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Elections 2009

CORI JUSTICE

Policy Briefing

European and local elections are taking place in early June. It is a moment of major change. Not just in Ireland but in Europe and across the world the collapsing financial systems have produced unparalleled economic upheaval with major implications for people across the globe.

Millions have become unemployed; many for the first time in their lives. Governments have been forced to bail out banks and borrow enormous amounts.

Services have been cut drastically. People who had become accustomed to a good standard of living have suddenly found themselves in serious trouble. Poor people have found their already meagre resources and services further reduced.

At a time like this it is crucial that the politicians elected to the European Parliament and to Local Authorities have a vision of the future they wish to see emerge and some appreciation of what is required if this vision is to be attained.

Catholic Social Thought places the dignity of the

human person at the centre of such a vision. It also highlights the need to recognise that:

- Participation by people is both a right and an obligation;
- The Common Good should be at the centre of policy development;
- All property rights are subservient to the rights of all people to subsistence;
- People who are poor, marginalised or vulnerable should be the focus of special concern;
- Subsidiarity should be at the core of decision making;
- Solidarity requires recognition of the reality of interdependence in all aspects of life today.

The future will be shaped by decisions taken by, among others, those who are elected at different levels of the political structure. These decisions will involve choices. These choices will be based on values.

Consequently, every voter should discover what the vision and the

values of those standing for election are. They can then vote for candidates who propose to build a future that voters would like to see emerge.

In this Policy Briefing we set out a range of issues we believe are important in the context of elections for the European Parliament scheduled to be held in Northern Ireland on June 4 and the Republic of Ireland on June 5.

We also set out issues we consider to be relevant in the local elections to be held in the Republic on the same day.

We ask all readers to reflect on these issues and to consider taking them up with canvassers for the candidates standing for election.

We also urge readers to vote. Very often people are critical of the democratic process maintaining that politicians ignore the will of the general population.

It is also true however that politicians pay close attention to the wishes of voters.

Elections are important for democracy. So we urge you to vote.

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Policy Briefing is a regular publication issued by CORI Justice. It addresses a wide range of current policy issues from the perspective of those who are poor and/or socially excluded. Comments, observations and suggestions on this briefing are welcome.

Give Priority to the Common Good Over the Market

Those who are elected in the upcoming elections need to recognise that solutions based on the market alone will not solve the present series of crises. Of course there are problems with the market and these must be addressed. But there is far more to progress than getting the market right. A balance is required between the various aspects of life. Failure to recognise the need for such balance has produced the present situation.

The dominant world view that produced the current global crisis is highly problematic. A great part of the current crisis is rooted in a philosophy of individualism that sees the individual as the primary unit of reality and refuses to acknowledge the importance of communitarian connectedness.

This philosophical approach sees the person principally in economic terms and considers the market to be the key place of advancement/development.

In this understanding a person can measure his/her worth by discovering what he/she is worth in the marketplace. The consequences of this approach are all around for people to see.

CORI Justice believes that an alternative to the present dominant view of the world and how it should function is required.

We need to move from a world that is built on individualism, anxiety and greed to a world that is built on the reality of abundance, the need for generosity, the dignity of the person and the centrality of the common good.

It is not enough for economic activity to be profitable. It is also essential

that it promote the common good.

One example of this in practice would be a recognition of the fact that economic development and social development are two sides of the one coin. Economic development is required to produce the resources needed to provide good social services. At the same time, however, it has to be acknowledged that good social services are required if the economy is to develop to its potential. For example, a cursory look at the contribution a good education system makes to economic development serves to illustrate the validity of this claim.

Consequently, preference voting in the elections should be based on the candidates' expressed views on these relationships - between the market and the common good, between economic development and social development.

Address Poverty

Not enough has been done in the EU to address the scale of poverty and social exclusion. 16% of the Union's population is at risk of poverty. In the Republic of Ireland the poverty level is at the European average but in Northern Ireland it is 20%.

Over the years the EU has taken a series of initiatives and funded a range of programmes to address poverty and social exclusion. These have had many positive impacts. However, the fact that one in every six people is at risk of poverty in such a wealthy part of the world is a major indictment of the Union's priorities more than six decades after its foundation.

Many issues addressed by the European Parliament have an impact on the quality of life of people across the Union. The Parliament controls the EU Budget and thus has a strong influence on how funds are allocated and on what programmes are given priority.

CORI Justice believes that the elimination of poverty and social exclusion should be at the core of EU policy. Quality social services should be available to all who need them in areas ranging from health to education, from social housing to public transport. Likewise people with disabilities should be supported where necessary to play a full role in society.

