**Autonomy vs dependence**

Speaking at the Ageing and Health conference at Chatham House, UK, earlier this year, Laurence Rossignol offers a ministerial insight on the French perception of elderly individuals as active and valuable members of society.

**AN AGEING SOCIETY** is one in which the percentage of elderly people in the population increases until, eventually, the balance of generations is shifted. That’s not the situation in France. The fertility rate has been, and remains, one of the highest in Europe, with every woman having an average of two children, so life expectancy continues to rise. Consequently, the age structure of the French population is maintaining its overall balance.

Elderly people are, by definition, at an advanced age, but this tells us nothing about their social contribution to society. For instance, in France, the voluntary sector relies on them heavily, and it is crucial to acknowledge and encourage this intergenerational dynamic. Having said that, we should still regard the rising elderly population as a serious phenomenon, since it is already having a significant impact. We must take a fresh look at our policies in every sphere; we need to rethink public transport, voluntary and professional care, distribution of goods, the housing market, third-sector services, and even some financial products such as life annuities.

**TOWARDS A CHANGE IN PARADIGM**

France has decided to address the issue of ageing in terms of ‘autonomy’ – as opposed to ‘dependency’. This is not merely semantic; it reflects a genuine political commitment. Indeed, dependency refers to a form of passivity whereas, by using the term autonomy, I am stressing a positive view of people. To enable individuals to remain active members of society, we want to delay the loss of autonomy. The French Government sees ageing as a journey that takes place over the whole course of life, not a uniform phenomenon – there is not ‘one’ old age. So our duty is to avoid categorisation and embrace all these diverse and multiple forms of ageing.

Elderly people can sometimes feel inadequate in a society where usefulness is assessed through one’s work or responsibilities. Despite this misconception, in France, about 5-6 million old age pensioners are engaged in charities. Civil society could not function to the same extent without their contribution – we need our older citizens as much as they need us.

**ADAPTING SOCIETY**

It’s absurd to believe that the loss of autonomy can always be avoided. Guarding against the phenomenon does not mean denying its existence. Instead we must ensure that, even if elderly people’s health is deteriorating, they can enjoy the best lives possible. I am therefore spearheading a policy with a twofold aim: to support individuals who are facing this difficulty and adapt society to ageing.

Designing policies for fragile elderly people also means taking steps to support their families. In France, 4.3 million people are informal carers for elderly people; the fantastic work they do is essential, but it is also a heavy and potentially exhausting commitment. I am therefore seeking to ensure the status of carer is recognised and, when implemented, this legislation will give carers support and a ‘right to rest’.

Although most people wish to stay at home, this is sometimes not feasible and it may be more appropriate to grow old in residential care. We must therefore support elderly people in terms of accommodation, including those 1 million people in France suffering from neurodegenerative diseases. We have set up specific ‘activity and tailored care units’ in residential care institutions, which stimulate the sensorial and cognitive functions of Alzheimer’s patients, and develop alternatives to conventional medicines and prescription drugs; and different forms of care, such as music therapy.

The challenge we face is not so much to introduce appropriate policies for an ageing society, but rather to critically consider the policies we need to implement in a society where people are living longer. I believe that priority should be given to prevention and that the authorities should help society delay the loss of autonomy. However, the authorities also have a duty to accommodate the changes that decreasing autonomy brings. To this end, we must broaden the scope of our action to consider individuals comprehensively; we must tailor our actions to match the whole spectrum of journeys people take in their lives.

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