

# The Pensioner

Newsletter of the Houghton-le-Spring District Pensioners Association

## Free Bus Travel Nationwide

A Private Members Bill to introduce free, nationwide bus travel for all pensioners will be presented to Parliament by Worcester MP, Michael Foster on Friday October 15th.

The National Pensioners Convention are calling on all their affiliates to write to their MPs urging them to turn up on the day to support the Bill.

Most pensioners in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland already enjoy free travel on buses and in Southern Ireland pensioners can travel free on trains as well as buses.

Other cities and districts in England give their elderly free travel, London, Merseyside, Birmingham among them. Why can't pensioners in the North East have the same concession?

**Does your MP support the Bill?**

## Pensioners Lobby Parliament

Just days after MPs returned from their summer break, over one thousand pensioners from across Britain took part in a mass lobby of Parliament, on Wednesday September 8, to publicise the first ever Pensioners' Manifesto.

The lobby was organised by the National Pensioners Convention (NPC) and is part of a year-long campaign which aims to put the concerns of older people at the top of the political agenda.

Among the delegates were a small contingent from pensioners branches in Tyne & Wear, who lobbied several of the North East MPs and discussed the merits of the Manifesto.

Earlier on the day, the Greater London Pensioners Association organised a demonstration, blocking the traffic around Westminster, and marched with their banners to Parliament.

NPC President, Rodney Bickerstaffe greeted the 1,000 plus pensioners in Westminster Hall and urged them all to be fair — but very firm with their MPs in discussing the manifest and to leave them (MPs) in no

doubt that their support for the manifesto will have a direct affect on voting at the next general election.

The Pensioners' Manifesto has been created after months of nationwide discussion among thousands of older people, including groups in the north east, and deals with areas such as pensions and income, health and care, transport and mobility, neighbourhood and community and active citizenship.

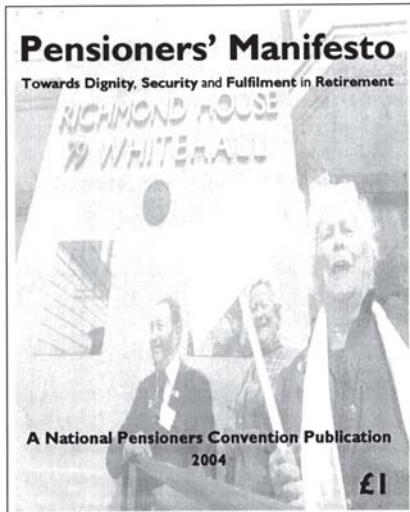
Over the coming year, the NPC will ask every candidate in the general election to support the proposals contained within the manifesto and their responses will be publicised by pensioner groups in every constituency so that the electorate will have the information before choosing how to cast their votes.

*Details on the contents of the Manifesto on page 2*

**BY 2014 ONE IN THREE GERMANS WILL BE OVER 60 YEARS OLD**

A demographic revolution in Germany — page 4

# Pensioners' Manifesto



Some of the main items from the Manifesto's 62 proposals include:

- The basic state pension should be raised to the level of the Guarantee Credit of £105.45 per week and be paid in full to all pensioners.
- The basic state pension should rise every year in line with average earnings.
- The 25p a week age addition at 80 should be increased to £25, to cover the increased costs of

living independently with age.

- There should be a Winter Fuel Allowance of £300 per pensioner household which rises annually in line with fuel costs.
- All those of pensionable age should be provided with a free, annual comprehensive health check.
- Good quality and affordable home care services and home adaptations should be provided to enable older people to remain independent in their own homes for as long as possible.
- All long-term care and accommodation should be provided free regardless of the setting.
- Carer's Allowance should be paid in addition to any state pension individuals may receive.
- A nationwide travel scheme should be introduced that enables pensioners and disabled people to travel on all buses, coaches, ferries, trams, tubes/metro and trains free of charge.
- Council tax should be abolished and replaced with a fairer and more equitable system based on government grants, increased localised business rates and income tax.

## Beware Bogus Callers

Pensioners have been warned to guard against bogus callers, after a survey claimed that 500 of Sunderland's over-60s lose cash or property to the conmen each year.

