

Tyne Bridge Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

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B&Q—Launch of Packaging Waste Scheme

I was pleased to be able to launch B&Q's scheme in the north east to make a charge of 5p for carrier bags to encourage recycling and reduce waste. It follows a successful trial in Scotland, all proceeds from the charge will be given to the environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy and will help reduce the impact of the unnecessary waste created by millions of plastic bags that otherwise end up in our streets, hedgerows, or in landfill sites. The trial in Scotland showed that the number of carrier bags given out was reduced by 82%. People are increasingly aware of their own impact on the environment and often wish they could do more to help, so its good to see business helping to provide opportunities to reduce the amount of unsightly waste we see around us.

- Christmas Lights

Benwell -

It seems like a long time ago but I was delighted to join children from St John's in Newcastle and members of the community to officially switch on the Christmas Lights at Adelaide Terrace Shopping Centre in Benwell.



Sage Education Conference

Education Secretary Ruth Kelly delivered the keynote address to the conference at Sage Gateshead. The conference theme - 'Learn Create, A Process Of Illumination' - also included a varied programme of practical workshops based on 'Every Child Matters' and gave delegates from all over the UK to explore education policies.



...And Christmas Fireworks

I attended a spectacular firework display on the Newcastle Quayside, one of several organised jointly by Gateshead and Newcastle as part of the Winter Festival. The intention had been to try and make the celebrations more inclusive, on the principle that previous New Year's Eve celebrations were 'too exclusive' as only about 50,000 people got passes for the Quayside to see the spectacle. As only about 1000 turned up to see these, perhaps the policy might be reviewed and the New Year's Eve fireworks restored.



Comment

In many ways, the Chancellor's **Pre-Budget Report**, made at the beginning of December, sets the tone for the current Parliament.

Certainly, a strong economy continues to be crucial to achieving the Government's ambitions for Britain. A fairer society, where all communities enjoy increased opportunity and security, is vital for the health of our country and for our long term economic success.

Thanks to the steps that the Government has taken so far to put the economy on a sound footing - like Bank of England independence and reducing Tory debt - the economy has kept on growing and living standards have kept on rising. Despite all the problems of the world economy, Britain has low inflation, interest rates still below 5% and record employment with 2 million more people in work than in 1997.

The Chancellor also announced not only that the £200 winter fuel payment would continue to be paid throughout this Parliament but also that there would be additional help to pensioners to keep their homes warm - an extra £300m is being put aside to install central heating for free for the poorest pensioners, with discounts for all pensioner households.

He also announced an additional £53m to help improve facilities and activities for young people in every community, with youngsters having a big voice in how the money is spent.

The consequence is that there will be more public investment taking place in our schools, hospitals and transport and infrastructure in the next five years than the whole 18 years of a Conservative government.

But there will be many Labour Party members and supporters who remain gloomy and cynical about this government's commitment to social welfare and schools reform,

and while I share some of the concerns expressed we have got to recognise the dangers inherent in too much self-criticism. Constructive criticism is healthy but apathy, disinterest and cynicism are eroding the Labour movement in a way I have never before encountered in all of my years as a trade union activist and party member.

2006 should be a year we all pull together - including the Labour leadership - to continue delivering an agenda of opportunity for all. David Cameron's summersaults to make the Tories electable may have many Tories thinking, 'Is he thinking what I'm thinking?' Equally, some voters could be watching the emergence of a new-look Tory party with interest. Meanwhile, Charles Kennedy's admission that he has been doing more drinking than thinking, and his plea for a vote of confidence, sets the scene for more interesting times ahead in UK politics.



Parliament

Bills considered by the Commons included the Second Reading of the **Work and Families Bill** - this Bill seeks to extend paid maternity and adoption leave, extends the right to request flexible working to carers of adults, helps fathers to play more of a role in their child's upbringing if the mother returns to work and helps employers manage the administration of those rights.

As with the introduction of the minimum wage, some in the business world predict the end of civilisation as we know it; I predict that more flexible working will raise employment levels, improve standards of living and enable carers and parents to stay in work.

Other Bills included the remaining stages of the **London Olympics Bill**, the **Government of Wales Bill**, the **Armed Forces Bill**, the **Criminal Defence Services Bill** and the **National Insurance Contributions Bill**.

At her invitation I met with **Education Secretary Ruth Kelly** and was joined by Gateshead Councillor Catherine Donovan and a representative of North East Councils' Association to discuss the Education White Paper. I also led a delegation from Gateshead Council to meet **Transport Minister Stephen Ladyman** to press the case for economic development along the A1 Western Bypass, being blocked by the Highways Agency.

Along with colleagues from Tyne and Wear, I met with **ODPM Minister Phil Woolas** to voice our concerns about the extra costs of the concessionary fares. I was also able to raise this during Prime Minister's Question Time.

I attended PLP, Northern Group and Transport Select Committee meetings and the launch of the paper I am supporting that offers an Alternative White Paper on Education. I also met with representatives from Amicus, Sigoma, 3M, Tyne Tees TV, Angel Trains and the Northern Small Business Forum.



Constituency

I met with representatives from Northumbria Police to discuss the proposed regional force.

It was with great sadness that I attended the funeral of **Alf Johnson**, a former Gateshead councillor, Mayor and fellow Alderman. Alf was a loyal and active Trade Unionist and Labour Party member for many years, a friend and colleague who will be sadly missed by those of us who remember his commitment to the service of his community and his dedication to the people of Gateshead.

A sad start to the year but nevertheless I wish all members and constituents a happy and healthy 2006.