

## *The Big Care Debate in the House of Lords*

*A personal perspective by Chester U3A member, Alison Betts.*

*The wind was keen & bitter blowing over Westminster Bridge as I presented myself at the Cromwell Green entrance of the Palace of Westminster on Friday 7th December. I was here to be a participant in 'The Great Care Debate' that was to take place that afternoon in the chamber of the House of Lords. I couldn't believe my luck in having this privilege, to actually sit on their Lordships benches & possibly even make a contribution that would be recorded for posterity in a special edition of Hansard. Over one hundred members from many U3A's were joining together with roughly an equal number of school age students from ten invited schools & community colleges to address the very important question of 'Who should be responsible for providing support to the vulnerable in our society?' As we assembled in the Great Hall & queued for a coloured lanyard that would put each of us in one of three groups, the spread of age was evident, the youngest aged fourteen, the oldest I wouldn't like to guess, but maybe into their nineties. The cavernous Westminster Hall was the only area where photography was allowed sadly, as the starkness of the stone there was in complete contrast to the splendour & magnificence of the gilded, panelled & frescoed areas beyond. We were ushered into the beautiful Royal Gallery, lined with portraits of Monarchs for a welcome by the Yeoman Usher. After depositing coats & bags in the Norman Porch the three groups, green, orange & purple, were separated each to get a tour, lunch & a briefing in a different order. I was in the green group, first we were divided again into roughly twenties to be given the tour. First into the House of Lords chamber with its red benches & elaborate gilded throne, Pugin's style evident throughout. We had to stand in front of the benches, no one but their Lordships is ever allowed to take a seat, except that we were to be specially permitted to do so later that afternoon. From there our tour took us down the bench lined corridors of power through the famous main lobby to the larger, plainer & newer Commons chamber with its green benches & public gallery. An excellent buffet lunch followed then we were ushered into the Robing Room for a short briefing on the do's & don'ts for today's debate by two young members of the English Speaking Union (ESU), co-sponsors of today's event with the House.*

*The ESU as proponents of debating & public speaking had already been working for a period with the school groups to prepare their speakers and arguments for presentation.*

*The mechanism of the debate had been laid down & we had all been informed of its structure & given links to source material & news coverage to allow us to appreciate & research the issue being debated. The question 'Who should be responsible for providing support to the vulnerable in our society?' was to be argued by three teams one assigning primary responsibility to each of 'The State', 'The Family' & 'The Third Sector'. Where 'Third Sector' encompasses religious, charity & voluntary groups.*

*The time came for us to take our seats within the historic environment of The House of Lords. We were assembled & ushered into our places by Mr Phipps, Principal Doorkeeper, one of the black uniformed administrative officials of the Lords. He told us that we were to rise as the Lord Speaker, Baroness D'Souza entered to take her place at the Woolsack. 'Lord Speaker', as we were to address her gave us all a warm & kind welcome telling us that this was only the sixth time outsiders had been permitted to sit in this chamber & it was the first inter-generational debate to take place there. She emphasised how important and pertinent this debate was to society as a whole, from the youngest baby through those born with, or acquiring disabilities, to the eldest, rendered vulnerable through age & its associated infirmities. Also she stated that through our debate we could only achieve a vote on primary responsibility, however no one should be in any doubt that all three, the State, Family & Third Sector would have some part to play in the care of the vulnerable.*

*The majority of the speakers were pre-prepared, the longest being the opening speeches at four minutes each. A student & U3A member presenting the case for each 'corner' in the order above, all students first, then U3A members, six in total.*

*A brief & over-simplified summary of each of their points that I noted down is as follows. For the State, it is the only all encompassing body able to provide such institutions as universal education & the NHS. It is the only one with the necessary financial resource. It is democratic by being accountable to the people & the most efficient. It acts for us all & it would be unfair to offload this burden to others.*

*The speakers for the Family pointed out that most of the care given now to the vulnerable in this country is by the family. The majority of babies are born into loving families. Also kinship caring is widespread with those people taking responsibility for own vulnerable relatives & knowing their needs & desires. Whilst the support of the State in finance & provision of care places, working patterns etc was still vital, it was thought too impersonal to be the primary arbiter of care. The exception being for that minority who have no family, or where circumstance, be it addiction, mental health problem, family breakdown, whatever, rendered them vulnerable & also alone.*

*The arguments set out in favour of the Third Sector were that they were a constant presence whatever party was in government. Charities were regulated & not for profit. They were not political or distant as with the state, or too close & personal as with the family. Their representatives were mostly volunteers or not well paid so hence were more committed to their cause. Many niche charities provided specialist provision borne of personal experience & hence could be most effective. Many on the periphery of society could not or would not engage with their own family or the state whereas this area could gain their trust, maybe through shared experiences & hence provide the assistance needed for their care. For some their religious beliefs might be such that only a group from within their own community is likely to be able to gain their confidence.*

*Their speeches were all excellent & powerful, all persuasive in their own way, but which held the greatest sway & was there any concise pertinent point I could raise myself? There followed the open floor with speakers limited to ninety seconds, minutes indicated by a digital time on the wall & the final limit set by the rap of a gavel. There were sixteen prepared speakers called on by the Lord Speaker by name who gave their own or school's considered opinion. The majority view, certainly among the student speakers, pointed to their conclusion being that the State should have primary responsibility. A few impromptu speakers managed to get The Lord Speaker's attention & had the opportunity to make their own points, I was not amongst them. All too soon it was time for each of the teams to give their three minute closing speeches prior to the final vote. The vote was taken by a show of hands with the Lord's doorkeepers taking the count. Mr Phipps jotted down each total on a scrap of paper to pass to the Speaker though the fact that the majority view giving The State primary responsibility was obvious from the forest of hands raised. The exact count given in reverse order, as declared by Lord Speaker Baroness D'Souza, was 21 for the Third Sector, 41 for the family, and 138 for the State. Lord Speaker declared that the result of this debate within the House was that the State should be primarily responsible for providing support to the vulnerable in our society. She commended everyone on the standard of the debate & reiterated how vital this question was & how the discussion needed to be carried forward in all areas as it was an issue of concern for us all now & in the future. We rose as the Lord Speaker finally exited the chamber. Then we filed out to retrieve our coats, exchange a few last words with the other participants prior to leaving the Palace of Westminster by the Sovereign's Entrance. Thus people of all ages brought together from each corner & province of the British Isles for an historic occasion dispersed back to face the chill wind of the December evening with memories of a truly remarkable day.*

*Notes*

Full coverage of the debate is available on the website, Parliament TV, highlights can be seen on [www.youtube.com/ukhouseoflords](http://www.youtube.com/ukhouseoflords).