Corruption in political and business life has become a prominent issue in Ireland in recent years as measured by the number and duration of parliamentary and quasi-judicial inquiries. Media interest in the topic has been intense. There has been a widespread perception that corruption is rife. This view is reflected in a decline in the standing of politicians. In an October 1999 opinion poll, for example, only 20 per cent of the Irish public expressed trust in government ministers.¹

Definitions of corruption are broad ranging. Some authors opt for definitions based on laws and other formal rules because these allow relative precision and stability. Others stress cultural standards to accommodate more realistic and subtle definitions. A third school seeks to put the wider political implications of corruption and the moral issues centre stage (Johnston, 1994). An accepted core element, which is taken here as a working definition, is ‘the abuse of public office for private gain’. Such gain is not necessarily financial but is of personal value to those involved.

Newness, scale and varieties of corruption

In Ireland, the received wisdom is that the misuse of office and a marked want of probity have increased in the past decade. Politicians of previous generations are assumed to have been less corruptible. This was certainly the image of the founders of the state who took relatively drastic measures to stamp out elements of corruption that had emerged during the war of independence from 1919–21. In comparative terms, Ireland is still perceived by outside observers to be relatively low in the ‘corruption league table’:

Ireland is internationally regarded as a country in which corruption in business and politics is slight... [In surveys conducted by the anti-corruption group Transparency International] this State has fallen, in the space of three years, from 11th to 15th place... Ireland is eighth of the 15 countries of the European Union (EU).²
Suggestions that standards of political behaviour were under threat were made as far back as the late 1960s. In 1967, George Colley, a leading Fianna Fáil deputy, warned of low standards in high places (Dwyer, 1997: 153). Again, in the early 1980s, a series of scandals enveloped the Fianna Fáil government led by Charles Haughey. Nevertheless, they seemed confined to a small group within the Fianna Fáil party. In general, parliamentarians, the civil service, public enterprises and local government were regarded as assuredly honest. Corruption has become a prominent issue only in more recent years.

Several incidents in the early 1990s suggested the existence of a ‘golden circle’ of business people that influenced the dispersal of large amounts of public money for private interest. The scandals centring on the McCracken, Moriarty and Flood Tribunals (Figure 13.1) focus on the issue of politicians,

**The Flood Tribunal** is investigating the planning process in North County Dublin. The Tribunal also has the power to investigate any improper payments to politicians in connection with the planning process.

The Tribunal was established by the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) in October 1997 under the chairmanship of Mr Justice Flood. A key witness, Mr Gogarty, alleged that the former minister for foreign affairs, Mr Ray Burke, received payments amounting to IRE£80,000. Mr Burke says he received IRE£30,000.

The terms of reference of the Tribunal were widened in June 1998 following the disclosure of a further payment of IRE£30,000 to Mr Burke in 1989, this time by Rennicks Manufacturing Ltd. The Tribunal is also empowered to investigate all improper payments made to politicians in connection with the planning process. Under this provision, it is investigating allegations made by the UK-based Irish property developer, Mr Tom Gilmartin, about payments, including a claim that he gave Mr Pádraig Flynn, a former minister and EU Commissioner, a IRE£50,000 cheque in 1989.

**The Moriarty Tribunal** was established in September 1997, and is a follow-on tribunal arising from a report by the McCracken (Dunnes Payments) Tribunal. It is investigating payments to former Taoiseach Charles J. Haughey and former Fine Gael Minister Michael Lowry. In particular, it is investigating whether any political decision might have been made by either Mr Haughey or Mr Lowry when in office to the benefit of a person or company which made a payment.

The Tribunal is conducting inquiries into the Ansbacher deposits, but only to ascertain whether any politicians received money from the deposits, and if so where that money came from. It is already known that Mr Haughey had accounts in the deposits. Additionally, the Tribunal uncovered Denis Foley, a back-bench Teachta Dála (TD, Deputy to the Dáil), as an Ansbacher account holder. The Tribunal is also inquiring into the performance of the Revenue Commissioners in the raising of taxes from both Mr Haughey and Mr Lowry and into the effect of offshore accounts on the tax base.

**Figure 13.1** The Tribunals