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The Free Travel Pass: One of Haughey's greatest legacies

Charlie Haughey's 1967 Budget Speech signalled the introduction of the Free Travel Scheme for the elderly which was undoubtedly revolutionary in its social impact. Throughout his political career, Charles Haughey displayed a deep and genuine concern for the welfare of older people. He endeavoured to provide the elderly, not only with the basic necessities of life, but, to ensure that they had some comfort and companionship in their later years.

Free Travel is available to people aged 66 or over and to certain incapacitated people under age 66 who permanently live in the State. It allows for the use of public transport, and a large number of private bus and ferry services, free of charge. A spouse or partner may also travel free.

Mr. Haughey himself recalled that this measure was introduced against the strong advice of his senior civil servants at the time. Indeed one senior civil servant insisted on accompanying him right up to the door of the Dáil Chamber on Budget day in an attempt to finally persuade him to drop the proposal.

The writer Micheál Ó Nualláin wrote as follows in 2005, "The Free Travel Pass is the greatest thing since fried bread or the sliced pan. It enables the elderly or those over 66 years to escape from being perpetual prisoners in their own home and be able to freely travel daily, locally or throughout the length and breadth of the country. Many on pensions could not heretofore afford the luxury and expense of public transport and were forced to remain mostly confined to their homes."

"Until a few years ago most elderly people were prisoners confined to their homes and could not often afford to travel by public transport locally or throughout the country. Locomotion or travel for many was mostly confined to shanks mare on their own two legs as far afield as old age energies could muster. This meant that shopping was confined to nearby establishments. It made forays further afield difficult and rare. Frequent long journeys were difficult and often out of the question. The elderly and senior citizens were as it were placed under house arrest."



"The Free Travel Pass enables those of advanced age to travel free locally on public transport thus enabling them to go shopping, to the library, visit friends, or whatever, in clement or inclement weather. They may also travel anywhere throughout the country on public transport to visit relations, friends or have a daily change of environment. I know a number of people who use the Travel Pass to have a pleasurable day out. They travel a hundred miles or more, often to a town they were never in before, have their lunch or a couple of drinks or both, and then return home replenished. That was never possible for them in the not too distant past.

The Free Travel Pass has revolutionised the life of the elderly and in time will revolutionise the elderly lives of many millions who are yet unborn. It touches people individually and personally and is a tribute to their age.

Just imagine the miracle of the age, all public transport is free for the elderly, all local transport, in Dublin that not only means buses, it includes the DART, the LUAS and the Blue Bus. Long distance travel is also free to any place in Ireland and that includes the six counties by Bus or Rail.

This wonderful and inspired amenity has made a great difference to the life of those in advancing years. This means more that the travel itself, however important mobility is. It means that the needs of older people are recognised and acted on meaningfully, forging a caring society and bestowing esteem on the elderly. We should also not forget that the politician responsible for bringing about the implementation of this inspired legislation that made all this possible is none other than the late Charles Haughey."

As a public representative, Mr. Haughey received a considerable amount of correspondence from the public, on a wide range of issues, right up to the day he passed away and indeed this correspondence continued to be received by his family for many months after his death. If any single issue can be said to have dominated his post in the latter years of his life, it was undoubtedly the Free Travel Scheme. As one wag put it cryptically, it allowed every old age pensioner "the freedom of the city", the ability to come and go, to travel around at will, anywhere and at any time. It was particularly moving for his family to observe elderly mourners proudly holding up high their bus passes as his funeral cortege made its way out to St. Fintan's cemetery in Sutton.

Charles Haughey had great talent and ability. He also had imagination and flair. The introduction of the Free Travel Scheme is a clear example of this. This simple measure had a profound impact on Irish Society and is considered by many to be one of his most positive and enduring legacies.