The survey, by NOP, on behalf of British Gas Help the Aged Partnership, indicated that 1,500 of the city's 58,148 over-60s have been approached by bogus callers. The crooks bluffed their way inside 700 times, and on 500 occasions something was stolen. Gill Walton, senior safety development manager at Help the Aged North East, urged the elderly to guard against the often highly organised, professional criminals. She said:

*"If you don't have a door chain, get one. If you have a chain, use it and don't let anybody into the house unless you are sure that you know who they are. If they have an identity card, take it, check it and ring the company concerned to check the caller is genuine. Don't let them in unless they are genuine callers, and if you are unsure ask them to come back, and have somebody with you when they do."*

The survey also found that 80 per cent of people in the North East approached by bogus callers didn't bother to contact police, compared with 40 per cent nationally. The research showed that 2,708 of County Durham's 108,316 over-60s had been approached by bogus callers. Conmen managed to get into homes on 1,354 occasions and on 882 occasions something was stolen.

Durham Police said it ran a "Nominated Neighbours" scheme, whereby elderly people tell callers to go to a neighbour who will check their identification and return with them to the pensioner. "Genuine callers will be happy to do that," a spokesman said.

NOP surveyed a representative sample of more than 3,400 people aged over 60.

**Copies of the Pensioners' Manifesto can be ordered from the Houghton-le-Spring District Pensioners Association, at £1 each.**

**Call 0191 265 9121 for further details.**

# Cash If You Want It At The Post Office

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have been forced to relax the rules on pension payments.

After months of campaigning by pensioner groups up and down Britain the DWP have announced that those individuals who do not respond to requests from the Pensions Service to have their pension paid directly into a bank, building society or post office account will be sent a weekly cheque which can be cashed at the post office.

For months the government have insisted that all pensioners must have their pensions and benefits paid directly into a bank account after the pension book is phased out after February next year. But pressure from the NPC and its affiliated groups and organisations

including a 50,000 signature petition and a high profile publicity campaign has resulted in the change of policy.

Helen Grew, NPC Vice-President, said,

*"Around five million older people want to collect their pensions at the post office and many of them have been coerced into getting rid of their pension book in favour of opening an account.*

*"But if they now want to opt for this cheque-based system instead they should be allowed to do so."*

The NPC has received numerous complaints about direct payments, including some from individuals who have been given post office accounts, but are physically unable to use them.

## Cost of Free Bus Travel

A free nationwide bus travel scheme for all older people would cost the Treasury no more than an additional £260m, Alistair Darling has confirmed in a letter to the National Pensioners Convention.

*Much less than fighting a war in Iraq.*

A new study by the Office for National Statistics has shown that older people have greater difficulties in travelling to local shops and hospitals and have to rely more on public transport.

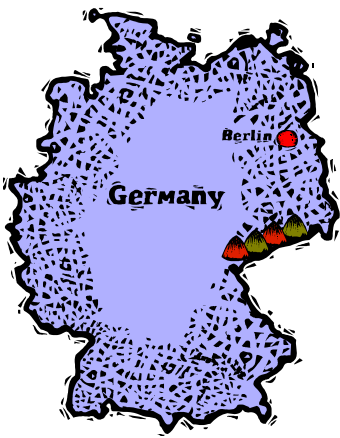
The report has also revealed that people over 70 made an average of 700 trips in 2002, compared with 1,100 trips by those aged between 50 and 59.

*National Pensioners Convention Transport adviser, Peter Rayner, has said, "We now realise just how little extra money would be needed to transform the lives of millions of older people with free, nationwide bus travel."*

*Our Chairman, Alex Pirrie, receiving an Age Positive Award from Lorraine Kelly in recognition of his voluntary work, helping to combat age discrimination, in particular helping with the promotion of the well-being of over 50's and providing a voice in the local community.*



# One in three Germans will be over 60 in ten years



## All over Europe, a demographic revolution is under way.

By the middle of this century, more than half the population, it is predicted, will be over the age of 65. But in Germany, the changes may hit hardest. Within 10 years, a third of the German population is expected to be over 60, and there is not enough money to cope.

The average state pension is double what it is in the UK. No wonder, perhaps, that Germans resolutely resist saving privately for their retirement. The government there is waking up to the prospect of its greying population putting an unbearable strain on public finances.

