

GREY POWER LOBBY REPORT
AUG 4 – AUG 7 2008

A small lobby team visited politicians, ministries and various other organizations from Monday afternoon 4 Aug and finishing Thur noon 7 Aug 2008-08-08 The team consisted of Dick Stark, Chair Health Committee and Election Strategy, Ian Anderson, Chair Superannuation & Taxation Committee, Roy Reid, Chair Law Order & Justice Committee, Violet McCowatt, Chair Social Services Committee and myself as President and Lobby Convenor. Mrs McCowatt returned home Wed morning 6 Aug after visiting with the Ministry for Social Development and the Minister for Social Development and Senior Citizens Ruth Dyson.

This visit was successful and it was noticeable that all politicians we met were keen to hear our messages and also very receptive to anything we brought up with them. Min of Police Annette King was unavailable to meet with us as she was required in the House to present some legislation but she asked Phil Goff to substitute for her and we found him to be very knowledgeable and capable and a very fluent speaker.

Ministry of Social Development

This meeting is usually arranged for the Monday Afternoon as Politicians are still returning from their electorates and it leaves the whole afternoon free to discuss many subjects fully with the Ministry Officials.

We firstly discussed the Portability of Pensions as the review which began in 2000 has just been completed. It was the Government's commitment to NZ First that commissioned the review and it covered the treatment of overseas pensions affecting something like 55,000 people and t also the payment of NZ Superannuation overseas.

Generally the review states that a fair and equitable Pension is paid in NZ and that no person shall receive more than one pension of the same type. This was explained to mean that if any person coming to NZ is eligible to receive a pension in their own country and is dealt with in any way whatsoever by the government of that country then that pension is taken by the NZ Govt and NZS is paid. There has been no change in the way pensions from UK, Netherlands or Canada are dealt with in NZ.

Average Wage

The Team requested details as to how the Ordinary Time Average Weekly Wage was calculated as there is some criticism of the method in the calculation. We were informed that the Dept took an average of the ordinary time wages of 18,000 persons. These were the equivalents of full time workers receiving a full time wage. The gross wage was

averaged out and then the tax taken off leaving the Net Average Ordinary Time Weekly Wage from which the NS is paid. We stated that some of our members had asked if the average wage contained a portion of part time workers wages but we were assured that the calculation was from wages of full time workers..

50 Plus

We stated that widows, invalids and single beneficiaries over the age of 50 years with no other income were living in poverty and that we were concerned that there appeared to be no official poverty line calculated in NZ. This is becoming a concern to the department and they have announced that from Monday 4 Aug 2008 the Food Grant from WINZ has been doubled. This is actually a grant and it is not required to be repaid. We were asked to bring to the attention of our members that people should go to their doctor to get information with the financial problems to get assistance with allowances available to them.

Annual review of Disability Allowance.

The disability Allowance in the past has been reviewed annually but from now on will be rolled over each year if the costs incurred drop or remain the same. Those who receive the Disability Allowance will now not be required to fill in the forms annually or send them to the Super Centres at WINZ. The only need to visit WINZ will be if costs increase and the allowance is to be increased to cover the increased costs,.

It is also reported that from October 1 2008 the subsidy for Hearing Aids is to be increased to \$500 for each hearing Aid. The current subsidy is \$198. Lynley Spears, The National Manager for Seniors will send copies for distribution to Fed Office.

Lower Salaries Commission/Authority

In line with suggestions from Motueka Association and other members in the federation we promoted the idea of a Lower Salaries Commission with the Ministry. The idea is to take Superannuation away from the politicians and have NS set by an independent body such as the Higher Salaries Commission.

The answer we received at this stage is that all the data used to set NS comes from the Department of Statistics which is independent of the government. There could be times when we would not be happy with the result but on the other hand there could be times things were more in our favour. This was the first time this had been brought up and the Lobby Team were pleasantly surprised the idea was not dismissed out of hand and we shall continue to promote this as a method of setting the level of all Lower Incomes and benefits.

Other Matters Discussed

On Sept 26 the new regulations covering the Enduring Power of Attorney come into place.

The Code of Practise for Equity Release Schemes will be voluntary.

This will be in place for an estimated three year period.

The Super Gold Card was also discussed and it was noted that the free off peak bus services will begin in most places on October 1st 2008. Some places may be later than 1 October but the money has been made available from govt but it over to the regional councils and one or two regional councils may not be ready to comply at that time.

