

Voting in Pursuit of Justice

The Forthcoming Election

The imminence of the third General Election since the Irish economic boom began provides an opportunity to consider how far we as a people, residents of one of the wealthiest countries in the world, are concerned with eliminating poverty and injustice.

It is without question that high levels of economic growth, which have now lasted more than a decade, have enabled a vast and positive transformation in the lives of many. Growth has driven up incomes from work and enabled increases in social welfare payments; it has resulted in improvements in health and education services, and in the development of the country's physical infrastructure. Above all, it has provided an answer to the desperate want of jobs that so long blighted our country and resulted in a peak unemployment rate of 18 per cent and the forced emigration of thousands of young people.

Yet it is increasingly evident that economic growth and prosperity do not automatically mean the creation of a fair society, where all benefit and those in greatest need are given priority. In a prosperous Ireland, poverty and inequality remain important issues.

Eliminating Poverty: Success and Failure

Over the last decade, poverty as we normally think of it has fallen significantly. Officially, this type of poverty is described as 'consistent poverty'. People are regarded as consistently poor if they fall below an income poverty line and also lack two or more items from an official index that includes, for example, being able to keep one's home adequately warm, being able to afford two pairs of strong shoes, having enough money to buy presents for family members at least once a year. Official figures show that 7 per cent of the population was in consistent poverty in 2005. It is likely that the numbers in consistent poverty will fall further while the economy is buoyant: indeed, in the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007–2016*, the Government has set the target of reducing the figure to between 2 and 4 per cent by 2012.

Understanding Poverty

But there is another form of poverty – relative poverty. The reality of this kind of poverty is not generally appreciated, and its elimination is not on the political agenda. Governments do not like to talk about relative poverty, because economic growth does not, of itself, lead to its reduction.

It is notable that in the new *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion*, the Government has failed to set any target for reducing relative poverty. Even so, the definition of poverty cited in the *Action Plan* (which is the definition first adapted by the Irish Government in the original National Anti-Poverty Strategy in 1997) is one that, in fact, defines poverty in relative terms:

People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and other resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities, which are considered the norm for other people in society.

Relative income poverty has persistently remained around 20 per cent throughout the economic boom of the past decade. (In 2007 terms, the poverty line – set at 60 per cent of median income – for a single person is €209.87 a week or €10,951 a year. For a household of four, it is €486.90 a week.) Officially, relative income poverty is referred to being 'at risk of poverty' – which almost suggests that it is a form of 'virtual' poverty and that it is somehow not real, at least not yet. However, relative poverty is still real poverty: as the Government's own definition implies, it is about lacking an adequate income to buy the goods and services needed to function socially in a society with ever-higher expectations.

Equality – What are we Trying to Equalise?

Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winner in economics, asks a simple but fundamental question about inequality. *What are we trying to equalise?* He points out that if our answer is that we want to equalise income, then we must recognise that the same level of income can yield very different standards of living, depending on whether one is sick or healthy, old or young, living in a good area or a bad one, living in a rich society or in a poor one. The more fundamental issue, Sen argues, is equalising human capabilities to function. These are things such as capability to live, to be healthy, to develop one's understanding, to move freely, to have a family life, and to appear in public without shame.

Sen makes the point that different sets of goods are required to enable us to realise these capabilities depending on whether we are living in a poor country or a rich one. For example, clean clothes (even if they are old and worn) may be all that is required to appear in public without shame in some poor countries. In a rich country, however, more expensive and new clothing is frequently required if one is not to be shamed. Similar considerations apply to the level of education, health and housing that is considered acceptable.

The Poverty of Poor Public Services

Applying Sen's thinking to modern Ireland, it is evident that the situation of people on low incomes – whether they are deemed to be in relative or in consistent poverty – is made immeasurably worse if the public services and social supports they need are inadequate, inaccessible, or not available at all. With limited incomes, it is not an option for them to buy their way out of waiting lists for medical procedures; neither can they afford to pay for additional tuition for their children facing examinations or access privately provided counselling, dental, physiotherapy, or psychological services for themselves or their children. It is they who suffer on housing waiting lists if the provision of social housing fails to keep up with need.

While Ireland has put in place a system to measure consistent poverty and relative income poverty on a regular basis, we have no system that routinely measures 'relative poverty' in terms of access to health, housing, education, social supports, and transport. But while the available data in these areas does not provide a comprehensive and integrated picture, we have enough information to know that many of the people who live on low incomes are also the people most affected by the deficiencies in the provision of these services. We know too that in many instances poverty is highly concentrated in specific communities and as a result, made worse.

Addressing inequality in Irish society, therefore, not only requires reducing income inequality: it necessitates improving the overall provision and standard of social services and ensuring that these include the targeted supports that are necessary to respond to those in particular need.