For the first time — and accompanied by a public outcry — pensions have been frozen and moves are afoot to shift the burden much further into the private sector. The issue is regularly hitting the headlines in Germany.

The country's best-selling book for many weeks this year has been *Das Methusalem-Komplott* (The

Methuselah Conspiracy), a tirade against ageism and a bleak picture of the near future. It says some regions are already in a sort of death spiral, with the population imploding, not just because so few babies are being born but also because young, qualified people are shipping out in search of the shrinking number of jobs.

The town of Wittenberge, in former East Germany between Berlin and Hamburg, is said to be the negative demographic role model for the Germany to come. The average age of the local population is 47. Young people are an increasingly rare sight, most of the active workforce having abandoned the town when traditional industry (including the Singer sewing machine factory) closed down and job opportunities evaporated. Staff at one of the old people's residential homes say theirs is the second-biggest employer.

The local Mayor, Klaus Petry, prefers to be optimistic: "I see our ageing population as a positive thing. Old people have a huge amount to contribute to society here. They're consumers, they go to the local theatre, the swimming pool."

But the predominance of the elderly is clearly beginning to take its toll. Christian Berndt, one of the doctors running a predictably busy practice in the town centre, looks rattled by lack of younger patients on his books. "We need the young ones too," he says, "the

healthy ones. They pay their taxes but don't tend to draw on the system and be so demanding of expensive care, they way old people have to." The net effect, he predicts, will be that, in future, doctors simply refuse to set up practice in areas like his simply because of the economics.

But for all their lack of youthful vigour, residents of Wittenberge tend not to be downbeat. This has not been an easy place in which to spend the past 80 years; the times of manic inflation, the horrors of the second war, the post-war deprivations, the pressures of life under communism. Even the frailest residents of Willi Kupas Retirement Home will say, with a smile on their faces, that their retirement has been, even is, the time of their lives, involving a spending power few of them ever previously experienced.

One pleasant legacy of the DDR and the communist expectation for women to work — almost every elderly woman in Wittenberge has built up a tidy contributions-based pension (compared to her traditional West German "Hausfrau" counterpart).

"We often tell people when they visit us here," says one barely mobile woman in her late 80s, "We're so lucky. We had a good time on our pension, lots of travel. Now we've got a lovely place to live, nice food, all of it free."

**Her children, when they reach her age, may not be quite so contented with their lot.**

# *Pensioners To Get Older*

*By Bill Bowman (Wallsend Pensioners Association)*

If the government get their way people will have to wait until they are 70 before becoming O.A.P.s.

Such a move has not yet been proposed. In fact if asked they would strenuously deny such a thing. Well they would wouldn't they? Because that would be one big vote loser — at present.

But, most likely by stealth, a rise in the retirement age will come about.

First they have to get us used to the idea; get us to think the unthinkable, knowing that early reaction, not only of workers but also employers, will be one of outrage.

So a suggestion by an economic think tank that workers stay on until they are 70 (if they so choose of course) has been leaked to the media.

In reply to the angry but predictable protests from pensioners organisations and trades unions, government ministers will state that the afore mentioned think tank is simply thinking out loud, that they are considering many options, and that they (government) have no plans to introduce such a scheme.

They could add, but won't, at present. To be fair to the government, any government, such a step must be up for consideration with longer life expectancy and lower birth rates having caused a pensions crisis.

In the opinions of many, a higher retirement age is not

a question of *if* — but *when*. Before this happens however, there is a deal of persuasion to be done: Employers need to be convinced (some enlightened ones already are) that the experience and reliability of the over 65s will make up for any lack of physical fitness or mental dexterity.

Workers will have to be assured that they will receive equal treatment and not be relegated to a menial role and that their pensions become immediately available should they become unable to continue working.

Trade unions demand that all rights will be safeguarded and agreed to.

The government is already offering incentives to people who choose to delay collecting their state pensions. Perhaps they will make retirement a gradual process with the working week of those reaching the age of 65 being reduced by one day per year and receiving one fifth of their pension to begin with and gradually increasing until at the age of 70 they receive the full amount.

There is also an EU directive, which outlaws age discrimination and stops firms imposing compulsory retirement ages.

The mere hint of advancing the retirement age is anathema to many but like it or not there is more than a strong possibility that it will come to pass.

