

**GREY POWER LOBBY REPORT**  
**23rd TO 26th MARCH 2009**

The Grey Power Lobby Team visited Politicians, Ministries and other Organizations 23 to 26 March 2009. The team was the writer, Les Howard together with Dick Stark, Roy Reid, Ian Anderson and at some meetings, Violet McCowatt. This series of meetings were unknown territory because it was our first session with the new National Government, with the previous Labour administration occupying the Opposition Benches.

There was one really noticeable impromptu meeting with Dr Nick Smith, National Minister for ACC. I had contacted Dr Smith along with all the other politicians etc with an email request for a meeting. The contact was made on 24<sup>th</sup> January and was acknowledged the same day with a promise to get back to me to arrange a suitable time. Unfortunately, Dr Smith did not get back to me but our team met him in a lift in the Beehive. He greeted us with, "This must be the Grey Power Executive Team". We responded suitably to which he stated that we should arrange a meeting through his Secretary. My reply was to ask what was wrong with this week and I explained that I had already contacted him in January with the email acknowledged but that was as far as it had gone. His face reddened and, with his head down, the moment the lift arrived at the ground floor he took to his heels and was last seen hurrying away in the distance. We think he must be feeling guilty about the ACC portion of the new motor registration charges and did not want us to present our members case against any increase in ACC charges. Be assured that we shall follow up on this.

The agenda we set ourselves was very demanding and it was great to get through all the meetings set down. The Team all handled themselves extremely well and were a credit to our organization.

**MONDAY 23<sup>RD</sup> MARCH 2009**

**Ministry of Social Development - Unqualified Spouse and National Superannuation**

The MSD Team has a new Leader in Dianne Rogers who has taken over from Michael Papesch. This was our first meeting with her and our collective opinion was that she appeared to be prepared to listen and take notice of what we had to say. Re: the Unqualified Spouse payment for National Superannuation, she made a commitment to investigate our claims that many of our members between 50 and 65 years were not capable of employment and that those who could work a little were

discriminated against by having their earnings abated at 70 cents in the dollar for all income in excess of \$80-00 per week. Her agreement to investigate our claims and come back to us is probably the most encouraging signal we have had over this matter as previously there has been no interest whatsoever from MSD or the politicians. MSD will be announcing changes to Benefits on 1 April 2009.

### **Super Gold Card**

The new head of the MSD Team, Dianne Rogers, is an Australian who actually was involved in setting up the Australian Card for Seniors in Western Australia. She stated that we in NZ are far in advance of where they were after 18 months of the card being in operation and actually the only Australian States who had larger participation from the business sector was in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. We discussed the free transport and expressed to her that it was good in metropolitan areas and in towns where bus services etc were available but in many areas there was little or no assistance to the elderly and we wish that the government could also recognise those who live in areas with no public transport. The MSD will raise with Transport the issue of the Waiheke Island Ferry only providing one way tickets to Super Gold Card Holders and report back to Grey Power and will also investigate the Whitianga Commuter Ferry and report to Ian Anderson. We left her with the question whether the card could be used for Fuel purchases or motor registration.

### **NZ Superannuation**

MSD gave us a rundown on the rates of NZ Super as from 1 April 2009 and explained the effect of the proposed 9 day fortnight. We asked about the 9 day fortnight because we were concerned that it might lower the average wage, thus affecting the rate paid. We were assured that, as it was only expected that a maximum of 25,000 workers would be affected, there would be no effect on NZS. The offer was for one period of six months in an 18 month period that could be taken up and only for firms with a work force in excess of 100 workers. The rates from 1 April 2009 will be sent to Federation Office for circulation. There will be an increase of 3.38% on 1 April increasing the rate for a married couple to \$478-38. The full increase since 1 April 2008 is 8% including the increase on October 1<sup>st</sup> which has already been paid. The CPI was discussed as we have always stated that many of the items that make up the CPI are not relevant to Grey Power members.

## **Transport**

We also raised the issue of transport to and from Base Hospitals when patients are required to travel for treatment and informed MSD that the 20 cents per kilometre was completely out of touch with reality and they promised to look into this as well.

