



The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice

Working for social and economic change tackling poverty and exclusion

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JUST.NOW

May 2007 Justice Briefing

Election 2007

An opportunity to vote for a more just society!

To use your vote as your voice!

To be in solidarity with the people who, have not benefited from all the economic progress!

1 Vote Can and Will Make a Difference



Did you Know?

England 1649 - 1 Vote meant that King Charles 1 is executed



U.S.A. 1776 - 1 Vote gives America the English language instead of German.



Germany 1923 -1 Vote made Adolf Hitler leader of the Nazi Party.



Wins Loses
BY 1 VOTE!

Ireland 2002 -1 Vote meant that in Limerick West Dan Neville won by one vote and Micheal Finuncane lost by one vote.

Each and every vote is the voice of an Irish Citizen. One voice speaking out has changed the course of history. Our vote when used effectively can be a vote for greater social justice

This edition of Just Now focuses on the 2007 Elections, it presents the Election Issues, which have been identified by people who struggle with poverty, inequality and injustice.

It also contains points for reflection, which can be applied to the General Elections.

Some Election Issues Identified by People Living in Poverty

During the past nine months three members of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice office staff have been travelling around Ireland. We have gone from Donegal to Cork, from Galway to Tipperary and have facilitated the Active Citizenship/Voter Education Programme in 24 of the Republic's 26 counties. Our contact with community leaders/groups and with participants in community workshops has given us a unique insight into the concerns of people throughout Ireland. The Vincentian Advocacy Group studied the issues raised by low-income communities and presents the 9 most frequently identified concerns. Each issue is followed by a possible question for election candidates.

Inadequate Income

The current lowest levels of social welfare payments make it impossible for people dependent on low income to have a minimum essential standard of living. For example on a social welfare payment of €185.80 a week it is not possible for a single person to pay the rent, buy nutritionally adequate food, meet the cost of heating and light, and engage in society. People on a low income, including those dependent on the minimum wage, focus on the need for the government to increase the social welfare payments and the minimum wage to take into account the cost of living. At present the payments trap people in poverty.

Q1. How would you describe an inadequate income? What is your view on this Issue and how would you address the present grossly inadequate rates?

Poverty Traps

Many people who are dependent on social welfare payments are penalised financially when their efforts to seek employment leads to loss of medical cards and an increase in rent. A slight increase in income at present can mean that people are no longer entitled to a medical card and other secondary benefits. The problem created by poverty traps needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Q 2. What would you do to eliminate poverty traps?

Child Care

The lack of affordable and accessible childcare creates a major obstacle for lone parents to return to education or employment. Among low income families there is a strong belief that free child care should be provided for all families entitled to FIS (Family Income Supplement)

Q 3. What steps would you take to make affordable and accessible childcare more available?

Health Care

This is a major anxiety for all households on low incomes. Frequently voiced demands are for medical cards to be made available to all children under 12, the replacement of the doctor only medical cards with full medical cards and the rapid reduction of waiting lists.



Q 4. How would you deal with the demand to increase the availability of medical cards and the reductions of hospital waiting lists?

Education

There is a general opinion that the present class sizes have a serious and negative impact on the educational achievement of children from low-income families. The reduction of class sizes to 20 in the lower classes in the primary school and a more realistic provision of psychological and speech therapy services are seen as essential first steps towards improving educational standards

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Q 5. What is your understanding of the current deficiencies in our education system? How do you propose to respond to large classes and very inadequate psychological and speech therapy services?

Housing

The latest information on waiting lists for social housing indicate that approximately 43,000 households are on waiting lists. In order to make a significant reduction in this figure many people request that the government make a clear commitment to provide, as a start, 5000 social housing units a year

Q 6. Identify the measures you would take to systematically reduce the waiting lists for social housing?



Alcohol Abuse and Substance Abuse

This is regarded as a major social problem for the whole country. Breaking the link between sport and drink in advertisements is seen by many as an essential first step.

It is also generally recognised that a sustained public education campaign should be undertaken if the problem is to be really addressed.

Q 7. How would you involve the drink industry in order to tackle the major social problem of teenage drinking?

What approach would you take to address the availability of drugs on the street?

Death on the Roads

This is also recognised as a national crisis. The raising of the eligibility age for a driving licence and stricter penalties for "drunk driving" were frequently presented as possible solutions to the current crisis. The inclusion of a programme on safe driving in the senior cycle was also seen as a way of changing attitudes.

Q 8. What steps would you take to deal with this serious problem as a matter of urgency

Increase in Violent Crime

A large proportion of the participants in the workshop spoke of the need to provide better social and sport facilities for young people. Increasing the presence of Gardai on the streets throughout the country and the provision of more adequate psychological, psychiatric, and rehabilitation services for people in prison were also identified as possible ways to remedy the current situation.

Q 9. What would be your priorities in making communities more safe for Irish Citizens?

The following Two Issues were raised by members of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice

Mothers in the Home

At present married women who care for their children in the family home are paying up to €120 per week in extra tax. The present tax system penalises one-income families. An urgent redressing of the situation was seen as necessary to eliminate the injustice of the current practice.

Q 10. How do you view this matter and how would you respond to this taxation Issue?

Overseas Aid

While there is a general welcome for the governments' pledge to reach the UN target of 0.7% of G.N.P. on overseas aid by 2012, it was recognised that there is a need to ensure that the government achieves its goal by annual increases until 2012. There are questions as to whether the proposed figure of 0.7% of G.N.P. is sufficient to meet the millennium goals.

Q. 11 Outline you position on this Issue?

Prayer and Reflection

The Common good at Election Time

" As citizens of the State, we are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity. So we cannot relinquish our participation in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote the common good.

Pope Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est

But in spite of our recent economic success, Ireland still has huge and shameful social problems crying out for attention, and they are a moral challenge to our personal responsibility.

Sean Fagan S.M, 2007

The main question to be answered in Election 2007 is - What kind of Ireland do we want in the coming decades? Ireland needs a Government committed to an agenda for fair and sustainable progress.

CORI 2007

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 interests 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 likely 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.

Working Notes 2007

A Time for Discernment

It may be helpful to use some questions taken from Catholic Social Teaching to guide our decision-making in relation to the 2007 Elections.

- How does the candidate's position advance the common good?
- Does it unite us as one or create divisions?
- Does it include all?
- Does it give advantage to some at the expense of others
- Does it enhance or diminish human dignity, life, rights?
- What does it do to people, for people?
- Who can participate?
- How will this affect people who are poor?
- What will this do to Earth and the natural world?

Education for Justice



Prayer at Election Time

Loving and Gracious God, we remember that your plan for us is fullness of life lived with love, justice and mercy.

Be with us as we work together in selecting political leaders of our society. Help us to keep the common good before us.

Strengthen our gifts of wisdom, courage and respect for the views of others.

Deepen in us the willingness to act in solidarity with people who are economically poor.

Help us be persistent in testing political remedies against what they will do for people, to people, with people, and what they will mean for the health of our earth home.

Help us to support one another in exercising our precious responsibilities as citizens in a representative democracy.

After the elections, strengthen us to continue to work with our leaders, seeking an ever more just society that acts in harmony and interdependence with all creation.

We ask this in the name of Jesus in union with Your Spirit.

Amen

Education for Justice

Design: Mary Murphy

Illustration: Helen Mac Mahon