Almost everybody in Ireland would, if asked, profess to believe in justice and to want a just society. Many individuals would consider the pursuit of social justice to be one of the key elements of their job. Government ministers, senior civil servants, health board workers, clergymen, and a host of others must at least make the pretence that their main task in life is to build a more just society. Yet when we scratch the surface we find that there is in fact little agreement on what constitutes social justice. Some policies are pursued in the name of justice which fly directly in the face of other policies also pursued in the name of justice. This may account for much of the uncertainty and frequent changes of direction in public policy in Ireland, as elsewhere.

The basic ambivalence in the area of justice relates to the notion of equality. Equality is generally seen as a key element in social justice. For instance in South Africa during apartheid it was the unequal treatment of black people and white people that was universally condemned. The fact that many black people in South Africa were fairly well off, often much better off than other black Africans, was considered irrelevant. In this country unequal treatment of men and women in such matters as recruitment for jobs, social welfare entitlements, and membership of sports clubs, is seen as less and less acceptable. In Ireland the fact that the richest ten per cent of the population are, on average, fifteen times better off than the poorest ten per cent, is often cited as unjust.

On the whole, people do not get as excited about the last injustice mentioned as the first two. The first two examples concern basic liberties of citizenship, and it is widely agreed that citizens of a just society should have the same basic rights. It is not, however, universally agreed that the distribution of wealth and income should be equal. One reason for this is that nowadays equality of wealth or income is seen to be less basic a right than equality of opportunity. In practice this means opportunity to gain positions of authority, status and wealth. If a woman, or a man, is discriminated against in a competition for the post of managing director, carrying a salary of £100,000, such unequal treatment is likely to be considered more unfair than the fact that the canteen workers in the company earn £6,000 per annum.

But a serious side-effect of equality of opportunity is that it militates against economic equality, and this in turn, over time, makes equality of opportunity impossible. It should be stressed that it is not the equality of opportunity that is the problem, but the acceptance of opportunity it entails. In practice, opportunity means opportunity for advantage. Our culture makes champions of people who ‘get on’ in life. ‘Getting on’ means being in a better job than that of one’s parents, living in an area populated by rich people, being able to holiday in places inaccessible to poor people.

In recent years the culture of opportunity has become rampant in the industrialised world. Government policies reflect this. Thus there was great concern in Ireland in the mid-eighties that the tax regime would inhibit bright young people from gaining economic advantage over their fellows, and that they would be ‘forced’ to emigrate. In other words taxation meant
there was not enough opportunity for inequality to make Ireland attractive. In Britain, recent Tory party policies have reflected a glorification of advantage, of getting on, of unequal wealth, with emphasis on lower taxes, privatisation, curbing the trade unions, and supposedly ‘freeing the market’.

The charge is sometimes made that pressing for more economic equality is merely ‘envy’. But envy can be a cheap word to use. People are justifiably resentful that society can treat them so unequally in the way it distributes its wealth. Moreover a lack of economic equality, however engendered, creates inequalities of other basic needs and rights. Technically the poor in Ireland have equal ‘basic’ liberties with the rich (defined as e.g. the right to vote and be voted for, freedom of speech and assembly, liberty of conscience and thought, the right to property and freedom from arbitrary arrest). But they do not have equality in basic needs such as education or training, healthcare, access to the law on many issues, equality of respect, access to employment, housing or leisure activities. Nor, consequently, do they have equality of opportunity. The inequality in basic needs is bad enough in itself, but it also means that in practice some of the so-called basic liberties, such as the right to be elected to public office, or the right to private property, are meaningless.

It must also be stressed that great inequality will always cause poverty, because poverty has a relative, as well as an absolute dimension. It is now accepted that an individual in Ireland (or in the U.S., or Germany) can be said to be living in poverty if their income is less than half the average income in that country. This is because such a level of income will inevitably exclude them from ordinary living patterns and activities. To quote Townsend, Poverty in the UK, (1979):

“Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the kind of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged, or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.”

The stated objectives of the last Government Budget (February 9, 1995) illustrates the tension between policies designed to create greater equality, and those designed to give more opportunities for greater inequality. Mr Quinn stated:

"I intend to set out three objectives for the Budget: (1) to reward work; (2) to promote enterprise; and (3) to strengthen social solidarity..."

It is not the purpose of this article to state that the 1995 budget was a particularly unjust one. Nevertheless it is inescapable that, as bald statements, objectives (1) and (2) are likely to reduce the social solidarity which objective (3) is aimed at, since they will increase economic inequality, and intensify the social exclusion of those who cannot access work or find opportunities for entrepreneurship. The first two objectives pander to the ideology of the dominant, who proclaim that they cannot use their wealth and talents in the interests of society unless they are allowed to be fifteen times as wealthy as those at the bottom of the heap.

Not even the most rabid egalitarian expects or desires that all people should be exactly equal in income, wealth or personal circumstances. Yet is there any good reason why we cannot construct a society where the richest person is no more than, say, twice as well off as the poorest? Are we so venal that we cannot contribute our gifts and talents back to the society who gave them to us without demanding exorbitant compensation? It may be true that the best talents can only be tapped by allowing rewards to be allocated according to labour market forces. But in practice high rewards are given to individuals precisely where the market is not allowed to operate frequently. High profits come about as the result of lack of competition and monopoly power, and high salaries and ‘emoluments’ as a result of closed shops, boardroom cliques, old boy networks, and effective exclusion of most shareholders, not to speak of the general public. If a ‘Dutch auction’ was allowed to operate for the jobs of the board members of the largest companies and financial institutions in Ireland, (assuming that it was possible for the auctioneer to identify comparable talent) how many of the present incumbents would keep their jobs?