Report of the 2013 Blackpool Pensioners Parliament

This report has been prepared by David Jones & Gill McLoughlin and also incorporates material from Mary Dyer Atkins and Mike McLoughlin.

Tony Brockman – International Consortium of pensioners living abroad (ICBC): - He highlighted the plight of our pensioners living abroad. People whose pensions, are frozen, and never updated after departure from the UK. Many of them paid first class stamps during their working lives, but receive a second class pension. Long standing rules have not been changed. There should be a change in the law aimed at assisting those pensioners whose pensions are frozen. There are 600,000 British pensioners living abroad, they are not all treated the same if you go to live in commonwealth Countries e.g. Canada, Cyprus, India, Australia, New Zealand, etc your pension is never increased after departure from the UK. However if you go to live in some countries for e.g. the USA, Israel, or some other countries, then the pensions are updated yearly.

The Hotel left a lot to be desired on arrival although they had the names of the individuals, they were not under any circumstances prepared to allow any one in without a reference number, even if that meant that the people in question had to return home or find alternate accommodation. The staff, were surly, hard worked and not very happy not a single smile from any of them. It has to be said that the food was not very good and was not well presented. The staff had been told that if they joined a trade union that they would be sacked. One of the two lifts appeared to be permanently out of commission, it was fortunate that our delegates were given rooms on the ground floor, which saved us from endless queuing to get on to the solitary lift. The rooms were very clean, but small, not comfortable for a couple as they were really cramped, and I would say mission impossible for a really handicapped couple. The delegates are not prepared to go back to the Metropole Hotel which is clearly anti trade union. We believe that Unite should campaign to recruit hotel staff in Blackpool and at the Metropole in particular.

The weather was glorious and the march from the Blackpool Tower to the Winter Gardens was well attended (there being a good thousand people on the march with their banners) and they received a much warmer response this year from the locals who were both vocal and supportive. The sun really shone on the righteous on this occasion. The Parliament was opened at 2.00 pm by the new NPC Chair Ron Douglas who welcomed fellow pensioners and reminded them that they represented the frail elderly and the 1.8 million pensioners living in poverty in this “civilised country”. Ron Douglas also explained that our long serving President Frank Cooper had retired at the NPC BDC in March 2013. We were then welcomed by the
Blackpool Mayor Kath Dawson, who has marched with us on three occasions previously, she said supporting campaigns for better pensions and pensioners was of the utmost importance; with one in eight pensioners living in poverty. The NPC President presented her with a small cheque for the charity that she is actively supporting. This was followed by the opening of the rally. **We were very disappointed to be told that no members of Parliament would be present at Blackpool and that no provision had been made to send us a substitute speaker.**

**Dot Gibson NPC General Secretary:** - gave a very thorough report of the work carried out by the NPC during the year, its meetings with the minister for pensions and the opposition shadow minister. She outlined the lack of resources and the massive task that lies ahead of us if we are to prevent the universal benefits being removed from us by this coalition government; all three main party’s appear to be prepared to hack into the universal benefits. We need a social care system that is paid for out of taxation. We must take up the question of all retired members receiving their proper pension. If they work in the NHS and then return to commonwealth countries to look after relatives, then their future pensions are frozen. Some leave the UK so as to leave their houses to their children who cannot afford to buy their own house. The NPC has agreed to support the People’s Assembly in London on Saturday June 22nd, it is important that this is a successful event – afterwards we can see where we can go on those lines. The Pension triple lock is now under threat. There is a huge crisis in the care industry, carers are poorly paid and very poorly trained, they can only spend 15 minutes with a client (how much can you do to help a disabled person in 15 minutes?) and do not get paid for their travelling time between calls – do not blame the carers, it’s the system that is at fault. A national care service would cost everyone 75p per day through the tax option, this service should be linked to the NHS. The contribution that retired people make to society is never included in the GDP. Pensioners need the bus pass so that they can go shopping and engage in Dot Gibson rounded of this session by saying “The Pension Charter” is our guide, billions for bankers, peanuts for pensioners; we must not be scared to stand up for pensioners’ rights. The NPC must lead from the front, NPC is going to the people assembly, we might lose the triple lock, we are all fighting for future pensioners, we must warn young people how the pension act is going. Fuel poverty is a scandal when fuel companies are making a fortune and making the future very hard, financially for pensioners. The fuel allowance must be retained for the needy pensioners. We now live in a divided Country and there is much anger in our society. The call for a “National Care Service” is not pie in the sky. The TUC must now turn its attention to the State Pension.