Hon Peter Dunne Leader United Future

Peter Dunne is always ready to meet and he listens intently to us and also brings some new ideas forward. On the matter of Tax Cuts he would like to see a new rate of taxes that he would promote if he has the opportunity with the confidence and supply deals in forming a new government. His rates would be for the first \$12,000 income the rate of tax would be 10%, 20% for \$12,000 to \$38,000 and 30% for those above \$38,000. This would also lower the incentive for those on Higher Incomes to form Family Trusts etc. Peter Dunne also believes the current “basket of goodies” used to calculate the increase in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) could be adjusted as the present formula short changes NS.

The idea of a Lower Salaries Commission was also promoted with United Future and he is prepared to take a look at it. The policy of NS always being increased retrospectively where superannuitants are always trying to “catch up” is not what Peter Dunne favours. His policy would be to calculate the CPI and pay the CPI increase in advance and then make an adjustment the following year. ie: if the increase 1 April is calculated to be 5% then that be paid out for the next year. If that was found to be too high or too little then the adjustment would be made at the next years adjustment. United Future is prepared to assist with data to calculate the income where a Poverty Line is drawn and is in favour with more flexibility for Prescribing Nurses.

Ann Martin – Age Concern

Age Concern is an organization that aligns with Grey Power and the RNZRSA in matters we have a like interest and always make themselves available to discuss matters we can promote in combination. They are active in the fields of Local Body Rates, Home Equity Release, Code of Practise for Retirement Villages and NS versus the Cost of Living. They are critical that the government has done nothing to stem the flow of collapsing finance institutions and the effects on our combined

memberships who have invested to give themselves those little extras that NS cannot and does not provide. Age Concern is interested in supporting Grey Power to make it easier for members to obtain Spectacles, Dentures and Hearing Aids with low interest suspensory loans paid back over longer periods of time and are also against the increased Pharmacy Charges and after hours doctors charges.

Age Concern cover 18 Elder Abuse Centres nationwide and work with the other 6 Centres they don't cover. Violet will be sending out a list. Another matter mentioned was that when one spouse goes into a rest home and their combined income is too great to obtain the govt subsidy then as the combined income is reduced to the threshold level, the spouse not in care can then re-apply for the govt subsidy and is not left without his/her level of income.

Meeting with RNZRSA

Violet McCowatt and Roy Reid met with Mrs. Margaret Snow Welfare Officer for the RSA. The reason for this meeting was to discuss "Asset Stripping" of the Elderly in Rest Homes. We had examples of returned servicemen who have had to pay considerable sums of their savings for their care. We wished to gain the support of the RSA in our efforts to have Asset Testing of the Elderly abolished.. Both the RSA and Grey Power are of the opinion that the asset testing should be abolished immediately and will lobby the Government to achieve this. This was an excellent opportunity to be able to discuss matters that are of concern to both our organizations, And would appreciate being kept informed of our Lobbying effort.

Dalton Kelly, Dr Jan Pearson, - Cancer Society

This meeting with CEO, Dalton Kelly of the Cancer Society was a first and we also met with Dr Jan Pearson. Most of the discussion centred over Mens' Health and Prostate Cancer. The Society has been awarded \$1.5 million dollars from the MOVEMBER movement to be spent on Mens' Health Campaign, Prostate Cancer Research, Mens' Health Challenge and Support Men with Cancer. The Campaign is to begin on Fathers' Day. The Cancer Society also have a number of volunteer drivers who take cancer patients to treatment.

The research will encompass a Mens' Health Forum and early detection. Because women have been so successful in getting Breast Cancer treatment and men have been suffering without support for years the Forum has now recognised the Mens' need and the Movember money has become available. In the past money has been made available to another group and put into interest bearing investments. This time the Cancer Society has been granted the money to use immediately.

It has been agreed that further meetings will take place between Grey Power and the Cancer Society.

Hon Michael Cullen, Min of Finance.