## **Not So 'Fare' In Scotland!**

Pensioners in Perthshire are being 'humiliated' by bus firm Citylink according to a claim in a Scottish newspaper.

Many pensioners have contacted the Perth and Kinross Pensioners Forum to claim they have been told to wait at the back of the queue until fare-paying passengers have boarded the bus. Jack Stewart of the Pensioners Forum said:

*"Our senior citizens are being told to get to the back of the queue until all fare-paying passengers have boarded. Many of them are tourists from abroad who are bewildered at the treatment given to our elderly. Citylink have been approached previously regarding this matter and were told in no uncertain terms to stop treating our elderly as second class citizens — this is not acceptable."*

However, Citylink say they have to give priority to other passengers because they have booked their places on the buses in advance. A spokeswoman for Citylink pointed out that it is a pre-requisite for passengers to book tickets at least two days in advance. If this fills the bus, pensioners making a last minute decision to take a trip will miss out.

Jack Stewart was not impressed with that view and pointed out that pensioner's fares are already paid by the Scottish Executive and thus should be seen as being pre-booked.

# CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

By Bill Bowman (Wallsend Pensioners Association)

Once again the government of the day promises, as so many preceding governments have promised before them, to make our streets safe for decent folk to walk on.

They will rid them, they say, of the gangs of youngsters who make so many lives miserable with their aggressive manner; their loutishness and drink/drug fuelled anti-social behaviour. Stricter laws more firmly enforced by the courts, more Community Support officers, doubling of electronic tagging, more rights for families to demand action against jobs and 5,000 more patrol officers (Bobbies on the beat) are to be introduced plus 1,000 more drug treatment places.

All laudable objectives, which we all sincerely hope, will succeed.

*But will they?*

Not on their own I think. Let us take a look at this *enemy within*, these young people who are after all, our children and grand children and not so many aliens who have dropped upon us from outer space.

What makes a minority—albeit a large minority—act the way they do?

Parents? Obviously they must shoulder much responsibility. Caring though the great majority are, far too many do not take an *active* interest in their children while others pander to their every whim in their desire to be liked rather than be firm when that is required. I have seen many

otherwise loving parents, whilst not exactly encouraging their under-age offspring to start drinking, offer no objection when they do.

Older generations? That means all of us. Yes. We have allowed standards to slip, discipline is now almost non-existent and we are afraid to raise our voices when we witness bad behaviour. We have set a poor example letting the drink and drugs culture to flourish. Under age drinking in pubs and clubs is, as I have seen for myself, commonplace, and while I have no first hand knowledge of the drugs scene it has been sufficiently exposed for all of us to know it is rampant. Even a notice in our local rent office informs us that drugs are available on every street corner — *although whether this is issued as a warning or advertising a facility I am not quite sure.*

Then there is the media. All the Soaps feature the local pub as the centre of community life: *Coronation Street* has the *Rovers Return*, *The Woolpack* in *Emmerdale* and the *Queen Vic* in *East Enders*. Scarcely a film or T.V. drama that does not have couples (often of the same gender) leaping into bed with each other after the briefest of meetings and swearing seems as acceptable as *God Bless* and the tabloids will pay anything for *Kiss and Tell* stories. The more explicit the better. And I remember when Eliza Doolittle in

Pygmalian shocked the nation when she said “Not bloody likely”.

Ah, the age of innocence.

Punishment, when meted out, is of the ‘slap on the wrist’ variety and is hardly the deterrent it is intended to be and while I certainly do not go along with the ‘*Bring back the birch/cat*’ fraternity, I do believe that punishment should mean exactly that.

One suggestion which does have sufficient merit to be considered is consigning young offenders to work parties removing graffiti and picking up litter or some other useful task and for them to do it at a time they would most like to be doing something else — like enjoying themselves.

But punishment alone is not the answer. ‘The devil makes work for idle hands’ is a truism we should heed and some of the millions earmarked for law enforcement might be better spent providing more facilities to occupy the minds and interests of young people.

Sports clubs, music societies where they can learn to play an instrument, show and film groups which engage their imaginations etc etc. Really there is no limit to the number of directions in which we can point youngsters (our youngsters) to use their constructive abilities instead of hanging round street corners looking for trouble. Some of these already exist but not nearly enough.