## **Hon Sue Kedgley – Green Party**

Sue is one parliamentarian who resides in Wellington and can be relied upon to meet with us. We discussed a number of issues. She is concerned about ‘point of origin’ labelling on food and stated that we should know where our food came from. She informed us that China was now taking over from India as the supplier of Pharmaceuticals and that a lot more generic drugs and medicines would be manufactured in China. She also expressed her concern about Elder Abuse and the fact that a lot of the abuse is family based.

She advised that we should visit the ACT Party website for their policy on privatisation of water and roads and explained that their leader is all over the country speaking about rates and getting a large following. She is concerned however that there is a hidden agenda and that the policy on their website clearly state that councils should stick to their core responsibilities and that water and roads should be fully commercial enterprises which means that we would be required to pay a private business for our water and to pay tolls for the use of street and roads.

This can be checked on the ACT website and this information is as stated. Sue is the Green Party member we meet regularly and is always available to us.

## **TUESDAY 24th**

### **Ann Martin – Age Concern**

Ann is the CEO of Age Concern NZ and is always on our agenda to meet as we do work closely together in many ways. One of the main problems we share is rates and that when Councils announce there is a 4% increase in rates the full increase is more likely to be 17 to 20%. This is because councils only announce the increase in the General Rate and targeted rates are ignored. This General Rate Increase is the rate taken in to account by the Ministry of Social Development when they calculate the rise in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) but the remaining targeted rates are ignored. This makes councils look good but is bad news for those on low fixed incomes such as Superannuitants and Beneficiaries. The

Independent Earner Tax Rate, a Tax Credit for Workers is available to Students but not to Superannuitants and we both have concerns over this and will be working together on this issue.

Other issues discussed were Home Equity Release Schemes (which appear to have dropped away with the downturn in the economy), the collapse of the Finance Houses has had far reaching effects on both their members and ours, the problems of people registering on PHOs, Doctor's charges and the charges levied by Occupational Therapists (when members are referred to them by their GPs when applying for driving licenses). The Occupational Therapist charges are in vicinity of \$450-00.

Age Concern raised the problem about overseas-trained GPs being unaware of Work & Income's entitlements and not understanding ACC's workings.

#### **Ted Gallen – MSD**

Ted rang and asked if we could spare a few minutes to discuss a clause in the Enduring Power of Attorney Act that both Grey Power and Age Concern had been asked to make submissions to change, to allow for a couple to use the same law firm when nominating their respective partners as the Enduring Power of Attorney. The previous clause mandated that when a couple went to a lawyer to appoint each other as EPA, they had to use two separate Law Firms which made the cost prohibitive. MSD had approached both Grey Power and Age Concern on this issue and both Ann Martin and I put in submissions which were quite similar. The changes will require all parties in parliament to agree before they become law and this should happen later in the year. Basically, the changes make it more affordable for two partners to nominate each other as Enduring Power of Attorney. Ted is well known to us and has always been of great assistance to Grey Power.

#### **Rt Hon John Key – Prime Minister**

This was the first time we had met John Key on a Lobby Visit in his capacity as Prime Minister. He was very relaxed and friendly and we found him very easy to talk to. He had his advisors present. He again stated that he would resign if any government he led altered, in any way, the age of entitlement or age of eligibility of National Superannuation.

We asked about the proposed 9 day fortnight and he replied, as the MSD had done, that the number of workers involved would make no difference to NS and that the measure was because it would cost a lot more if

workers lost their jobs and had to be paid the unemployment benefit. He also stated when asked, that the present government had no plans to privatize water. Water would remain in public hands where the people wanted it to do so but if some wanted it to be private in some places then it would be over to those concerned.

When discussing Health, he stated that the money in the Health Budget would be used more efficiently and there would be substantial savings to be made in the Health area. He stated also that he wanted more efficiency from the Electricity Generating Companies rather than have them increase their prices to the consumer.

He said that he valued our meetings and that the knowledge and experience we had was invaluable to him and his party. I found John Key much easier to talk to than the previous Prime Minister.