**Frances O/Grady TUC General Secretary:** - The TUC supports the NPC in its campaigns for a “National Care Service” paid for out of taxation. We do not agree with the policies of this right wing government. This government is only for the rich and is destroying our welfare state, enough is enough, as a union let’s make a case for fairness, let’s remember Jack Jones’s 100 anniversary and do what he did best, organize and help those of lesser means. There was the need to keep
universal benefits; otherwise those who do not need benefits have no stake in ensuring the welfare state continues and will resent paying into a system that gives them nothing back., let the tax system deal with the rich pensioners who are not in need of those benefits. On the issues of the health care in the community and care homes – there should be quality of care for all regardless of the ability to pay. Care homes and nursing homes should all come under one umbrella, be paid for out of tax, staff should be given proper training in how to treat their patients with dignity, and given decent wages and conditions. We have a Government of the rich for the rich: Let’s have a property tax, a mansion tax and tax the rich.

Tony Brockman – International Consortium of pensioners living abroad (ICBC): - Tony Brockman made a good case for pensions not to be frozen for people who live abroad. He highlighted the plight of pensioners living abroad, people whose pensions, are frozen, and never updated after departure from the UK. Many of them paid first class stamps during their working lives, but receive a second class pension. Long standing rules have not been changed. There should be a change in the law aimed at assisting those pensioners whose pensions are frozen. There are 600,000 British pensioners living abroad, they are not all treated in the same way; if you go to live in commonwealth Countries e.g. Canada, Cyprus, India, Australia, New Zealand, etc your pension is never increased after departure from the UK. However if you go to live in some countries for e.g. the USA, Israel, or some other countries, then the pensions are updated yearly. No one should be penalised because of where they choose to live, Lady living in Australia receives a UK pension of £6 per week. Couple living in Canada receive £54 (man) & £34 (Wife) p/week, the pension is the same as it was 22 years ago, if they were living in the US they would be in receipt of a full UK pension.

Mark Serwotka PCS General Secretary: – some of my members have had a wage freeze for 6 years. The NPC has always come out and supported us. We believe that no pensioner should receive less than the poverty line (government own figures) of £178. We have to fight for the pensioner of tomorrow and debunk the view that there is no money. We support the NPC campaign to achieve a minimum pension of £178 p/w; 50% of pensioners live on benefit, 7% of national welfare is spent on pensions. The Labour Party must start to inspire people we need to recreate the spirit of 1945. We are the 6th richest country in the world we must also keep our universal benefits and let the tax system sort out the anomalies. We must not in 2015 replace the Con/Lib coalition with the same under Milliband & Balls, because that would not inspire anyone. The Labour Government in 1945 made sweeping changes when the National Debt was three times than it is at the present time. Cameron has targeted the welfare state and reduced its spending power by £30 billion, which has been given to the private sector. He is also trying hard to divide the young from the old and labelling pensioners and those on welfare as scroungers. Out of the 27 EU countries our pension comes 24th – what we need is Dot Gibson on BBC question time.
Prof John Ashton, President of Facility of Public Health: - Age expectation is now at 4 score and ten years, 50% of the babies born today should live to be 100. There needs to be solidarity between the medical profession and social care, in order to give security to pensioners, there is a 20 year gap between the life expectancy of the of the rich and poor. We need to invest in the good society and not the big society. Security in old age comes from solidarity and not from privatisation and market forces. The NPC has politically much power and influence if used properly. Children and elders are vulnerable and are increasingly getting killed in car accidents which are not killing the drivers of the car. Services designed for poor people are usually poor and do not meet the needs of the people for whom that are intended. The collusion between all three parties is a disgrace – there is a need to reconstruct the social contract.. There is a lot of power in this room, experience and political know how – stop playing games – win security – stop buying the Daily Mail and the Sun. It is a right of young people to defend what we have achieved, what we have achieved is young to old protection and working together, young people need to stand by us, everybody pays in, so everyone should get something out, stand together, fight together and we will win together.