Because of the dominance of the market over the common good in policy-making arenas within the EU in recent years, the elimination of poverty and social exclusion have not received the priority they require. Delivering real social cohesion across the Union and beyond should be an EU priority in the coming five years. Those elected to the European Parliament will be in a strong position to ensure this priority is addressed effectively.

Promote Solidarity

Solidarity was at the core of the establishment of the European Union which also sought to promote pluralism, non-discrimination and tolerance. These were seen as promoting human dignity, freedom, democracy and respect for human rights.

A key dimension of solidarity at the EU level concerns social protection and social inclusion. More than 80 million people in the EU were at risk of poverty before the recent economic crisis. We deal with these issues on page 3 (cf. item on future of the welfare state). But there are other aspects to solidarity in the EU.

Solidarity among EU States

Structural funds and cohesion funds were put in place as a concrete symbol of solidarity between the richer and poorer regions of the EU. Ireland benefited enormously from these funds and much of the country's infrastructure was part-funded at least through these funds.

With the expansion of the Union to 27 countries it is very important that the regional disparities, which have increased enormously, are addressed with sustained and well-resourced action.

Solidarity with the wider world

Looking beyond the EU's borders the Union's solidarity should be expressed with policies that promote peace, human rights and democratic development.

In practice this would require Europe to use its huge economic, political and scientific capacities to promote just and collaborative international relations. It has used its resources to promote positive development across the EU. It should do the same across the planet which has so many people in great need.

Secure the future of the European Welfare State

The development of the EU has been strongly portrayed as a peace process. It has been effective in that regard and has contributed to the process of bringing democratic stabilisation to some high-risk regions of Europe.

Commitment to supporting the welfare state has been a consistent part of EU policy and strong rhetorical support continues. There is much affirmation in the EU of the 'European Social Model'. However there is no one dominant model of the welfare state or one dominant 'social model'.

In recent decades a number of developments have led to questions being raised concerning the reality of this commitment.

From the 1980s onwards there has been a reaction against the 'interventionist'

state and growing support for market fundamentalism in the EU.

There is also a questioning of the peace-building motivation for the EU.

Instead we have seen the emergence of a view that the European Union should focus on building its power and pooling its sovereignty.

This implies a very different understanding of the EU and has raised questions on whether or not it remains committed to the 'European Social Model' and to ensuring the continuation and strengthening of the welfare state.

In recent years there has been a growing fear that the elimination of borders across the EU would lead to a 'race to the bottom' where welfare provision was concerned. The evidence on this is mixed.

Recent economic pressures following from the collapse of much of the world's financial system have led to growing calls for a reduction in social welfare rates and the cutting back of social services.

In many cases these calls are based on claims that are patently untrue e.g. that Ireland's welfare rates are among the most generous in Europe when in fact they are at the other end of the spectrum. However the lack of data to support the claims has not stopped these claims being made. Rather they appear to emanate from a wish to see the welfare state rolled back.

The incoming European Parliament should give priority to ensuring the welfare state is protected and promoted. The recent economic collapse has highlighted the need for the European Social Model to be secured for the future.

Strengthen Democracy

Participation is a central requirement for democracy to succeed whether at the European or the local level.

EU Level

The European Union has been criticised regularly for its lack of democratic accountability. This perception of the EU as not being very democratic has been strengthened by the priority it has given to economic issues and its failure to give social services and issues such as poverty and social exclusion the same level of attention.

Local level

At a local level there have been several attempts in recent years to strengthen the participation of various sectors. The development of Strategic Policy Committees saw the direct involvement of a wide range of local people, other than elected Councillors, in the policy-making process.

The development of County and City Development Boards was meant to ensure the integration of local decision-making and planning and the elimination of parallel processes that often worked at cross purposes or simply ignored each other. This has a long way to go before it reaches its goal.

Involvement of people

At every level, the democratic process needs to involve people more. Participation by as many as possible strengthens the institutions and makes it more likely that decisions are well informed and based on the experiences of all and not just the privileged few.

Both the institutions and the people they serve have a shared responsibility to ensure such participation is possible and that it happens in reality.

Promote Subsidiarity

The principle of Subsidiarity states that larger entities should not assume the roles and functions of smaller entities unless it is absolutely necessary. Putting this principle into practice is meant to protect people from abuses by higher-level authority.

A question of responsibility

It places a responsibility on these higher-level authorities to help individuals and groups to enable subsidiarity to be achievable in practice. It also places a responsibility on the individuals and groups to play a responsible role in this process.

