

## CHURCH RESPONSES

"Irish people do not want to promote policies which benefit themselves while driving more people into poverty" (C.M.R.S., Conference of Major Religious Superiors). Yet in the Budget Ireland's overseas development aid (ODA) was reduced by £11m (26%). What has happened to our not-too-distant generosity shown in Bob Geldof's "Band Aid" ? It's 'strictly business', this time.

And it is not only 'strictly business' for Third World countries; what we do to others we do to ourselves; the £10 hospital charge remains, while tax relief on VHI remains unchanged; a wage earner on £5,000 p.a. will receive an increase of £1.00 per week, someone on long-term unemployment assistance, £4.20 - receiving an apparently enormous increase of 11%, - while, in contrast a £15,000 wage earner will gain £6.00 per week. This Budget "moves our society further in a direction where political priorities are more concerned with the demands of the better off than with the needs of the disadvantaged" (C.S.S.C., Catholic Social Service Conference, of the Dublin Archdiocese). For the unemployed especially, this Budget displays a feeble attempt to alleviate what the Government's own Commission on Social Welfare described as "the seriously impoverished situation of the unemployed". In gross terms - tax-payers

will receive £91m in relief this year, public sector employees will receive £70m, while social welfare recipients get £45m. This budget is biased in favour of the better-off, and the Minister hardly disguises this; in the context of social welfare he refers to "fraud and abuse of the system", while he refers to tax evaders as those "who fail to meet their responsibilities" - yet the money lost through the former is only a fraction of that lost through the latter.

Both the C.M.R.S. and the C.S.S.C. *WELCOME* - with the strong qualification mentioned above - some of the changes. For instance; the flat-rate increase of £4.20 for the long-term unemployed and those on Supplementary Welfare Allowance; the 6% increase in child dependent allowance; the general 3% increase in social welfare payments; the £3m allocation for the homeless, over 3 years.

Both organisations strongly *CRITICISE* the Government's failure to take what options were possible to tackle poverty. For instance, they criticise; the lack of consideration of low-paid employees outside the tax net; the poor delivery of social welfare services; emigration was ignored; the Homeless Persons Bill was ignored; no plans to create the 20,000 jobs promised in the Programme for National Recovery; no attempt to widen the tax base.

Both organisations rely for the strength of their claims on an appeal to morality. This appeal leads firstly, to a demand for a *fairer distribution* of resources. However, just as important as distribution is the right to participate in the creation of resources, i.e., jobs. An undue concentration on distribution may fail to directly challenge current developments; the ever increasing numbers of those excluded from participating actively in the economy (or emigrating) and the growing resentment of those who see themselves shouldering the economy.

Secondly, the appeal to morality of itself may not adequately value the bargaining world of politics. In a similar vein, "The Work of Justice" (Irish Bishops' Pastoral, 1977) appeals to employees to "respond positively to appeals for reasonable income restraint". And "these appeals should be accompanied by firm assurances that the real value of wages will be protected, that any access accruing profits will be ploughed back into new jobs..." (No.93). Are the Bishops adequately distinguishing charity from the concrete structures which facilitate justice? 'Firm assurances' are, for the most part, as firm as the bargaining power of a particular interest group.

Finally, one looks forward in the future not only to these two welcome submissions from agencies of the Catholic Church, but perhaps to submissions from the Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Church of Ireland and from the Presbyterian and Methodist churches.