Owen Jones, Author: - Owen Jones is a young man who recognises the need for the young and old not to be alienated from each other. This coalition government is being only too successful with propaganda to prompt separation of people in society. We need to continue to fight this propaganda with the help of more young people. My generation must not let your generation lose their hard won universal benefits. There is no shortage of anger or fear in our society, as it grapples with a wage freeze, banking crisis, bedroom tax and a housing crisis. We must demand a living wage and that the government builds affordable houses and that the banks are brought under control, in particular the culture of awarding themselves massive bonuses very often for failure and not success. We must demand control of the banks, an end to tax avoidance by large companies and those registered in tax havens, and tackle people like Philip Green Top Shop, whose companies are registered in Monaco in his wife’s name and thus pays no UK tax. We did not create this economic mess, it was caused by free market capitalism but we the workers and the poor are being made to pay for it. The banks were nationalized but we have no control over them. We must stay together, fight together and win together. Owen received a standing ovation.

Tuesday Evening Unite Social

Tuesday evening a social was organised at the Blackpool Royal British Legion Club for Unite members by Ronnie Morrison and Alan Jackson on behalf of the North East Yorkshire & Humberside Region. This was the second social for Unite members organised by this region at this venue and it was excellent, the buffet laid on was superb and was sufficient for a regiment. It was also an excellent opportunity for networking with members from other regions, it is important that this type of social evening is to continue in the future. We suggest that a thank
you letter is sent from the National URM Committee to the North East Yorkshire & Humberside RCC.

“Pensioners and Devolution Wednesday Morning” - Chaired by Ron Douglas.

How to keep warm in winter, the cost of food, the quality of care and inadequate bus services in rural areas were highlighted as the main problems facing pensioners in the three regions of the UK with devolved administration. Speakers from Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales spoke of the plight of hard up pensioners during this two hour debate.

Eddie Lynch, chief executive of Age Sector Platform, a charity representing 35 pensioner organisations in the province, stated that two out of three pensioners in Northern Ireland were struggling with the cost of food. Another problem was the high cost of heating oil on which 70% of households in Northern Ireland depend compared with 4% of households in the rest of the UK.

Sarah Rochira, Older Peoples Commissioner for Wales emphasised the importance of community services for the elderly. She claimed that there were more, older people in Wales per head of the population than anywhere else in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. She went on to say “The way that we care for older people is absolutely shocking”. She also emphasised the importance of the concessionary bus pass particularly in rural areas and added “We have the bus pass, but no buses”. In urban area’s the withdrawal of the bus pass would mean that many pensioners would not attend the surgery and would miss out on flu jabs etc.

Cathy Leach a member of the Scottish Pensioners Forum stated that pensioners in Scotland were being “badly treated, pushed around and demonised”. The quality of care in the care homes leaves an awful lot to be desired and in most instances is just not there. We will shout that it is our country, we built it, we have paid for everything that we receive with our money. The media keeps saying that pensioners keep getting the best benefits and everybody else is losing out, in particular the young, this is not true and should be stopped now. How do we change, must work on what older people think, mobilize and work together, organize and unite, “unaccepted becomes accepted and accepted becomes the norm.

