

**Report on the National Pensioners Convention's Pensioners' Parliament, Blackpool, June 12-14<sup>th</sup>, 2018.**

***From the NUJ's 60+ team (Jenny Sims, Mary Brodwin, Ann Coltart and Jim Symons)***

**Campaigning for change**

***Overview by Jenny Sims***

**Change was in the air at this year's Pensioners' Parliament at Blackpool, the annual event for members of the million-strong National Pensioners Convention (NPC); with "challenge" and "campaign" the two most commonly heard words from speakers and delegates over the three days.**

The NUJ's four 60+ delegates marched to the Winter Gardens alongside more than 500 others from all over the UK, representing different unions, older people's forums and other organisations – as well as individual members.

Headed by a jazz band, it was noisy, lively and hit the headlines of the local newspaper, the Blackpool Gazette. But apart from a piece in The Morning Star, not a line about the march or the parliament appeared in the national press. And that's one thing Jan Shortt, the NPC's General Secretary wants to change.

Considering the NPC represents more than 1,000 organisations and more than 1 million members, it does not get the attention it deserves, she claimed. She also criticised "the media," as did others, for stories blaming older people for the housing and jobs problems of the young – and fuelling a divisive gap between them.

The generation gap is something the NPC is already working on, and a whole session of the parliament was devoted to it. (See below).

It is launching a recruitment drive to bring in younger members, and delegates were invited to "bring a younger friend" next year as part of it. This is not simply a step to safeguard the NPC's survival (though it recruited new members last year, they only just replaced the numbers lost, according to national organiser Neil Duncan-Jordan), but to help get the message across the NPC campaigns to safeguard the rights of future generations – not just this generation of older people.

The opening rally's line-up of speakers which included union leaders and an academic showed there was plenty to campaign about, from the NHS and

social care, to public transport and funeral poverty. (The NPC pledged to formulate a strategy on the latter in the coming year).

Each drew attention to a particular scandal and called for change. For example, Mick Newton, UK Miners' Pensions Association said 200 former mineworkers are dying each week. They had not received the pensions they should have because the government had raided the Miners' Pension Fund. Newton called for "democracy" in the way such workers' funds were invested and used.

Parallel sessions explored these issues in more detail and the NUJ's delegates covered all of them between them. See their reports below.

### **Brexit and the myth of generational warfare** *(By Mary Brodwin)*

**Dr Genna Carney, Queens University Belfast, made a powerful case to argue that older voters are not to blame for Brexit. She said that the problem was that the media played the most important role in how the referendum was conducted. Generational warfare is now as important as class and racial divides to set us against each other.**

After the referendum she looked at all English newspapers from 23 June - 23 July 2016 and many of the articles blamed pensioners - 'It falls to millennials to fix their elders' mistakes' was typical.

But Genna took a longer term view. It wasn't baby boomers that broke the UK. It was Cameron born in 1966 and Boris Johnson and Farage, both born in 1964. She saw the issues of social and economic inequality as the problem.

She said what is the point of having stereotypes like 'baby boomers' and 'millennials'. They don't really tell us anything. Simply throwing everybody together is actually ignoring important things like gender, class, ethnicity and any other identity you choose.

She looked at 81 articles and found only one based on meaningful research. Nineteen stories of 81 found in 15 different papers were based on the *same* press release from the Resolution Foundation and led on much the same tack – "Millennials are worse off than the previous generation." The Resolution Foundation's "*Stagnation Generation*" report was not based on research. Instead it was provocative, partial and ideologically driven. She stressed that we must be wary of think tanks.

Today there are higher levels of inequality generally – increased levels of debt, lower levels of job security, and greater levels of competition in the job market.

The *Stagnation Generation* report seems to suggest that each generation should be better off than the previous generation. Why is this assumption made? Children of the Great Depression were worse off than the previous generation. In the UK in the 1980s and 1990s there were children of the previous decades' economic crisis who were worse off than their parents. It is because of the set of circumstances into which they were born and when they came of age that they hit a perfect storm of rising indebtedness and a bottoming property market and, vitally, the *Stagnation Report* always leaves out the retraction of the welfare state.

All of these are the result of deregulation and neo-liberalism spearheaded by Thatcher and Reagan and taken up willingly by the likes of Blair, Cameron and latterly Theresa May. They have replaced an era that provided the welfare state, NHS and defined benefit pensions between 1945 and 1979.

