

ITS AN OLD, OLD STORY



GROUPS lobby Parliament like the tide visits the beach. Each day, delegations supporting or opposing different issues arrive at the shores of Westminster, demand an audience with MPs, write their names in the parliamentary sand and then disappear.

I'm not knocking this. It's a vital part of bringing some reality into the Alice Through The Looking Glassworld that Parliament can easily become. But for the staff at the House of Commons I suspect it looks a little different.

The staff will have seen it all before. They wait - quietly, courteously - for the groups to leave so that the tide can roll in, and wash the beach clean, ready for the day which follows. Only rarely does a name get written on the beach which stubbornly refuses to go away, defying time, tide and anything else which would have it quietly tucked away.

It happened this week. In letters bigger than anyone could ignore, were written the words "Maxwell Pensioners". Coach loads of those cheated by the Maxwell theft again descended on London to remind Parliament that they will not go away until justice - the return of their full pensions - is guaranteed.

Some of the stories are harrowing — the man who worked for the same firm since 1946 and now receives the princely pension of £180 a year because Maxwell had lifted all but the final two years' pension contributions; those whose houses stand at the point of repossession if the pensions are lost; those whose health has been ruined; those relatives of the pensioners who have died during the ordeal.

They come to Parliament for justice. So far, all they have received are crumbs and a select committee inquiry. When the bombs went off in the City of London last weekend, the Government came straight out and offered to meet half of the £1bn cost of damages.

YET they still refuse to act as the bank of last resort for the Maxwell Pensioners - guaranteeing that they will not make a stand on this because it is afraid of the fundamental principles at stake. These principles are quite simple; that a pension is not a flutter at the bookmakers, it is a worker's deferred wages. As such, the pension belongs to the worker, not the Trustees of the pension fund.

The second principle is no less clear; those who syphon off pension funds are thieves; those who receive the monies, in tax havens or numbered bank accounts, are accomplices to the theft and must return the money. This is how an individual would be treated by the police if they received stolen goods. The same rules apply to international banks and finance houses.

In 1985 the Government was quick to introduce powers of sequestration to chase the miners' funds all round the financial world. They were hell-bent on getting their hands on every penny. I have already suggested to the Government that they use the same powers to recover the Maxwell monies. I am told that this is naive and inappropriate, but I suspect it is more accurate to say that there are different 'class' issues at stake.

The miners were never big contributors to Government fund-raising, but the movers of money - those who play the international financial markets - now are. And the international banks and brokers would be really miffed if they had to return the stolen monies.

But it goes much deeper. To establish, in law, the principle that pensions are savings, and belong to the workers themselves, would strike at the heart of the pick-pocket economy.

THERE are now some big players in the British economy, who thrive off company take-overs - not because they want to run the business better, but because they want to get their hands on the pension funds. It's like mackerel fishing. You just throw some hooks into the water and pull out all the money you can handle ... and it's legal. Licensed theft of a lifetime's contributions.

So why doesn't the Government stop it; make it illegal; establish in law that your pension is yours, not theirs? For at least part of the answer you might like to ask who is at the front of the queue to get their hands on the miners' and railway workers' funds? A Government could pay off a lot of debts with that sort of money.

If we let the Maxwell pensioners lose this one, a lot of us could find we go the same way.

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