### **Hon Lianne Dalziel - Labour Spokesperson on Justice**

This was my first time since I have been on the Lobby Team that I have met with Lianne Dalziel and I found she has a very quick and sharp mind and knows her subject well.

We spoke to her about youth offending and the idea of so called “Boot Camps” and her response was that she did not believe in Military Type training for offenders of any age. She felt that the training only helped offenders to be fitter while mixing with other criminals only increased their scope to offend more. CMT was mentioned by the team and she stated that CMT worked well but those who were caught up in CMT were not offenders. They were just people who went about their lives in their own way but were not criminally motivated so the system worked well for them but would only increase the ability of those with offending as a way of life.

Her main concern is alcohol. Drugs are a problem but, as most people drink alcohol and only a few by comparison took drugs, she is more concerned about alcohol. The controlled liquor outlets are ok but she believes that if we want to have “cut price” liquor then we will have problems. While a “stubby” costs less than milk then it had to be a problem. She asked that Grey Power look to make a submission to the new Sale of Liquor Act. Her opinion is that most young people get their liquor from their parents or other members of their families. Controlled outlets are not the problem but families supplying liquor, and supermarkets and dairies selling discounted and cheap liquor are. She would like to see the age to purchase at a liquor store raised to 20 years

and earlier closing for those establishments and City/District Councils having more control over the number of Off-Licenses in their communities.

### **WEDNESDAY 25th**

#### **Hon Darren Hughes - Labour Spokesperson on Transport**

Darren Hughes is and always has been very good to talk to and is very open and frank with the team. He is not in favour of funding Auckland Roads from fuel taxes or levies as if more roads are built then more cars will be using those roads. He is still more inclined to rail transport and mentioned that Labour's vision for visitors to the Rugby World Cup was to have them get off their plane at the airport and catch a train to the city rather than pay \$70 to get there by taxi.

He is opposed to the use of hand held cell phones whilst driving and texting whilst in charge of a motor vehicle is definitely a no-no.

In regards to younger people offending in motor vehicles, he stated that although the young people might have friends with them under the influence of alcohol they appeared to always have a dedicated sober driver while many drivers caught up in police check points were not in the younger age bracket. It is always a pleasure to meet with Darren Hughes.

#### **Hon Peter Dunne – Leader United Future.**

Peter reiterated that he was still of the opinion that NS should be calculated and paid out in advance rather than the present set up where superannuitants were always playing "catch up". He has already met and discussed this with the Minister for Senior Citizens, Hon John Carter. He did say though, that his bargaining position since the last election is not as strong as it was under the previous administration, but he would still be pushing this as he firmly believes that this would go along way to solving NS problems.

He also stated that the 9 day fortnight would not lower the average wage to any degree as only a very small part of the work force would take this up. Peter stated he wanted the top tax rate stabilized at 30 cents and is concerned that Councils are not spending their petrol tax on roading.

Peter is very keen to continue our meetings

### **Hon Steven Joyce – Minister of Transport**

The Minister was asked by the team to ban the use of cell phones while driving and he replied that he understood the previous minister Hon Harry Duynhoven had began a survey on this and he would let us know the results when he received them.

He acknowledged the so called “boy racer” problem but the name “illegal street racing” was what he preferred to call it. He has a Transport Safety Strategy under way and would send it on to us when completed and ready for submissions. He is against texting and use of hand held cell phones whilst driving, as was the previous minister. We asked about compulsory third party insurance and he responded that he has reservations on this as he did not want to add further to the cost of re-licensing to the public. He acknowledged there was a problem with Mobility Scooters and this would be addressed under Public Safety. He also stated that there were no plans to change or alter the Super Gold Card.

### **Sue Primrose - Disability Sector – Ministry of Health**

Sue Primrose is one we regularly visit as she is in charge of the Disability Sector of the MoH. She covers Hearing Aids and one of her main interests is in the use of Disability Aids in the home. Work related hearing loss is covered by ACC but she handles all other cases and believes that audiologists place too much emphasis on age as the main cause of hearing loss rather than what has happened to people during their lives.

