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TX: 31.03.03 – HALF PRICE COACH TRAVEL FOR DISABLED AND ELDERLY PEOPLE

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ATKINSON

Good news for more than nine million disabled and older people. As part of its drive to get more of us out of our cars and on to public transport the Government is footing the cost of half price coach travel for the over 60s and disabled people. On Friday You and Yours reported how men over 60 are about to benefit for the first time from half price local bus travel. Well now the Secretary of State for Transport Alistair Darling is putting up £10 million worth of grants to coach companies which come on board.

DARLING

We promised that we would introduce a scheme that would allow older people and disabled people to travel half price on long distance coaches. The new scheme will come in from the 1st May, so that will mean that older people, people who've got disabilities, will be able to get that concessionary travel throughout the whole of the United Kingdom.

ATKINSON

You say the whole of the United Kingdom but Scotland isn't actually signed up yet is it?

DARLING

The position is that the companies get reimbursed by grant. Now the Scottish Executive which is responsible for bus travel north of the border has deferred a decision until after the elections there on the 1st May. But that doesn't really matter because National Express that operates those services have said that they're going to operate the half price scheme in the meantime. Obviously they'll want to get funding from the Scottish Executive if the scheme is to continue but it does mean that as of the 1st May all long distance coach travel that's part of the scheme will qualify, so it doesn't matter where you live, if the bus company operating is operating the scheme, whether it's in Scotland or the rest of the country, you'll be able to get that half price fare.

ATKINSON

Now National Express, as you say, are on board, which other companies are?

DARLING

Well a number of other companies are, in fact we expect most of them, large and small - as you know there are quite a large number of companies operating throughout the country - the requirement is it's got to be a scheduled service - that is it's got to run for more than six months - it's got to be widely available - in other words it can't just be a day trip, if you like, or a one off. But we expect because of the fact that grant has been made available to bus companies that in most parts of the country long distance coach operators will be offering half price coach fares and that will make a big, big

difference to a number of particularly elderly people who use these services to go and visit people or to perhaps go on holiday.

ATKINSON

Why have you allowed the coach companies though to opt out of certain times and certain types of ticket?

DARLING

Well clearly I can understand that if you're a coach company and you're operating a peak hour service, perhaps one of the commuter services into London, then your bus is already full and it makes sense to operate the half price coach fare at a time - an off peak time or a time that isn't so busy. And I suspect that many elderly people will not want to be travelling when the bus is crammed full of commuters. We wanted to make sure also that if a bus company is operating a discount already then it would be unfair to, if you like, give a double discount. What we're trying to do here is to take advantage of the fact that there a lot of people going by bus who go at times when the bus isn't always full, it's not a peak time service, but we can offer half price fares, just as we promised in our manifesto, so that we can get more people travelling by bus and make it easier for them to travel.

ATKINSON

Now in terms of disabled people, a lot of disabled people will say this is a great idea but a shame that the access is so bad for coaches.

DARLING

This is something that we've been addressing - more modern coaches do have better access than the older ones but clearly there is a long way to go. I agree that if you're going to offer a half price coach fare then you've got to make sure that people can take that offer up.

ATKINSON

With this new coach scheme you can travel say from Edinburgh to London for half price, yet your local bus scheme allows you to only go locally and once you hit your boundary you have to pay full fare.

DARLING

Well obviously we want to make sure that concessionary fares are available as widely as possible but you've got to balance that with the cost of providing these services. What we're trying to do is bit by bit extend the opportunity to travel. Clearly there's things that you might want to do in the future but obviously you've got to have regard for the cost of that. There's other people who need to receive help as well and what the Government is trying to do is to strike the right balance so that you've got local concessionary schemes, some of which are quite extensive, but you've also got this long distance scheme. But you do have to strike a balance as to what's possible and what's affordable. But I think the announcement today will go a long way towards helping people, particularly those who are travelling long distances.

ATKINSON

That's the Secretary of State for Transport Alistair Darling.