

If you were to see Elizabeth (she prefers to be called Betty) Foulton going about her business in the Wester Hailes Shopping Centre, you might think "there's another pensioner in for her shopping, then quickly back to the sanctuary - or loneliness - of her flat". But you'd be wrong. Look again. There's something in the stance, in the demeanour, especially in the steadfast gaze that says "here is a proud and determined woman".

DETERMINED

And determined she is. Determined to put her socialist principles into action: to help those less able to help themselves. Betty, the Wester Hailes representative of the Scottish Old Age Pensioners Association (SOAPA), first gained the experience and know-how to represent others as a shop steward of the NALGO Union when she worked in the

BETTY THE BRAVE

This month the Sentinel talks to Elizabeth Fulton, the Wester Hailes pensioner who has travelled all the way to London, and risked arrest by occupying the Conservative Party Headquarters in Edinburgh, in order to protest against Norman Fowler's proposed Social Security Cuts.

administration section of the Lothian Regional Council Headquarters, George IV Bridge. But her socialism and involvement with SOAPA go back to her youth.

Betty was born and brought up in Dalkeith. "I've always been Labour minded." She recalled. "My parents were in the Labour Party and my father always had people about the house who were talking politics."

But it was through her uncle, William McGowan, that she first heard about SOAPA.

William McGowan was, in fact, chair, then president of the Pensioners Association, and the founder of "The Pensioner", the monthly paper for pensioners which called for a charter of demands: the fulfillment of which would give pensioners a decent living.

I suggested to Betty that

she must be very pleased that we've got a female pensioner in charge of the country; someone that's bound to stick up for pensioners. Was I joking? "I think she's done nothing at all for the pensioners," came the swift reply, "and with this Norman Fowler Review that's going through parliament at present, it's actually cutting the pensioners; it's hitting them in every way, as well as many other families in Wester Hailes. The cuts will affect practically every household in the Wester Hailes area."

PUBLICITY

That brought me to ask about Betty's recent exploits to highlight the effects of the Fowler Reviews. "As SOAPA representative on the Wester Hailes Representative Council I automatically became involved with EdinBRAGG, which is the group which organises against Social Security cuts in Edinburgh, and also LOSS, which is against cuts in the Lothian Region." These groups, along with similar ones all over Britain, organised a week of action in September to publicise the extent of the attacks being made on the Welfare State.

The occupation of the headquarters of the Scottish Conservative Party was part of the week of action," explained Betty. "Steve Briggs, the organiser, walked casually into the Conservative Headquarters and when he nodded to us we all ran up the stairs and barricaded ourselves in the Committee Rooms. We had Margaret Thatcher sitting on the walls looking down on us, and Churchill and Heath and all the rest of them. We managed to put some banners outside the window to attract attention."

The police were called and they could have been arrested but they agreed to go peacefully if they were allowed to talk to the media. Was the risk worth it? "It achieved what we wanted to achieve; it got noted and advertised that we were against the Cuts. Lots of people don't realise that the Norman Fowler Cuts are coming."

PROTEST

Betty's trip to London was to take part in a rally which was also a protest against the Fowler Cuts and specifically their impact on the elderly

such as: abolition of the Death Grant, cuts in Housing Benefit, and the means testing of special payments which intimidates a lot of elderly people applying for what is rightfully theirs.

Before the march began Betty was actually interviewed for BBC Radio's "News At One" programme. How did that come about? "This radio reporter must have heard the Scots tongues and he came over and asked did I think it was doing any good to come down all the way from Scotland to campaign about something which was almost sure to go through?"

Betty was clearly rattled. "It did sort of...em...put our hackles up a bit when he mentioned Scotland; the Scots coming down to England as if Scotland isn't any longer part of Britain. Actually, I do think Margaret Thatcher has separated Scotland from England. She doesn't care about us, as with the heating allowance for the South of England but nothing for us."

Quite clearly a lot of Betty Foulton's energy goes into resisting the Conservative Government's attacks on the Welfare State. But why? Again we have to go back to her youth. She can remember Britain before the pioneering Labour government of 1945, before the implementation of the Beveridge Report which recommended that everybody should be covered by insurance from the cradle to the grave.

"When I was a child," Betty recalled, "the elderly, if they were poor, were just more or less put into what they used to call Poor Houses, they were clothed in a uniform and just given enough to keep them alive. Also, if you weren't able to work, and you didn't have any money, you were put in there."

"Now we can see things receding back to the bad old days. Mrs Thatcher said she wanted her people to go back to Victorian values," exclaimed Betty rather caustically. "If we go back to Victorian values we go back to those terrible conditions; and that is what she is trying to do: she's trying to make it so those who are able to pay for things will be allowed to get things. But those who are not able to pay are not going to be allowed to get them - it's as simple as that."

CAMPAIGN

One of the specific things the Scottish Old Peoples' Charter calls for is FREE TRAVEL ON ALL PUBLIC

TRANSPORT, and this is a campaign Betty will be involved in during the run up to the Lothian Regional Elections in May 1986.

Once again it is a political issue and one that Betty knows a lot about: "We had free travel for a while on the buses whilst the Labour Group controlled the Regional Council, and that was very acceptable. But now we have the Labour and Tory councillors at a more or less equal number within the Regional Council, and three Alliance councillors who hold the balance of power, and who tend to go with the Tories - it was because of their votes that it was decided that we would be charged for our passes and that we couldn't travel with them at certain times."

What does a person who does so much for the causes of the elderly think about the condition of our young people

interview

today?

"It's sad that so many of the young ones are having to leave school with no job to go to, because this means they haven't a future in front of them. It must be frustrating," said Betty sympathetically. "Those were bad days when we left, but I don't ever remember being out of work. When I left school I was automatically in work. This gave me something in life, some sort of achievement. Nowadays they haven't got that and this is why they turn to drugs and other things."

INVOLVEMENT

But there are some young people who help us in EdinBRAGG and in SOAPA up at the Wester Hailes Community Workshop. I would like to see more involvement between the youth and the old age pensioners. I feel that in Wester Hailes we are lucky having the Community Organisation because we have people from all different groups on the Representative Council."

Returning specifically to the situation of youth Betty concluded: "All the young are not bad, all the young are not on drugs. I think the main problem is unemployment. The unemployment situation is bad just now, due to the Thatcher influence - closing down steel works, closing down mines, closing down railway works, closing down... There is a loss of hope. Scotland is going to be closed down altogether if we don't STAND UP AND FIGHT!"

And that clearly is what we must do. There is no doubt that Betty has the mettle to take on that other pensioner at No. 10. But we must follow her example and unite - old and young - in a determined fight to safeguard and extend the achievements made by Betty's generation - to guarantee a decent standard of living for all our people from the cradle to the grave.

Colin Bartie



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