

Older Persons Council

1 October 2019

10.00am Baptist Church Te Moana Road.

Rt Hon Jim Bolger ONZ

‘The Journey to Age equality’

Greetings all and I thank the organisers for their invitation to share a few thoughts with you this morning. I want to thank John Hayes for his welcome and acknowledge the Mayor K Gurunathan- Guru- for his contribution and his reflection on the work of the Older Persons Council and all the others who have contributed to this event.

In the words of Nelson Mandela “A society that does not value its older people denies its roots and endangers its future”. Mandela went on: “let us strive to enhance their capacity to support themselves for as long as possible and, when they cannot do so anymore, to care for them’.

I agree with my late friend Nelson Mandela.

Currently there are about 700,000 NZ’s receiving National Superannuation and that figure will approximately double to say 1.2 million in 20 years. That means doubling the cost which has to become an issue.

The issues effecting older persons are receiving much greater attention with every passing year and with the number growing rapidly it will require society to reflect on what changes in attitude and support will be required regarding the issues that affect older New Zealanders.

Only last night I heard the question that as we have a Commissioner for Children—do we need one for older persons?

This position of Older Persons was covered in a small Dominion Post article last Monday (23.9.19) describing the changing society in Australia, and I am sure that it will be very similar in New Zealand.

The article was titled “A hundred years on life’s pretty good”. I welcome the title as so often we only hear pessimistic stories. The reason for the positive title is supported by the facts - I will quote one or two.

‘A girl born 100yrs back would be expected to live on average to 63 years and a boy only 59 years’. That means most in this room would have crossed the great divide by now and many of your questions might have been answered. The article goes on that most Australians, and I add New Zealanders, ‘can now reasonably expect to live into their 80’s’.

Life is good, the article concluded. That is not what most of today’s articles conclude which is a great pity because life is good by comparison with that experienced by earlier generations. The current older generation and their more immediate predecessors have transformed the world and in particular we will live on average about 20years longer. That’s something to celebrate.

I don’t dispute there are many problems but I quoted the above to remind us that much has changed for the better and we should acknowledge the progress of the last century, the century that those who speak for and assist Older Persons grew up in. Our century we could claim.

The century when the world’s population grew from only 2 billion to today’s population of 7.7 billion and despite that huge 5.7 billion

growth in population, we, the world, have seen huge improvements in our life expectancy and in our collective standard of living.

All this requires a big change in how young people engage with and support the older generation and it also requires that older people support necessary change. To put that another way the policies that were appropriate 100years ago are no longer adequate in a world of 7.5billion people and growing on to say 10 billion by mid-century.

On the question of age two political figures dominate much of the media debate in the Western world and they are Prime Minister Boris Johnson in Britain who was bluntly told by the UK Supreme Court that his advice to the Queen to prorogue Parliament was 'unlawful' and for Parliament to get back to work. The man who wants to be Prime Minister of UK, Jeremy Corbyn is aged 70yrs- well able to qualify as a member of Older Persons organisation but that hasn't stopped him and the British Labour Party from seeing him as the person to lead Britain and not get hung up on his age.

Across the Atlantic in USA those aspiring to lead are older still. President Trump is 73yrs, Joe Biden, the leading Democrat is 76 yrs, followed by Bernie Sanders at 78 and Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, a hugely important position, is 79yrs. The other front runner Elisabeth Warren is a youthful 70yrs.

If you can aspire to lead the most powerful country and the largest economy in the world in your late 70's early 80's then there is no reason to let chronological age alone dictate attitudes, engagement or involvement in society.

It's a very powerful message for the Older Persons Council to take forward and clear encouragement to society in general to keep

looking for ways to utilise the experience and knowledge of older persons. A very important point.

At the other end of the age group we witnessed last week the huge impact that the 16 year old Swedish girl Greta Thunberg has had in energising the world, to get our attention and demand action on climate change. Half a million marched in Canada for the cause and about 170,000 marched across New Zealand and similar marches elsewhere as people of all ages went out to march and so the message was spread.

There is much to be done on the issue of the risks from climate change, not discussed in earlier generations. It is growing to be the biggest issue today's world must address.

And as an aside I find it disgusting that a number of middle aged and older men in the media feel that they should attack such a committed young woman because they don't agree with her message-sad.

Climate change is an issue of great importance to coastal communities like the Kapiti coast and I am pleased that our Council is aware of the challenge, and we must accept that the response will include withdrawing from some threatened coastal communities.

None of that will be easy to implement in a fair manner but that doesn't mean we can avoid such decisions.

There was big coverage of the UN Climate Conference in New York last week which will help all to see which countries are likely to meet their Paris Climate commitments. We know some like the US- the largest polluter per head of population- won't because President Trump is in the process of withdrawing from the Climate Change accords, and by all evidence is a climate change denier.

But other countries are making some progress, for example Great Britain has recently lasted a week without using any coal fired power to generate electricity for the first time since the Industrial Revolution. A start, but a long way to go.

Renewables overtook coal as Germany's main source of energy for the first time in 2018.

Chile recently announced that it will close 8 coal fired powered power stations over the next five years on its path to be totally on renewable energy by 2040.

Closer to home the Land and Environment Court in New South Wales, Australia blocked a new coal project in a landmark case which cited climate change as a key reason for the decision.

Those are just a few examples of how the world is starting to respond to the need for change in the energy sector but there is still a long way to go. In the vehicle sector more and more car manufacturers are manufacturing either hybrid or pure electric vehicles and the first hydrogen powered vehicles are coming on the market.

However the big question is are we doing enough? and the blunt answer is no. Much more effort is needed if the world is to avoid massive change caused by global warming.

Stuff news reported last month (23.8,19) 'government considered banning fossil fuel vehicles.' High drama in the minds of many, stupid in the minds of others—or is it an example of facing up to reality and actually doing something significant.

This proposal was not from the Green Party but from a staid Government Ministry—the Ministry of Transport according to the

report, which proposed banning the importation of fossil fuel vehicles from 2035 onwards.

New Zealand would not have been the first with such a policy as France, the UK, Norway, Holland and Germany all have policies for emission free or low emission cars from dates between 2025-2040. The suggested date for New Zealand was 2035 in the middle of the bunch.

Further such a move would have saved a nett \$2.26 billion and averted 27 million tonnes of CO2 emissions between 2021-2050. Such a move would have no impact on people's ability to move. I drive a plug in Hybrid. The transition would have required careful management- but I am sure doable. Recall we did a much bigger transition from horses to motor vehicles at the beginning of the 20th century.

Where does the Older Persons Council fit into all of this inevitable transition?

It can either be a grumpy old group which is seen to be opposed to virtually all necessary change, or you could focus on advocating for the inevitable change but with a clear focus on promoting change in a manner that understands the perspective and needs of older people. Put simply we must manage change better going forward and the voice of older New Zealanders needs to be presented and promoted.

I mentioned earlier the impact of young Greta Thunberg amazing advocacy on climate issues. She is to be congratulated and supported. But equally reflect on the voice of Sir David Attenborough, age 93 years, and his powerful advocacy to the world on what must be done to prevent a climate catastrophe.

The obvious message is, it's not an age issue but a willingness to become involved in what is arguably the biggest issue of our time. But I am sure that mature citizens will also be motivated by an emotion as old as humans themselves, the desire to hand on a better world to their children and grandchildren than the one they inherited.

Let me conclude on that point. I am sorry to confirm that older citizens can't just sit in the sun, you have to add your voice to the voice of others to promote necessary change if we are to seriously confront and respond to all issues.

Thank you for your attention and if there is time I am happy to accept questions.

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