If you live long enough as baby boomers to see new ideas from the 1980s such as deregulated markets and globalisation cause massive surges in inequality you might be a little disillusioned with politicians and big institutions that seem to put themselves and their interests ahead of the majority of people. Much of the insults aimed at older people should be aimed at governments that use deregulation. And if you are old enough to have seen this happen you might decide to vote leave.

We should work together and call out the politicians who are playing roulette with our democratic institutions, demolishing our welfare state and allowing the large multinational companies to operate as stateless entities without any corporate responsibility.

She ended - in terms of the NPC we must take a strong stand, be assertive with the media and refuse to be blamed for exercising our rights. In particular we need to keep doing what we're good at: writing letters to MPs, newspapers, and anyone else who will publish alternatives to the mythical consensus that Brexit is a war of generations.

## **Pensions inequality and intergenerational fairness** *(By Ann Coltart)*

**The recent trick of dividing people between the privileged elders and deprived millennials is regularly challenged at the annual Pensioners' Parliament – as it was again this year.**

Dr Jo Grady (Sheffield University) pointed out that under-pensioned precarious young workers were heading for a worse situation in their retirement than our current pensioners.

She said that 4 million people were now in non-regulated employment – far from the stereotype of full time work, when pension contributions from employer and employee were the norm.

Neil Duncan-Jordan, of the National Pensioners' Convention, emphasized that there had been a shift in perception from the “revered pensioners” to “greedy, selfish, undeserving old folk” today.

Neil mentioned the story of one rich pensioner who had used his winter fuel allowance to buy a crate of wine - picked up gleefully by certain elements of the media.

In contrast, he noted that the UK was at the bottom of the OECD list of 37 developed countries for pensioner poverty. There must be intergenerational solidarity, he said, to avoid a worse crisis for future pensioners.

He called on trade unions and the voluntary sector to concentrate not only on pay but pensions and pointed out that pension funds were so often invested by private corporations in arms and environmentally damaging activities.

## **Tackling loneliness** *(By Ann Coltart)*

**As with many topics at the annual parliament, loneliness is an emotional state which touches people of all ages.**

In older people, there may be issues such as losing a partner, disability, family dispersal, lack of transport, financial hardship and being valued less than younger people.

Anne Callaghan is campaign manager for *Scotland's Campaign to End Loneliness* and the *Be More Us Project* in Glasgow.

Among the activities she suggested for those who found themselves in a lonely situation were: phoning mislaid friends, starting a conversation with a stranger, smiling at people locally, volunteering, taking up a hobby which involved meeting others and being curious and open to one's surroundings.

She gave examples of Chatty Cafes, where strangers meet regularly in parts of Glasgow, a penpal scheme between school students and older people in Moray, daytime discos for those avoiding going out at night and sending letters as a change from texts and emails.

Anne also cited cases of businesses willing to be involved in such schemes and charities skilled in proposing social contacts for those who cannot leave their homes for any reason.

### **Social Care: Time to bring about real change** *(By Mary Brodwin)*

**David Bridson, Age UK, started by saying it is time to bring about change. And it is primarily us who will have to do it, but as campaigns manager for Age UK he wants to do whatever he can to enable us.**

Nowadays one in five elderly people miss meals and care packages have been reduced because of cuts not because needs have changed. There needs to be a big and bold solution.

Age UK needed to find what people wanted so they spoke to 137 older people, each for three hours at a time. They picked a cross section of areas – one session was with Prime Minister, Theresa May and some of her constituents and another was with Health and Social Care Secretary, Jeremy Hunt.

They found that amongst other things, the carers themselves are suffering. They have no time, no resources and often few skills to give the care. The cost of care homes is astronomical and is crippling people. Carers are not being given the support to do a good job. There is a postcode lottery and worst of all there are “care deserts” – where councils say they have no resources.

When people do not get social care they stay in hospitals longer which is costing the country millions. There have been 20 years of consultations with no solutions.

There is a £2.5 billion gap to sustain the system – that’s before even any suggestion of improving it. The forthcoming Green Paper will only address care in 20 years’ time but we need funding now. The NHS is going to get funds but there is no point if social care is not getting money as well, as one in six people go to hospital **because** they are not getting good social care.

The solution David said was to share the burden of cost across society with a rise in taxes. He said people are willing to pay more if they get a better service.

