advanced by identifying owners, and putting a value on natural resources.

"The very process by which a community, a country, a society or any other unit of human organization would engage in this inquiry could have a salutary effect on

many problems.

"There may also be an important lesson for our struggle for world peace. For with the growth of our knowledge of who controls earth would inevitably come the realization that it is **they** who must pay everyone else for that privileged access to nature, rather than the reverse.

"In those few instances in which the value of land is collected by the community at large from those who claim its ownership, there have been beneficial effects ranging from general material improvement to more balanced growth.

"The interrelated but elusive goals of peace and prosperity can be more directly achieved when those who gain specifically from their access to nature at least share that gain with all those who are denied."

Human needs could be more fully supported if the riches of the earth were "fully distributed to all mankind without the artificial barriers of nation, state, government, corporation and titles.

"Yet even within these humanly-created barriers, it is possible to make our planet a safer, healthier and more satisfactory one for all. We can begin raising our own and the world's consciousness of this better way in every human community on earth."

That, said Mr. Finkelstein, could be achieved by world organisations participating in a project to identify the ownership and value of land.

RENTS: land hoarding kills firms

THE MYTH that the construction industry's main enemy is Britain's planning system has come under attack from several sources, writes Ian Barron.

Environment Minister Michael Heseltine's draft circular on development controls, which will soon be sent as guidance to local authorities, has been subjected to forensic treatment by the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA).

They say that responsibility for delays in development lay with "difficulties of land assembly, and difficulty in financing new developments in the current economic climate."

But while the TCPA may not be a disinterested party, the Conservative-controlled London Boroughs Association cannot be considered hostile to the Government or the principles of the free market.

And their chairman, Simon Randall, in

also taking account of the short-term problems induced by the current recession, has now spotlighted the high cost of land as the reason why there could be a national shortage of 500,000 homes by 1986.

BUT WHAT causes the price of land to rise above the reach of builders and prospective home buyers?

The TCPA, in rejecting the allegation that planners hold up applications unnecessarily, notes:

"One could even argue the paradox that the greater the delay the greater will be the value of the development, a factor which is not lost sight of by those developers who obtain planning permission and then fail to use it."

The Association quite rightly emphasises that the private sector, by artificially shrinking the supply of land, pushes up the price beyond realistic limits.

One result is that entrepreneurs are not able to set up companies in suitable premises, for sites "are available only at prices or rents which small firms cannot afford."

But while the diagnosis may be correct, the solution advocated by the TCPA - granting local governments more effective powers to assemble land for development - is no answer.

For the public sector - councils and statutory bodies - are notorious land hoarders. Interposing more powerful bureaucracies between land and prospective users cannot be considered an optimum policy.

What we need is a mechanism which sensitively monitors the changing needs of users while simultaneously deterring owners from holding land idle. That can only be achieved by imposing a high *ad valorem* tax on the annual value of all land.