

Hands Off the Free Travel Scheme!

The years have taught me to be very suspicious when kites are being flown in the media about entitlements that cost the government money.

It usually means they are testing the water to see what might be acceptable to the public and what might not.

For weeks now, little news items have been appearing about the Free Travel Scheme and we are told a government working group is currently reviewing the future of the €77 million-a-year scheme, which benefits more than 780,000 people every year.

At the same time, transport companies involved in the scheme say the money they receive for their participation is not covering their costs and they might have to opt out.

They point out that funding for free travel has been frozen at the same level for the past four years while the number of pass-holders has increased over the same period of time.

However, government sources say it is unlikely additional money for the scheme will be available for next year. Some sources say State transport providers, such as Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, have privately sought the reintroduction of peak-hour travel restrictions which, they argue, would allow them to raise additional revenue.

These restrictions were introduced in the 1960s and limited free travel on certain routes during morning and evening rush-hours.

The last of those restrictions were removed in 2006 amid charges that OAPs were being treated like second-class citizens.

A spokesperson for the Department of Social Protection said the Free Travel Review had not been finalised and that the Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton, appreciated the value the scheme provided to the mainly older people who used it.

Hmmm and Hmmm again, 'sez' you. It looks to me that the Government wants to tamper with the scheme to save money and they are testing the water.

Age Action Ireland says any changes to the scheme will be "vehemently opposed" by older people.

Too bloody right they will and proper order too. Thousands of retired people have lost all or part of their pensions that they paid into all their working lives and many have lost their hard earned savings into the bargain, all because of government and bank bungling.

Incidentally, Free Travel is not really free at all because those now using it have already paid for it in advance through a lifetime of taxes.

This Government has made many mistakes and, following the Local and European Election results, they would hardly make another whopper Would they?