



# Old

I am not in fact that old, but last Tuesday I passed another staging post. There are staging posts when we grow up – the date when we can join the army, vote, get married, go into a pub or drive a car. And there are staging posts on the way down. Last Tuesday I reached the date when I would have retired from Widgets if the Mad FD in the Attic had not retired me early. Come to think of it, that is the same as the Rumbley retirement date.

Until last Tuesday I was simply a person who did not work. But now I can be classed as one of the Retired. That strengthens my case for getting a concessionary rate from my barber. Being one of the Early Retired should not qualify, being Retired, but not an Old Age Pensioner, makes me a marginal case, and the doubts will finally stop when I become an Old Age Pensioner. It must be difficult for barbers to adjudicate with so many men over 50 not working. A staggering proportion. How staggering? I seem to remember the figure as one-third – anyway, truly staggering.

I think a real distinction should be made between those who are Early Retired and under 60, and those who are Early Retired and 60 and over.

After all, the good old European Court of Human Rights has started to drive along that distinction. Free prescriptions, free eye-tests. Maybe, these have come thanks to Europe, or maybe, our government was simply scared that Europe would find that Britain was discriminating against ageing men. Free bus passes cannot be far behind. And with a free bus pass, I might even board a bus again, which I have not done for 30 years.

With my enthusiasm for joining the wrecking gang who try to breach the walls of the mutuals, you might have expected me to join in a class action suit about Cold Weather Payments before the European Court of Human Rights. As it was, I just watched the television coverage of an elderly Scot winning his argument that men

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got cold in winter the same as women, and, therefore, that men deserved to get winter fuel payments at the same age as women. Ever since *Braveheart*, the Scots have been a plucky race, ever ready to fight the forces of tyranny, especially when these happen to be English.

Now, I never suffered from the cold during the winter, and I pay for my gas by direct debit, but I felt that it would be churlish and Europhobic to resist a ruling of the European court. It seemed to take ages for Britain to come into line and pay a Winter Fuel Allowance to deserving ageing men. Eventually, big advertisements appeared in the newspapers. The gist seemed to be that either I should wait for a claims form to be sent to me, or I could print off a form from the internet – although it struck me that anyone who could afford the telephone bills for using the internet would have a cheek to claim a Winter Fuel Allowance.

As I did not trust the DSS to spot I was a deserving case, I decided I would use the internet. My feeling that it would be rude to the European Court of Human Rights to refuse the Allowance over-rode my sense of hypocrisy at being able to afford to pay for

the phone call to retrieve a claims form from the Net.

Immediately a snag. The DSS page needed Adobe Acrobat Reader to convert from its print format to mine. Now, I am not stupid, but I tend to be seized by techno-panic when I am confronted with a box on the screen telling me I have to click a button to download a slice of video or a slab of music or convert some text. I simply panic. My throat goes dry, and my button-clicking finger seizes up. Fortunately, my son – the IT hot-shot – was shortly due to be returning home for a bank holiday weekend. He came home, made it work, and I sent off my claim form.

I will not tell you how much I received – for that is my business and it is impertinent of you to enquire. My daughter objects that, as a young taxpayer, she is paying for my gas fire. Not at all, I reply, I still pay tax, and all the Chancellor is doing is raiding one pocket and returning what he has taken into the other. I go into a rant about how I can remember, in the dark days of the Second World War, gazing out of the window of the family air-raid shelter and seeing friendly searchlights picking up the enemy bombers overhead. She replies that air-raid shelters did not have windows, and in any case, living through the Blitz does not give me the moral entitlement to a Winter Fuel Allowance.

As I am beginning to enjoy the fruits of age, I am starting to send off for catalogues for the wrinkle-free cruises I will be able to afford when I start to draw my State Pension. Mmm, the Martinique cruise sounds promising. No, not the cruise through Norwegian Fjords. Much too chilly, even with my Winter Fuel Allowance. No, not the South China Sea cruise. Too many pirates, and look at what happened to Nick Leeson.

I think *The Treasurer* might have to set in permanent type the phrase 'J.F is off on another cruise'. ■