

People Before Profit: Building a Decent Society

The debate on the delivery of Public Services in Ireland has some particularly national characteristics, but it must also be seen in its broader international context. Indeed among the right-wing neo-liberal political elite which dominates the USA and most of Europe the very concept of public services is under attack. Education, health, the supply of clean water, or care of the elderly is merely another service from which maximum private profit can be extracted.

Within the EU we have the ongoing saga of the Bolkestein/Services Directive, driven on by our own Charlie McCreevy in which all services, including education, would be laid bare for open competition on the basis of the "country of origin" principle. On the wider stage we see the manoeuvres of both the EU and US delegations at the WTO talks attempting to coerce the developing countries of Africa, Asia and South America into accepting an open door policy of competition for all services.

It is important to state clearly that there are certain public services which should never be privatised and must remain under public control. The concept of the public good must be reasserted. We must state publicly that illness is not an opportunity for profit, old age is not an opportunity for profit, educational need is not an opportunity for profit.

The Workers' Party must set the political agenda on this issue. Politics in Ireland has been steered away from debate on what is in the interests of the public good. Minister McDowell spelt out the dominant ideology with his statement that there must be inequality in society. The culture fostered is one of unashamed pursuit of individual wealth and the division of society into those who seek to be part of a greedy elite with previously unheard of wealth, and those who are denied access to education, housing and health care and serve in the workforce as poorly skilled and lowly paid. Promotion of the interests of a wealthy elite fits comfortably within this ideological framework and ignores the wider social consequences. Public services provision within this state must be seen within this overall context. Our objective is to place this entire debate in the context of "society", and within the parameters of equality and justice.

Privatisation is a Health Hazard - Not a Solution

Our health system is a mess. Everyone now knows how much our service has fallen behind the developed world in recent decades. There are two tiers - one for those who can pay and are treated promptly, and the other for the rest, who must wait. We see trolleys used as beds, fiddled waiting lists, and deadly shortages of key personnel. Bureaucrats and bad politicians call the health system "Angola". For sick people it is more like death row.

In her reaction to this situation Mary Harney's true colours are revealed. The Minister for Health, faced by a mountain of misery, sees only a potential mountain of money for the burgeoning Irish private medicine industry. The Progressive Democrats' fundamentalism is thus exposed - everything in society must make a buck for their voters and sponsors.

Despite all the evidence from our own system, the evidence from reports carried out by such diverse bodies as the ICTU and ESRI, the international experience ranging from Britain to Australia, Harney leads the FF/PD government in a headlong crusade of privatisation. As well as the tax allowances on construction costs, the public subsidy to health insurance companies, the institutionalised double jobbing Mary Harney announced a further featherbedding measure. Private hospitals are to be given public lands, within the existing grounds of public hospitals, for their new hospitals.

"Waiting list" figures from a handful of hospitals issued last year were fiddled in a blatant, childish way. Real and immediate problems, from the MRSA epidemic, the meningitis booster debacle, the ongoing A & E overcrowding, the robbery of OAPs in public nursing homes, or the Blood Transfusion scandal are all met by Press Release, media briefing, smiles and promises, and a complete lack of planning or action.

The hamstring and expensive Freedom of Information Act had to be used to gain snippets of information on MRSA, caused by infection contracted in unclean hospitals. We learn that it is an epidemic and that an even deadlier strain killed three people last year. Affected patients are not told and nor are their loved ones. It might say on the death certificate if the braver doctors are involved, but it remains largely a state secret under Harney. We have lost comrades to the MRSA scandal. We must commemorate them by exposing this scourge. Its cause is so clear. Its cure is so easy - spend more money on cleaning and pay these workers properly.

Harney's much publicised "hygiene audit" - a blatant attempt to push the responsibility for MRSA onto nurses and other staff - revealed a massive deficit in basic infrastructure. Many hospitals had been refused money for elbow operated taps for doctors and nurses, cleaning staff served meals to patients in some hospitals, and privatised cleaning services delivered very bad value for money.