# Come And Join Us

***A question often asked: "Is it worthwhile joining a pensioners organisation?"***

We always reply with a resounding "Yes!"

***"But what do they do?"***

They provide a platform from which we can all air our views for a start. They also represent us to the government and other organisations; they let it be known just what we think and they do so with a voice that is growing ever louder, a voice that refuses to be ignored.

And the government is beginning to listen; they would be foolish to do otherwise. There are over eleven million pensioners in this country, a very sizeable portion of the population. Large enough to sway any

election, for our voting power is even greater than that vast number would indicate, because older folk, more than any other age group will turn out and put their crosses on a ballot slip.

We could be even stronger, very much stronger if more of us joined pensioners organisations.

Apart from campaigning for a better life for their members, many pensioners organisations provide a wonderful opportunity to meet new people and organise 'get togethers' and outings. Many members have found friendship in their local branch and discovered there is no need to be lonely.

So come and join us. You can be assured that you will be made most welcome.

Houghton le Spring District Pensioners Association meet every other Wednesday in the Hetton Centre, Welfare Road, Hetton le Hole at 11am.

Our next meeting is on October 6th, when we will have a speaker from NEXUS to talk about transport developments in Tyne & Wear. Everyone is welcome to come along and take part in the debate. Refreshments are available.

Other meetings this year are October 20th; November 3rd; November 17th; December 1st; and December 15th.

## Application Form

Annual membership is just £1 and is open to anyone over the age of 18

To join, simply fill in the form and send it to: Houghton le Spring District Association, c/o Carlton House, 24 Grey Terrace, Ryhope Village, Sunderland SR2 0QS — or just bring it along to one of our meetings.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Post Code \_\_\_\_\_ Tel: \_\_\_\_\_

**NPC**  
NATIONAL  
PENSIONERS  
CONVENTION

## National Pensioners' Convention

19-23 Ironmonger Row

London EC1V 3QP

Tel: 0207-553-6510

Fax: 0207-553-6511



## North East Pensioners' Association

Project Office

St Cuthbert's House

391 West Road

Newcastle NE15 7PY

Tel: 0191 275 0363

Fax: 0191 274 6491





# Houghton-le-Spring District Pensioners Association

## 'Tis The Season of Promises

It's come round again. That time of year when politicians line up to promise us all the earth. The Political Party Conference Season.

Liberal Democrats first, followed in the next month or so by all the others with their promises of lower taxes, more jobs, better education, no more queuing for operations etc. etc. — the list goes on.

This year there is a lot of promises being made to a particular group of people. The pensioners! For years pensioners have been ignored in the 'promise' league as their vote wasn't considered important enough. Now there is a growing realisation among politicians that the pensioner is fast becoming the largest voting block! Too large to be ignored!

The Liberal Democrats have in their 'promise' list,

*scrapping the council tax and replacing it with a local income tax* which they claim will leave 90% of pensioners better off.

Another is *free personal care for all elderly*. Currently around 40% of people in residential care have to pay their own fees and every year around 70,000 pensioners, have to sell their homes to pay for long-term care.

Both of these 'promises' make good vote catchers, don't they?

But will 'promises' be kept? We've had 'promises' before and are we any better off?

Next year will see a general election and all the political parties will have to do more than just 'promise' to get the Grey Vote! There will have to be a cast-iron guarantee that 'promises' will be delivered after the election!

## More protection for vulnerable people

Help the Aged has welcomed the start of a new scheme offering protection to vulnerable adults.

The Protection of Vulnerable Adults (PoVA) scheme effectively bans people who have abused a vulnerable adult in their care from ever working in a care position again. The scheme places a legal duty on care providers to check whether a potential employee is on the PoVA list before allowing them to work in a care position.

Rachael Childs, Health and Social Care Policy Officer for Help the Aged, said: "Once fully introduced, the PoVA register will be a step in the right direction to combat the estimated half a million incidences of elder abuse which happen at any one point.

"To truly offer older people a safeguard against abuse Help the Aged call for a rapid introduction of the PoVA register for all health and social care teams together with full criminal records checks on care workers."

The PoVA scheme applies to care homes and home care agencies in England and Wales.



Members of the Houghton-le-Spring District Pensioners Association, at the Hetton Centre where they hold their meetings.