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Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 26 October 2010

One of the most remarkable facts I've come across recently – well, I call it a fact because I heard it on the radio, so it must be true! – is that our life expectancy is increasing at around two-and-a-half years per decade. I know statistics turn people off, but before you do, just think about that: for every 10 years you live, you get a bonus of two-and-a-half. That means every year gives you an extra 3 months, every month an extra week, every day 6 more hours!

That's why, as I once heard a sociologist say, 80 is the new 60!

And yet, instead of working those extra 20 years, warmed by the glow of self-satisfaction that supposedly comes from making our contribution to society, most of us want to retire early, long before the official retirement age. We feel we've earned the right to live the rest of our lives on the beach – at least metaphorically, if not literally – fading ever more slowly into the ever more distant sunset!

And we feel we've earned this long, ever-lengthening, holiday, because we've been contributing to the welfare state for so long, so now it's our turn to benefit. Maybe that's why the TUC is threatening a long cold winter of discontent, though perhaps neither as cold nor as malcontented as in France, that traditional barometer of unrest.

This is not the place for a political critique of last week's Public Spending Review, but I'm reminded that when the Talmud says "according to the work comes the reward", that doesn't just mean that workers deserve a fair wage, but also that a fair wage deserves fair work. We can't at the same time cut our working life and extend our retirement, reducing our contribution to the collective pot and simultaneously increasing what we draw from it.

Though the political ideologists will never agree what has to give, clearly something has to. We all know you can't cram a quart into a pint pot, but we often forget that we can't squeeze a quart out either!

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