Ireland and subsidiarity

In practice, Ireland's Local Authorities, have a range of powers and functions that have been devolved since 1976. The principal ones are: housing and building; road transport and safety; water schemes and sewerage; development incentives and controls (includes planning); environmental protection (including waste collection); recreation and amenities; agriculture, some education, health and welfare issues; and a category entitled miscellaneous services that includes issues such as financial management.

It is clear from this list that these Local Authorities have substantial work to do. However, much of the key decision-making is still controlled by central Government as it controls most of the finance.

Government in Ireland has failed to honour this principle of subsidiarity in a meaningful way. The recent programme of decentralisation was not really a decentralisation of authority but rather a re-location of the offices of some Government Departments. CORI Justice believes that substantial further devolution of power to Local Authorities is required before the principle of subsidiarity is honoured in full.

Policy Issues in European Elections

The European Union has a complex policy-making process involving the Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. The Parliament's role has been increasing in recent years.

As the only directly elected body at EU level the Parliament constantly asserts its role and legitimacy in the policy-making process.

The Parliament elected in June, 2009 will have many issues to address and many decisions to make. These decisions will

all involve choices. All choices are based on values. So it is very important to ask questions of candidates in the forthcoming election to ascertain their stance on various issues and to discover the values that will shape the choices they intend to make.

On these two pages we identify some of the key issues the European Parliament will address in the next five years. We outline why each of these issues is important. We go on to suggest one or two actions that could be taken by, or supported by, the European Parliament.

Poverty and Social Exclusion

The Importance of this Issue

16% of the EU's population are at risk of poverty. That amounts to more than 79 million people. These figures mark wide variations between countries. Sweden has a rate that is below 10% while Lithuania, Spain and Portugal are above 20%.

Every person in Europe has the right to live life with dignity. The EU has designated 2010 as the European Year Against Poverty and Social Exclusion. The European Parliament should ensure that this year leads to meaningful and effective action.

Action

- The EU should make the elimination of poverty a priority goal of the Union.
-

Democratic Deficit

The Importance of this Issue

The structures of the EU are complex. The Commission, the Council of Ministers and the Parliament have responsibilities in different combinations depending on the issues addressed. Sometimes the member states act together effectively. At other times they compete with each. However, there has been consistent criticism that the EU is distant from its citizens and pays insufficient attention to their needs, concerns and opinions.

Action

- Develop procedures that can involve the citizens of the EU in a real and meaningful way.
-

The Future of Work

The Importance of this Issue

8.1% of the EU's labour force is unemployed. This amounts to more than 20 million people and the number is rising - it is up more than 4 million in a single year.

To ensure all people's right to work is respected the EU urgently requires policies to be reoriented to ensure that all forms of work are recognised and valued (not just paid employment) and that the number of good jobs is increased to as high a level as is sustainable.

Action

- Reorient EU policy on work to reflect this approach.
-

Building Solidarity

The Importance of this Issue

Solidarity is required among all those who live in the EU. Likewise between the countries of the Union. However, it is also important that all EU policies including trade, agriculture and fiscal policies should support the aims of moving the world towards zero poverty while protecting the world's environment.

Action

- Promote financial transparency and tax justice so as to avoid capital flight and tax evasion.
 - Ensure that all EU trade policies are oriented towards poverty reduction and environmental protection in the EU and across the world.
-

Policy Issues in European Elections

The European Parliament is the only institution directly elected by people in the EU. In recent years the Parliament has been given more power. It must be consulted by the Council of Ministers before decisions can be made.

The Parliament now has power to:

- Accept or reject Commission proposals on EU legislation and pass EU laws jointly with the Council on many issues.
- Accept or reject the EU Budget.

- Approve international agreements and admission of new members.

Most of the work of the European Parliament is done through committees. The committees cover areas such as: Foreign affairs, human rights and common security and defence; Budgets; Economic and monetary affairs; employment and social affairs; environment, public health and consumer policy; agriculture and rural development; and many more. Members of the European Parliament in the 2009-2014 period will exercise influence in all of these areas.

Sustainability - Economic, Environmental and Social

The Importance of this Issue

Recent economic upheavals have prompted many to reflect on what went wrong with what they thought was a secure future guaranteed by constant economic growth. The need to give priority to policies that ensure sustainability has been widely accepted. Sustainability has three dimensions: economic, environmental and social. All three are necessary. Economic development must be sustainable; the world's resources must be protected and the society must be one in which people are happy to live.

