

## Here's Tae Us - Year of the 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday 27<sup>th</sup> January 2017



Tom Berney, Chair of the Scottish Older People's Assembly, reflects on the year when more people are reaching their 70<sup>th</sup> birthday than ever before. He looks at disparities between rich and poor and hopes the 'baby boomers' will champion the same life-enhancing improvements they have experienced for their children and grandchildren.

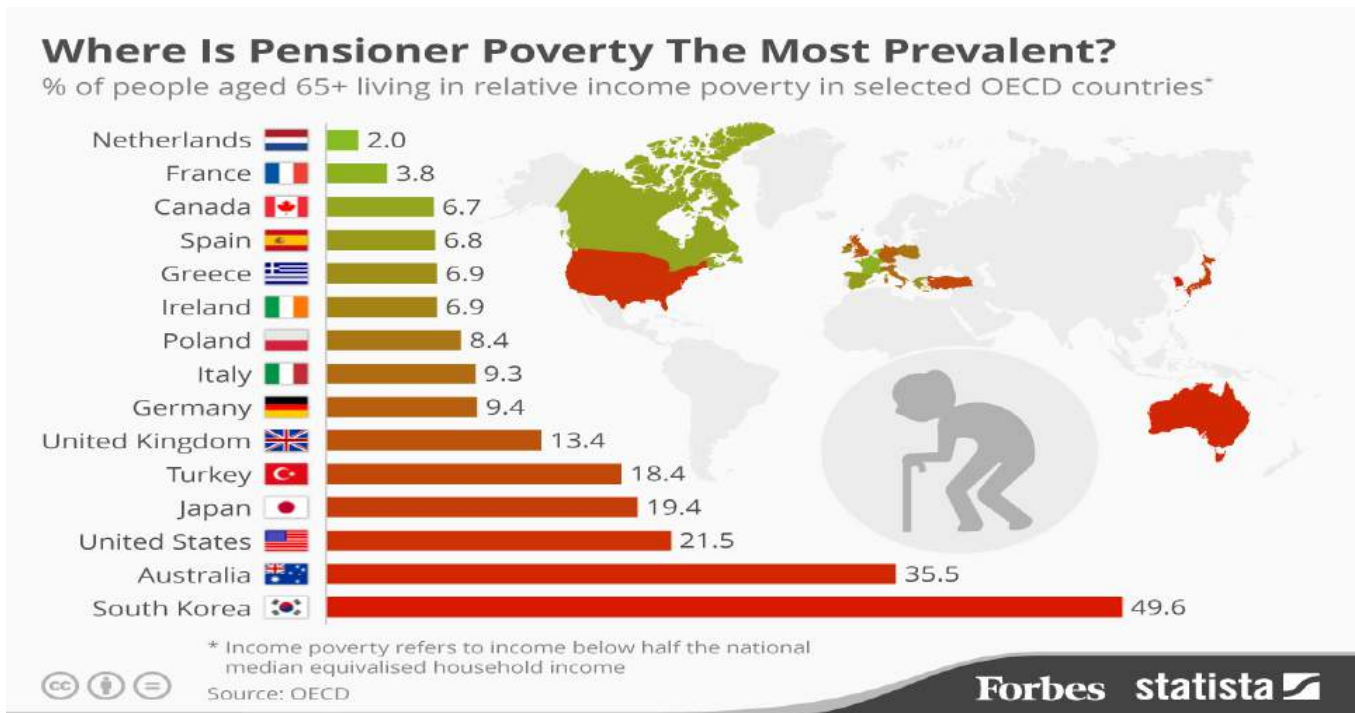
Much of our attention this week has been diverted by the shenanigans over the American Presidency. It brought to my mind Franklin D Roosevelt's statement that **"The measure of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."** It makes a striking contrast with Donald Trump's first days in office when his earliest priorities have been to commit to reducing health support for the poorest, and introducing "massive" tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy.

That is thousands of miles away in the USA but, sadly the British government seems set much more in the Trump than FDR mould, as their steady erosion of welfare spending continues. The UK has one of the greatest disparities between rich and poor of any developed country. According to the economist Joseph Stiglitz many CEOs now get paid 300 times the rate for ordinary workers. It has led to a situation where as Mark Pearson from the OECD, said: "It's not just income that we're seeing being very concentrated - you look at wealth and you find that the bottom 40% of the population have only 3% of household wealth, whereas the top 10% have over half of the country's wealth."

Apart from the obvious inequality and unfairness of that situation keeping the poor down is also self-defeating in its own terms. The OECD calculates that if living standards in the UK for poorer people were raised to the relative levels of France, annual growth in our national income or GDP would rise by 0.3% every year for 25 years. Making everyone more prosperous and proving FDR's point!

As SOPA Chair I'm acutely aware that there are 1.6 million British pensioners (140,000 in Scotland) who are living below the poverty line. 900,000 of them live in severe poverty. You will see from the chart that our

pension poverty is worse than most other developed countries. That is meant to be compensated by other benefits, but older people fail to claim £5.5 billion of the state benefits to which they are entitled.



We have raised that issue with the Scottish government, as from next year several welfare benefits will be devolved to Scotland. It will still only be about a third of the full welfare budget, as pensions, for example, will remain with Westminster. To their credit, in preparation for that, the Scottish Government has organised a series of public consultation meetings to try to devise a more open, fairer and accessible welfare system. Obviously, ensuring that people are aware of, and encouraged to claim their entitlements, must be a part of that.

2017 is a significant year. The peak of the baby boom was 1947 so this is the year of the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. There will be more celebrations of 70<sup>th</sup> birthdays than ever before in our history. I expect you'll attend one. If you do, remember that it is a celebration of well-lived lives by the people who dragged war-ravaged Scotland into the more creative, tolerant and prosperous country it is today.

So here's tae us! But even at 70, we baby boomers have a duty to do everything we can to ensure that prosperity is spread more evenly and the same sort of lives we experienced are also achievable by our children and grandchildren.