There are tens of thousands of decent people in what remains of our public health system. They range from public health van-drivers to specialised endocrinologists, specialists in the cancers and ambulance personnel, who can fight fires and deliver babies. Unfortunately they are fighting a culture, permeating from the cabinet, the department, the HSE which regards patients as customers and the health service merely as one more commodity to be sold to the highest bidder for the maximum profit.

The legacy of this uncaring official attitude is everywhere to be seen. It is now almost twenty years since the scandal of the delivery of contaminated blood products to haemophiliacs was first discovered with the terrible consequence of Hepatitis C and HIV infection which has led to over 100 deaths. The department is still failing to deal fairly with the victims of this tragedy or to pursue the international firms which caused the problem.

The Neary scandal, in which almost 200 women were mutilated highlights another aspect of this problem. Not only did the Department or the local Health Board fail to act in a proper supervisory role but the medical profession, as is its wont, closed ranks around an incompetent and criminal member.

The saga of developing an up to date national children's hospital further highlights the problems in our health system. Tallaght Childrens Hospital is open for less than 10 years; The National Children's Hospital in Crumlin has had major, if piecemeal, investment over the last decade also; while over fifty million Euro has already been spent in preliminary work to relocate Temple Street Children's hospital. Now it appears that all three hospitals may be redundant as there is a new plan - a plan for a "state of the art" facility probably on a green field site. This level of messing is mirrored in the decision of the minister to close the only specialised TB hospital in the country - at a time when there is a massive spread in the disease and particularly in the spread of the drug-resistant strain of the disease.

Some former allowances, like diabetic diet supplement (it was abolished in last year's Budget - they said it was "amended") have to be okayed by the most senior hospital consultants. It is a ridiculous imposition for a doctor but the decent ones respond promptly to the forest of forms that the welfare sick face continually.

We see access to a full range of health services as a right, not a privilege. The FF/PD government has strengthened the two-tier system.

The service needs more than extra beds and extra money, it needs a progressive rethink and a full turnaround within the framework of a clear policy.

The principles that we believe must underlie the new health service are:

- * The bulk of services must be free to all at the point of use.
- * The service should be funded from general taxation.
- * There must be no public subsidising of private health.
- * Key health personnel must be incentivised back into the public service.

The bedrock of a modern health service must be a free, universally available, publicly funded, and properly resourced primary care system. There must therefore be a national network of primary care centres which not only provide GP services but also provide dental, optical physiotherapy, chiropody, counselling and other services. GP services must be available to all citizens on a 24 hour basis. The primary care centres must also be the focus of health education and disease prevention, and the health service generally must adopt a more holistic and integrated approach to health care.

The state's legalisation of consultant mixers greatly subsidises private healthcare. It destroys the functioning of a public health service. It must be ended. To this end, the Workers' Party calls for:

- * The phasing out of all private beds in public hospitals.
- * The phasing out of tax relief for private health insurance.
- * The ending of tax relief for the construction of private-profit hospitals.

The way doctors are paid contributes to inadequacies in medical services. Neither payment per patient, nor salary-based payment for medical services reflects the real demands that conscientious doctors are placed under, particularly in working class areas, where health problems are most chronic. To eliminate this, we call for:

- * Consultant pay to be on a fee-per-job basis.
- * GPs to be paid on a fee-per-visit basis.

As stated, key health service personnel are in short supply. This shortage is beyond critical. This is affecting both waiting lists and quality of care.

There must be an immediate reform and massive expansion in the numbers being trained as doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other medical personnel. The Workers Party supports the proposal that there should be a common entry qualification for all the sciences at university and that medicine would then become a postgraduate qualification.

Further, urgent steps must be taken to staunch the outflow of nurses, midwives, physiotherapists, speech and occupational therapists and other clinical personnel from the public to the private health services. The question as to why so many doctors and nurses leave the health care service completely after a very short period of service also needs to be addressed.