'The Election Issue'

The articles that follow in this issue of *Working Notes* draw attention to a range of issues that illustrate the continuance, and in some cases the exacerbation, in the Ireland of today of some long-established forms of inequality in the vital areas of income, housing, health, and education. For example:

- The waiting list for social housing is now significantly higher than it was in 1996: 43,000 households were on waiting lists in March 2005, an increase of 70 per cent on the figure ten years earlier. Voluntary organisations within the homeless sector estimate that the number of homeless people is at least 5,000. The astronomical rise in house prices over the past decade has locked many out of the chance of becoming a home owner and locked others into ownership at a very high cost relative to their incomes. In effect, the housing boom has increased 'housing poverty' and significantly widened inequalities in wealth.
- The improvements brought about by large increases in health expenditure are over-shadowed by the shortages in provision across the spectrum of health services, including primary care, acute hospitals, long-term care, therapies and supports, and mental health care. Meanwhile, there has been increased privatisation of provision and the inherently two-tier nature of much of Irish health care has become more entrenched.
- More than 10 per cent of young people leave school without completing their Leaving Certificate and a further 4 per cent leave without attaining any qualification. Educational disadvantage is much more likely to be the experience of children from economically and socially deprived communities, who then face the risk of being unemployed or finding only poorly paid jobs in adulthood. In this sense, educational disadvantage is an important factor in children who are poor becoming adults who are poor.

The remaining articles in this issue seek to highlight other aspects of need and injustice that should also be a concern as we go into a General Election. For instance:

- The number of people being sent to prison continues to rise, despite the enormous cost of imprisonment. Irish prisons lack the facilities and services to deal with the addictions and other personal problems, and the educational and social disadvantage, that underlie much offender behaviour. As these go untreated, the likelihood of re-offending, and the risk of more people becoming victims of crime, increases.

- Both harmful alcohol consumption and drug abuse have risen sharply over the past decade. Irish society has shown itself to be reluctant to face up to these problems and to develop adequate policies, structures and services to tackle them effectively.
- While Ireland has welcomed migrant workers to fill the labour shortages consequent on its rapid growth, it has been slow in putting in place systems to protect the rights of these workers to just conditions of employment and to respect the right to family reunification and to long-term security of status for those who wish to remain in Ireland. Meanwhile, applicants for asylum must live in 'Direct Provision' accommodation and are debarred from working for the period (in many cases lengthy) during which their application is being processed.
- Over the past decade, Ireland's climate pollution has risen by 25 per cent, almost twice our Kyoto target, and per capita we are now the fifth most climate-polluting country in the world. To a large extent, we have been relying on buying carbon credits to make any progress towards meeting our Kyoto target.
- Ireland is on course to meet its commitment to devote 0.7 per cent of GNP to development aid. However, the commendable progress on aid has not been matched by an acknowledgment that much of the good it will achieve may be undone by our contribution to the climate change that will have devastating consequences for the world's poorest countries.

Self-Interest or the Common Good?

In the election process, both people and politicians are engaged in an exercise of balancing self-interest with the interests of others, and balancing it also with the interest of the common good. In Ireland, as in many other modern democracies, the political focus is the battle for the 'middle ground' – for the support of that large section of the community which includes the people most likely to vote, the people most able to voice their demands, and the people most likely to be 'floating voters'. Inevitably, parties shape their policies with this in mind: thus, even before the election we witness promises of tax cuts. In such a situation, both people and politicians can overlook the concerns and needs of those who are most vulnerable, or who have little influence, or who for one reason or another do not use their voice or their vote.

The task of bringing such groups into the mainstream of political concern is a long-term one. An immediate challenge, however, is to find ways of ensuring that their interests are not, after all, overlooked in the election we now face. Voters' desire to protect and advance their interests and politicians' pragmatism and clever campaign tactics should not be the defining features of this election. Irish society needs to see a concern for social justice and for the common good in the demands of voters and in the promises of politicians.

Undoubtedly, taxation and public services will be core issues in the General Election. The two are, of course, inextricably linked – though this is not always evident as politicians promise, and voters expect, simultaneous reductions in the one and improvements in the other.

While there is widespread agreement that public services in Ireland need to be improved, there is also concern about efficiency and waste in publicly provided services; a reluctance to face up to the levels of taxation that may be required to effect improvements; an ongoing concern that too many are still able to evade paying the taxes for which they are liable, and that apart from this the taxation system contains many tax breaks that are, in reality, only usable to those who are already wealthy.

The improvement and reform of public services, the support of voluntary initiatives, and the development and implementation of fair systems of redistribution, are not simple tasks for any country but they are ones worth struggling with, for alongside wealth and job creation, these structures represent a significant element in the process of addressing 'need' in a modern, complex society. On the positive side, a country as prosperous as Ireland has been fortunate enough to become has at its disposal the resources to take on these challenges. In the forthcoming General Election, politicians and people have the chance to signal their commitment to realising the 'social dividend' of Irish economic growth and to creating a fairer and more inclusive society.