Alan Sidaway, who is a member of “Scotland’s Older People’s Assembly”, said on behalf of Scotland, that we do not have a pensioners parliament even though the young people do, we are all worried that pensioners are having to sell their house’s, the “bedroom tax” poverty is the same in Scotland, we have no gas in urban areas just like Ireland, the HNS is not being hit in Scotland, the triple lock is not secure. We need a pensioner’s champion in the parliament and we need to speak to Alex Neil (cabinet secretary for health and well being) on this issue. The bus pass in Scotland is much better than in England as we can use it 24 hours a day and we get free long distance travel all over Scotland, we can use
our pass all the way to Carlisle, but the English pensioner can only go to the border. Also working on free travel and provision of community transport, also on the protection and keeping of pensioners in their own homes by using Care Call administrated by the Red Cross. The volunteers, like lots of other organizations, rely on people stepping in and helping Alan himself who is sometimes called out at 2.00 AM to help people in distress. It is very important to do as much as possible to enable people to remain in their own homes for as long as possible, it is the pensioner, granny and granddad who look after the grandchildren, because both parents have to go out to work, we must all work together, look forward and stick together and as Jack Jones said “keep right on”. Why cannot the bus pass be used all over the UK? Perhaps we should join up with Wales and Northern Ireland, agree on its use in our areas, shaming the Westminster government. In Ireland they have the golden trekker which enables you to obtain cheaper travel in Ireland.

Dignity in Care

Chaired by - Dot Gibson.

Matthew Egan (UNISON), Standard of social care in the home’s are very variable and in many cases unacceptable. Care is now outsourced to private care companies Poor management and privatisation have led to unacceptable standards of care. Elderly people are given 15 minute slots, health care workers are not given a travel time allowance in their rota’s and have very poor levels of pay. It matters little how good the carers intentions how can you possibly with dignity get someone out of bed, washed, dressed and fed in 15 minutes, but this is what they are expected to do! Carer’s have zero levels of contact their patients. Most staff are not unionised due to privatisation. There should be a charter for home carers which would include the following: - 1. No 15 minute slots 2. Workers to be given time to talk to their patients 3. Occupational training is essential. Union recruitment is important as is the intergration of the health and social care. There is an annual Dignity day on February 14th and this should be used for campaigning.

Dr David Oliver (Kings Fund Fellow): - Works in a NHS Hospital and is a specialist in care for the elderly. The NHS should supply cradle to the grave care, dignified care should be available at the point of need with no age discrimination. Medical care needs in the elderly can be very complex. Services need to work together and complement each other. 1 in 4 elderly hospital patients have dementia which puts extra strain on nursing staff and also on home carers, who are often ageing themselves. There is a need to look further, there will be severe problems for the local authorities who are facing massive cuts; there needs to be a fresh debate on overcoming health and social funding for today’s and future pensioners. Dr Oliver read some of the letters that he had received from relatives of some of the victims of the Mid Staffs scandal and they were indeed horrific. Suggested dignity for the elderly should be defined as follows: - 1) Maintain self
respect and to be treated with respect 2) Choices of care in dying 3) Minimum standards of training for health assistants. As there is no mandatory training in place at present. The present Coalition Government are addressing problems of dementia but much more needs to be done.

**Pension’s Seminar.**

Chair Norman

Speakers were NPC National Officer Neil Duncan-Jordon and Jay Ginn, from Sussex University.

The state pension should be a right, not a benefit to be ‘capped’ or affected by ‘cuts’. People will not save for the new second pension because they do not earn enough, and employers will keep wages low to save paying in. Part time working women, on low pay, will find it difficult to accumulate enough credit to reach the 30 years required. The new pension of £144 is designed to save money over the decades, and will create a two tier system with the current pension staying as it is. What is needed is a Citizens Income as of right, not subjected to ‘means testing’. All people are different, with different working lives, but in retirement, we should all be equal, and entitled to an adequate single Citizens Pension, paid for through taxation.

**Wednesday Afternoon**

**Protecting the NHS**

Chair Jan Short.