The Workers' Party therefore calls for:

- * The total reform of education for all medical personnel.
- * The introduction of proper contracts for all doctors, nurses, and all other medical and support staff employed directly by the HSE or employed in hospitals funded by the HSE.
- * A substantial pay increase for all clinical (non-medical) personnel, regardless of national agreements.

* The swift introduction of a range of other incentives centred on working conditions and facilities.

The cost of medicines, both to the state and to individual patients and their families, is an issue that must be urgently tackled. The international drug and pharmaceutical companies are grossly overcharging the Irish consumer for medicines and are making vast profits from the Irish public and the Irish healthcare system. The position of these companies is unchallenged by government because of their general spinelessness and by the medical profession because of the huge sponsorship and rewards system which is put in place for many doctors and specialists. The Workers' Party believes that the best and most appropriate drugs must be available to all public patients regardless of cost. However we also believe that significant savings can be made through the operation of an agreed list of generic drugs in place of more expensive proprietary products.

The pharmacy trade is one of the most restricted trades in the country. The recommendations of the competition authority should be implemented, but this will only be effective if accompanied by a massive expansion in the number of pharmacists being trained in our third level colleges.

Services to cancer sufferers are unacceptable and are a social betrayal. Patients are being exposed to life-threatening delays in receiving chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Personal support is seriously lacking as well.

We want:

- * Radiotherapy facilities in all regions.

- * A cancer patients' charter, outlining guaranteed maximum waiting times for treatment.

Mental health facilities are equally deplorable. The botched implementation of a "care in the community" policy has contributed to homelessness and drug addiction, as well as to a deterioration in support services to sufferers from mental illness. All acute psychiatric patients should have a statement of needs prepared, and implemented by the HSE.

We therefore seek:

- * All acute psychiatric patients to be assessed for their full range of needs, which must be met by or through a HSE charter.

For our disappearing public dental service we call for:

- * A free annual dental check-up for all.

- * Free dental service for everyone under 18.

- * A nationally agreed rate of charges for all routine dental work for all.

Social fragmentation and age trends are making it more likely that most people will spend their last years in residential care. People are entitled to shiver at the prospect, given recent scandals. Residential care costs are huge. We seek:

- * The creation of new step-down facilities, convalescent centres, and residential care homes funded and directly operated by the HSE.

- * The provision by the state of adequate carers' allowances, home-help services, respite care, and rehabilitation services.

The above measures will not instantly solve all our peoples' health needs, but they would take society in the right and best direction.

The public feel powerless to influence the bureaucracy which makes key decisions about health services on a collective and on an individual level. There is an urgent need to give patients more powers and rights in dealing with officialdom. Therefore we seek:

- * A health service ombudsman.

- * Direct election to the Health Service Executive.

End the Privatisation of Health Care

The Government's obsession with placing exhausted patients more and more with the private sector to deliver our health care is profound and alarming. This ideological crusade is most recently highlighted by the government's decision to hand over public lands to private speculators to create 1,000 private bed spaces. Those investing in private health care range from beef baron Larry Goodman and construction chief Bernard McNamara to clerics from the Bon Secours Order.

If we were to believe our Minister for Health Mary Harney, people like Larry Goodman and Michael Cullen of Cullen car fame, are involved to selflessly improve our health system. The profits made by the Blackrock Clinic in 2004 tell the true story!

It is easy to see why beef barons and construction bosses wish to invest in the health service. In 2004 profits at the Blackrock Clinic increased by 72% to over six million euro, shareholders in the

clinic were paid 3.1 million euro in dividends.

Despite profits of this magnitude being made our Government handed out massive subsidies to private companies in the health service.

Beacon Medical Group will receive 42% tax relief for the development of the Beacon Hospital in Sandyford in Dublin. This will cost the state 66 million euro over a ten year period.

The same level of tax subsidy was provided in 2002 for a private hospital in Galway, through a special amendment to the Finance Act.