One of her main interests is financing the equipment modification and housing modifications. If a person needs rails and ramps etc in their homes because of uncertainty in their movement, then Sue is the person who looks after them. Firstly, the patient should see their GP and be referred to an Occupational Therapist for assessment and, if they qualify for the equipment, then Sue ensures they get what is required, even to the provision of a lift in a home in extreme cases. She has just issued an invitation to Grey Power to join the MoH Reference Group for this department.

### **Hon John Carter – Minister for Senior Citizens**

This Minister appears to be very down to earth and enjoys what he does. He tells us he works well with the previous minister, Hon Ruth Dyson and that should tell us he is not afraid to ask for information. The protocols between both this minister and the Minister for Social Development, Hon Paula Bennett have just been finalized. John Carter’s

domain will be the Elderly, Rest Homes and the audits of Rest Homes, Elder Abuse. He assures us that, if we receive any complaints about any Rest Home, he would order a spot audit of that home and he is looking at ways to make it easier for Rest Home clients to lodge complaints without fearing repercussions.

He is also the Associate Minister for Local Government and sees local body rating as coming within his scope. He has promised to look into the Abatement Rate for those on the Unqualified Spouse rate of NS and appears to me to be one who can be trusted to get things done rather than just talk about what needs to be done. Initially, I was disappointed that the position was one outside cabinet but now I do not think this will detract in any way from his responsibility. The Minister sees a need to increase funding and extend the scope for providing Senior Net Education. He also believes Councils are over-burdened with compliance costs and sees a need to embark on a programmed return of many services back to Central Government. The National Party Policy on Local Government will be government policy and not the Act Party policy. One of the better meetings for the visit.

#### **Elizabeth Knopf – Ministry of Health Respite Care**

This lady took over some time ago from Anne Foley who moved to another department. Anne was very good and appeared to be on top of all that happened in Respite Care whilst Elizabeth Knopf appears to have difficulty in understanding her role.

We have repeatedly asked what is being done about Respite Care beds in Rest Homes and always get the same answer that some areas work well while others do not. Rest Homes are required to provide beds to give carers an opportunity to have a rest from their duties but most DHBs do not appear to be interested in the problems associated with Respite Care and the Rest Home Operators are only interested in having their facilities fully occupied. In all the time that Elizabeth Knopf has been in charge of this department there has been no alteration to the number of beds available. She agrees there should be more money to recruit and retain nursing staff for Rest Homes. Home Care Workers will receive an extra 3% for their travel costs from July 1<sup>st</sup> and rural Rest Homes can get supplement to funding from their DHB's.

#### **Hon Clayton Cosgrove Labour Spokesperson on Law & Order**

This meeting had been arranged for the previous day Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> but Mr Cosgrove was required in Christchurch on Tuesday and requested we fit him in sometime on Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup>. In addition to Law & Order,



Clayton covers SOEs, Police & Corrections and is associate spokesperson on finance.

We again spoke about the Gold Card and that, while it was great in Metropolitan areas and in cities and towns with train, ferry and bus services, in many places there was nothing to offer because public transport was non-existent. He agrees with our summing up. He wants the cost of dumping rubbish at Council Refuse Stations added to the Gold Card.

**Dr Jim Primrose – Ministry of Health**

Jim is charged with the setting up and running of the PHOs. We have been meeting with him since the PHOs came into being. He knows that some PHOs operate better than others and the shortage of GPs does not help in any way. He believes that Clinicians do not involve themselves enough in some areas and some DHBs will be moving some services from Hospitals to Community Run Clinics. We mentioned that some GPs are charging \$5 for blood tests and the DHBs should be informed of this. Smoking is on the decrease significantly among younger people. Jim is not satisfied that the balance is right between Academic and practical qualifications for Nurse Practitioners.

