

ANNA PUKAS



REPORT FROM BERLIN

You need Hans...

IF he ever chooses to go public, Professor Hans-Herbert von Arnim could find himself the most popular man in Germany.

He has made a crusade out of ensuring the nation's politicians do not get ideas above their station when it comes to setting themselves salaries, allowances and pensions. And he is prepared to go to the Constitutional Court, the highest court in the land, to do it.

In a year which has seen Germans hit with a seven per cent tax rise, 500 per cent increases in rents in the old east and the highest inflation rate for more than ten years, many people feel von Arnim is needed like never before to crack down on the crafty politicians who seem to think they alone are immune from all the belt-tightening measures they inflict on everyone else.

A youthful-looking, deceptively mild-mannered man of 52, the professor's main job is lecturing in business studies at a Rhineland college. Reining in the excesses of politicians became a crusade when, as head of a tax institute 20 years ago, he says he realised 'those with power almost always abuse it for their own purposes'.

Since then he has scored some impressive victories against the grey suits in the federal and regional parliaments.

His most recent was against the local government in Hamburg, which tried to vote itself an increase of nearly 20 per cent. It backed down when von Arnim produced the file he was ready to set before the Constitutional Court. It is also thanks to him that since 1975, all members of parliament, both federal and regional, are taxed on their salaries at the same rate as anyone else, instead of the very favourable nominal rate they enjoyed before.

Not surprisingly, he sometimes gets threatening letters. But it does not worry the father of three, who prefers to ride his bicycle to work than drive his BMW — 'bought and paid for by myself, no favours involved'. He even sympathises with his enemies, saying: 'I suppose I've done a few people out of a few million deutschmarks over the years.'

He cannot understand why those he has crossed use the term 'moralist' to abuse him. 'Morality is actually what most politicians lack,' he says.

Few would argue with him there, as he pores over bulky piles of council documents, looking for attempts by politicians to slip themselves a nice little earner. He might never be caught changing into a flowing cape in a telephone box, but many Germans already regard von Arnim as their Superman.