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## Charity and the Careless State

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Now that Christmas is coming, there will be the annual debates about ‘the poor’ and ‘the homeless’; we will be exhorted to engage in charitable acts for the needy. Given that the poorest 10% of Irish households experienced a drop of 26% in their disposable income between 2009 and 2010, and the wealthiest 10% had an increase of 8% (according to the EU SILC study), and that economic inequality is growing visibly with each budget, such calls may seem highly morally commendable. However, charity is not justice; it is neither a robust nor an effective response to economic inequality. In fact, charity perpetuates inequality and legitimates it creating in the process a truly ‘Careless State’.

Charity is an entirely voluntary act; it can be given and it can be taken away. It is a personal choice, not a collectively binding agreement of solidarity. At the individual level, it is driven by the desire for moral recognition on the part of those who give rather than recognition of the rights of those who receive. It can and does service the guilt of the better off, rather than the needs of the vulnerable to live with dignity and independence.

Moreover, charity also leads to the moral judgement of those who in receipt of it, a framing of the recipients as deserving or undeserving. It is politically dangerous in this respect as it creates the public impression that those ‘offering charity’ (those doing their ‘good deeds’) are morally superior to the needy as they are working out of virtue. Because charity is a gift offered by those who decide to give, on the terms which they decide to provide it, those living on charity have no rights to the services or goods offered that can be vindicated by law. Being in receipt of charity is thereby demeaning; it has to be sought through supplication (effectively by begging – not all begging is with a cap-in-hand on the street). And this means those seeking charity are subject to scrutiny on the terms defined by the givers who exercise power over them. It is premised on the institutionalisation of unequal and unjust economic relationships. Only in such a structurally unequal system can those with resources be in a position to ‘offer charity’ to others.

Responding to inequality by acts of charity will not and cannot challenge the generative causes of injustice. To say this is not to deny the valuable work done by charities. Many charities speak out and some campaign on structural injustices; but even these operate under the restriction of the Charities Act 2009 which states that...they cannot promote ‘*a political cause, unless the promotion of that cause relates directly to the advancement of the charitable purposes of the body*’. This means that structural inequalities are secondary considerations in most charitable work, and this reinforces and exacerbates injustice. It gives the false impression something is

being done politically to address the deeply demeaning reality of living in poverty or without a home.

Why do we respond so often (and so generously at the individual level, at times) to economic inequalities by offering charity even though it is ineffectual? Why do we not institutionalise systems of taxation for distributing wealth in a progressive and egalitarian way so that those who are most vulnerable have equal access to good health services, education, housing and transport comparable to others? Why is charity the governing ideology of public policy within the Irish welfare state? The problem rests in large part in the way ethical and moral issues are framed in Irish cultural and political life. The principles that have guided much of welfare policy have been those of voluntarism and/or subsidiarity; these have been interpreted in a narrowly defined way to mean the absence of State intervention even when such is necessary. The State has been absolved from acting, as charitable religious, voluntary and professional groups claim to be able to act in lieu of the State. Effectively people set up charitable enterprises for public purposes (and while valuable in their own right) this means that politicians are excused from raising taxes to fund and develop services and supports in a systematic way at national and local level. In theory, services and supports can be provided through voluntary contributions and local initiatives. In practice, however, voluntarism means reliance on one's family or local community, both of which differ greatly in capacity. The inevitable result is that, where there is no voluntary effort, there are no services or supports. When communities are ravaged through unemployment and families are unable (or unwilling) to support the vulnerable within, those in need are left to the vagaries of the market. A service exists in one town, village or community, not in another; services are haphazard, unplanned and entirely unequal in terms of provision. The problem is exacerbated in a highly mobile society, where family and community networks are dismembered through migration and emigration. By relying on charity to guide public policy, Ireland has never developed a deep political and moral commitment to developing a truly welfare-led caring state, a state whose primary concern is the welfare of *all the people*, not just those who have the means to exercise political influence in one's local constituency.

So as Christmas is coming, the poor will be temporarily showered with the empty rhetoric of concern; the left hand of the state will exercise its unique mode of compassion, through encouraging charitable acts, Christmas boxes, donations, benefit concerts and the like. There will be sentimental displays of political good will. By doing the occasional charitable act people will be forgiven for refusing to pay more taxes and thereby depriving their neighbours of basic services.

But it is in the right hand that power is yielded; it is in the budget that social justice lives and dies. And there is little sign of love and justice in the disproportionate cuts to the incomes of the most vulnerable that have occurred over several budgets of both the current and previous

administration. Despite a professed belief in equality by most politicians at election time, when it comes to political practice, this does not translate into action; it is empty rhetoric. In real political terms a belief in charity is what underpins public welfare policy. This will ensure that 'the poor we will always have with us'. We will continue to have what we now have; an increasingly Careless State. It is a simple sociological reality that without addressing the deep structural causes underlying economic inequalities, poverty is effectively replicated in each new generation. In this political scenario, those of us who are comfortable, and especially those who are wealthy, will have continued opportunities to remain virtuous and offer charity for Christmas. It is helpful to remember, however, that solidarity is the political form of love.

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Her new book with Bernie Grummell and Dympna Devine examines how neoliberalism is creating new forms of carelessness in Irish education— *New Managerialism in Education: Commercialization, Carelessness and Gender* (2012) Palgrave Macmillan.