**Hon Ruth Dyson – Labour spokesperson on Health**

**Hon Phil Goff – Leader of Opposition**

**Hon David Cunliffe – Labour Spokesperson Finance**

**Hon Ross Robertson – Labour Spokesperson Senior Citizens**

We spent some time with Ruth Dyson until she was required in the House, and met with the other three MPs where Ruth again joined us to continue discussions. Firstly, we spoke to Ruth about spot audits in Rest homes, which we had mentioned to both her and David Cunliffe during the latter part of their term in government. She agreed that spot audits were necessary and it is pleasing to see that the present National Minister of Health is staying with the idea that we floated last year. She also mentioned that DHBs wanted to increase the threshold for people to get into Rest Homes and that a committee had been formed to review rest homes but it was dominated by DHBs and medical personnel.

We then met with the other three MPs and discussed National Superannuation. Phil Goff is adamant that National will eventually change NS and that they intend borrowing to cover the shortfall in the Cullen Fund when he invests less in the fund. All stated that ACC was only technically broke and that Nick Smith was making political capital out of the situation. ACC invest part of their income and use the interest in those investments to help run the funding. As interest rates have

fallen, their investment income is now lower and they have a cash flow problem but their trustees have done rather better than the Cullen Fund trustees. They would be irresponsible to cash in the investments at this time but the income so derived will get better as the recession lessens. They say that ACC should not become a political football.

There was also a long discussion on doctors' charges and the collapse of the finance houses. The latter having a big impact on our membership.

### **Hon Tony Ryall – Minister of Health**

We sent in a rather large agenda prior to visiting Wellington in order that the Minister could have some of the information we required. We spoke of getting doctors to 'hard to staff areas' and he is going to get the coverage by using newly qualified doctors to staff these areas and discount 3 to 5 years off their student loans. He is concerned that some doctors are acting as locums as a career and that some doctors are working weekends and holidays etc as locums to earn extra money.

On the issue of charging for blood tests by some doctors, we should take this up with the DHBs as some patients with diabetes need twice a week blood testing and the charges are a big drain on their NS. Some patients who have been prescribed Warfarin require monitoring twice weekly.

With regards to the Carers in hospitals and other institutions, he does not want to see them anxious about their work or income during the recession as this reacts on their work and again the patients suffer.

The accommodation rate for those visiting in other centres has been increased from \$80 to \$100. We asked about funding by Pharmac of the drug Lucentis which is not subsidised but is used worldwide for the eye disease 'macular degeneration'. People who have this drug are no longer subject to blindness and we believe it is better and less expensive to save people from blindness than allowing the disease to take over. This will be looked into and reported to us later.

The increase in mileage costs of travel from 20 to 28 cents per kilometre will be announced on Friday 27<sup>th</sup> March. The return of DHB elections we would like returned to the ward system and would also like to abolish the STV system of voting.

### **Hon Paula Bennett - Minister for Social Development**

We asked Hon Bill English to arrange a meeting with this Minister. I had contacted her twice by email and each email was acknowledged with

a promise to contact me later. Later never arrived and as she is the minister for the department that calculates our NS we wanted particularly to meet with her. Both the Prime Minister and his deputy had stated to us that if we had problems arranging meetings with ministers etc to let them know and they would arrange meetings. Dick Stark contacted Bill English and later the same day a meeting was arranged. Unfortunately however, the meeting left a sour taste in our mouths as we felt we had received the old-fashioned “brush off” and had wasted our time meeting with her.

We discussed the unqualified Spouse Abatement Rate with her but she was either not interested in the elderly or did not know what we were talking about and finally she said that if we had problems to see the Minister for Senior Citizens rather than her and he would handle our problems. As she is the Minister in charge of National Superannuation, I believe she should shape up to her obligations rather than be so dismissive. It appears she thinks that a loud laugh will solve all questions put to her and this meeting was a complete waste of her time. Well, it certainly was a waste of ours.

#### **Hon Bill English – Minister of Finance**

This minister was very pleasant and we discussed the Tax Abatement Scheme and the Independent Earner Rebate Scheme. The Minister promised to get figures for us and forward them to Ian later. In the issue of the CPI (Consumer Price Index) we mentioned that the Ministry used a figure of \$540-00 dollars per year to cover local body rates and we asked where we could get a rate bill of \$540-00. We stated that the Ministry only took the general rates into consideration in the basket for the CPI and that other targeted rates were ignored. We could not unfortunately ignore the targeted rates and they were part of our expenses each year.