This meeting focussed on the October Tax Cuts and the effect on NS and the minister stated that the Oct 1 Cuts will be larger than the usual annual adjustment and that combined with the yearly adjustment on April 1 2009 should see a single superannuitant, living alone with a fortnightly superannuation of somewhere in the vicinity of \$620. The increase calculated for NS on Oct 1 2008 will be in the vicinity of 5.4%

We asked the minister of his response to changing to a Lower Income Authority or Commission and he was not in favour. He was of the opinion that superannuitants would lose out in the long run by changing to an independent commission. On the matter of reducing the tax on motor fuels he also stated that because of the higher price of motor fuels, not as much was being consumed therefore the tax was lower and all the money now collected was going into the transport system for roading, railways etc. He did however acknowledge that many of our members have now been “burnt” with the collapse of many finance houses that had been considered as safe investments and not only had many lost their investment income but also their capital as well.

Hon Harry Duynhoven. Min of Transport Safety

The matter concerning members was the banning of Cell Phones whilst driving and the Minister supported this up to a point. He could see where we were coming from but also stated he had studied this problem in Sweden and they have not actually banned the use of such phones but had a system whereby a cord with an earphone is in use and to call someone on the phone needs only a touch to the earphone with a hand and you are in business. This apparently leaves your hands free to drive the vehicle and whilst speaking it is no different to speaking to a passenger in the car. The legislation will not be in place before Sept 2009. Submissions will be called for and a select committee set up before any legislation can be enacted. He is as impatient as we are but says we have to follow the rules etc but would also like to see the legislation in place yesterday.

Hon Ruth Dyson. Min Senior Citizens and Social Development

We approached the minister once again on the abatement rate for the unqualified spouse and were advised that the list of abatements would be part of the review of Core Benefits later in the year and that we could come back to her with a different attack. She acknowledged that many Beneficiaries aged between 50 and 65 years were living in poverty and

that the review was to address that problem. In the past we have had no movement from the government on the unqualified spouse abatement rate but it does appear that something will be done about the problem later this year.

The matter of Respite Care was brought up and it appears that in some parts of the country the care givers do not have a problem with having a break from their duties whilst in others there is no respite at all. It all hinges on whether the Rest Homes have beds permanently available to take patients in to give the care giver a break or not. Some Rest Homes don't make beds available all the time because they need to operate to capacity to be viable. She suggests the Min of Health would be interested in attacking this on an area basis.

On the matter of the Super Gold Card she stated that the free public bus use in off peak times would come into place on Oct 1st 2008.

Government has made money available to Regional Councils etc but it was over to those councils to get the scheme up and running.

Hon Ron Mark – NZ First

Ron Mark was an Regular Army Officer and is very interested in a programme for young offender aged between 17 – 18 years. We would like to see the scheme extended to 16 year olds as well. This programme would be to instil discipline and self respect into young offenders and is administered by the Army. The Army already runs such a scheme at Burnham Camp whereby those taking part are sent to Burnham and are expected to take part in army life by sleeping in army barracks and being fed like the army personnel. They have to parade for meals and have army drill etc before being taught trades to set them up for life in the outside world. NZ First would like to see this scheme extended so that judges could use it as a sentencing tool. The courses used to be of 12 weeks basic training followed by 3 – 6 months trade training. Now they are of 6 weeks life skills. There are several such courses currently around the country and they have been successful in re-training young offenders. The Army cant at the moment cater for more as they do not have the personnel but NZ First would have substantial pay increases in an endeavour to train and retain the personnel. This is a type of “Boot Camp” without bullying. It is a long term ideal of Ron Marks to have this scheme operate more fully than it has in the past.

Paulett Finlay & Maria Williamson Min of Health

Paulette is a Senior Analyst for the Health of Older People and Maria is a Senior Policy Analyst. Paulette was asked about dedicated Rest Home Beds for Respite Care. She replied that in some areas the beds were easily available but in others they were not and Bay of Plenty was one of

the latter where there are big problems. Some Careers will not enter into any agreements that tie up their beds and want to operate with full bed use at all times. There is no flexibility so that care givers can get a break when they plan for it. DHBs have money for a carer support subsidy but there is little interest in some areas. DHBs are focussed on the problems but there does not appear to be any quick fix. It was suggested we make an appointment to meet with the Health Care Providers NZ next time round. Paulette was filling in for Elizabeth Knopf who usually met with us.

Hon Darren Hughes. Minister of Statistics

Darren Hughes in addition to being Min of Statistics is also Associate Min for Social Development. He is always a pleasure to meet with because he has a grandmother who is a Grey Power Member who keeps him up to scratch on the needs of superannuitants. He is keen to see the review of core benefits and particularly the abatement rate reduced to 30 cents in the dollar for all benefits including the rate for the Unqualified Spouse. Darren gave up quite freely his view of the coming general election and is quite upbeat for Labour's chances for forming the next government.