Dr Jacky Davis, from the NHS Consultants Association during the debate on protecting the NHS stated: “We need to mobilise public opinion”. Describing the Health Service as a “cherished institution” she urged pensioners to contact their local journalists, write to their local MP’s and get in touch with Health Watch. The NHS is being “sold off” and accused David Cameron of “treating the health service like a business opportunity for his mates.” Britain she said was in the grip of an ideological attack on the public services. With the passing of the Health and Social care Bill 2012, the profit motive is now in place and behind the NHS logo are private companies taking profits. The fight to regain the principles of the NHS must continue, but will be up against commercial interests, who will hide behind confidentiality. If the International Trade Agreement is signed, the American health companies will take over, some of whom are already over here, running services.

Dr David Wrigley, a spokesman for the “keep the NHS Public” organisation (as is the other speaker Jackie Davis) and a member of the BMA Council, deplored what he called the “commercialisation of the NHS. he has worked hard to oppose the ‘Health and Social Care Act’. This government had no mandate for the changes to the NHS within this act and sadly it is almost certain that if they had been in
opposition the Liberal Democrat’s would have voted against it. The changes came into operation on 1 April and 13 July is the 65th anniversary of the NHS and we must continue to fight hard to save our very valued NHS, he said it is not too late. Dr Jacky Davis told us she was disgusted that this act had been passed, but it had been and we must work with what tools we have to ensure we fight off the worst effects of it and keep the pressure on Labour to reverse it if they get back into power. She was selling copies of the book ‘NHS SOS’ which she had helped edit, in the back is a list of things we can do to stop total privatisation of the health service. These included Political pressure, keep NHS in the spotlight, track what is going on the government won’t tell us, twitter, hold union leaders to account, attend commissioners meetings, join patient participation groups, make sure local journalists are aware of the campaign, write to your MP. Get involved with health watch which has taken over from LINK, stand as an NHS trustee to name only a few. While none of us will be able to do all of them I feel sure we could build a campaign around some of them. I was heartened to hear Dr Davis say that the only union to campaign against the changes was UNITE, so let keep it up! This was followed by some question and comments from the floor, but as in the morning not enough time was available.

The Future of Concessionary and Public Transport

Chair Derrick Baker

Tosh McDonald (ASLEF Vice President), The bus pass is 100% safe till the end of this parliament, however make no mistake travel concessions re under attack, they do not fit in with Tory ideals. They also want to take away pensions and make people work till they drop. There is a similarity between our government and Hitler’s Nazi Party. Railway workers are now not able to travel for free due to privatization. This government has failed, big time, privatization is a failure, workers are using 20% of their income just to get to work, staff including guards are being cut. The Government is suggesting that Rail Track, should take over from Network Rail, however there are safety issues that need to be resolved. Franchised Rail is not working. All new trains should be built in Britain.

Ron Douglas (President of NPC): - East Coast main line should be nationalized. Private Companies are making huge profits and are still getting subsidies from the government. He also stated that the bus pass should give people a discount on the trains. There should be no need to pay £30 for a Senior Citizens Rail Card. Bus routes are being ditched so bus pass is irrelevant to some people.

There was a lively debate about mobility scooters. There has been an increasing number of accidents involving the scooters. A mobility scooter is classed as an invalid carriage along with manual and powered wheel chairs. There needs to be legislation to control their use, at present there is no mandatory driving training, no
need to have insurance cover, nor is there a legal eyesight standard to meet. With an aging population the demand for mobility vehicles is likely to increase. Design and safety features need to be examined.

