

The Big Care Debate, December 2012

“Who should be responsible for providing support to the vulnerable in our society?”

Your intrepid secretaries availed themselves of the unique opportunity offered by the Third Age Trust, advertised in U3A Matters and mentioned at our monthly meetings, to attend the above debate in the House of Lords on the 7th December. The sixth such debate organised by the English Speaking Union, this is the first time the U3A has been invited to participate and Jim and I feel privileged to have attended. The other participants were pupils from a number of different schools from around the country. An excellent buffet lunch in magisterial, but bitterly cold, surroundings was provided, along with briefing and a guided tour of both Houses. The oldest part of the Houses of Parliament date from 1099 though most of it was built in the ancient looking Gothic style during the nineteenth century after the designs of Pugin. We were then conducted with all due ceremony into the chamber of the House of Lords and will be the only commoners this year allowed to sit on the lords’ benches. (Very comfortable they are, too.)

The debate was organised along tri-partite lines with equal numbers of pupils and U3A members allocated to each group. There were three motions put to the floor: the state should be responsible for caring for the vulnerable in our society; it should be the family; and it should be what is referred to as the third sector, namely charities, religious institutions and privately financed and run bodies.



Pointing out an interesting architectural feature to Jim, while he gazes in the opposite direction (typical)

Those speaking in support of state responsibility argued that only the state has the financial and bureaucratic resources to provide universal and unbiased support. It already provides other core areas of care such as the NHS and education and offers material support to the family and third sector. Unlike the family and the third sector,

the state is accountable to the entire electorate and only such a collective body as an elected government can offer a sound foundation for care.

Whilst those speaking in support of the family as the main providers admitted the state has a legal responsibility to provide care they felt this care can be impersonal and sometimes resented by those receiving it. The family can be extended beyond the original nuclear family to include kinship carers. Only the family can provide the intimacy and knowledge many in need of care require.

The third sector argued that they have on-the-ground knowledge and experience in various areas of need. They are approachable in a way government cannot be and have the objectivity and experience the family may lack. The third sector speakers emphasised their a-political and caring nature.



An overall view of the magnificent chamber

Having read some distasteful anti-ageist articles on the internet recently I was heartened by the compassionate and intelligent attitude the pupils and students had towards all those in need of care, particularly the elderly, and how seriously they took their own future responsibilities. The speakers for the family and the third sector spoke well, indeed often better, than those who argued the more obvious case of the state. However, logic must dictate that only the state has the resources to provide care to the vulnerable in our society.

The voting went as follows: for the third sector – 21 votes; for the family – 41 votes; and for the state 138 votes. As the Baroness D’Souza summed up, “the state has won”.



Baroness D'Souza, the Lord Speaker, chaired the debate with charm and good humour

I really cannot emphasize enough what an extraordinary experience the day was, how beautiful the interior of the chambers are and what a unique privilege we were offered, as members of the general public, to feel we have some small voice in our government's policies. We would urge other U3A members to avail themselves of any such opportunities offered to us in the future.

Cher Palmer, joint secretary of Horley U3A