

Tyne Bridge Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

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Regional Hearing in Tyne and Wear

I joined Phil Hope, Minister in the ODPM, as he led the public hearing in Newcastle, aimed at stimulating debate on an Elected Assembly in the North East. This was one of series of Hearings across all three Northern Regions, as part of the Government's 'Your Say' information campaign, and provided an opportunity for people living and working in the region to have their say on what an Elected Assembly should do, and what powers it should have.



Learning Shop Workshop

I spoke to students on a Citizenship course in Gateshead about governance, citizenship and the importance of voting.



Home Secretary's Visit to the Region



I joined Home Secretary David Blunkett when he and his Ministerial team visited the region for a series of workshops primarily about policing and asylum issues. I took the opportunity to raise some of my concerns about the way in which we deal with some failed asylum applications - whilst some are physically removed, others are left without support.

Shipleigh Art Gallery

Lord Burlison and I attended the opening of a new craft gallery at Gateshead's Shipley Art Gallery.



Metro Interchange

I was able to welcome the Secretary of State for Transport to Gateshead's newly re-furbished bus and metro interchange, a wonderful development that truly enhances Gateshead's town centre with its spectacular public art and its impressively light, airy and welcoming design. !



I met with Party members from the newly created **Dunston Hill and Whickham East** ward.



Parliament

The Budget, and the Debate upon it, was the highlight of Parliamentary business in March. It included an **extra £100 to pensioner households over 70yrs** to help with **council tax payments**; introduced the first ever **Minimum Wage for 16 and 17 year olds** and **increased the adult rate** by twice the rate if inflation, benefiting 1.6million workers; it also extended **exemption for church repairs** to the whole 17.5% vat.

And this is against a background of the **highest number of people in work in UK history** and the **lowest unemployment** for a generation, the **lowest inflation for 30 years**, the **lowest interest rates for 40 years**, and the **fastest growing economy** in the G7 nations. Under this government, we also have the **lowest borrowing** of any G7 country cutting net borrowing to 3.4% - vs 8% under the Tories - our **national debt has been slashed** to 33% of GDP vs 44% under the Tories so we are making the lowest interest payments since 1915 - just 2% of GDP.

There have also been two other major topics of discussion this month - the **European and Local Local Elections (Pilots) Bill**(see below). And the third reading of the **Higher Education Bill**.

On the **Higher Education Bill**, I remained concerned about variable fees and I supported amendments that would ensure it is strictly controlled.

In the event, the Government agreed to these amendments rather than risk the Bill falling, a sensible compromise that gets the universities the funding that they need whilst also giving a package of student support that I believe will be of considerable benefit to future students from Tyne Bridge - including the ending of

up-front tuition fees; grants of up to £2,700 a year (none at present); bursaries of up to £300 and no student will have to repay loans until they earn a decent wage.

Other legislation this month has included the **Fire and Rescue Services, Traffic Management** and the **Employment Relations Bills**.

Comment

The progress—or lack of it—of the **European and Local Elections(Pilots)Bill**, to allow postal vote pilots in the three Northern regions and the East Midlands in the elections this June, has provided a salutary lesson in the relationship between the Commons and the Lords. Normally any attempt to block government legislation is curtailed after a time in recognition of the primacy of the elected House. This Bill however was running up against time constraints because of the practical problems of organising all-postal votes in time for the June elections. Despite accusations of ‘Tony’s cronies’ the Tories and Liberal Democrats actually outnumber Labour in the Lords and took advantage of the time factor by engaging in a game of ping-pong between the two Houses to a greater degree than ever before. Clearly the two opposition parties are not interested in making voting easier for people. In the end the government was forced to accept a Liberal Democrat amendment insisting on ‘witness statements’ to go alongside every vote. This was actually opposed by the Electoral Commission and will have the effect of disenfranchising thousands of voters as happened in Newcastle last year. I spoke in one of the debates and pointed out to those who want an elected second chamber that such a House would have all the power and authority that elections confer and this sort of legislative gridlock would become the norm.

General

In addition to my Select Committee responsibilities, I have attended the **PLP and Northern Group** meetings this month. I met with Lord Falconer to discuss my views on **House of Lords’ Reform** - which is now back in the melting pot—and attended meetings with representatives from **SIGOMA** and the **Greyhound racing industry**.

I also attended an interesting meeting, led by **Peter Hain**, the Leader of the House of Commons, on the possible shape of a future Labour Party. The basis of the discussion is that people join the Party because they share the vision of a better society - this was about how we create a Party that revives grassroots activism and enables members to comment meaningfully and shape Party policies.

I also met with students from **Gateshead College**, visiting London, the Chief Executive from **Newcastle Brewery** and representatives from **Northern Defence industries**.



Constituency

Several Ministers were here in March. The **Home Secretary** with his Ministerial team to discuss Home Office issues, the **Secretary of State for Transport** visited to - amongst other things - officially open the bus and metro interchange in Gateshead, and the **Minister for Local and Regional Government** addressed one of the three regional hearings as part of the Government’s campaign to raise awareness of the forthcoming regional government referendum.

I have also spoken to students from **Gateshead’s Learning Shop** about governance - a lively and stimulating debate about rights and responsibilities