

Tyne Bridge Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

David Clelland MP

www.david-clelland.org.uk

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Queen officially opens Sage Gateshead



I was pleased to be able to be present when Her Majesty the Queen officially opened Sage Gateshead. It was a momentous week for Gateshead, with the Princess Royal visiting Saltwell Park earlier in the week to view the tremendous restoration work carried out by the Council to the park itself as well as to Saltwell Towers, and culminating in the visit by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh.

Tyneside Irish Festival

I opened the 19th Tyneside Irish Festival, the start of two weeks of high-kicking dancers, hauntingly beautiful harp music, toe-tapping fiddles, Irish storytelling and Newcastle's very own Rose of Tralee. I was delighted to be able to present Father Joseph Travers with a gift in recognition of his work in the community.



Opening of Royal Mail Delivery Office



I opened Royal Mail's new delivery office on the Team valley, a £2.5m investment in the latest letter-sorting technology and in good facilities for staff.

Remploy

I am a member of the Commons' Remploy Group and met with trades unions involved in the company. I subsequently visited the Gateshead remploy factory and was able to explore some of the concerns raised by the trades unions.

Meeting with Peter Carr



I met the Chair of the Strategic Health Authority to discuss, amongst other issues, current plans for the re-organisation of the health service. Whilst I accept the logic of a larger SHA, I have concerns about PCT re-organisation although I note the Minister's assurances to staff about future employment



Comment

2005 has turned out to be a *global annus horribilus*. Beginning with the tsunami, followed by devastating hurricanes, the London and Delhi bombings and recently the devastating **earthquake in Pakistan** that killed more than 56,000 people, wiping out virtually an entire generation and leaving more than 2.5m people homeless and in need of shelter and nourishment. DFID has pledged more than £33m and is continuing to airlift food, water and tents but, as winter approaches, much more help is needed urgently.

On a more encouraging note, a high turnout and a yes vote for Iraq's **constitutional referendum** gave a glimmer of hope for the country's future. Predictably, the 'no' vote was concentrated in the Sunni areas most unhappy with the document and, also predictably, insurgent attacks have continued. But perhaps the notion that ballots are better than bombs might yet triumph.



Parliament

5 months to get to the starting gate, and another 2 before the winner emerges, but now the race is on to decide whether Cameron or Davis pick up the poisoned chalice of the Tory leadership. Whoever it is, however, is less important to Labour's future prospects than the way in which we govern.

Education Secretary Ruth Kelly set out highly laudable objectives with, which I agree, in the **Education White Paper** - higher standards and better schools to overcome the link between an child's educational prospects and their parents' educational background. Whilst there have been massive improvements in schools since 1997, much remains to be done. However I'm not con-

vinced that this White Paper is headed in the right direction.

Often, White Papers are like the curate's egg - good in parts. However, in this case it is the bad parts that make the egg unfit for consumption or delivery.

The 12th Education White Paper since 1997 is based on the notion that all parents are middle class, articulate, caring and intensely interested in their local school. Its authors seem blinded by their own experiences and show little perception of what is reality of life for many in constituencies like Tyne Bridge. Many parents do not have the educational background themselves, are too busy working all hours god sends to make ends meet or just don't give a damn about anyone but themselves to become intrinsically involved in the day to day management of their school. So, whilst the articulate and pushy are influencing the school to suit their own kids, who will look after the interests of the rest? Not, it seems, under these proposals, the local education authorities who are being sidelined. This aspect, together with schools becoming self governing bodies run by educational trusts, parental groups or commercial organisations are just two of the many unacceptable proposals.

I made it clear to the Secretary of State during Education Questions last week that I cannot support the proposals in their current form.

And, whilst I can see some merit in mergers between **Strategic Health Authorities** so that they cover larger areas, I hold similar reservations about mergers in PCTs, which I believe can better serve their communities if they are co-terminus with social services boundaries. The Health Secretary has clarified the position relating to staff currently employed by the PCT by saying that 'District nurses and other staff delivering clinical services will con-

tinue to be employed by their PCT until and unless the PCT determines otherwise.' However, as I pointed out to the Prime Minister recently, he himself has said that the NHS should be so good, so efficient and so popular that the private sector becomes irrelevant. The PM replied that he does not want improvements to the service to be blocked by dogma. However, I do not see the influence of the private sector diminishing - on the contrary.

The Health Secretary also announced proposals to **ban smoking in public places** - apart from licensed premises that do not serve food, or private members' clubs.

The House gave a Second Reading to the **Terrorism Bill** with a pledge to cap the price of the national ID cards.

I was able to meet with constituents attending a **Make Poverty History** lobby.



Constituency

With other MPs, I met the Transport Minister to press the case for tackling Tyne and Wear's problems with new **concessionary fares**. I joined other Gateshead MPs in a meeting with **Gateshead Council's Leader**, and met with the chairmen of the **Strategic Health Authority**. Due to short notice I was unable to join **ODPM Minister Yvette Cooper** when she met Scotswood and Bensham residents on Pathfinder issues.

I was glad to be able to accept the invitation to open the **19th Tyne-side Irish Festival**.

With deep sadness, I attended the funeral of John Hird. I knew John for longer than just about anybody in the Labour Party - ever since my apprenticeship. He was a good councillor and respected friend and colleague. He will be sadly missed.