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£14m is a small price for Wedgwood treasures; The country can find the money to save our heritage and help these poor pensioners

BYLINE: William Waldegrave

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As a former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I know that most of government is about saying "no". The demands from passionate and sincere lobbies for money will always overwhelm the supply of cash. But a good government has also to have the courage sometimes to say "yes" when all officialdom is saying: "But think of the precedent, Minister!" The **Wedgwood Museum** tragedy is such a case. For 50 years or more, the Wedgwood family, fearing that once out of their hands, the company might one day go under, gave their treasures to a museum to celebrate the greatest (pace my wife's Minton ancestors) of all the great Staffordshire potters, Josiah Wedgwood and his co-workers and successors. Go to the museum's website to see its treasures. There is the celebrated replica of the Portland Vase (below); there are the First Day Vases from 1769; there is the history of one of the greatest sources of popular art that the world has seen; the core of part of Britain's and the world's first industrial revolution.

The museum is internationally famous, on Unesco's elite list. It is popular and is located in the right place - in Barlaston, the heart of the former Potteries. But it is about to be closed and its contents sold. This is not the result of wicked government cuts but of a previous Government's understandable attempt to make sure that companies with broken pension schemes could not hide assets that should go to the pensioners.

By a sad series of mistakes, in law the museum's assets do not belong to a separate trust, but to the Wedgwood pension fund, which has a huge deficit.

It is tempting, as usual, to say that the law is an ass: had not the Wedgwood family been giving away their property for decades in acts of great philanthropy to what they believed was a museum safe from the company? And they were right, so far as shareholders went: the museum survived the bankruptcy of Waterford-Wedgwood Ltd and the collection was not sold for the benefit of the shareholders. But the museum was, the law said, still entangled with the pension fund. In fact, the High Court decided it was the last man standing of the former Wedgwood Group empire, and so on to it should fall the entire the burden of the £134 million hole in the pension fund. And it was ruled that collection, which could be worth £14 million, was an asset of the museum, not part of a separate trust, so off to the sale room with it.

There are two conflicting moral imperatives here - to get as much for the poor pensioners as possible and to preserve a museum collection of spectacular importance for the nation. The arguments about who is to blame and what could have been done differently are now beside the point. The case is being reviewed by Dominic Grieve, the

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Attorney-General, and some say that the Supreme Court should reverse all the lower courts' decisions and, Denning-like, look to common sense and what the intentions of the Wedgwood family were. But then the pensioners would lose out.

The best outcome is for the Government to say that this is one of those cases where we have to say "yes". In five or ten years no one will say: "They were mad to spend £14 million on saving the **Wedgwood Museum**". What we will say, I assure you, Danny Alexander, will be: "Thank goodness the Chief Secretary of the day had the good sense to do it."

Lord Waldegrave of North Hill is Provost of Eton College and a former Cabinet minister, 1990-97

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