Uniting the Generations

Chair Marion Wilson

Josh Rowland's (NUS): - Josh gave a resume of the difficulties facing young people in general and in particular the difficulties that face students as a result of the massive debts that many of them run up during their time at university. We are very conscious that we have very similar problems to the older generation, in that most of our problems are caused by the government. Students felt that they have been particularly let down by Nick Clegg and his Liberal Democrats who were always claiming to support the idea of not increasing the fees imposed by the Blair government, yet fully supported the government in raising the top limit from £3,000 up to £9,000 per year, leaving Universities to decide on their own fee. Young people are generally pretty fed up, they usually find it easier to relate to their grandparents rather than their parents. They do not fall for the argument that the pensioners do not suffer from the cuts, and that the benefits given to pensioners are the cause of the massive youth employment. Students who are faced with having to get worthwhile jobs which are increasingly becoming scarce and faced with having to repay massive loans: are also becoming worried about the future and whether they will be to secure a decent pension. Students also have to achieve a balance between their studies and pulling in part time work. All those who employ students only pay the minimum wage, we are actively campaigning for a living wage. We need to have a continuing dialog about how we link young and old. It is our intention to stand up to Cameron, we need to be together, we want strong links between the NUS and the NPC. Dot Gibson NPC General Secretary also spoke during this session and made observations strongly supporting the line that Josh was taking. This was followed by a very lively discussion which served to illustrate how much activity takes place up and down the country which involves joint activity between young and old. In the view of the writer Josh’s contribution was one of the outstanding speeches of the Parliament, this was also the opinion of Dot Gibson.

Wednesday Evening Social in the Winter Garden Ballroom

The Wednesday evening entertained was provided by Bill Barrow’s Jazz Knights and the Mersey Beats at the annual NPC Social, it was a great social occasion and a good time was had by all. Even one lady from the East Midlands was observed on several occasions to be up and dancing with the aid of her walking stick. It is believed that a photo was taken during her dancing, it is hoped that it is not going to be used for blackmail purposes.
Thursday Morning-Closing Session, Chaired by Ron Douglas.

Dot Gibson: - Stated “the rally on the first day was the best we have ever had.” The care movement needs lots of updating, keep the NHS, it is 65 years old and is the envy of the world, we must encourage younger pensioners to come into the NPC, to help with the campaigning, as we are fighting for tomorrow pensioners, we have put out more material than any other organization. Janet Shapiro: - Spoke on women’s issues, women are suffering from the miss seller of pensions and wrong advice, 1 in 4 women need dignity, men do not have this problem to the same degree. Single pensioners are the worse hit, social care for women has been cut, the care system is in crisis.

Ellen Lebethe: - What are your aspiration with regard to dignity and social care, this issue must be taken seriously, they must listen to our words, access to good quality service, we need warm homes and some comfort in later life, all have the same hopes and aspirations but some just have loneliness, isolation, dignity exclusion, black ethnics are a part of our nation minority groups, black women, gays and disabled suffer the worse with many being discriminated against. The “them and us” syndrome, language is a problem. A third of black people have income below the full pension, finance is a problem. It is in their culture to look after their parents etc, we need to look after our older people, everyone needs to live in a society which allows them to be happy and free from worry

a) The single tier pension of £140 p/w is being rushed through, and will not be to the advantage of all (does not include present pensioners), it is meant to bolster the private pension providers b) The triple lock increases to pensions is under threat c) Care quality needs to be carefully monitored and funded from general taxation, care is not just about how we pay for it but its quality d) Work needs to be done on working with the young, ensuring no split of generations e) We must defend universal benefits f) Lone women pensioners are the most likely to be living in poverty g) We must change the negative image of old age h) We need to be engaged in our communities, everyone needs to be allowed to build a pensioners movement which is genuinely inclusive i) It costs pensioners more to live in rural areas, lack of public transport, long distances to shops, post office, bank and visit to the GP and you cannot eat the scenery. There are very few police in the rural areas, many more are required to deal with the cowboy’s who prey on the elderly j) young people are being moved out of rural area’s by the wealthy who want a quiet country abode, there is a great shortage of public transport in rural area’s.

Many valuable points were made during this discussion but those were the main ones. A film the Spirit of 1945 was mentioned several times during the parliament and Dot Gibson NPC General Secretary was one of its contributors. Would it be possible for UNITE to get hold of it so it could be shown in Regions and Branches. The NPC had been economical with the presentation of parliament and Dot Gibson did mention the need to do this because of shortness of funds, but it did not affect the quality of the speakers or the contributions from the floor of the various sessions.