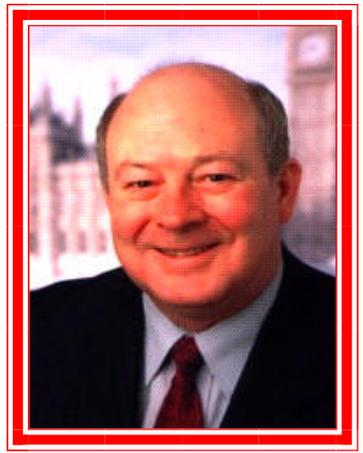


Tyne Bridge Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

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7th April 2006



Traidcraft

I visited the Traidcraft factory on Team Valley to mark Fairtrade Fortnight. These two weeks highlighted the very real difference that consumers can bring about in some of the poorest communities simply by the products that they purchase. There has been a huge growth in the number of certified fair-trade products - from 150 or so in 2003 to over 1,300 today, and much of the growth in public awareness and the increase in public demand has been due to the work of the Gateshead-based company.



Gateshead College Visit to Parliament

I always enjoy a lively discussion with the college's students - I hope that they enjoy it too, and find it useful! Not surprisingly, topics covered this time included the Education Bill, the impact of concessionary fares for pensioners on the young people's travel as well as a more general discussion about the workings of Parliament.



Education Bill Debate

I met with local primary and secondary school head teachers to discuss the Bill's provisions and hear their views and impressions.



Pictured with Head-Teachers from Carr Hill, Tyne View and Brandling Primary Schools and the Head of Kingsmeadow comprehensive. All had much to say about the Education Bill and its implications for their pupils.

Out and about



Leafletting in Bridges Ward with Angela Armstrong

Comment

Tony Blair is not the only person who wishes he had not said he would retire before the next general election! Just one more distorted comment from the press about his successor/handover/date etc will be more than enough.

It is an exasperating distraction from the real business of government to constantly read about **Blair/Brown splits** - the latest, that Blair had been forced to include Brown in the launch of Labour's local election campaign as a result of media pressure was nothing but nonsense. The truth is that the campaign was to be launched simultaneously across England by senior ministers. Gordon was doing his bit as near to Gatwick airport as possible so that he could then fly out to attend a UN meeting. The meeting was cancelled; Gordon was then left without that time/travel constraint and was at the campaign launch.

I guess the fiction was more interesting - why let the facts get in the way?

Equally distracting are allegations of 'loans for honours'. I truly doubt whether anyone, Labour, Lib Dem or Tory, actually said 'loan us several thousand pounds and we'll put you in the Lords.' Again, the truth is more boring - all parties naturally nominate their supporters to the Lords', what would be the point of nominating people who would not help the party get its legislation through? (Although looking at the voting records of some of Labour's nominations, I sometimes wonder myself).

In future, the **Cabinet Secretary** will propose the honours list - I wonder how many ordinary working men or women will make that list in future - and Sir Hayden Phillips will look at the question of political funding.

But the real damage may be with the Lord Chancellor (as was) suggesting there could be a possible vote in the summer on Lords' re-

form. This is entirely the wrong time for a sober look at the future powers and composition of the second chamber. I fear, and the PM's recent thoughts seem to bear this out, a knee-jerk reaction from current events may mean support for an elected second chamber, and the real casualty then will be good governance.

Parliament

The Budget dominated the last month, and I was particularly delighted to receive a letter from a Treasury Minister confirming that the Chancellor had picked up on my proposal for a **national concessionary off-peak bus fare scheme** for pensioners and the disabled to commence in April 2008. This will then resolve many anomalies with the current scheme—not least our local funding problems.

The Chancellor's updated **economic forecast** showed that the UK economy is stable and growing, and that public finances are sound. Helping children and young people, the Chancellor allocated an additional **£585m** by 2007 in **increased direct payments to schools** in England; further payments into **Child Trust Fund** accounts at age 7; and an increase in the childcare element of the **Working Tax Credit**. He also increased the **Stamp Duty starting threshold** to help first time buyers, and increased the **Inheritance Tax threshold** to £312,000 in 2008 and £325,000 in 2009.

This was a 'green' budget and I was pleased to see measures to tackle **climate change** - an increase in line with inflation of the Climate Change levy from April 2007, and the introduction of a new zero rate of **Vehicle Excise Duty** for the small number of cars with the very lowest carbon emissions and a new top band for the most polluting new cars.

This month I have spoken in a

Debate on the local ongoing financial problems posed by the **concessionary fares scheme**, and organised a meeting of colleagues with the **Prime Minister** to discuss this further. I also raised the problem during a debate about **general transport issues** - a speech which has led, interestingly, to complaints from the Go-Ahead Group that I was being unfair to them by suggesting that local bus services left a lot to be desired? I hope to meet with representatives of ONE North East to try to rescue the student travel scheme.

Following strenuous efforts to get the **Highways Agency** to lift the block on developments in Tyne and wear, I was pleased to see that the meeting that I arranged between **Ministers and Gateshead Council** before Christmas has now had one positive result in the go-ahead for development of the **Jockey** factory site in Gateshead

I also met with the Chairman and managing director of Stagecoach and students from Gateshead College. I met with the Lord Chancellor about Lords Reform and I visited Washington, New York and Madrid with the Transport Select Committee in connection with our inquiry into Public Transport security



Constituency

I hope to do as much work in the **local election campaign** as I can over the next two weeks - please let me know of activity and I'll try to join you. Apathy may well be the real the enemy, yet Labour has much to be proud of, locally and nationally. People are often blinded to the facts by the latest headlines and we have to remind our supporters and others of the huge improvements that have been made and the plans we have for further improvements to the quality of their lives and our commitment to the welfare of their families.