Former health minister Edwina Currie was always going to be a controversial presence at this year’s RCM annual conference, but no one anticipated quite how controversial, as Rob Dabrowski reports.

EDWINA CURRIE caused a mass Twitter backlash when she called striking midwives ‘disgraceful’ and said they should not get a pay increase.

Her comments were made on the Jeremy Vine show, as thousands of rain-soaked midwives, MSWs and students protested on picket lines, in the hope of securing a 1% pay rise, as recommended by the independent Pay Review Body.

Edwina took to Twitter after the show and her claims prompted hundreds of angry responses and led to a handful of newspaper articles criticising the former health minister.

A month later, Edwina was on the stage at the RCM annual conference for a Question Time-style debate, where she refused to back down on her previous statements.

The outspoken 68-year-old was booed, jeered and heckled when she said midwives should not be given a pay increase.

‘There isn’t a tree growing in Downing Street with golden apples on it,’ she said, closely followed by ‘there is no nirvana where there’s an infinite amount of money’.

As well as riling the audience, there were moments when members of the panel – which included Zoe Williams from The Guardian, Labour parliamentary candidate Jo Stevens and Paul Nowak for the TUC – reacted with anger.

One of Edwina’s most contentious comments was that ‘those in a caring profession shouldn’t be on strike’ and that the trade union model was ‘completely inappropriate’ for midwifery.

Zoe Williams’ thoughts on the issue were greeted with cheers. ‘If you had not taken strike action, then you would be letting down future generations and your peers,’ she said. ‘I think there’s huge public support for this industrial action.’

It was not until 45 minutes into the debate, that one of Edwina’s comments was greeted with anything other than silence or anger. There was subdued applause when she said she wanted issues around alcohol and behaviour to be addressed.

After the debate, Edwina spoke to Midwives: ‘I think the feeling was that I should have concentrated more on the wonderful work that midwives do,’ she said.

‘Midwives do a brilliant job, which is evident in a lot of the work that they do. But if I think that they could do better, then I think many senior managers would agree.’

She remained highly critical of the industrial action and said, if the decision were hers, she would ‘absolutely not’ give midwives the 1% pay rise.

‘I firmly believe that the TUC approach to going on strike that the RCM has adopted is a mistake. It has taken them into politics, where they should not be – childbirth should not be political.’

She also accused the other panel members of ‘pandering to the audience’ and said: ‘I’ve been known all my life for being outspoken. I’ve always said people may not like what I say, but at least I will not lie to them.’

RCM chief executive Cathy Warwick was travelling back to the conference in Telford from a television interview in Birmingham and followed the debate on social media during her journey.

‘I think Edwina did a good job of stirring up discussion and debate, and that’s always a healthy thing,’ she said.

‘But I would completely disagree that you can’t belong to a caring profession and a union – the evidence would all suggest otherwise – and I think she has deeply offended many midwives.’

CURRIE OFF THE MENU

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