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ERIS, Tolpuddle Martyrs House, 238 Holdenhurst Road, Bournemouth BH8 8EG

E-mail: erispapers@mypostoffice.co.uk

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UK NEWS

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Brexit -Time for a new UK citizens' constitution

The EU referendum has raised important questions about where power lies and where it should lie, which won't be seriously addressed without creating an independent process for change. There is a widespread perception that our political system is broken. Many feel that key decisions are made in the interests of corporations, banks and the super wealthy.

Increasing inequality and an antiquated voting system, which has produced a majority government with the support of fewer than one in four registered voters, add to a growing discontent. At the heart of this social disquiet lies our uncodified and somewhat mysterious constitution, whose essential features date back to the end of the 18th century. We have to take democracy into the 21st century, tackle the underlying problems of trust in our political system and address the constitutional issues about how countries within the UK relate to each other.

That is why we are supporting the proposal for the creation of a citizens' convention on the constitution. This has to be an open, transparent and independent process, because those who hold the levers of power have too much of a vested interest in preserving the status quo. A citizen-led process could refound the UK on the democratic principle of popular sovereignty where power truly does rest with the people and decisions are made in the public interest.

Neal Lawson Compass, Anthony Barnett Founder; open Democracy, Natalie Bennett Green Party of England and Wales, Alexandra Runswick Unlock Democracy, Michael Mansfield QC, Michael Sheen, Klina Jordan Make Votes Matter, Stuart White Jesus College, Oxford, Nick Dearden Global Justice Now; Corinna Lotz Assemblies for Democracy

Source : The Guardian

Missing out on pensions and benefits

The government is to write to more than 100,000 people who are set to miss out on the new state pension owing to a lack of contributions.

A rule imposed in April means people need at least 10 years of National Insurance contributions in order to start qualifying for the pension.

MPs on the Work and Pensions Select Committee had complained that many would have been unaware of the change.

Now the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has decided to write to those most at risk "as a one-off exercise before the end of the year.

The letters will go to individuals within nine years of state pension age whose records suggest will have fewer than 10 qualifying years of contributions by the time they retire.

"This will test whether direct mail is more effective for this group, given we can identify them and we believe it is possible to formulate a clear message and call to action," the DWP said.

The 10-year rule was introduced alongside the new state pension which is being paid to those who reached pension age from April. So it is going to men born after 5 April 1951 and women born after 5 April 1953.

It is paid at a flat rate of £155.55 a week to those with a full 35 years of contributions. Those with contributions of between 10 and 35 years will receive a proportion of this total.

The previous basic state pension, which is still being paid to existing pensioners, is worth about £120 a week, plus top-ups such as the state second pension for those who qualify.

While the move is to be applauded, it begs the question why the DWP does not do more to make sure that pensioners get the benefits they are entitled to.

Around £31 billion Worth of vital benefits intended to help low-income pensioners is going unclaimed each year, according to an analysis last year by Age UK.

Official figures show that around 1.3 million people entitled to Pension Credit - which tops up the income of the poorest pensioners - did not take up this benefit in 2013-14, missing out on an estimated £2.86 billion in total - or an average of £2,132 per person per year, Age UK said.

Meanwhile, around 260,000 pensioners missed out on Housing Benefit during the same period, sacrificing £820 million in total or around £3,224 each a year.

www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-36596172

<http://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/archive/pensioners-miss-out-on-billions/>

source: FACT SERVICE

Student Nurse bursaries to be scrapped

Plans to scrap bursaries for student nurses and other NHS staff in England are reckless, unions and charities say.

The government plans to overhaul the system in September 2017 and charge those studying to be front-line health workers for their degrees. But in a letter to the prime minister, more than 20 groups led by the non-TUC union, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), said it could put people off working for the NHS.

Currently student nurses, midwives and other staff, such as physiotherapists, are entitled to bursaries of £4,500 to £5,500 - on top of a grant of £1,000 each year during their training. Their course fees are also covered.

But the government has proposed scrapping these and introducing university fees to bring health staff in line with other students.

Those studying for advanced roles, such as district nurses, could also be affected.

Government ministers argue that the move will lead to an increase in nurse students - of about 10,000 - as applicants for courses currently outnumber the places available by two to one. This is because there is a cap on places.

But the letter, which has been signed by the BMA and the Patients Association, warned it was an “untested gamble” and urged the government to halt the plans to properly consider their impact.

The letter continues: “Under these plans, the government has failed to allocate any funding for extra clinical placements and mentors, vital in giving students real, practical experience. Healthcare students can spend up to 50% of their studies in clinical settings, so the quality of their education experience could be significantly affected. “These plans are a short-sighted attempt to solve a long-term and complicated problem. They have not been properly risk assessed, and continuing with them as they stand would be nothing short of reckless.”

RCN general secretary Janet Davies said that as nurses spent about half of their degree course working in the NHS it amounted, in effect, to “asking people to pay to go to work”.

“It feels very wrong,” she added.

www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-36561619

<https://www.unison.org.uk/news/article/2016/06/health-workers-and-charities-unite-to-urge-rethink-on-nhs-bursaries/>

source: FACT SERVICE