Sue Primrose. Ministry of Health Disability Services

Hearing Aid subsidy will be raised to \$500 for people over 65 years Ministry is putting out flyers to Audiologists and also to Consumers and hope to extend the subsidy to peoples need rather than age. Some audiologists are already putting out flyers stating subsidy is now available if you go to them but the cost of their Hearing Aids is high and it is a way they can get extra business by giving the subsidy now instead of November. A meeting of Audiologists will be held in early September. Sue has given us two contacts we should meet with.

Jessica Lissamam, Manager Hearing Therapy Services in Wellington and Fiona McRae from Veterans Affairs.

One of the main causes of Macular Degeneration is smoking and Fiona McRae is the person to see re this disease. Spectacles can be very expensive but most people can get them for less than \$800 Ministry can supply magnifiers for those needing them.

Hon Simon Power. National Spokesperson Law & Order

This M.P. is always keen to meet with Grey Power and this time around he was the first MP to confirm an appointment and in fact did so before I had half the requests sent out.

He would like to see the problem of driving and using cell phones addressed and would be in favour of Harry Duynhoven's campaign to use the earphone type leaving the hands free rather than a complete ban.

The use of Legal Aid to those who have been convicted and then appeal against their sentence was discussed but not in favour as he would not be in favour of a system whereby if an offender has money they can afford a lawyer but if legal aid is required then that offender misses out.

Simon gave us some papers he had prepared on the Gangs, Police Tools, Victims of Crimes and Youth Justice.

On the Gang problem National would give the Police more wide ranging Powers to curb and finally get rid of gangs. When asked why the action was so light he stated that there would have to be changes to legislation to get the action needed and that took time. Eventually they would see gangs disappear.

The extra tools they would give the Police would be "tazers" so that the Police would be protected in dangerous situations.

The Victims of Crime would have their rights protected unlike the present legislation that gives all or most rights to the perpetrators and finally the Youth Justice paper would see offender over the age of 12 years answering to their serious crimes in court but if young offenders went "off the rails" then some sort of Disciplinary "Boot Camp" would be the form of rehabilitation used.

The Court System would also be sped up so that offenders would appear to answer to their crimes quicker.

Hon Phil Goff. Minister for Corrections

We had not scheduled a meeting with this minister but he was substituted by Hon Annette King, Min of Police because she was required to be in the House. Mr Goff was an able deputy and we found him to be very knowledgeable and a fluent speaker who knew his subjects.

We began by asking about banning cell phones whilst driving and his reply was that Harry Duynhoven covered this with Transport Safety and his use of cell phones was limited because he was not a great user.

On the question of legal aid he said that the govt had carried out a survey on the use of legal aid and it was actually decreasing. He is not in favour of reduction because he said Courts can get it wrong and he would not want to see someone incarcerated for something they did not do. It was a tradition of English Justice practised in England, Canada, Australia and NZ that people have the right to appeal and should not have that right denied.

Hon Maryann Street. Minister for ACC

This is a minister we had not met with before and we wondered what the result would be but she proved to be very capable and knew her subject. On the levy increase for the registration of petrol cars she explained that this was necessary to cover the cost of accidents and it had been done after much consultation with the Dept of Labour and ACC itself. The fee for diesel was not altered because diesel car users paid road user charges. A lot of diesel was used in off road situations such as farm machinery and also in boats etc and the petrol levy was solely to cover the increase in motor accidents.

In addition to the accident there are treatment costs and home support services for victims which had risen dramatically.

The over 55s do not have more accidents than the general population but they do take longer to heal and their bones are more brittle so the cost of weekly compensation is greater.

She is looking for other ways to fund ACC.

Hon David Cunliffe. Minister of Health

This was our first official appointment with the Minister of Health although we had met him briefly during our March visit.

On the question of the Health Remit from the AGM the Minister informed us that there would be a growth in Management but that would entail less Admin Staff and more Medical Staff. He also stated that DHBs would not be autonomised but would be required to more co-operatively and that the MoH would be held accountable to ensure this took place. There would be a lot more input from clinicians.

