



The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice

Working for social and economic change tackling poverty and exclusion

Members:

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul,
The Vincentian Congregation,
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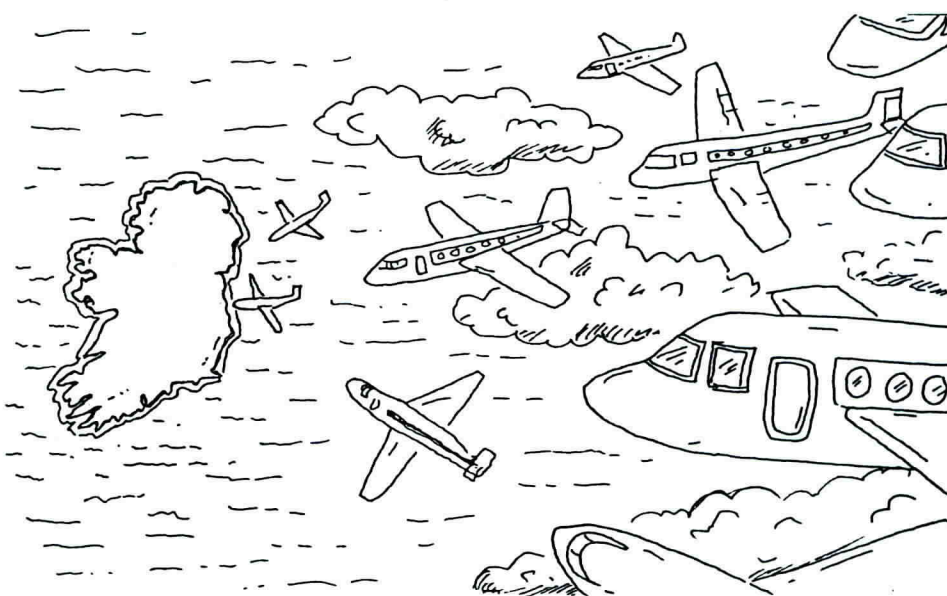
JUST.NOW

October 2003 Justice Briefing

The October Issue of Just.Now focuses on the Irish Presidency of the European Union and the opportunities it offers to promote justice.

The EU Presidency January - June 2004 An Opportunity for Irish Leadership

The first six months of 2004 will be among the most important in recent decades for Ireland. During this period Ireland will have the presidency of the EU. Our small country will be called on to exercise a key leadership role at a time when the number of member states increases from 15 to 25. Between media coverage and the impact on traffic of state cars driving 25 EU leaders to airports and meetings, the presidency of the EU cannot but impinge on our consciousness.



Economic and market matters tend to dominate the EU agenda. There are approximately 56 million people in the 15 member states of the EU living in poverty and hardship. For their sake it is hoped that the Social Agenda of the EU will be treated as a priority. Many Irish N.G.O.s will be doing what they can to ensure that during the Irish Presidency attention will be given to the social vision and agenda of the EU - strengthening the fundamental values of Europe so that the EU is an advocate and guarantor of peace, solidarity, equality, social and economic justice for all.

The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice is grateful to Robin Hanan, E.A.P.N. (European Anti Poverty Network) for generously preparing the following material for this edition of JUST.NOW. Robin's and E.A.P.N.'s consistent support for the work of the V.P.S.J. is warmly acknowledged.

The Irish Presidency of the European Union, January to June 2004

What is the Presidency?

In the first half of 2004, Ireland takes over the 'Presidency', or chair, of the European Union. This involves chairing the European Council, made up of the Prime Ministers from the member states, and the Council of Ministers, along with several thousand meetings at civil service level.

The Council and its working groups are still the main decision-making bodies in the EU, in spite of the increased powers and much higher profile of the European Parliament and the European Commission.

The Presidency's main job is chairing hundreds, if not thousands, of meetings at both Minister and Civil Service level. This involves preparing agendas, working out compromises to get decisions and generally keeping the system moving.

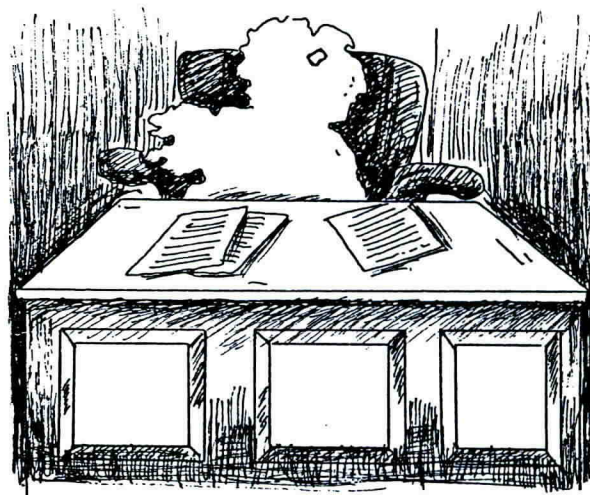
The Presidency also takes on a leadership role, both in the EU and overseas. For the first half of next year, Ireland will chair the EU delegation meetings before all important discussions in, for example, the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation. Most EU diplomatic missions to conflict areas, like Iraq or Sierra Leone, are led by a 'Troika' of the last, current and next Presidencies.

For a small country like Ireland, simply managing all these meetings is a strain. Next April, the EU expands from 15 member states to 25, and already the Council and Working Groups have 25 countries represented, speaking 20 working languages.

The main pay-off for this is that the EU Presidency is a chance to show-case the Government and the country, like a political

version of the Eurovision, and to influence the direction of the EU.

