**The Royal British Legion Conference 2017 – Branch Delegate Report**

Not a lot seems to have changed since the last time I went to conference; apart from this time in Southport I didn’t seem to be the youngest delegate there. So, some positive signs of change. But many signs that things are not changing at all in the organisation. It was reassuring to see though that while very few speakers stood up to debate the more controversial topics, the endless queue formed almost instantaneously once again when the question of whether the membership fee should go up by a £1. But more about that later...

The President opened the conference with good and bad news. Fundraising and demography are still a challenge, but TRBL is stepping into the modern age with the Veterans’ Gateway, the online portal for all your veterans’ needs. The big challenge, he said, was to balance the limited resource between remembrance and welfare – the problem with such a large charity with two diverging goals.

The chair then took to the stage, his first in the role, and we pleased to inform conference that changes were coming. Members are now represented at the Exec Board through the Director Membership and Volunteering, but there was still a way to go in engaging the membership to become more active in the governance of the organisation.

Yes, TRBL had been hammered by the Data Commissioner for a breach of data laws, but we did get an early payment discount (£9,600 down from £12,000) for early settlement. And it was a breach seven years ago. But lessons learnt.

Respect was high on the agenda too – respect for all! The poor behaviour of the past needed to end, including the poor behaviour of members towards the staff.

And youth – yes, I did say youth – was mentioned. Many times in fact. TRBL needed to look at new ways to membership for younger members, and if some of the young people who took to the stage at conference were a sign of things to come, then about time I say!

The DG took to the stage next; membership is down and the service charity sector is crowded (over 2,000 service charities competing for the same money). But it was not all doom and gloom. TRBL led the way in the Veterans’ Gateway (being launched today) and was updating its strategy for members and for care services. The new remembrance centre at the National Memorial Arboretum and the new structure of the head office were signs that things were improving.

Then the brave bit – the membership system wasn’t perfect and TRBL needed to improve it. At least if the problem is recognised, they can try to fix it I guess.

The new Finance Director braved the audience, and reassured us that the accounts were not as bad as they might look at first glance. Drops in income were not all due to drops in donations, as some were one off in year grants, such as LIBOR.

Finally, the star of the show, young Sophie Bedford of Ypres Branch address conference. She told of how she and other members of the branch supported the Somme commemorations last year, providing acts of remembrance every day for pilgrims and visitors alike. She told of her pride in representing TRBL on site, the gratitude of those who attended for her work, no matter the weather, and on how a visiting Australian veteran had brought her close to tears with his stories. At this point you could feel the tears starting to come back. Rightly, a standing ovation for this future start of TRBL, and well deserved indeed.

The Great Pilgrimage 90 was then explained by Bob Gamble; I will not go into detail as you will have already seen the e-mail.

The membership forum as another opportunity for the same old local gripes to be dragged out for their annual airing. Although a few gems did sparkle; a national recruitment drive, the membership system (already addressed by the DG but that never stops delegates from having another opportunity to gripe) and fees. No further forward.

Rachel McKeown, the National Youth Standard Bearer took to the stage and gave conference an insight into her life. You could feel the force of pride of this young lady, proud of the fact that nearly all the national standard bearers come from one branch in Northern Ireland, and proud of the chance to carry the standard for her time in office, and the opportunities to travel and meet new people that it brought. Like Sophie before her, she brought conference to its feet.

The remaining speakers to conference updated delegates on the County Branch project, currently being trialled in Sussex and aimed at supporting small and struggling branches through streamlined governance structures. We also had the chance to hear more about the policy and campaigning work of TRBL, how 10 out of the 12 of the campaigning objectives from the 2015 strategy had been completed or where on going. Not bad for a large organisation.

Now the bit you are all waiting for – motions. All the charter motions passed with pretty hefty majorities, all over 90% of delegates agreeing. Very little debate too, and passed in record time. If only this could last.

Other motions were a mixed bag. Some should have fallen as the seconder didn’t attend conference and branches stood up last minute from the floor (I was tempted to raise a point of order, but behaved). Motions 1 to 7 passed, although the debate about getting training to put out cones and stop traffic for parades (motion 4) was getting close to a fight, verbal blows were traded.

Motion 8 fell, more down to poor wording than to intention; expect to see that back again in Belfast.

Motion 9 passed, one single membership fee regardless of the number of branches a member of, with branch top up fees where appropriate. Maybe a loss-maker for TRBL in the long term, so we will see what Haig House does with this one. Skipping motions 10 and 11 for now, all the other motions were passed by 80-90% each.

And then it arrives, the highlight of conference, the annual membership fee debate. Could we raise membership by a £1? Would the extra cost drive members away because it was unaffordable? If it was so unaffordable, why were so many delegates buying loads of branded goods from the conference stands that they probably didn’t need? Yes, the old arguments came out, nothing new there, but in the end it was voted down, 66% against. Then the confusion of motion 11, withdrawn at the last moment; as the chair pointed out if motion 10 failed and motion 11 also failed, TRBL couldn’t have raised membership or kept it the same – stalemate. It would have been interesting seeing them squirm out of that one.

And finally, as the delegation from Northern Ireland kept reminding us throughout conference, just in case we had forgotten, or thought it had changed – conference 2018 **WILL** be in Belfast next year.

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