#### **Dr Peter Moodie – Pharmac**

Dr Moodie is in charge of Pharmac, the organization which approves and purchases all the subsidized drugs used in NZ. We asked him about the drug Lucentis used for ‘macular degeneration’ and he replied that the drug company that produced it has also produced a drug called Avastin for a type of cancer. It had been found that by reducing Avastin to 10 separate units it has proved very successful in combating ‘macular degeneration’ at a cost of \$40-00 per injection. The same drug company had also produced Lucentis at \$2000-00 per injection and had begun a campaign to have Lucentis used rather than Avastin. Dr Moodie mentioned a Professor Maltino in charge of ophthalmology at Otago

University to back up his claims. However hospitals can fund whichever drug they wish as they are both available.

On the question of Losec, Pharmacs have monitored the use of the generic and here have been only 10 adverse reactions they know about and the factory that produced Thyroxine was so old the owners closed it down and the new drug was made elsewhere but we did not get any further information on this. The God Seal product is available but when Medsafe re-examined Thyroxine they still could not find anything wrong with it. We shall not let the matter die.

### **Hon Simon Power – Minister of Justice**

This minister was always keen to meet with us when in the Opposition and still is as a Minister. He told us that he will ensure that funding continues for the Community Law Office. It is currently funded from Lawyers Trust Accounts but this is unsustainable.

On the matter of “Boot Camps” he is of the opinion they do not work for offenders but they do increase the options for an increase in crime. He thinks that “Boot Camps” can only be effective with good parenting and after-camp monitoring.

He is of the opinion that Liquor Outlets should have defined hours of opening that are much shorter in duration than those currently operating. His bill on Alcohol Sale & Supply has had its first reading and to date has unanimous political support. On the issue of Illegal Street Racing, there is new legislation in the pipeline with a new bill before cabinet. There will be laws by the end of this year to deal with a Change in the Bail Laws and the use of Police Tools. He also stated that there would be another prison built this year and that even if Labour had still been in office they would have had to have built one as well, but he did not answer the question of keeping mental patients in prisons and not in mental institutions.

### **CONCLUSION**

This was the first visit since August 2008 and we have a new government on the Treasury Benches. While we are well acquainted with many of the MPs visited there are some new ones in office and in the main they were keen and happy to meet with us. As previously advised, there was one who we felt gave us the “brush off” and one who did not meet with us but had the grace to retreat quickly when we mentioned that we had attempted unsuccessfully to meet with him.

The Prime Minister has made himself available to us at all opportunities. Both he and his deputy Bill English spent two hours with us at our last Board Meeting in Auckland. When I invited them I did not really expect both to attend but, credit to them, they both fronted up and I believe this is due to the high regard they have for Grey Power. This is a sign of goodwill and has taken many years to build up. All MPs with the two exceptions, have told us they look forward to our meetings as we bring them information from one end of the country to the other.

In the past, a tough line from previous Lobby Teams resulted in meetings being abandoned and it was only because of approaches made by John Jefferson and then the late Graham Stairmand that these meetings again take place. I also believe the present team members re-enforce the approaches made by both former Presidents. It would be sad if the visits were curtailed in any way or even cancelled because of over-enthusiasm by any person from Grey Power.

With regard to the various Ministries and other organizations we visit, all tell us they get as much from our visits as we obviously do and long might that continue. It is only through these visits we can make our claims heard and eventually actioned as attested by our list of achievements.

My grateful thanks to the team for their hard work and for the gains they have helped to achieve for Grey Power. The Lobby team wish to thank all Associations who contributed issues to pose to the various Ministers.

Les Howard  
National President  
Grey Power Federation Inc  
Leader Lobby Team

Herewith: MSD minutes, new NZ Superannuation rates, United Future correspondence.