There are currently proposals to replace the 'rotating' Presidency of the EU with a more flexible system of chairs for different Councils, so it is possible that this will be the last Irish Presidency, although this change is vigorously opposed by small countries like Ireland.



Some of the issues coming up next year under the Irish Presidency include:

New EU Constitution: If the Inter-Governmental Council (IGC) which is currently meeting under the Italian Presidency does not reach agreement on a new Constitution, the Irish Presidency will take over. Important issues in how to strengthen fundamental rights, the fight against poverty and greater democracy are still undecided.

Enlargement: 10 new countries join the EU in April 2004 and negotiations on the next two (Bulgaria and Romania) will continue.

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Joint Report on Social Inclusion:

Each 'Spring Summit' (March 2004) reviews progress on the 'Lisbon Agenda' to modernise the EU, which includes the anti-poverty strategy and the employment strategy. Next year, this will include the Joint Report on Social Inclusion, effectively a comparative report on the 15 National Action Plans (NAPs\incl).

Gender Directive: This much-delayed Directive should be developed before and during the Irish Presidency.

Report on CEDAW (*Beijing Platform For Action*) The Irish Presidency will co-ordinate engagement with this important United Nations event in New York, focussing on violence against women, health, barriers to education and employment and political representation.

European Parliament Elections in June 2004. These are not formally linked to the Presidency of the Council, however the Council and Parliament deal with the same issues. The Vincentian Partnership for Justice Citizenship programme will encourage participation in the EU elections.

The Third European meeting of people experiencing Poverty and Social Exclusion will be held, in Dublin, Brussels or Donegal.

Opinion: The challenges for the Irish Presidency

The Presidency of the EU is always an imposing task for a small country, but it is also a huge political opportunity.

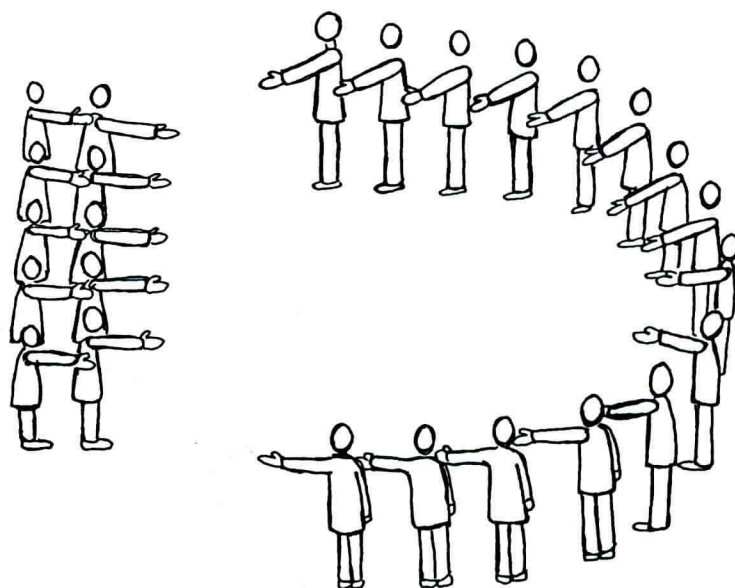
The Presidency is also, of course, a big political challenge. The Irish Government will

be called on not just to promote consensus but, particularly in a Europe of 25 members and more, to provide leadership on the key questions in the Council, the IGC and the international forum where the EU is active.

Many of these questions come together in the discussions on the new Constitution: Can the EU balance its drive to 'economic competitiveness' with social goals or is this simply a pipe-dream? Can we open up and democratise the EU? Will the EU simply speed up the worst features of 'globalisation' or will it provide the political space to resist? Will the EU develop a more cooperative relationship with the developing world? Will the EU be a force for greater equality?

What kind of leadership will Ireland provide on these issues?

Apart from the Constitution, which may be decided under the Italian Presidency or may continue into the Irish, two key tests for the Irish Presidency will be the ability to bring forward the social aspects of the Lisbon Agenda and the 10-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action.



An Enlarged EU - from 15 to 25

The Irish Presidency of the European Union, January to June 2004

What does this mean in plain English for the eradication of Poverty?

- The Lisbon strategy to 'modernise' the EU economy and society promised a lot (*'make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion by 2010'*) but so far the National Action Plans Against Poverty and Social Exclusion, developed under the strategy, have produced little.
- The 'Spring Summit' under the Irish Presidency will review progress and adopt the 'Joint Inclusion Report' looking at the national action plans against poverty adopted this year and laying out the way forward. Without a serious commitment of energy and resources, this strategy will fail and more and more people will be alienated not just from the 'European Project' but from the whole direction of the European economy and society.
- Fifty six million people in the EU at present, live in poverty. The eradication of poverty requires political will to commit the necessary resources. Otherwise the number of people in the EU living in poverty will dramatically increase with the integration of the 10 new member countries.

The eradication of poverty is one of very many issues where it is important for Irish individuals and groups to follow closely the work of the Presidency and to be prepared to contribute ideas and expertise. Even if the presidency system survives, this will be the last opportunity of its type for 13 years!

Robin Hanan, EAPN Ireland, eapn@iol.ie

Prayer and Reflection

Catholic Social Teaching

"Solidarity helps us to see the 'other' - whether a person, people, or nation ... as our 'neighbour', ... to be made as sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God".

Pope John Paul II, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, #39

Prayer

*God Our Father,
Open our eyes
just as Jesus restored the blind man's sight.
May we have clear vision to create
structures of justice
that include all Your people.
Heal us of the blindness of our own
assumptions.
Release us from our clouded perceptions.
Make our hearts and minds clear that we may
see the world as You see it,
And work for justice for all.*

Reflections: Centre for Concern - Education for Justice