

NPC Pensioners' Parliament 2019

Blackpool, June 11-13.

Report from the NUJ 60+ Council's 4 delegates: Jenny Sims, Mary Brodwin, Julian Swainson and Jim Symons.

OVERVIEW by Jenny Sims. This was a historic parliament in that it was the last to be called such. From next year it will be re-named the *Pensioners' Convention* as a result of a motion at the National Pensioners Convention's policy-making body earlier this year. But the 2019 Parliament is most likely to be remembered in the NPC's history as the one that united protesters against the government's abolition of free TV licences for over 75s and its handing over to the BBC responsibility for collecting licence fees. Many vowed they would not pay the fee – or the fine for failing to do so – and said they were prepared to go to prison over it, including NUJ NIAC and north Wales member, Roy Jones.

“Can't pay, won't pay” was heard frequently. In response, a coach was organised to take more than 50 members directly after the conference ended to a demonstration outside the BBC's studio in Salford. (Report in the next issue of *Senior Reporter* from Mary Brodwin).

Over the three days NUJ delegates attended parallel sessions on housing: older people and fuel poverty; tackling intergenerational unfairness; ageing without children; the social care crisis; public transport; and tackling digital exclusion. See reports below.

How do we solve the social care crisis? Report by Mary Brodwin

Speaker George McNamara, Independent Age, painted an unremittingly bleak picture of the state of social care provision. It is failing in every respect. Firstly, its inaccessibility. There are 19 health and social care bodies in England - you have to remember all their names just to get the vital support needed. It is not surprising that 40% of those eligible for pension credit are not receiving it because it is not a system there to help, it wears you down. The system is unfair and outdated. The safety net promised by national insurance contributions is clearly broken.

By 2037 a quarter of the population will be over 65, an increase of two-thirds on today's numbers. In privately funded care homes prices have increased by up to 87%. Yet local authorities give such homes millions of pounds without any guarantee of minimum standards of the quality of that care or the training and skills of the care workers.

Loads of care homes are going bust and handing back the keys to local authorities. Money is coming in from private equity outfits seeking to make a profit. Privatisation of social care means that our money is going to shareholders.

Care workers do not get paid enough and there are 100,000 vacancies.

We need to replace the Care Quality Commission. It is not fit for purpose. George said when there are failing schools Ofsted goes in. In social care we cannot continue with a situation where a report is given on huge failures of care and nothing happens.

No Kidding? Ageing without children Report by Julian Swainson

Finding this session was something of a challenge in the Winter Gardens complex as it was held in a cold room at the top of a mountainous staircase. Those who made it were rewarded with an interesting session where Sue Lister and Ann Murray used drama and audience participation to get us thinking about how to cope with increasing needs as we aged without the close support of children or other relatives. With a reported 92% of care supplied from within families, those without children were encouraged to develop other networks to give local support and friendship to prepare ahead for circumstances where help may be vital. Simple suggestions included forming good relationships with near neighbours. We heard stories from participants whose families live in far distant countries and others isolated by unexpected events such as the sudden onset of deafness. Sue and Ann present dramas for many audiences in the *Real People Theatre* company that challenge some of the uncomfortable preconceptions around ageing. On the basis of this session I would recommend a web search to find out more about their useful and enjoyable work.

Why public transport is good for all Report by Julian Swainson

This session included an inspiring talk on the benefits of good public transport from Pascale Robinson from campaign group *'We Own It'* and an introduction to the creation of the bus pass from Peter Rayner, an NPC vice president.

UK public transport is in a mess following Tory privatisations, with an ever diminishing number of services being used to create vast profits for a few individuals while vital services disappear leaving many people isolated. Older people have been particularly affected by the Tory onslaught on public transport with a continual erosion of bus pass facilities and route coverage and a chaotic failure to use new technologies to best effect. There are many social benefits to public transport, including reduction of private vehicle mileage and subsequent pollution and congestion problems. Older drivers have an increasing risk of accidents with age, so many will continue to drive simply because they have no other affordable option. Good public service provision is essential to minimise climate change and make town and city centres more pleasant and usable. A free market approach has caused many problems, and it is notable that London, where MPs are, retains a publicly-controlled system to great effect. *We Own It* campaign for a return of this public asset to public control and ownership. Look them up!

Tackling digital exclusion Report by Jenny Sims

This session looked at the challenges facing older people who are digitally excluded from society and what can be done to tackle the problem.

Speaker Derek Walker, Chief Executive, Wales Co-operative Centre (Wales's co-operative and social enterprise development body which implements projects that strengthen communities and promote inclusion) began by taking a show-of-hands poll of the digital capabilities of the people in the room.

Percentage-wise, they closely mirrored findings of the *UK Consumer Digital Index 2019*, published the previous week by Lloyds Bank, which showed that in Britain: 62% are **Digital**

First (use multiple devices, shop and stream online, and prefer to manage money digitally); 25% are **Digitally Competent** (digital usage but prefer face-to-face support); and 12% are **Digitally Disengaged** (little or no digital behaviours).

How to tackle the latter is the big problem, but Walker gave examples of how the Centre is acting as an “agent of change” in training frontline staff in libraries, social care, other public services and the third sector, “so they can support older people.” Libraries across Wales now run “Digital Fridays” to help with basic digital needs and online form filling. ‘Digital Heroes,’ trains schoolchildren to help people in care homes and the community use tablets and smart phones.

But during the Q&A session, Walker faced some angry and hostile comments from a minority who claimed they would never go online because of the fear of scams, non-affordability and other reasons. He responded: “We’ve got to support people – or the gap gets wider.”

Tackling intergenerational unfairness Report by Jim Symons

It was good to hear one of the young people, Rhiannon Taylor, a local activist in the Chester area (Women’s Officer for Chester constituency Labour Party). She spoke at length about her experience talking to older people on the doorsteps.

She highlighted the lack of GPs, the fact that there is only one doctor for every 350 patients, and the length of waiting times to see a doctor. She also noted that there are over 100,000 vacancies in the NHS, and Trump’s attempt to steal our most precious asset. She also spoke of people, both young and old, who are still having to choose between heating and eating. She then spoke of how only one in six people who have paid into the system their whole lives now live in poverty. Over five million people are both working and having to claim benefits. The Trussell Trust has reported that they have issued 1.6 million emergency food parcels in the last financial year alone. The main beneficiaries being people under 30 and over 60 years of age. The plight of the homeless was also discussed, as well as the increase in mental health issues many of which are exacerbated by the attitude of D.W.P and P.I.P staff.

Finally, she discussed the problems of transport and the government’s obsession with HS2. In light of increasing bus and rail fares, and the lack of disability facilities on trains, many people of both the older and younger generations are restricted from visiting friends and family. This again causes isolation and depression in many cases.

Many of the decisions being made in Westminster by MPs who are totally detached from the real world, pitch both generations against each other. The old Tory gambit of Divide and Conquer. We must all fight against this attitude, and show that all generations are not born with big bank accounts, and silver spoons in their mouths. It is time to say “Enough is Enough.” We should all get together, like-minded people in our communities, and form action groups. Let’s all, young and old, stand together and show that we won’t be bullied any longer!

I think that if we all took a leaf out of this young activist’s book, we can make ourselves heard.

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