

Tyne Bridge Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

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Newcastle/Gateshead Poets

Towards the end of last year I was asked to be one of three judges in a poetry competition organised by Newcastle and Gateshead Libraries departments. The topic was 'Shopping'.



With some 500 entries, almost evenly split between the two sides of the river, it was quite a task over the Christmas period to sort out a shortlist of potential winners and runners up before the final judging on 16th January.

However we came up with our list of finalists and the award ceremony took place at Gateshead Library on 29th January.

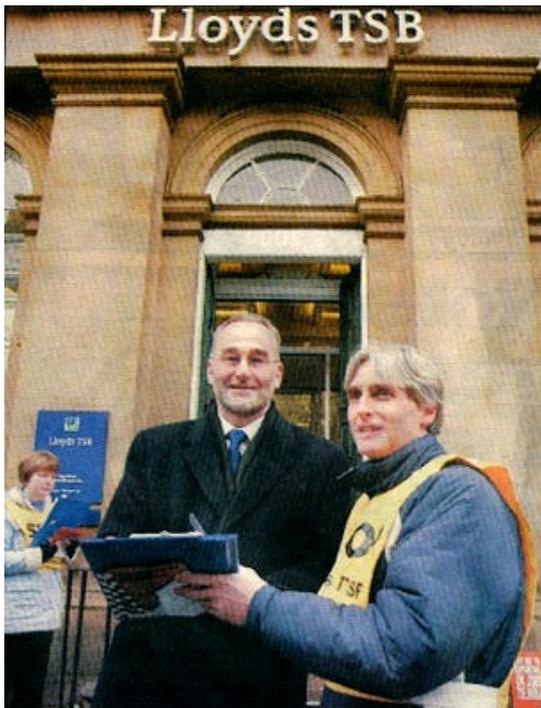
There were four age categories and some fine entries. My personal favourite was the runner up in the 5-7 age range which simply read—

*"I hate shopping for salad,
I love shopping for Jaffa Cakes"*.

LloydsTsb Call Centre Closure

Along with Newcastle Central MP Jim Cousins and Council Leader Tony Flynn I met with senior managers of Lloyds TSB in an attempt to force a rethink.

While we did make some progress in getting the bank to think more about the impact on employees and the local economy by promising to do all they could to soften the



impact and help with alternative employment—I have to say they are quite determined to carry on with their proposals.



Post Office Closures

I spoke in the debate in the House on Post Office closures and the particular impact on Tyne Bridge residents. While there is no doubt that people are voting with their feet and the use of sub post offices is declining in some areas, there is still a great need in areas like ours and I expanded on this in the debate. Latest information is that the Post Office is to think again about the Armstrong Road/West Benwell and Low Teams proposals, the other proposed closures have been regrettably confirmed.

Tony Flynn signs the petition opposing the jobs transfer.

Comment

"It seems however that some sections of the media have already decided the outcome (of the Hutton report) and want a head on a platter. My own view is we should wait and see." (Parliamentary Report Oct. '03)

The **Hutton Report** shed light on the events that led to Dr Kelly's death but Lord Hutton's conclusion - that a journalist lied, and in that lie impugned the integrity of the Prime Minister and attempted to bring down the government - has failed to satisfy the media blood lust following their disappointment that the result did not confirm their own cynical preformed conclusions.. Andrew Gilligan was typical of too much modern journalism - twisting or falsifying the facts to fit his own opinion of what happened rather than searching for the truth. The only one guilty of 'sexing up' documents was Gilligan himself.

"...we are asked to believe that the PM lied to the Cabinet and the House of Commons.It would be astounding if any Prime Minister were to deliberately and knowingly lie to the Commons on any issue, let alone one as serious as this." (Parliamentary Report June '03)

This week the attention shifted to the shortcomings of the intelligence estimates of Saddam's pre-war WMD capability.

Fair enough, but personally after the reaction to Hutton I see little point in more inquiries whose conclusions will not be accepted unless they pander to the anti government prejudices of the nation's sceptics.

"....while Saddam certainly did have programmes for the development of weapons of mass destruction, and of course we know that he has used such weapons in the past, the continued existence of such weapons has yet to be proved." (Parliamentary Report Oct. '03)



Parliament

The Hutton Report was debated in the House after a Statement by the Prime Minister. Second only in controversy this month was the **Higher Education Bill** which received its Second Reading in the Commons, amid a fever of anticipation, virtually hours before Lord Hutton's report was to be released. Whilst I still had reservations about some of the Bill's provisions I decided to support the Second Reading, because it allows more time for further discussion. To vote against would have been to kill all of the new proposals and perpetuate the current student financing system - which is not good. The vote was narrowly won by the government.

What's in the Bill?

As it stands the bill; abolishes fees paid 'up-front' and makes higher education free at the point of use, provides generous grants for less well off families, more help with living costs, increases the income level for repayments from £10,000 to £15,000 and provides more money for universities. The system outlined would be of huge benefit to the majority of families in Tyne Bridge where more than 70% fall into the income bracket where the new grants and assistance apply.

What about the Manifesto Commitment?

At the time of the last election some universities were threatening to introduce their own additional fees to 'top-up' the existing fees—some by as much as £15,000. We said we would not introduce 'Top-Up' fees and introduced legislation to prevent them.

That still left Higher Education with the funding problems they have today however, and it was not an option to do nothing. What is now proposed is a completely new funding regime.

The government is not, therefore, proposing 'Top-Up' fees and is not breaking a manifesto commitment. The big remaining question is about fixed fees versus variable fees. I have previously opposed variable fees, although I do recognise that it may not be entirely equitable for every course to cost exactly the same. The fear was that 'variable fees' could lead to a much higher level eventually than the proposed maximum of £3,000. The government have gone some way to alleviating this concern by building into the legislation a provision that no real increase can take place before 2009, and after that only by a positive vote in Parliament. There will also be a full review of the system at that time to assess the impact of the new system and make amendments if necessary.

Even then, Higher Education will still be essentially a state funded system with the taxpayer providing the lion's share of the costs.

Other pieces of legislation this month were the **Housing Bill**, that includes regulation of private landlords much campaigned for by Gateshead Council, the **Employment Relations Bill**, **Civil Contingencies Bill**, **Fire and Rescue Services Bill**, **Child Trust Funds Bill** and **Horseshoe Betting and Olympic Lottery Bill**.



Constituency

I have adjusted my Newcastle surgeries so that the Cruddas Park and Benwell Library surgeries will in future be on the first Saturday in the month 10-11 and 11-12 respectively.

I presented awards for the Newcastle/Gateshead libraries Poetry competition and attended a meeting with the leader of the City Council about the LloydsTsb call centre closure.