A TASTE OF LIFE IN THE UPPER HOUSE

Children’s nurse Joan Myers visited Lord Soley to find out more about the Lords. Frances Pickersgill reports

Entering the Palace of Westminster through the peers’ entrance takes you to the centre of political life in the UK.

It is here that Lord Soley of Hammersmith greets paediatric consultant nurse Joan Myers from Whittington Health in north London. She is visiting Westminster to find out about the daily life of a peer and the process of applying to become one.

Ms Myers and Lord Soley share common ground in supporting a memorial statue of nurse Mary Seacole in the grounds of nearby St Thomas’ Hospital. Mrs Seacole is buried in Kensal Green cemetery in the west London constituency where Lord Soley, then known as Clive Soley, was MP until 2005.

Ms Myers believes there should be more nurses represented in the House of Lords. She supports Nursing Standard’s Peer Pressure campaign to help bring this about.

‘The Health and Social Care Bill was hotly debated in the Lords recently, but only two nurse peers were able to speak on the bill. That has to change. There needs to be more nurses in the House of Lords,’ she says.

The key function of the Lords is to examine and revise bills originating in the House of Commons, to examine public policy through its specialist committees and to hold the government to account by posing questions and engaging in debates in the chamber. All bills must be agreed by both houses but, ultimately, the Commons must ratify the legislation and is accountable to the electorate.

‘The House sits for about 140 days a year,’ Lord Soley explains. ‘Peers do have other jobs, although I am almost full time. Like my colleagues, I have several external interests such as the Mary Seacole Memorial Statue Appeal and I am particularly interested in the development of the rule of law in the Middle and Far East, notably Palestine, and now Tunisia, Egypt and Burma.’

‘Other peers include eminent scientists, business people, trade unionists, writers and politicians and we all use our expertise and choose causes to champion depending on our interests.’

Lord Soley became a peer after 26 years as an MP, when he felt he had achieved most of his objectives. ‘Initially, I was unsure about becoming a peer, because I had already had a career in public life,’ he says.

Position of influence

Lord Soley believes the Lords is rather different from the Commons. ‘The Lords is less combative and there is more time for debate. I am glad that I accepted the invitation because it has enabled me to continue to influence national life and do

Public health

The European Health Award rewards policy initiatives that contribute to meeting health challenges in Europe, including projects that address important threats to the health of the population. Applications are now open for its 2012 award, which is worth around £8,000. The closing date for submissions is May 29. www.ehfg.org/de/healthaward.html

Travel and leadership scholarships

The Florence Nightingale Foundation is offering travel and leadership scholarships. The foundation is interested in proposals for travel scholarships to study best practice in any aspect of dignified care, nutrition and/or hydration, long-term conditions and clinical practice issues that enhance the patient experience. The foundation is also offering a number of leadership scholarships and development opportunities. Check out the foundation’s website for submission closing dates. www.florence-nightingale-foundation.org.uk

Health visiting

NHS Employers has established a share and learn network to bring together people involved in delivering the health visitor implementation plan 2011-15. The network meets bi-monthly in Leeds and London and provides employers, commissioners and health visitors with a forum to share local challenges, experiences and best practice in delivering the new health visiting vision. For dates and venues during May and July go to http://tinyurl.com/HV-share-and-learn
Research grants The American-based Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International, promotes evidence-based research and practice. The organisation is offering small grants of up to £3,000 to encourage nurses around the world to contribute to the advancement of the profession through research. See the website for details and submission closing dates. www.nursingsociety.org/awards

Research teaching Fifty bursaries each worth up to £1,000 are available from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to enable staff engaged in research to update their skills. There is no prescribed list of accepted training courses, but preference will be given to applications for training at ESRC-recognised institutions. There are no closing dates for applications, but requests should be submitted at least six weeks before the course is due to start to allow time for the application to be considered and processed. http://tinyurl.com/ESRC-training-grants

Pay and conditions Guidance has been published by the unions representing health staff to help activists resist local proposals to cut NHS pay, terms and conditions. The guidance follows reports that some foundation trusts in England are trying to alter Agenda for Change contracts. Some are threatening to dismiss and re-engage staff on new terms and conditions should management and unions fail to reach agreement. The guidance is designed to help local trade union representatives resist the introduction of such changes. http://tinyurl.com/bld6rg8

what I consider to be important work in the Middle East.’

Ms Myers is keen to find out how it feels to address a room full of peers.

‘Making a point in debate is quite straightforward and nurses should not feel intimidated,’ says Lord Soley. ‘The British parliament is accountable to the people and this is reflected in its design. There are no barriers, podiums or lecterns for peers who can just stand and address the House. Everyone is supportive and generally congratulate new peers when they join the benches.’

Lord Soley explains that there is also a mentorship or buddy scheme in place to support new peers in their early days.

Lord Soley left school at 15 with no qualifications, did some unskilled work, but was always desperate for an education. He did not become an MP until he was 40. ‘Now that there are few hereditary peers, the Lords is a more diverse group,’ he says.

As her visit draws to a close, Ms Myers reflects: ‘Talking to Lord Soley here today confirms to me that it would be good to encourage nurses to be peers.

The House can look grand and intimidating, but it seems a hospitable and welcoming place. ‘What stood out for me is that peers can leave a legacy of improvements for the greater good. Nurses are at the forefront of health care and they should be at the forefront of the nation, too’ NS

Common ground: Joan Myers with Lord Soley of Hammersmith

RESOURCES

How to become a peer http://tinyurl.com/Become-a-peer
Nursing Standard’s Peer Pressure campaign www.nursing-standard.co.uk/peer-pressure