NPC Pensioners’ Parliament

6th to 8th June 2017

Blackpool

**Opening Session**

Storm force winds and driving rain greeted about 6oo pensioners to Blackpool for the 25th annual Pensioners’ Parliament. The march through the streets was curtailed but spirits were high. The Parliament was opened by the Mayor of Blackpool, Cllr Ian Coleman, who was presented with a cheque from Ron Douglas(President, NPC) to his charity funds - the Royal British Legion and a respite home for Young Carers.

The first speaker was **Dr Deborah Price (Professor of Social Gerontology, University of Manchester)** who talked about the politically motivated divisions in society which divide young and old whereas the real divisions are social and welfare. Young and old have the same social issues, unaffordable housing and benefits being stripped away are examples of intergenerational policies being masked as inequality.

**Neil Radia (Chair, National Association of Care Catering)** highlighted the social problems being caused by local authorities reducing or withdrawing Meals on Wheels services primarily due to reduced local authority budgets due to austerity. The unintended consequence being hungry pensions, socially isolated and lonely. It’s more than just a meal, it maintains independent living and reduces hospital admissions. Withdrawing Meals on Wheels is also false economy. A meal costs £3-50 per day; a hospital bed costs £300 per day.

**Paula Peters (Disabled People Against the Cuts)** described her group as a campaigning group who publicly demonstrate fro the rights of disabled people who have suffered £18 billion of welfare cuts since 2010. She was very politically motivated and her contribution developed into a Labour supporting campaign speech.

**Jim Tilley (Director, International Consortium of British Pensioners)** The ICBP campaigns against the grossly unfair pension enhancement rules for ex-pat pensioners. Pensioners living in Europe get their pensions enhanced but those living in the Caribean do not; those living in the USA get their pensions enhanced but those living in Canada do not. There is no logic to the rules and 550,000 pensioners are affected. Visit [frozenbritishpensions.org](http://frozenbritishpensions.org) or [pensionjustice.org](http://pensionjustice.org) for details.

**Heather Wakefield (Head of Local Government, UNISON)** spoke of the crisis in Social Care. It’s a financial crisis and a crisis of quality. It’s a politically driven crisis she said and all governments since Thatcher have serviced the care budget inadequately. The vital work that care workers do is not getting the recognition nor the support it deserves. Whilst 2% of GDP is spent on defence only 0.5% is spent looking after the most vulnerable people in society. The outsourcing and privatisation of care with the introduction of a 12% profit margin on average is the perfect storm of a huge drain on public money and reduction of both quality and quantity of care.

**Jan Shortt - NPC General Secretary** brought the session to a close, thanking all the speakers for their contributions and Neil Duncan-Jordan especially for organising the Parliament. She brought the NPC Pensioners’ Manifesto to the delegates’ attention pointing out the policies of Theresa May’s government is to undermine the the aspirations not only of pensioners but the vast majority of working people too.

On Wednesday morning I attended the session which asked:

**Where now for State and Occupational Pensions?**

**Hilary Salt of First Actuarial** spoke of the changing nature of occupational pensions generally but which we have seen in the Post Office, Royal Mail and BT. Pension deficits on the balance sheets are not liked and the latest excuse for downgrading schemes is inter-generational fairness. It’s a nonsense, she said. Companies pay nine times as much to shareholders than they pay into pension schemes. External factors have put negative pressure on funds. Quantative Easing has diminished gilt yields on which funds rely as a safe investment. Cash withdrawals are becoming a worry. Some people are taking 100% in draw down and being taxed on 75% of it. It could be argued that they have impoverished themselves if ever they need to claim means tested benefits.

**Neil Duncan-Jordan NPC Officer,** focussed on the state pension. The BSP is still £60 per week less than it would have been had Thatcher not broken the link to earnings. In spite of this some people argue that the triple lock if too generous and is unaffordable. This year the BSP increased by £3 per week and was slated in the press as being unfair to working people. But 2.5% of £6000 is still a lot less than pay increases in the private sector and marginally less than increases in the public sector. Politicians and journalists argue that the link has done its job but the BSP is still too low and millions of pensioners are still in poverty. It is a worry that the New State Pension, introduced in April 2016, will rise at a faster rate than the old one. This is because the whole of the new pension will will rise according to the Triple Lock whereas only the pension element of the old scheme is linked to the triple lock i.e. SERPS , graduated pension and S2P rise only by CPI. Neil said the NPC will continue to campaign for parity between the two schemes. For various employment and pension criteria pensioners of tomorrow will become increasingly reliant on the State Pension. It needs to become 70% of average earnings, about £200 per week in order to eliminate pensioner poverty.

**The State of the NHS and Social Care.**

**Paul Evans, NHS Support Federation** said the government has charged NHS senior managers with finding new ways to save money. It’s only the dedication of staff that keeps the NHS going. In real terms the NHS has received 1% per year increase in funding since 2010 even though health care inflation is running at 4% and is the average of what it has had before 2010. The government try to say it’s our own fault for living too long whilst at the same time access to Social Care has diminished which in turn increases pressure on the NHS. It’s a political decision to fund health care less and it’s not even keeping pace with the rise in GDP.

Since 2013 all NHS contracts have been put out to tender and out of the £20 billion worth tendered £7 billion have gone to the private sector. It’s a gradual but definite progress toward privatisation. The danger is that it will become a two-tier service.

**Dr Tony O’Sullivan, Health Campaigns Together** spoke about how early intervention in illness improves the outcome exponentially. Yet this is becoming increasingly difficult due to reduced resources. Hospitals and A&E department are closing or being centralised, there are 15,000 fear beds than there were in2010, inequality is rife, EU countries have greater resources and more equipment per capita than the UK, and the Naylor Report recommends that NHS property should be sold which the government is forcing through by withholding funds.

Good community based care does not replace hospital care; the two should be integrated into a seamless service.

**Jan Shortt, NPC General Secretary** found it difficult to believe anyone would want to destroy the NHS but, she said, that is what is happening. Social Care is in crisis. The NPC have taken their policy of a Health and Social Care Service to Parliament and it is now being discussed. The problem is how to fund it in the face of differing ideological principals. There will always be a dilemma for as long as health care is free and social care is chargeable through local authorities.

**Thursday Closing Session.** The theme of this session looked at the development of NPC local groups which is the new role for Dot Gibson who is now Deputy General Secretary. Neil Duncan-Jordan looked at the Pensioners’ Manifesto which, he said, was not just for the election but aimed to carry our aspirations forward into the next period. Jan Shortt confined her closing contribution to the state of Social Care and the NPC’ policy on the issue. Copies of the manifesto will be available at the next NW RM Council meeting on Wednesday 19th July.

**The Pensioners’ Parliament in 2018 will again be in Blackpool from 12th to 14th June.**

**Graham Wilson**

**NW RM Secretary**