

Kate tackles PM on widows pensions

The widow of a West Midlands Police dog handler who died on duty in 1987 has written an open letter to the new Prime Minister as part of a campaign for life-long pensions for all police widows.

Under current regulations, widows of officers in the 1987 Police Pension Scheme have to forfeit their pensions if they re-marry or co-habit forcing them to choose between future happiness and financial security.

Kate writes:

Dear Mrs May,

I am the widow of PC Colin John Hall; I have been campaigning for life-long pensions for all police widows for the past two years. I have written letters to you before in your role as the Home Secretary and the replies, as expected, have been very impersonal. But when I heard your acceptance speech on 13 July it felt as though you were speaking directly to me and my family. So I thought it may be time that I spoke to you on a more personal level.

My husband, Colin, was one of those 'white, working class boys' you referred to in your first speech as PM and you are quite right in that he didn't go to university. What he did do, however, was become a police officer. He was a police dog handler and served with the West Midlands Police for 21 years.

On Sunday 29 November 1987, he was dispatched with a number of his colleagues to tackle a disturbance at a block of flats and, having dealt with the incident, he suffered a heart attack and died at the scene. He was 40-years-old. At 24, I found myself a widow, and our four-year-old daughter Kelly lost her best friend in the world.

In your speech, you praised David Cameron for having led 'a one nation Government' and you explained that the word 'Unionist' as part of the official title of the 'Conservative and Unionist Party' is very important to you as it means, '...we believe in the union, the precious, precious bond between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland...'

This struck a chord with me. Kelly and I are still part of the police family, when one of our family members is hurt - wherever they may be in this precious union of ours - then we hurt; when they shed tears at the loss of a colleague, we weep beside them. You say: "David Cameron's true legacy is not about the economy, but about social justice."

In 2014, all RUC widows were granted their pensions for life; it costs not a penny more continuing to pay a police widow her pension should she decide to re-marry or move in with a partner, than it would if she remained living alone. Northern Ireland is rightfully proud of this achievement and having granted justice to its RUC widows.

You told me in your speech that as, '... someone from an ordinary working class family, life for me is harder than many people in Westminster realise'. I would like them to realise that I have been made redundant on more than one occasion and now, as someone with a six-hour a week temporary contract and a chronic disability, I remain in constant fear of losing my job.

My daughter suffers from the same debilitating illness and she also suffers from depression – in your speech you acknowledge that for those with mental health problems, 'there's not enough help to hand'. She works incredibly hard to make up for the times that she is ill, but if she has any more time off work within the next six months she will almost certainly find herself looking for a new job and the cycle will begin again.

Kelly will never have a mortgage of her own with such a precarious employment status. I am 53 and my partner is three years away from retirement, he earns less than the average UK salary. As you rightly say, life for folks like us is a struggle. Please understand that it takes a lot for me to swallow my pride and speak publicly in this way but I have so many people depending on me.

You have promised me: "The Government I lead will be driven, not by the interests of the privileged few, but by yours. We will do everything we can to give you more control over your lives."

I feel less in control at this point in my life than I ever have before – that's quite an admission when you consider I was a widow and single parent by the time I was 24.

Your party has been described as the 'modern, compassionate, one nation Conservative Party'. The average age of a police widow is 74 - the compassionate take care of their vulnerable and elderly. There is no compassion in making us choose between our pensions and lasting future happiness.

You promised me and my family: "When it comes to taxes, we'll prioritise not the wealthy, but you." I'm not one of the 'wealthy'. All I ask is for the 'mighty' to reinstate the police widow's pension that Colin paid for; he would be so upset if he knew that his family had not been taken care of in the way that he intended.

I talked to Kelly and asked her what she missed most of all about Colin and she said: “When I see Dads and daughters together I always wonder what it would feel like to still be able to hold his hand, to remember what he sounded and smelt like, and what it would be like to still be able to hug him and do the day to day things – like to talk to him.”

In the scheme of things it is not much for a daughter to wish that she could speak to her father, to hug him or to hold his hand. You can't give her those things, Mrs May and neither can I. But what I would like to be able to do is remove some of the stress from her life and the reinstatement of my pension would go a small way towards helping me to do that. It's what her father would have done had he lived to see his precious little girl grow up. In your speech you said that if my family was one that was, 'just managing' you wanted to address me directly and I believe that you have. Now, as Prime Minister, you have the opportunity to show me that you meant what you said.

In your speech – the one in which you spoke directly to me - you said: “When we pass new laws, we'll listen not to the mighty, but to you.” To be fair, you did listen to me with half an ear as Home Secretary when I asked you to grant all police widows pensions for life. On the day that I visited Downing Street with a group of supporters in 2015, and a week after the tragic death of Merseyside PC Dave Phillips, you announced in the House of Commons that the survivors of officers killed on duty would receive life-long pensions.

As Dave Phillips joined the regular force in 2006, he would have been a member of the 2006 Police Pension Scheme so to mention his sad loss in your announcement was disingenuous and fewer than 300 widows are likely to have benefited from those changes.

You finished your acceptance speech by saying: “We are living through an important moment in our country's history.” Indeed the Government made history in granting the survivors of police officers killed on duty pensions for life, but Northern Ireland and Scotland both part of our 'precious, precious union' have gone further than that.

You clearly have a loving marriage, Mrs May - please do not deny this privilege to the widows of those officers who served their communities so well. You cannot make history as the first woman Prime Minister of this great nation of ours but you can be the first to grant life-long pensions to ALL police widows. Only then will I believe that you truly intended to address me directly when you made your acceptance speech. Until then it remains just words.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Cathryn L. Hall

Co-ordinator Police Widows' Pension Campaign