Ring-fenced funding should be available for social care. With the retreat of the state, too much is now left to the family to provide. They are having to provide intimate care which is not welcome by those receiving it. The state is retreating and families have to move in to fill the gap. Age UK want the talking to stop and big and bold solutions. We need to feed into consultation. Lobby MPs, feed into government and challenge the postcode lottery.

**Dame June Clark, DBE, Professor Emeritus of Community Nursing Swansea University, member of the NPC’s Executive Council through the RCN’s Pensioners’ Network looking back on nearly 40 years involvement with services for older people, and 19 years since she served as a member of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care of Older People, said one thing stood out.**

All the research and reports warned the system was in crisis, that resolution was urgent – then all were shelved.

She said the debate about social care is not just about cuts. It is about political ideologies and professional jealousies, turf wars between local authorities and health professionals. There is a stranglehold on money from the Treasury. (I’m not quite sure who June was referring to but she said that all of us should hang our heads in shame). What we do need to do, June said, is to think clearly and bring motions to the NPC’s biennial conference next year.

June supports “Indirect Care” which provides independence to users so that they can play a fuller part in society. A lot of these services no longer exist – day centres, lunch clubs, meals on wheels. With the result that loneliness is now a big concern. She says it is a crazy false economy which is adding to people’s bad health and in turn is putting a strain on NHS services.

She also talked about what is happening to Personal Care. This is care that directly involves touching a person’s body. Personal care is qualitatively

different from home care and should be provided free to those who need it, as it has been in Scotland since 2002, after devolution.

And she spent a great amount of time talking in detail about organisational restructuring, administration, legislation, medication assessment needs and briefing papers from the House of Commons (as if she were addressing fellow academics and health and social care professionals).

She concluded that she believed that health and social care should be delivered by an integrated care organisation (ICO) with its own budget and its own staff. The ICO should be the local face of a National Care Service funded from general taxation and that that is another big issue because we need to specify what we mean by “available to everyone who needs it,” based on a proper assessment of need and free at the point of use.

### **The NHS: 70 years old and still going strong? (By Jenny Sims)**

**The NHS is different in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, an earlier speaker, Dame June Clark, pointed out.**

Useful that she did, because surveys show many people are still unaware of this basic fact. And though NPC delegates came from all over the UK – the emphasis of this 2<sup>nd</sup> day session was on what’s happening in England’s NHS – particularly with Sustainable Transformation Plans (STPs) and Accountable Care Organisations (ACOs). Totally irrelevant to the rest of the UK – and confusing even to many patients in England.

Dr Brian Fisher, London GP, Vice President, Socialist Health Association, explained: STPs (introduced in 2016) split England into 44 areas of populations between 300,000 and three million to implement the government’s Five Year Plan (FYP) for health and social care in England.

But regrettably, though the FYP contained some good ideas, there had been nothing in it to prevent private companies getting involved. And since they had, one quarter of privately-run ACOs had been handed back to the public sector. Services had been cut in a random way, there had been 30,000 “excess deaths” in recent years, and overall, there was “a worrying state of affairs.”

However, Dr Fisher, was applauded for proposing some solutions – and hope. He called for: the renegotiation of Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contracts - which are crippling hospitals with debt, for local councils to take back social

care from private firms, and for older people to be included in research for more effective drugs.

He encouraged delegates to lobby for action, as he had done successfully in preventing the closure of Lewisham Hospital in south east London.

Dr Mark Taylor, consultant in older people's care at Blackpool's Victoria Hospital acknowledged the NHS's failures but focussed on the positives. Though there was still ageism, things were getting better. Older patients, like the 103 year old woman at his hospital who had recently been fitted with a heart valve, were obtaining treatments based on their frailty not age.

And he pointed to the findings of a report published by the Commonwealth Fund, that the UK's NHS provided "the best value in the developed world."

On NHS funding, he added: "If you want to save on the NHS budget, you've got to spend on social care."

(NB. Less than a week after this speech, Prime Minister Theresa May announced £20billion funding for the NHS to 2023/24 – with no mention of social care!)

### **Fringe meeting: Active minds – Still learning** *(By Jenny Sims)*

**The link between keeping mentally as well as physically active and their positive effects on older people's health and wellbeing was a recurring theme over the three-day parliament.**

A link was also made between cuts to community services including day centres and libraries, as well as adult learning classes and the rise in the incidence of social isolation and loneliness among older people.

These themes were brought together at a lively lunchtime fringe event hosted by the Association for Education & Ageing, and led by its chair, Professor Keith Percy.