Private hospitals do not provide emergency cover, do not provide A & E services, do not cater for patients with long term needs, do not train nurses or doctors.

The Workers' Party calls on Mary Harney to end the state subsidies to the gold-mine private medical sector. It is clear that the private sector has no contribution to make to the overall well-being of our health service. Those involved in that sector have only one interest and that is maximising profit.

So how can the Ministers justify handing over millions of euro to the private sector at a time when the Government tells us they cannot come up with funding to supply sufficient beds to meet the needs of our citizens?

We had these beds once, over 20 years ago. Haughey and Rory O'Hanlon (he bangs the bell in the Dail Chamber for a living these days) slashed and burned hospital beds. We still see the results in this stunning example of profit and ugly ideas leaving human beings and humanity itself in the dust.

Our programme is based on the needs of the people. The working class has over decades contributed more than its fair share of taxes to fund an efficient and effective health service. It is now time that the vast majority who pay the piper call the tune. It is our aim to fight with trade unions and others for a first class health service for all the people.

How to Build an Equal and Democratic Education System

The education system in the Republic of Ireland involves almost 20% of the population and, with its teachers, special needs assistants, laboratory workers and others, employs over 60,000 people.

Major change has and continues to happen in the education sector. Despite this, many of the problems we identified over twenty years ago continue and in many cases are worse.

Pupil/teacher ratios have improved; special needs education is recognised; participation at second and third level has risen dramatically, and the Gaelscoileanna and Educate Together sectors have developed. However basic and fundamental inequalities remain. Primary and second level education is largely publicly funded but privately controlled. Church control of education remains dominant.

Increased participation rates at second and third level mask huge inequality. For example participation rates in university from the large traditional working class areas (eg Dublin 1, 8, 10) has remained practically static over the last 20 years. Thousands of children leave school annually without even the most basic qualification. Thousands more are part of a rat-race for points which is at best counter-productive and at worst destructive to their educational experience.

Special needs education lacks coherence, planning, and proper implementation. It very often appears as if the position of the Department of Education in relation to special needs education is motivated by the need to create a firewall against litigation rather than an understanding of, or real concern for, the educational needs of these students.

There are hundreds of examples to which we could refer which would highlight the problems and inadequacies of the education system. However there are two over-riding issues which we must address, namely the bureaucracy within the Department and the right-wing ideological assault on the

education system and the accepted ideas on education.

The Department of Education is, even according to the Government's own experts, a shambles. As well as being a shambles, it is a department which has operated to a very specific, narrow, Catholic agenda since the state's foundation. For many decades the top echelon of the bureaucracy was dominated, perhaps even reserved, for members of the Knights of Columbanus. The history of the subservience of the Department to the wishes of the Catholic Church is well known, but perhaps nowhere as well demonstrated as in the sweetheart deal between the Department and the religious orders over the compensation deal for the victims of institutionalised sex abuse. This deal will cost the taxpayer over one billion euro, while the religious orders - the perpetrators of both the abuse and the cover-up - escape with paying only one tenth of that amount.

The ideological attack on the concept of universal education provided by the state is being waged at many levels. To most people the most visible example of the privatisation of education is the strengthening of the private fee paying sector, the growth of private-profit cramming schools, the burgeoning private third level sector, and the promotion of so-called "Public-Private Partnerships" in the building and maintenance of school buildings.

The ideological attack has been sustained and many-pronged. Many of the attacks have been made in public and derive from the expected quarters – eg Dr Ed Walsh, the OECD, and IBEC, the employers' group. Other attacks are more subtle. The almost 100% privatisation of research at publicly funded third level institutions through so-called "sponsorship" has been the direct result of the convergence of government policy and the transnational agenda. The continued clamour from business interests for education to be "relevant" (ie, it must do their training for them), the demand for league tables of exam results and the media obsession with the points race all push the focus of education from the public to the private.

