



## Heroes ...Just for One Day!

Our pension system has always had two ministers running it lately, the sort of Dynamic Duo approach that the Government would have us believe is in our best interests. I can't help thinking our Dynamic Duo is more like Dennis the Menace and Gnasher or Batman and Robin if you like.

Our Dynamic Duos of pensions started in May 1997 with Harriet Harman and Frank Field. That team-up lasted for nearly fifteen months and was superseded in July 1998 by the pairing of Alasdair Darling and John Denham. The replacement team was fairly short-lived and was itself replaced just six months later, in January 1999, by the Alasdair Darling and Stephen Timms team. Six months after that, in July 1999, it was all change again with the new and untried pairing of Alasdair Darling and Jeff Rooker. That dynamic duo had a longish run of nearly two years until May 2001 when the new team of Alasdair Darling and Ian McCartney hit the streets.

But it didn't last; just a year later, in May 2002, a different combo was given a run out by the scriptwriters; this time Andrew Smith teamed up with Ian McCartney and ended Alasdair Darling's long run in the limelight. That was the sixth change of personnel dynamic duo- wise.

The seventh, after the sixth duo's run of just over a year fizzled out in June 2003, saw Andrew Smith join up with Malcolm Wicks. A little over a year later, in September 2004, Andrew Smith hung up the cape and cowl for the last time and Alan Johnson teamed up with Malcolm Wicks to keep fighting the good fight. That was the eighth change. From there on in, as you know, it's all got a bit hectic with the writers changing the characters much more rapidly as the story, like the Heroes series on the TV, gets ever more complex and convoluted as it almost certainly heads for its similarly uncertain conclusion.

Just eight months after the Johnson/Wicks partnership came out with all guns blazing it was all over. The writers ditched both characters and in May 2005 unveiled the new-look pairing of David Blunkett and Stephen Timms. That story line didn't work out and got changed after just six months when, in November 2005, John Hutton took over from David Blunkett and our right to safety in the pension mean streets was entrusted to Hutton and Timms. That was the tenth change!

We didn't have to wait long for the eleventh; just the usual six months or so when, in May 2006, John Hutton lost Stephen Timms and got a new sidekick in James Purnell. The Hutton/Purnell team up, however, didn't cut it at the newsstands and by June 2007 the writers were looking for new angles to interest the (presumably dwindling) readership. Hutton and Purnell were both replaced by the fresh new faces Peter Hain and Mike O'Brien. It was the twelfth change in the comic-books run of just ten years and the makeover came with the promise of stability and, hopefully, a story line that would be allowed to develop for a longer run that just six months or so.

That was the idea, anyway, but it wasn't to be. Just seven months on and it was all back to the drawing board again for the writing team. Peter Hain was written out of the story and James Purnell has been written back in, this time in the Batman role with Mike O'Brien providing some stability by remaining on as Robin. That's the thirteenth change in just under eleven years. My guess is there'll be more changes before the year is out. Nice to know that pensions are still top of this Government's list of priorities.

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