

Robert Kilroy-Silk writes...on Plight of our Pensioners

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We are constantly being told by the prime minister, especially when he wants us to solve Africa's problems, that we are a wealthy country. It is true. We are the fourth largest economy in the world.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer repeatedly reminds us that he has presided over the creation of a successful economy. It is true. Inflation and unemployment are low and our growth rate is the highest in the European Union.

So why are there more than a million pensioners living below the poverty level? They are. They struggle week by week to eke out a living on meagre means-tested benefits. Thousands more are either too proud or too ignorant to apply for state help.

The plight of many of the elderly people in this country is so dire that over 20,000 of them die every winter from hypothermia. And, according to the General Medical Council, 40% of elderly patients entering hospital in one week last winter were suffering from malnutrition.

This is not acceptable. This is not right. This is not necessary. We could do better, much better. There is no need for poverty on this scale.

The facts are clear. Our government spends only 5% of our gross national product on pensions compared to the E.U. average of 11%. Again, the British state pension is equal to only 37% of the average national wage, whereas in countries like France and Holland it is well over 70%. Even little Luxembourg manages to pay pension equivalent to 83% of the average wage. Poor Greece manages to pay them at 80% - and even in the United States, where the major emphasis is on private provision, they manage to ensure that pensioners get pensions equal to 45% of the income of the average wage-earner.

If all of these countries, and many more - and apparently much poorer than us, like Ireland, can afford to pay decent pensions, why can't we? We can.

It is this government that has refused to increase the state pension sufficiently. It is this government that has steadfastly refused to link pensions to the increase in wages or the retail price index - whichever is the higher. And of course it is Gordon Brown who has reduced private personal pensions and destroyed the incentive to save by robbing private pension funds of £5 billion a year.

It will get worse. According to the report last week of the Pensions Commission last week, nearly half of our 28 million workforce is not saving enough to keep them out of poverty in their old age.

What is the government proposing to do? Nothing. It has no policies. It is not its problem. It does not care. It will not be in office when we reap the whirlwind of its inaction.

It does not have to be like this. With over 18% of the population over pensionable age, pensioners represent a considerable voting force. Isn't it about time that they used their political muscle to make the government care?