Furthermore, at both government and EU level, there is a marked shift from a position of education as being a public service to education being a tradable commodity. The proposed EU Constitution, currently in limbo, and the position of the EU at the WTO talks, has been to treat education as a tradable service. The long term implications of such a position becoming legalised leads to the possibility of the total privatisation of the education service on the same Thatcherite basis as electricity or water supply.

Within the above context it is easy to understand both the government's attempts to downgrade and abolish the national network of VECs and the need for the Workers' Party, as a socialist party, to defend and promote the expansion of the VEC concept. For over 70 years the VECs, which are democratically accountable to local government and are responsive to local circumstances and local needs have offered second and third level education to hundreds of thousands of people unable to gain access to the fee paying church run system or to the fee paying universities. They offered a full panoply of educational opportunity from full-time courses, to part-time courses, block release, adult education and second chance education. Over the last 20 years, the role and status has been denigrated and eroded. Schools have been whittled away and given to church control through the creation of so called "community colleges". Third level colleges have been pulled out of the VECs and either given "independence" or put under the wing of a nearby university.

We must defend the potential for democratic control which the VECs offered and oppose the centralisation of the Department and the empire building of the Catholic Church and the Universities.

One of the legacies of almost 200 years of private / denominational control of education is an engrained culture of secrecy. The continuation of this culture is both anti-democratic and anti-educational. Both parents, and the wider community, are entitled to openness in the education system. However support for openness cannot be interpreted as support for the construction of crude comparisons or league tables based on exam results or points achieved by students in the annual "points race". It is not in any way possible to compare a school in a working class suburb, with an open door policy to all potential students to a private fee paying school with multiple barriers to entry merely by comparing the numbers of university entrants they produce each year.

Our policy platform must be on two levels - the practical and the ideological. On the ideological level

we must defend the concept of education as part of the public domain available to all regardless of income. We must oppose the creeping privatisation of education and educational services. We must oppose the imposition of alien business concepts of profitability/viability on education. We must promote and defend the ideal of a full education for all citizens which includes provision for continuing, second chance and adult education.

We must also recognise that the realities which exist in society will also exist within the education system. Therefore the reality of bullying, disruptive activity and anti-social behaviour, which are widespread in society are also a problem in the school system.

Bullying can be by teachers of students; by students of other students; and increasingly by students against teachers. Disruptive behaviour by students puts massive pressure on the classroom teacher and also seriously impinges on the ability of other students to avail properly of class time. Therefore schools must be properly resourced, both in terms of legislation and staffing, to deal with all these problems.

Recognising that pre-school and primary education are the most vitally important in ensuring equality in education our proposals for the practical reform of the education service should include:

- * The provision of a universally available state system of play schools for all children from three to five years old.
- * A stepped plan over six years to ensure maximum class size of 20 pupils, with appropriate weighting to take account of the integration of students with special needs into mainstream classes.
- * The provision of adequate special education-needs teachers, special class teachers and, where necessary, special schools, to provide all children across the spectrum of learning disability with the most complete education possible.
- * A properly planned and funded approach to the training of special needs teachers, and also to the training of Special Needs Assistants.
- * The expansion of the school's psychological service.
- * The training and employment of sufficient speech therapists and other specialist staff.
- * The ending of the annual points rat race by ensuring sufficient places at third level for high demand courses like law; the introduction of a common entry requirement for all the sciences including medicine; the ending of the total reliance on end-of-year exams by the phased introduction of assessed project work and continuous assessment systems.
- * A universal grants scheme without any means test. Proper financial supports must also exist to ensure that students from low income families can complete second level education.
- * The abolition of tuition fees for students pursuing third level courses as evening students or as part-time students.
- * A state funded planning, building and refurbishment scheme to take account of the state's changing demographics.
- * Support for the development of a secular state-funded system of education. The Bush and Blairite concept of "Faith-based" schools is a recipe for segregation and sectarianism.
- * The concept of "citizenship" should be promoted within education - as a measure to oppose sectarianism, racism, and xenophobia.

Why Are 50,000 on the Housing List When The State Is Rich?