Action

- Put sustainability at the core of all policy development.

Migration and Refugees

The Importance of this Issue

Migration is one of the great challenges of our time. Migrants should be welcomed by the EU and integrated into European society. There is need for legislation across the EU to harmonise asylum procedures, manage legal immigration, reduce irregular immigration and prevent human trafficking.

Action

- Develop the legislation referred to above and promote the intercultural dialogue required to bridge ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural divides across the EU.

Third World Aid, Peace and Development

The Importance of this Issue

The world continues to be deeply divided with the vast majority of its population living in extreme poverty. The Millennium Development Goals have set key targets for 2015.

Action

- Ensure all countries in the EU reach the UN target for Third World Aid of 0.7% of GNP by the end of the Parliament's term of office in 2014.
- Take necessary action to achieve the 2015 Millennium Development Goals.

Climate Change and the Environment

The Importance of this Issue

Climate change and quality of the environment are of urgent concern. The EU has played a progressive role in shaping the global response to climate change. However the EU's 'energy footprint' remains too large and EU member states are struggling to meet their targets on carbon dioxide emissions.

Action

- Put policies in place to ensure that EU member states reach their target of an 8% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2012 and 20% by 2020.
- Act in solidarity with and help world regions suffering the most severe impacts of climate change.

Policy Issues in Local Elections

Local Authorities play a very important role in the democratic process. Often, however, they are overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant. They should be supported.

Government at national level has failed to decentralise many decision-making functions and the resources required to ensure that these Authorities can maximise their potential.

On these two pages we have identified eight of the core issues that Local Authorities address. We identify why we consider each particular issue to be important and we make proposals

concerning some of the actions we believe the incoming Local Authorities should take to address these policy issues.

Readers will be aware of many more policy issues that are of major importance to people and over which the Local Authority can have some influence. We urge everyone to reflect on these issues and on what could be done.

Assess the proposals being made by candidates and then decide to vote for those making proposals you believe are closest to the ones you consider to be most important.

Housing and Accommodation

The Importance of this Issue

There are more than 56,000 households on waiting lists for social housing. This number is rising in the present economic crisis. There has been progress in recent years as 9,000 new social housing units have been started annually. However this approach is now being reversed and Government is focusing on renting houses from developers who over-produced houses during the 'construction bubble' of recent years.

Action

- Ensure sufficient units are produced to eliminate the housing waiting lists. In doing this ensure social housing organisations are supported adequately.
-

Public Transport

The Importance of this Issue

In recent years there have been improvements in public transport. This is particularly obvious in the area of rail. However, there is no doubting the fact that Ireland's public transport infrastructure is still far below the level available in other European countries with a similar or lower level of income. A good public transport system is essential to support economic and social development and to protect the environment by reducing carbon emissions. Much public transport is delivered at local level.

Action

- Give priority to public transport when producing local development plans.
-

Local Environment

The Importance of this Issue

Our environment is a priceless asset. Our relationship with the environment should be one of respect. At local level there are a range of issues to be addressed including waste management, fire protection and pollution control. Issues concerning waste management and waste charges need to be addressed in a fair manner to ensure people living in poverty are not further marginalised by Local Authority or national Government decisions.

Action

- Give priority to addressing environmental issues in a fair manner.
-

Poverty and Social Exclusion

The Importance of this Issue

The failure to eliminate Ireland's poverty and income inequality during more than a decade of prosperity is very regrettable. The consequences of this failure is most obvious at local level. Tackling these consequences is a multi-faceted task requiring action on many fronts ranging from health to education, from accommodation to employment. Having sufficient income, however, is the key to enabling people live with dignity. County and City Development Boards should give priority to these issues.

Action

- Prioritise strategies and initiatives aimed at eliminating poverty and social exclusion. In particular, insist on national government providing sufficient resources to ensure everyone has the income required to live with dignity.
-

Policy Issues in Local Elections

Over the past decade there have been some very positive developments at Local Authority level. A number of **Strategic Policy Committees** (SPCs) were established in every Local Authority. These involve some councillors and others representing outside interests which vary depending on the issues being addressed by the particular SPC. The Community and Voluntary sector has representatives on many of these Committees.

Every Local Authority has a **Community Forum** which draws together all interested groups in the Community and

Voluntary sector who are active in the area. These Forums provide an opportunity to ensure the sector's voice is heard.

County Development Boards produce and oversee implementation of local development plans for the Local Authority area. These draw together representatives of the elected Local Council, local development agencies, national bodies and social partners.

