

# Comment

## *Is our bureaucracy falling behind its rivals?*

It is common knowledge that the regulations of the Department of Health and Social Security make more stimulating reading than those of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. But why? They look to be the same genre. They have the same air of implacable rectitude. They must surely be drafted by people occupying roughly the same grades in their respective departments, and possessing similar casts of mind—different, say, from those of their colleagues in the Countryside Commission or the monsignori in the department that produces all those bidding prayers. So why should one be more readable than the others? The answer is to be found in their differing holds on reality.

At first sight this difference might appear to be expressed in their relative knowledge. The most obvious feature of the Congregation's recent Instruction on the theology of liberation, for instance, is plain ignorance of the Marxism it condemns (and it would save embarrassment to the faithful if someone in the Congregation would look up the modern usage of words like "ideology"). There is nothing specially unusual about this. But then nor is it unusual for the DHSS. Their most recent regulations focus on abuses in lodging payments to people on supplementary benefit—all those people on the Margate costa del dole. The Social Security Advisory Committee asked for "fuller information from the DHSS on the extent of the suspected abuse". But "no estimate of the size of the problem could be produced". The DHSS don't know what they're talking about either. Culpable ignorance, the Congregation used to call it.

So perhaps the difference between them lies in their relative power. The DHSS is gunning for boarders under 26 on SB, and it can certainly make them jump. In Leicester, for instance, such people can stop in their lodgings for four weeks. If they do not find permanent accommodation within this time they must move out of Leicester, even if it's their home town. The process will then start again elsewhere. If they don't comply they will lose the accommodation part of their benefit. (Well, alright, people over 21 will get £3.30 a week for housing.) The Congregation cannot command such obedience from those it finds in serious deviation. Anyway, without bad faith its only remedy can be the single one it allows the poor against the rich, that of encouraging "interior conversion". This lack of power is one of the reasons why people at large do not take Church pronouncements very

seriously. But the Church is not in the power business. Its lack should not prevent the Congregation saying something interesting and to the point.

In fact the fundamental difference between reading the regulations of the DHSS and the Congregation arises from the extent to which they reveal the world around us. The DHSS regulations disclose on their face what is going on. Once everyone was evidently entitled to their housing costs. Now some are deserving of this and some (boarders under 26, say about 50,000 people) are not. Even the exceptions, like those of the chronically sick who can only reasonably live as boarders, are revealing. The benefit is withdrawn to cut "waste and abuse" says the Minister for Social Security, curiously making the problem stem from the benefit rather than the situation (unemployment and housing shortage) which the benefit is meant to relieve. But there is a deeper concealment. The under 26-year old, not chronically sick, is recognisably the able-bodied pauper, returned among us. This is the restless peasant who had to be controlled by Elizabethan poor relief, the indolent threatened by the 19th-century workhouse, a character who lingered on into the welfare state when the "less eligibility" principle fixed SB lower than other benefits. The welfare state was a fine truce between classes, but always the able-bodied pauper has had to be harried by the dominant class. And now it is all starting again.

To refer to class conflict is to wander into the ideology condemned by the Congregation. But the point here is that these regulations of the DHSS not only disclose their origins but even preserve the dream of housing for all in the very act of denying it. Thus one can fish out from them the way reality is being structured for us, and its fissures to. The directions of the Congregation, on the other hand, do not disclose their origins. They give instructions as to how to understand the world but everything, even the critique of Marx, seems to come in some privileged fashion from the Church itself. But neither the Church nor religious sentiments like the horror of violence can alone provide social analysis. Ways of doing this already exist with some criteria about observation and so on, and these cannot just be over-ridden if a plausible account of the social world is to be given. Besides, the Congregation's directions are so general that quite what is propounded or opposed cannot be deciphered from their face. No doubt people can guess it from other sources. But to do so comes close to the critical analysis of "even ecclesial realities" to which the Congregation objects. In short, the Instruction reveals nothing of the world, and it is this lack of purchase on reality that makes it so disappointing to read.