

The 'Not So Young' Should Claim the Future

On the 23rd of October the Office for National Statistics (ONS) issued a new set of National Population Projections, which show that the population in the UK is set to increase to 65 million by 2016 and to 71 million by 2031 mainly because of migration. Of these 22% or 15.6 million will be of pensionable age that is aged over 65 and over 66 from 2024/26.

They ONS further states that the so-called support ratio will fall from 3.3 in 2006 to 2.9 in 2031. That is to say that in 2006 there were 3.3 persons of working age for every person of pensionable age whereas in 2031 there will only be 2.9 persons to every pensioner. Obviously an organisation such as ONS must not make politically loaded statements, but by drawing attention to this development, they are implicitly saying that the people of pensionable age – the 'not so young' - are a burden to society and that this burden will grow in the future. But does this have to be so? It will be so if current attitudes to retirement and old age continue.

On the 1st of October 2006 the 'Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006'. During the consultations leading up to these employers' organizations successfully argued for the insertion of a default retirement age at 65. While the employee can ask for a continuation of employment after reaching this age the employer has no obligation to keep him/her in employment and can in effect dismiss the employee without further explanation. The employers had argued, they could not properly plan for their manpower requirements without the default retirement age. This seems to be spurious nonsense and is nothing other than age discrimination.

Employers need to recognise that any person of any age of sound body and mind is able to retrain and develop their career almost ad infinitum, but young people often have a worse attendance record than the not so young. They are more likely to chop and change their career path than their older colleagues. They feel less attachment to their employer and are generally more likely to lose patience when dealing with customers. To get rid of people just because they have reached a certain age therefore seems less than rational. Employers will need to give up the idea of default retirement. New terms of employment will have to be devised.

However, people of age also need to change their attitudes to life and they need to think about and plan for their senior years in different terms. They need to claim the future. They can do so by throwing off the idea of retirement as something you have earned, which gives you a right to enjoy a freedom without necessarily giving anything back. It needs to be exchanged for the idea that everyone is expected to contribute as much as they can for as long as they can. People should be prepared to work for as long as they are mentally and physically able to. Obviously they should also be adequately rewarded without having to rely on a greatly reduced income from the state or employer's pension scheme.

If these changes can be achieved there will be more people working for every person unable to work and the support ratios referred to above will be much greater and the burden of supporting those who cannot work will be greatly diminished. If these changes cannot be achieved 'the not so young' will continue to be seen as 'a problem'.