

Poor and poorer still

THE leaked papers suggesting that most, if not all, social security payments may be frozen or cut during the next financial year because of public spending restraints (Guardian, October 29) is appalling and yet another example of the Government's U-turn politics.

The suggestion made by some Conservative backbenchers that promises about benefits made during the election may have to be postponed because of the recession should be treated with contempt. Is this the degree of accountability the electorate deserve?

Judging by the experience of real cuts in child, unemployment and pension benefits during the last decade, and the length and depth of the recession, it seems unlikely, even if the economy had started the recovery phase, that the intended promises made on social security payments were ever likely to be translated into actual payments.

The next budget, like many of the past ones, will no doubt produce increases in personal tax allowances by the rate of inflation for everyone in employment irrespective of their in-

come level, but there will be no more for the poorest sections of the nation — the elderly, the disabled, the vast majority of those on benefit — if the Treasury holds their increases down to just 2 per cent. Social security was devised to help those most in need, but the tax cuts and personal allowances increases of the last few years suggests that the poorest sections have subsidised those in employment, resulting in a growing gap between the poor and rich.

Whether the Prime Minister intended it or not, this is the trend that is likely to emerge if social security payments are frozen or cut in real terms. Is this the "classless society" John Major is striving for? If so, the electorate deserve a better deal and a better government.

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