

THE PRESS

Meet John Hilton, new chair of the York Older People's Assembly

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By **Stephen Lewis**

John Hilton isn't impressed with the way we treat older people in this country. For some reason, we just don't value the wisdom and experience that age can bring, he says.

Other countries do – even some other European countries. Italy and France, for example, seem to respect and care for older people much more than we do.

“But I think the British have never been very good at valuing their older people,” admits the 67-year-old. “I don't know why.”

That is a tragedy, he believes, and not only for older people themselves, but for society as a whole. Older people have a wealth of talent, experience and wisdom that we could draw on to help make our communities better places to live, he points out.

As the recently-elected chair of the York Older People's Assembly, he hopes to be able to help change things for the better – and to help the city's older population find their voice.

He admits that popular former assembly chair Don Parlabeau will be a hard act to follow. But with his unconventional background, Mr Hilton may just be the person to fill those shoes.



He was brought up in the London neighbourhood of Battersea, the youngest of three boys.

Battersea was an odd mix of wealth and deprivation: BMWs on street corners rubbing shoulders with real poverty. And his was far from a traditional childhood. At the age of six or seven, he was diagnosed with rheumatic fever, which affected his heart and left him chronically tired.

For years, he was looked after at home by his mother, with the local authority providing him with a day of home tutoring a week.

Eventually, aged 14, he was deemed fit enough to attend school. He was not sent to a mainstream school, however, but to a school for disabled children.

This came as a culture shock, he admits. “I had been brought up in a very ordinary family.” His fellow pupils had a range of physical and mental difficulties, and many suffered from terminal conditions. “You'd be

playing in the playground with someone, then next week they'd be in a wheelchair, and next month they had died.”

It was difficult, but gave him a real sense of the challenges some people have to overcome, something which has stayed with him all his life, he says. It also made him see people with disabilities as people. “They can be just as stroppy as anybody else, for example,” he says.

Luckily, his head teacher, Sarah Eakins, recognised that he was bright, and pushed him to do GCSEs.

He left the school at 17 and used his technical drawing qualifications to get a job as an office junior in the drawing office of the London Electricity Board.

Over the next few years he moved up in the engineering profession, married, had a son, and moved north.

By the time he was in his thirties, however, he felt the itch to go to university. And, despite having been successful in his career, he realised engineering was not for him.

His then wife supported him, and he ended up studying political theory and modern history at Sheffield University.

He then did a masters degree in librarianship, and toyed with the idea of being a university librarian – before switching direction again and getting a job as an information officer with Nottinghamshire County Council.

A few years later, he moved to Doncaster council, where he was put in charge of community development.

It was the 1990s, and corruption scandals were tearing the council apart. The working class people of Doncaster – many of them from mining communities

devastated by the collapse of the mining industry – felt betrayed by their Labour council, Mr Hilton recalls.

There was a lot of unemployment, many people living on benefits who had virtually given up hope of ever finding a job.

To them, the corruption of councillors who had grown up in those self-same communities seemed like a stab in the back.

People wearing Doncaster council badges were often sworn at or jeered by the public, Mr Hilton recalls.

“I remember going to M&S one morning to buy a sandwich for lunch,” he says. “There was a newspaper seller. She really gave me a mouthful.”

He was tasked with repairing the council's relationship with the community.

The plan he came up with involved getting senior council directors to attend meetings in the mining villages and communities, where they came face to face with ordinary local people to answer their questions.

It took a while, but the strategy worked, Mr Hilton says. “There were people who were turning up simply to create trouble. But they were quickly told to shut up by others who wanted to listen.

“They had the chance to have conversations, on first name terms, with these very senior council officers in charge of delivering services. That did a lot to help restore trust.”

In 2004, job done, and now in his early 60s, he opted to take early retirement. His third wife, Sue, worked at the library at the University of York, so they moved to the city.

Retirement didn't mean simply putting his feet up, however. Since 2004, he has been doing consultancy work with Warwick University's local government centre on issues such as social exclusion and equal opportunities.

As part of that, he was involved in helping to evaluate a Government pilot project, LinkAge Plus, which aimed to find better ways for communities to provide services for older people.

He spent a lot of time in Gateshead and Salford, working with health and council services there.

It was while he was writing up his report that he thought: "I know all about what's happening with older people in Salford and Gateshead. But what do I know about older people in York?"

It was the spur he needed. Last November, he was elected on to the executive committee of the York Older People's Assembly, and was then chosen as chair.

His aim is to fashion the organisation into a body that can effectively represent the voice of older people in York – and make sure that it is heard.

To help him achieve that, he is keen to recruit more members.

There are about 350 members, he says. But membership is open to anyone who is 50 or older. "And we do need to recruit more."

Take it as a clarion call to York's older population. Here is your chance to make sure your values and your needs are put right at the top of the agenda. That's too good an opportunity to miss, surely?

IN BRITAIN, the focus tends to be on the young, Mr Hilton says. There is nothing wrong with that. The younger generation are the future, and we need to ensure that they are educated and brought up to be good, productive citizens.

But that shouldn't mean marginalising the old.

Often, older people tend to be seen as little more than a problem, Mr Hilton says – a burden on society.

If we're not worrying about how to pay their pensions, we're worrying about how to pay for their health needs, or their care homes.

But older people are so much more, he says: they also represent a pool of talent, skill, experience and wisdom our communities could tap into.

We can no longer afford to ignore the elderly. As we all live longer and healthier lives, retired people will make up a growing proportion of the population.

Projections suggest that by 2021, there will be more than 9,500 people in York aged 65 and over.

They will be fitter and healthier than older people in the past, and they will expect more out of life.

"We're getting older people that need much more than just health care and social care," Mr Hilton says. "They need opportunities to learn, to participate, to take part in education and sport."

It is also vital that somehow we start to break down the growing generation gap between old and young, he believes.

Whatever the cause – whether it is the rapid pace of technological change, which can leave younger people thinking the older generation is out of touch, or simply the natural self-obsession of the young – it isn't healthy, Mr Hilton says.

There are young people who see the older generation as has-beens.

"But we're not. Older people still have a lot to offer."

To find out more about the York Older People's Assembly, phone 01904 634661.

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