These structures provide opportunities for better development at local level. It is important they be used to the full.

Ensure County and City Development Boards fulfil their roles

The Importance of this Issue

County and City Development Boards have developed plans for the Local Authority area. If policies are to be really integrated with each other and if they are to address the real challenges presenting themselves at local level then it is essential that these Boards function effectively. To date very few of them have worked to their full potential. Ideally, there should be full consistency between the plans of these boards at local level and the plans of government and state agencies at national level.

Action

- Ensure that County and City Development Boards fulfil their full roles.
-

Community Forums

The Importance of this Issue

There is a Community Forum in every Local Authority area in Ireland. They draw together all the organisations in the Community and Voluntary sector working in that area. The sector's representatives on Strategic Policy Committees and on County Development Boards are chosen by these Forums. Each Forum is meant to provide a two-way process of communication - ensuring that views, information and opinions are transmitted effectively between the Council (and Board) and the sector.

Action

- Insist on Community Forums playing their rightful role.
-

Resourcing Community Activity

The Importance of this Issue

Community action is very effective in addressing problems that emerge at a local level. This has been recognised by Government for many years and a range of programmes and initiatives have been resourced to promote social inclusion through local initiatives. Many of these have followed a partnership model. At a time of economic crisis it is especially important that Government, at national and local level, recognise the huge value of, and provide resources for, community activity

Action

- Provide sufficient resources to maximise community activity.
-

Local Facilities

The Importance of this Issue

Local Authorities have responsibility for local facilities and amenities such as swimming pools, libraries, parks, open spaces, recreation centres, art galleries, cinemas, markets, museums and theatres. These facilities have a big impact on the quality of life experienced by people in their own neighbourhoods and localities. They also contribute to the strengthening of local community identity and solidarity.

The importance of these facilities and amenities is heightened at a time of economic recession as people have a much lower level of discretionary spending.

Action

- Ensure sufficient resources are allocated to strengthening local facilities.
-

A Fair and Sustainable Future

When people vote they are making choices not just about the candidates but also about the policies they (and their parties) support. People are, in fact, expressing their own preferences for the future of their local communities and the EU community.

For examples, decisions taken in Europe can have an impact not just across the 27 member states but far beyond the EU's borders.

As responsible participants in the democratic process there is an onus on all voters to study the policies of the various candidates, to avail of opportunities to inform candidates of their opinions and to engage in debate about the issues.

At election time the voices of the articulate and well organised are heard. Political parties are sensitive to their issues. It is therefore important that the needs and concerns of those poorly organised and with scant resources are not forgotten.

CORI Justice has produced this Policy Briefing on the upcoming European and Local elections to assist people in this process.

We strongly believe that people generally would be very positive about decisions taken locally, nationally, internationally, that were seen to be aimed at producing a future that was both fair and sustainable.

Recent developments have shown clearly that many decisions taken in recent decades failed to prioritise these two dimensions. Consequently, a very unfair society has emerged which is not sustainable from an economic, environmental or social perspective.

The people of Ireland and of the EU deserve more. It is possible to build a better future - despite the series of crises currently being faced. But it requires a commitment to make different choices based on values that give priority to people and the common good over greed and the market. This is a challenge that must be met.

Use Your Influence - VOTE

Many people feel voting is a waste of time. They claim decisions are made without real consultation and that their major interests are not given real consideration by politicians.

In the EU context they feel the issues are remote and not immediately relevant to their lives.

At a Local Authority level people sometimes feel that Councils have no power to do anything.

In both cases perceptions do not coincide with the reality. Major decisions are made in both arenas.

The European Parliament and Local Authorities will make decisions on major issues in the years ahead. Choose wisely.

Use your influence. VOTE.

Other CORI Justice Publications

The following publications (and many more) may be downloaded for free from our website and are available for purchase from the CORI Justice Office:

- **Analysis and Critique of Budget 2009 #2** (April 2009)
- **Policy Briefing on Poverty** (March 2009)
- **Socio-Economic Review - 2009** - Available June 2009
- **Policy Briefing on Taxation** (November 2008)
- **Making Choices - Choosing Future: Ireland at a Crossroads** (2008)
- **Values, Catholic Social Thought and Public Policy** (2007)

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www.cori.ie/justice

CORI Justice publishes regular briefings on a wide range of public policy issues. CORI Justice's core areas of work are: public policy; spirituality; enabling and empowering; and communication.

CORI Justice has been a recognised social partner within the Community and Voluntary Pillar of social partnership since 1996.

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