Since the state's early years, most governments understood that they had a duty to house families that could not provide a home from their own resources. Governments provided funds to local authorities to build houses for families who had applied for a home from the local council.

When the state failed to provide housing, as happened in the 1960s, it led to street protests and unrest.

So why in the year 2006, when government has more money than any government in the past, have we over 50,000 families on the housing waiting list as well as 100,000 people waiting for a home? And at a time when our society is supposed to be organised along the lines of Social Partnership. And a major selling point of Sustaining Progress to workers was the claim that it would tackle the shortage of social and affordable housing.

Now, as the national talks to replace Sustaining Progress draw to an end there are still 50,000 families on the housing list throughout the state. There are thousands more who cannot afford to buy a home of their own. It is part of the right-wing ideology of the FF/PPD coalition that people should drop their expectations that local authorities have a duty to provide housing for those on low income.

And while we accept that many in the trade union leadership want to see the housing problem solved, the direction in which they are leading the movement will not solve the housing crisis. Handing state land to developers and speculators is not the answer. Handing millions of Euro each week to rack-renting landlords and scrooge-like B & B owners is certainly not the solution. The Workers' Party demands that government provide sufficient Local Authority houses for rent to families or individuals who can not afford to buy their own.

Much was made of the social problems suffered by the large housing estates which were built in the 1960s and 1970s. While it was wrong to move thousands of people from Dublin city centre to places like Tallaght, Clondalkin and Blanchardstown, it was not the houses that were the problem. By and large they were built to a high quality. But still we have not learned from the past. Moving thousands of families from Dublin city centre far out into the county without providing the most basic amenities such as shopping centres, schools and transport was wrong.

Those communities also suffered from the corruption within our planning system. It is also true that the design of some of the estates was bad.

The cost of buying an average home has risen from 102,222 Euro in 1997 to over 300,000 Euro in 2005. While there are a number of reasons for the massive increase in house prices, the government if it wished, could have introduced measures to prevent the profiteering that has taken place over the past number of years in the house-building industry. The government should introduce price control for houses that are for sale on the private market.

In the 1998 budget the government eliminated interest deductibility and later in the same year, introduced a 9% stamp duty on non-principal primary residences. This resulted in house price inflation reducing from 29% in 1998 to 4.5% in 2001. The 2001 Budget did away with these measures and with the investors back in the market, house prices in 2002 rose nationally by 11.5% and 13.5% in Dublin.

While there may have been an argument for tax breaks for investments in the housing industry at times of high unemployment, there is no reason for tax breaks now, at a time when we require thousands of building workers from abroad.

In the recent past Bertie Ahern made much of the cost of land for development. He pointed out that the land in the Greater Dublin Area was owned by a handful of very rich individuals, and that they

were drip-feeding the land for house-building, so keeping the cost of housing high. At the same time a Dail committee was considering if it could introduce price control over land.

It looked at the Kenny report which had recommended in 1973 that land that was owned for development should cost no more than its present use value plus 25%. It had long been argued by those representing developers and speculators that the Kenny report was unconstitutional but the Dail committee, having spent many months considering the argument, decided that the Dail could introduce control over the price of the land.

The committee made its recommendation over two years ago. The committee made it clear that the Constitution would not prevent the government from introducing that section of the 1973 Kenny Report which proposed that land zoned for development should not be sold for more than its value plus 25%. The government is keeping its silence as the crisis grows. Since then we have heard nothing from the government on this issue. The speculators and developers seem to have won again.

The Workers' Party demand:

- * The immediate implementation of the Kenny report on the cost of building land.
- * That builders must provide a certificate of reasonable value when selling a house.
- * That the government provide sufficient funds for local authorities to meet the needs of the people on the housing list.
- * An end to all tax subsidies for second homes - whether these are so-called investment houses for rent or holiday homes.
- * A certificate from all developers, builders, contractors and sub-contractors that proper rates of pay, pension contributions etc as due under the registered agreement for the building industry have been paid to workers.