

just.now

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Many requests have been made to the office of the VPSJ to provide material on current social justice issues. **just.now** is an effort to draw attention to some current issues which have direct consequences for people who know the suffering of poverty, exclusion and disadvantage. These notes are presented on a pilot basis and readers are asked to give their comments and suggestions**. Please help us to provide basic information for busy people. We will refer readers who need more detail to the relevant sources. This edition deals with:

Budget 2003

(which will decide by how much the income of people dependent on social welfare or low wages will increase)

The New National Agreement

(which gives the community and voluntary sector an opportunity to work for a better quality of life for people who are poor or excluded)

The Future of Europe

(which is the future for all of us)

“Solidarity ... is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far.

On the contrary it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all.”

Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1988 (paragraphs 38.3 – 38.4)



TACKLING POVERTY AND EXCLUSION

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(The names of all who make a response will be included in a raffle for a Surprise Gift!)

After Nice...

The Convention on the Future of Europe

The Nice Treaty is one of a series of treaties designed to make the European Union a stronger reality. At its meeting in December 2001 the European Council agreed to establish a Convention to consider the future of the European Union. The Convention consists of representatives of national government and of the E.U. parliament. The Convention will deal with 80 questions under the following headings:

- ❖ The future role of the E.U.
- ❖ 'Who does what?' in the E.U.
- ❖ The structures and organisations of the E.U.
- ❖ A single voice for the E.U. in World Affairs
- ❖ A constitution for European Citizens

How the Convention on the Future of Europe will work

The Convention will work in 3 stages:

- a listening period in order to find out what citizens expect of the E.U.
- a discussion of the pros and cons of proposals put forward to organise the E.U.
- preparation of a draft document for presentation at the Inter Government Council (I.G.C.) in 2004.

Some Key Questions

The work of this Convention will have profound effects on all our futures and especially on the future of people who at present experience poverty and social exclusion. Since its formation the E.U. has focused on economic and employment matters and has done relatively little about poverty and social exclusion. The convention gives an opportunity to raise some key questions:

- What kind of future do we want in the E.U.?
- What do we want done to ensure a more just, equal and caring E.U.?
- How can we ensure that the eradication of poverty becomes a priority for the E.U.?
- How will a E.U. Constitution affect our own Constitution?
- What do we want included in the E.U. Constitution?

Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
That always seems about to give in
Something that will not acknowledge conclusion
Insists that we forever begin

Brendan Kennelly

The New National Negotiations

What are National Negotiations?

Every three years, the Government and the four Social Partners (also known as Pillars), come together in partnership, to negotiate a national agreement on pay and social inclusion. The agreement is binding for three years after the final document is agreed. The new negotiations begin on 31st October 2002 and run for a few weeks.

Since 1987 there have been 5 national agreements. However, the Community and Voluntary Sector have only been involved in the last two agreements.

Four Social Partners/Pillars

Employers, Trade Unions, Farmer Organisations, Community and Voluntary Sector.

The Community and Voluntary Pillar has 8 representatives which include: CORI, SVP and the Community Platform.

The Community Platform

The Community Platform which has 2 representatives on the Community and Voluntary Pillar is made up of 26 National organisations and networks (including the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice). These organisations and networks represent people and communities experiencing poverty and exclusion.

What is the role of the Community Platform in the national negotiations?

The role of the Community Platform is to bring the issues of poverty and inequality to the negotiating table. With other members of the Community and Voluntary Pillar it seeks to ensure that the voices of people living in poverty and suffering discrimination are heard at the negotiating table.

In the News:

Gap between rich and poor households grows.

Richer households with a gross weekly income of more than €1,399 saw their disposable income increased by 61% in 5 years and people with an income below €214 received an increase of 46%.

(Irish Times, Oct. 5th 2002).

Below are some of the aspects of YOUR life which will be under discussion:

Wages
Social Welfare rates
Unemployment
Taxation
Rural poverty
Urban poverty
Pensions
Education
Health
Housing
Discrimination
Human Rights

Most of the media focus will be on wages. However, the Community and Voluntary Pillar with the Community Platform will be striving to ensure that poverty and social issues will also be kept on the agenda. The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice will be lobbying for a better income for people dependent on social welfare and the minimum wage. The Partnership will also lobby for a programme which will promote the civic participation of people who are alienated from society and whose voice is not heard in decision making. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul and C.O.R.I. will be working on a wider range of issues. It is important that individuals and groups lobby (write or telephone T.D.s) to ensure that the rights of people who are poor or disadvantaged are not neglected in these new negotiations.

In the News:

Lone parents set to suffer most over work scheme cuts

Moves to cut 10,000 places on Community Employment Schemes will have a major impact on lone parents. 20% of lone parents at present participate in C.E. schemes and get €143.20 per week plus 16.20 for each dependent child.

(Irish Independent, Oct 10th 2002).

Budget – December 3rd 2002

Budget Day is the day on which we are told how the nation's finances are to be organised for the coming twelve month period.

As Budget Day 2003 draws near we ask: How have the recent budgets from a period of great prosperity benefited the poorer people of our country?

Budget 2003 is being drawn up in a dramatically changed economy. Growth has slowed almost to a standstill. Who will be rewarded and who will lose out in these straitened circumstances where the Government overspending moves towards €1 billion?

Up to Budget 2002, successive budgets have favoured the better off. People who are poor have consistently fallen behind in this era of prosperity. The widening gap between those who live life with ease and those who struggle to maintain dignity while living on social welfare or a low wage demands a more equitable sharing of the country's resources.

What are some key actions that Budget 2003 might take to lessen the divide?

Some concrete steps suggested by the St. Vincent de Paul in their pre budget submission include:

- Increase the lowest social welfare rate to a minimum of €130 per week
- Increase Child Benefit for the first and second child to €149 per month and for the third and subsequent children to €185.00 per month
- Increase Child Dependant Allowance to €25
- Remove all minimum wage earners from the tax net: raise the threshold to €12,870
- For Asylum Seekers: increase the present rate for an adult to €40 and for a child to €18 per week and move towards ending direct provision.
- Increase funding to all facets of primary level education, including extending Early Start to all schools in disadvantaged areas, raising the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to €120 for primary level rate and €180 for secondary level rate
- Extend the Medical Card Scheme to all children under 18 years

In relation to Social Welfare Payments CORI Justice Commission proposes (among other things)

- Raising the lowest Social Welfare payments to €132.80 per week so as to reach €199.60 by the year 2007. (Combat Poverty also recommends this sum.)
- Asylum Seekers: ending direct provision and increasing payment for adults to €50 per week.

The Challenge facing the Government in Budget 2003 is to ensure that priority is given to reducing the growing gap between the rich and the poor people, so that all may live life with dignity.

In the News:

Cutbacks in Education – 36 million - who will they affect?

Many of them will have a direct impact on programmes which targeted disadvantaged students. Cutbacks include €6 million from the School Retention initiatives, €3.8 million from the Back to Education initiatives and €5 million from the Access Programmes (these help disadvantaged students access Third Level Education).

" If there had to be targets, it should have been the powerful --- not those. Who are already suffering from educational disadvantage" (Irish Times Sept 14, 2002)