He acknowledged that in our current age of austerity classes were no longer free, and things were more expensive than they had been in the past. But there were still plenty of opportunities for older people to learn and also to share their skills.



And he praised Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, for his far-sightedness in launching his age-friendly strategy making Greater Manchester an “age friendly” city, recognised by the World Health Organisation as the first UK city region to do so.

Manchester has secured £1m funding from Sport England to encourage older people to be more physically and socially active.

Another speaker, John Miles from the AEA, pointed out that less than one per cent of the education budget was spent on older people – who made up a third of the population. More lobbying was needed locally and nationally by individuals and organisations.

One delegate in the room (may have been the Nordic walker) told fellow delegates: “We have work to do.”

### **Making public transport accessible for all** *(By Mary Brodwin)*

**Peter Rayner (NPC) poured cold water on taking up any fight at the moment over talk we sometimes hear that the government and the transport minister are considering whether they will renew the bus pass on a yearly basis instead or a three-year basis.**

Peter argued that no such thing can happen unless they repeal primary legislation and repeal the Act. He said: “Those of you that are trade unionists have surely learned that you shouldn’t do management’s job for them. Don’t start banging on about the bus pass.” His advice was: “Keep your head down. Let them come to us about repealing the 2008 Act then we will argue about the bus pass.”

Peter’s advice was rounded on by some in the audience, notably Fran Postlethwaite, who sits on the NPC Transport Committee, and is one of the founders of the South Yorkshire Freedom Riders. Her message was that we should be campaigning in as large numbers as possible. “Fighting for the things we think are important is something we should all be taking back to our areas and arguing for. Having numbers enthused and active is what starts to make the difference. The disabled won everything in South Yorkshire because we campaigned earlier on and if we had run away and said well, perhaps we’ll keep quiet and perhaps they won’t do anything worse to us is a recipe for

them to keep coming at you. We have to keep fighting and keep our vision of what public transport should be about.”

**Steve Chambers**, Campaign for Better Transport. Set up in 1973 to get more people using public transport, the campaign lobbies government and at a local level for accessibility on bus and rail. Whole villages are cut off from bus services. We see this year the second Beeching with bus services being removed as well. We need to defend the bus pass as it is keeping bus services alive. We should insist that government has a strategy for buses – it does for every other mode of transport.

There is the beginnings of a rail campaign and some railway openings are on the agenda. We need station access for all. It's local campaigners who give us our power and reach.

His talk got general agreement from the floor and someone made the point that one of the biggest bus providers, Stagecoach, does in fact get 25% of its income from the subsidy on the bus pass. Older people are keeping the bus services alive. There should be no cuts.

**Philip Corran**, Kings College, London, whose recent PhD is about elderly Londoners using public transport, said there are major shortcomings in London - including not enough “accessible transport.” He made the point that 45% of people over 65 are disabled. Age and disability are interlinked - lack of accessible transport leaves the bus pass redundant.

### **Understanding funeral poverty** *(By Jim Symons)*

**Erik Cramb, of the Scottish Parliament's Funerals and Bereavements Group, said many of the pensioners with the day to day struggle to make ends meet, have, lurking in the room, the fear of the cost of their own funeral, and the fear that there's nothing they can do about it.**

The truth is that talking about pre-paid funerals, now costing upwards of £4,000, is pretty meaningless to those struggling from day to day on the meagre state pension, and having no savings and no prospect of savings. Indeed, this is even more serious if a family loses a younger member tragically, say by drug overdose. Funeral grants pay only 38% of funeral costs.

The Scottish government is now committed to paying the funeral costs of any child under 19, with “extras” being met by the family.

They have also set up a working group of MSPs and other agencies to study this subject. They have also put in place inspectors to monitor crematoria, and funeral undertakers. This was named the Burial and Cremations Act, and came into force in 2016. It gives inspectors powers to close them down. It was also discovered that the actual cost of making a coffin was only £44.

It is estimated that only one in six funeral directors are truly independent, with the rest run by multi-national companies, but trading under the company’s old name.

I will be urging 60+ to take these matters on board and pursue Funeral Poverty as one of our main objectives over the coming two years.

### **Closing session**

Among key take-away messages for delegates from Jan Shortt, NPC general secretary, were:

1. “We have to do more work to engage with young people.”
2. “You can all make a difference. Plan – so we *do* make a difference!”

**End**