



Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network

JUNE 2003

Consultation or Foregone Conclusion

The Belfast Consultation on the Water Tax was held in the Grosvenor Hall on 13, May to a full and determined audience. Those attending ranged from old age pensioners to water service workers, parents on low income and benefits, students, trade unionists and community workers. It was clear from the start there was a mass of public feeling against the introduction of what was agreed would be 'double taxation'. It was stated that within our rates bill each householder already paid towards the cost and maintenance of water and sewerage provision until 1999 and that Government changed this system of payment without our consultation. Many people stated they were under the impression their increased rates bills already contained a charge for water services.

Communities Against the Water Tax distributed leaflets detailing the real costs people would face if these outrageous charges were introduced in Northern Ireland; a copy of this leaflet is included within Anti-Poverty News for your information.

Among the six speakers on the panel were the Acting Chief Executive of Scottish Water and two civil servants from Dept of Finance and the Dept of Regional Development. David Sterling of DFP was representing the Minister Angela Smith. From the start the panel were challenged from the floor for being biased in favour of the introduction of the water tax. The question was asked why there was no impartial panel representative to speak on behalf of the interests of the Northern Ireland householder. Debate was lively from the outset.

There were many interesting and pertinent points raised, such as, if this was a consultation why did the consultation document state that water charges would be introduced. People felt this left no room for participative democracy to occur. Previous consultation events in other cities throughout Northern Ireland were started with how charges would be paid, not whether they should be.

There was strong representation from the floor that people had not come to this event to listen to six presentations take up the majority of the time set aside for this event. What people wanted was real and active debate from the floor. The chair for the evening, Colm Bradley of Community Technical Aid, interpreted the demands of the audience that no presentations should be made and that debate from the floor would be facilitated and questions responded to by panel members.

A number of issues were raised; importantly the consultation document itself was described as flawed and misleading. It was stated that it should be withdrawn, rewritten and reissued for real consultation. This was voted on unanimously at the end of the event alongside the complete rejection of the proposal that people within Northern Ireland should pay additional charges for water. Speakers from the floor spoke of being placed in a blackmail position by Government with the threat of reduced budgets for education and health if costs for water and sewerage had to be provided from within the Northern Ireland budget. What was not discussed was the fact that seven eighths of water consumption in Northern Ireland is consumed by industry. Why in this case is the cost of increased investment being pursued from the Northern Ireland householder? Should industry not pay 7/8ths of the cost?

It must be said that statements made throughout the evening were somewhat contradictory. At one point people were reassured that our locally elected Assembly representatives would make any final decision required on the introduction of a Water Tax. Further on it was stated that no guarantee could be made that this would in fact be the case. There were many questions from those present on the absence of political representatives at such a crucial debate.

This is a real bread and butter issue for people. The facts of the situation are, people living in NI earn less and have a higher cost of living. There are 3 times more people in receipt of unemployment related benefits in NI than in other UK regions. There is no provision for relief from water tax for people on low incomes or in receipt of benefits. It will be the poor who will be affected most by this potential charge. Poor people living in affluent areas may have their water charge set by the value of their house, but this does not reflect their actual income. The outcome could be, having to move to an area you can afford to live in; resulting in the loss of neighbours you have known for a lifetime and the breakdown of local familiar community infrastructures. This would cause increased isolation for the more vulnerable sections of our community.

One person raised the issue of water meters, paying for the amount of water you use. This is particularly alarming to NIAPN and would impact most on larger families living on low incomes, men and women with caring responsibilities, and people with a disability. Such a system would raise levels of debt and have serious health implications, as flushing a toilet or having a bath could become a luxury people were unable to afford.

The obvious conclusion on the issue of the Water Tax is that access to water is a basic human right. As we need air to breathe we need water for life, no one should expect the most vulnerable members of our society to pay for this natural resource. If we look at the big picture on this issue, the privatisation of water is part of a global move toward control over a limited resource; it must be resisted. Gérard Mestrallet, CEO of Suez, puts the water industry position succinctly: 'Water is an efficient product. It is a product, which normally would be free, and our job is to sell it. But it is a product which is absolutely necessary to life.'

Some basic points on water

- Water is a human right. We need to work to guarantee a free basic provision of safe water for all.
- Water is essential for the entire biosphere, not just humans.
- Water is nature's gift and cannot be owned and turned into a commodity.
- Water is exhaustible. It is our duty to conserve and use it sustainably. No one has a right to pollute it.

If you want to demonstrate your objection to the water tax, contact NIAPN or Communities Against the Water Tax. Watch this space, we will be holding a joint event on this issue over the next few weeks.

1076 words