He also strongly supported the Nurse Practitioner Scheme and was determined it would work.

The 20 cent per Km travel allowance for patients travelling over 100km for their treatment will be reviewed thus ensuring people can afford to travel for their treatment.

When asked about the \$1 per item extra charge set by pharmacists he stated "Don't Pay It" He is categorically opposed to any scheme that increase the pharmacy charge above the \$3 per item and said it is a dispute between the Pharmacy Guild, The Pharmacy Council and the DHBs. He wants the Grey Power Health Committee to formally write to him re this practise.

We asked then about the shortage of GPs in rural areas and if it was possible to give GPs an incentive to work in rural areas such as reducing their student loans. This is something he is working on with Damian O'Conner who has the portfolio of Associate Min of Health with an emphasis on rural doctors.

He admits to a problem re those mental health patients who cannot be rehabilitated and is also in favour of Random Audits for Home Care and Rest Homes.

We asked the Minister about the insecticide “Endosulfan” as it was used by bowling clubs etc to kill worms so that casts were not present in bowling greens and that it could have bad effects on health of all people and it was banned in 56 countries and that Korea had banned beef imports from NZ because Endosulfan was present. The Minister promised to get an answer for us and would advise by email.

A lot of the subjects we discussed with him he is already putting in place and this supports the comments from other minister that he is a “Fixer” rather than a “Talker” and the team believe this appointment was the highlight of the visit.

Hon John Key – Leader Opposition

When we made this appointment Bill English was also supposed to be in attendance, however he was not present and Simon Power attended.

Mr Key stated that following the tax cuts of 1 Oct 2008 there would be further cuts 1st April 2009 and 1st April 2010. He also stated that the NATOTWW would rise more quickly under National as wages would increase more rapidly and that inflation would be controlled.

On the question of Local Body Rating National would ensure Councils had more resources and that Councils could no longer afford to fund society from rate monies and that the govt would need to assist. He also stated that bureaucracy had built up in local bodies and central govt.

We asked Simon Power about the Gangs and that his paper appeared to go light on them. He said he would like to see Gangs wiped out but legislation was required for this and also for local bodies under the Local Bodies Act to dismantle the fortress type premises they frequent.

Hon Tony Ryall. National Health Spokesperson

Tony Ryall was accompanied by Jo Goodhew, Nat spokesperson for the older persons health and also Jacquie Blue and Katrina Shanks.

Included in the policy is a section on Elder Abuse in Rest Homes and they are aware that there are still some “cowboy” outfits out there giving those who are good a bad name.

National would bring back the “Matrons’ in hospitals and were asked about income tested suspensory loans paid back over a longer period than the two years requirement of WINZ for Dentures and Spectacles.

They would also ensure that Respite Care beds were available so that carers could have a break when they needed it and after hours medical service would be improved even with a tele service for advice and medical needs.

Hon Jeanette Fitzsimons and Hon Sue Kedgley – Green Party

We discussed Endosulfan also with the Green Party and they have put submissions in to the Select Committee in an effort to ban the substance. They asked us to also put in a submission but we were a little too late as the closing date was Friday 8 Aug. They also stated the substance was banned in 56 countries and felt NZ should also ban it. We asked their policy on Gangs and they would toughen on gangs and their drug distribution. On sentencing they stated they would look at who we put in prison as NZ was second only to US in prison incarceration. Serious offenders who were a danger to the community would be incarcerated but others less likely to be a danger would be treated more leniently rather than keep building prisons.

They would like to see no violent TV programmes screened before 10pm. Greens would establish a “Poverty Line” and ensure that people did not go below the line and be able to take their place in society with enough to clothe, feed and keep themselves warm and enough discretionary spending to enjoy their place in society.

Homes would have insulation retrofitted beginning with the State House Sector followed by the private sector. When asked why not all at once they stated that it would not be right to insist private landlords retrofit their rental properties if the State properties had not been done.

In conclusion I would state that this was one of the better round of visits. All politicians were very keen to meet with us and we do not believe it was solely because this is election year. They knew we were in town and did all in their power to make things as easy as possible for us. This was the first time for instance that the under road tunnel between the Beehive and Bowen House was made available to us readily and Hon Ruth Dyson’s office has offered to ensure it is always available to us in the future as it is something of a rush to get from one venue to another to see the politicians.

Les Howard
Leader Lobby Team

