

Old Spanish Minicab Practices

A friend of mine drives a minibus for a local authority. His passengers used to be old people whom he took to day-care centres; now he takes the mentally handicapped to their schools. The old people are left to volunteer drivers using their own cars.

The reason for the change, he told me, was economy. Before the change, the mentally handicapped were taken individually to school in taxis at a cost of £1000 a day. Now they go in a minibus at a cost of £250 a day.

The question, of course, is why this economy was not made before it became financially impossible to continue in the same old way. When the combined transport costs of the elderly and the mentally handicapped were £1250 a day, they could have been £500 a day, 40 per cent less, without any loss of amenity to either group. Why, then, was the saving not made, despite the fact that it would have required no great intellect to make it? Indeed, the same people who failed to make it actually made it when obliged to do so. Mere lack of intelligence or capacity, therefore, could not explain their failure.

Of course one instance doesn't make a social and economic phenomenon, but one cannot help wondering how many parallel cases there must have been throughout the country. Just as we have stop-go in the economy, so we have profligacy-cutbacks in our public services. The profligacy is seldom noticed at the time; but the cutbacks, in part made necessary by previous profligacy, give rise to immediate publicity about the

hardship they cause. Once the public service grows beyond a certain size, its ethos changes. The idea of service attenuates, that of career opportunity expands to fill the gap.

On one side of the political divide the public service is regarded as inherently parasitic, time-serving and self-interested, on the other as inherently good in itself, irrespective of any inefficiency or incompetence, being more a means of redistribution and therefore of procuring social justice than of getting anything done. Elements of truth are taken for the whole truth.

Whenever I have telephoned the Pensions Agency I have been (pleasantly) astonished by the staff's courtesy and efficiency. There are no infuriating messages to listen to, no options to choose from; one speaks straight away to a human being, and a polite and intelligent one at that. How is it done? I think we should send a team of investigators.

First published in