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Budget 2023 – we look beyond the headlines.

Dave Smyth writes about the recently announced Irish budget and why it won't and can't work

While commentators, those in the media who facilitate them and establishment TD's & ministers queue up in front of any camera or microphone that they can find and gobble up as many column inches as they can to promote the budget announced on 27th September and sold as a "giveaway", let's take a deeper look...

With plenty of headline grabbing "one off" payments and so-called bonuses for people already living in or close to poverty, there have been no real policy changes and no meaningful measures that will tackle the actual problems. Instead, we've been handed a box of band aids and told to be happy about it!

As winter takes hold, this government have increased carbon tax in circumstances where they have provided no affordable alternative – once again leaving the most vulnerable having to make the choice between eating or heating. Even that choice is becoming more difficult as prices of everyday staples like milk, bread and butter rocket in price with inflation at 9% and climbing.

Budget 2023 was another missed opportunity by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil with their green helpers as they serve establishment Ireland, the system itself and those who benefit from the status quo – the rich, those in senior civil service roles, developers, and faceless "investors". Citizens took a back seat as usual. More and more, we are viewed by FF and FG as customers rather than citizens!

With record tax revenues and an unprecedented exchequer surplus available to them, they still avoided taking real leadership decisions or acting in the best interests of the country. Much of what they've provided is useless and will leave us all broke again very soon. I'd like to look at some key sectors, namely education, healthcare, social welfare, housing and public transport to focus on what they did and what Socialists would do.

Education

They have introduced free schoolbooks for primary school students and a €1,000 reduction in college registration fees. Education should be free and open to everyone. School books and uniforms should be free, as should lunch for students at all levels. There should be no "registration fees" or "voluntary contributions". The school meals programme has been extended but will not cover all. People from disadvantaged backgrounds often drop out of full-time education because costs are a barrier. Providing free

schoolbooks to primary school students does nothing to help the parents of teens and young adults in 2nd and 3rd level education and therefore does nothing to address the inequality and unfairness.

Healthcare

They have abolished all inpatient hospital charges. Healthcare should be free at the point of delivery, to all. As such, not just inpatient charges should be abolished. All charges to the public should be abolished. Free GP care is to be widened to include children up to 7 years of age, but this is again inadequate. GP's should not be in private practice where profit is their motive, the state should provide GP care to all who need it and for free. The scope of the free contraception programme has been widened to include all women from 16 to 30 years of age. This scheme should be scrapped and contraception made freely available to any and all citizens who seek it. To not do so is to discriminate based on gender and age.

Social Welfare

Social welfare incorporates those living with a disability or illness, those seeking work, those of pension age receiving the state pension and many other supports for families who need it. The current base rates for the various schemes are deemed inadequate as is, by a wide range of NGO's and campaigning groups who represent a diverse mix of citizens struggling to survive. In Budget 2023, FF and FG have provided a €12 weekly increase to these base rates. They have also postponed this meagre increase until January 2023, while at the same time TD's and government Ministers are to receive a significant pay rise to their already bloated salaries from November 2022. This demonstrates the utter contempt that they have for some of those who are suffering the most.

Housing

Since the 1980's it has been FF and FG policy to privatise housing for profit. From their persistent failure to build public housing to their schemes to enrich landlords such as HAP, they have succeeded in bringing incredible misery to a shocking and every increasing number of people. We are living in times of unprecedented homelessness and a housing crisis that's getting worse every second of every day. Those living in private rented accommodation lack any meaningful rights when it comes to security of tenure or rent rates. In this budget they have continued their trend of pushing public housing into private hands of greed. A €500 per annum tax credit for renters and the help to buy scheme just cement this flawed logic.

Housing should be a right, based on need not greed. Socialists would roll out a massive public housing building programme and make housing available to all with rent related to income, thereby making mixed public housing where every worker regardless of status could live together in real communities with diversity and togetherness as the ethos. We want public housing for all.

The current situation whereby landlords can make people homeless on a whim is disgusting and wrong. In other EU countries where renting is properly controlled, people are given real right of tenure with long leases and true security. FF and FG refuse to legislate for this because it removes the "opportunistic" element of their landlord class who see property as a means to a profit before anything else.

Housing must become a right and Socialists want to make this a reality. People who see housing as a commodity are greed driven pigs who prey on the vulnerable and create misery for their own personal gain. This cannot be allowed to become normal, and we will always fight for an end to rotten landlord thuggery and disregard for families, children and workers.

Public Transport

At a time where use of private cars needs to be discouraged, instead of any incentive to use public transport (where available) they have wasted a significant opportunity and introduced a pathetic 20% reduction. Socialists want to see free, frequent, and expanded public transport systems. Many other European countries have already introduced this with fantastic results. Outside of our cities, public transport is often inadequate to put it mildly and, in many areas, there simply isn't any! We need a massive investment in public transport throughout rural Ireland and we need to make public transport a realistic and efficient alternative to the private car. Budget 2023 does absolutely nothing to address this.

Conclusion

I mentioned the one-off supports that are merely designed to get good press rather than to tackle the actual issues. Giving people a double week or a "bonus" payment does nothing to change the problems. Energy costs won't change after these little extras are long gone. Socialists would re-nationalise energy and do away with the so-called competition that is nothing more than a cartel of the greedy and a cash-cow for the rich. When we had The ESB and An Bord Gais, both as semi-state operators, we had electricity and gas prices among the cheapest in the EU. Today, with multiple suppliers competing for profit rather than providing value, or properly competing at all, we have the highest prices in the EU.

Budget 2023 is another among the many stunts that FF and FG are famous for. Winter 2022 is set to be one many of us won't easily forget, if we survive it that is! 2023 will begin with a cost-of-living crisis that wasn't properly dealt with and no more "bonuses" for the people who will be hit hardest when bills start to arrive again. It has been flogged as a "giveaway budget" but instead it's more like a "hood winking budget".

If you would like to know more about our politics and if you want to be part of a massive people powered movement, search on social media platforms for The Cost of Living Coalition and join your local group as well as supporting the national campaign. Together we can fight back just like we did when they tried to impose water charges.

You can also download and read our alternative budget where questions like "How will we pay for all of this" are addressed in great detail, here: http://www.rednetwork.ie/documents/PBP_BUDGET_23.pdf

The RED Network (incorporating Rebel Telly) are a network of radical socialists within the political party People Before Profit, a 32-county people power movement on the island of Ireland.

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