

Tyne Bridge Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

David Clelland MP

www.david-clelland.org

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Opening of Sage Gateshead



The world's finest concert hall isn't in Vienna, New York or Milan - it's right here in Gateshead.

The building designed by Sir Norman Foster has already become a striking part of the riverside landscape but there wasn't a dry eye in the house when the doors opened to the public two weeks before Christmas with a magnificent concert kicking off an unparalleled world class programme of performances not only from the Northern Sinfonia, the resident orchestra, but

also from jazz, folk, rock and other classical ensembles. The venue will also host the Labour Party's Spring Conference and the NUT conference bringing thousands of delegates to the area and generating about £3m in revenue. There's also a music education centre, recording studios, workshop areas to say nothing of the café, cocktail bar and bistro with the finest views of the Tyneside riverscape

Launch of Labour's Child Trust Fund

I joined Chancellor Gordon Brown as he launched the Child Trust Fund which comes into effect in April 2005. There will be an initial endowment of £250 for each child born after 1 September 2002, rising to £500 for the poorest third of children, providing them with an asset for when they reach 18 years of age.

We should all be proud to be part of a government that offers such progressive, universal opportunities



Opening of Tic Toc Nursery

I was delighted to be able to welcome Cherie Blair to the official opening of the Tic Toc nursery in Old Fold. The nursery not



only offers care but also educative opportunities for children aged from six weeks old to school age, impressing Mrs Blair by its stimulating and nurturing environment.

New Deal for Communities

I met with Newcastle New Deal's Chief Executive Philip Stevens and Communications Manager Ben Landen as part of my regular updating on the many ways in which New Deal is helping people into jobs, training, better lifestyles, improving our environment and reducing crime.



Comment

Once more an idyllic scene, its hard to come to terms with the terrifying wall of water that ripped through the coastlines fringing the Indian Ocean on Boxing Day, the worst natural disaster for a generation.

We can't bring back the dead but we can - and must - do what we can to help those who survived, the 5 million left homeless, in desperate need of food, water, shelter, sanitation and medical help.

Within hours of the disaster, the UK government began organising relief flights carrying plastic sheeting, medical kits and water. £50 million has been committed as an *initial* response, *none* of which came from existing development aid budgets.

For the longer term, the UK - as president of the G7 in 2005 - has proposed a freeze on debt repayments from the affected countries, plus a review of their debts possibly leading to a debt relief.

There were a number of British tourists amongst the dead too, and an even greater number of British tourists remain missing. 43 police officers have been deployed to search for, and identify victims, as well as to offer counselling and help to those families affected.

The earthquake in one continent has left families devastated in every continent, but the unprecedented demonstration of sympathy and of generosity across the world has been astonishing. The true test of the international community will be how we can fund and assist both the immediate day to day emergency services needed and the long term reconstruction of these countries.



Parliament

In the context of the destruction wreaked by the Tsunami, all else pales into insignificance. But I must pay tribute to David Blunkett who resigned just before Christmas. I thought it a great pity that a very private part of his life should negate the sterling job he has done as Home Secretary.

Several pieces of legislation have been introduced since the Queens Speech in November. Just before Christmas, the Commons saw the Second Reading of the **Railways Bill** and I have been appointed to the Committee which is currently considering the details of the Bill. I have a particular interest in the way in which the Bill might impact upon the work of passenger transport authorities

Other Bills receiving Second Readings included the **Serious Organised Crime and Police Bill**, the **Road Safety Bill** - which introduces a raft of new measures to reduce casualties on the road by tackling drink driving as well as clamping down on the menace of uninsured and irresponsible driving and improving road safety generally.

I was also pleased to support the Second Reading of the **Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill**. When people are asked what matters most to them, many mention the state of their neighbourhoods. No-one wants to live in an area pestered by noise and blighted by fly-posters, litter, graffiti and burnt out cars. This Bill provides enhanced powers to local authorities and the Environment Agency to tackle these issues, and the anti-social behaviour that is generally behind them

Because of work on behalf of constituents in the past, I had a particular interest in the Second Reading of the **Consumer Credit Bill**. This Bill is probably the most significant reform of domestic credit law in 30 years. Amongst other provisions, it creates a new 'unfair credit' test, making it easier for consumers to take lenders to court when they are victims of unfair lending practices. I still want to see an upper limit set on the interest that lenders can charge and an end to 'doorstep' lending.

I have met with representatives from Gibraltar, the defence industries and the Showmans' Guild. I also arranged the inaugural meeting of an All Party Group representing the Turks and Caicos Islands as a follow-up to a delegation that I led there last summer. I have been elected chairman of the Group.



Constituency

Since the last meeting, the Boundary Commission, looking at population projections, announced that Tyne and Wear will lose a constituency after the next General Election. I attended a meeting at regional Party HQ to discuss the geographical boundaries. Proposals for Gateshead seem sensible but there are questions over Newcastle's proposed boundaries. These will be taken up with the Commissioners.

Together with Cllr Nick Forbes, I met with West End police officers to discuss issues raised by residents in Westgate ward.