

# Gateshead Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

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## *Bus Buddies Travel Scheme*



I was delighted to be able to help launch Nexus' Bus Buddies travel scheme in Gateshead. This pilot scheme, set up in conjunction with Gateshead Council, helps adults with learning difficulties to gain the confidence to use public transport independently. Trained volunteers will show how to use the transport network - what fares to pay, how to use ticket machines and understand bus and Metro signage. The public transport network is there for all members of the community to access jobs and leisure facilities, and it was great to chat to some

of the people already benefiting from the scheme and to hear, first-hand, what a difference it has made to their lives to be able to travel independently.

## *Warm Zone Training Successes*

The Gateshead Warm Zone has, in itself, been a tremendous success, assessing and surveying over 21,000 homes for energy efficiency and checking almost 2000 individuals benefit entitlements. But another success has been the number of people who have completed their training scheme and who are now moving on to other employment armed with the skills they have acquired via Warm Zone, and I was pleased to present their certificates in a ceremony at Gateshead Fire Station



## *Fare's Fair-Young People Campaign*

I joined Nexus Chair Cllr Dave Woods and members of the North East Regional Youth Assembly at the launch of their campaign for fair regional concessionary travel for young people aged 14-19 in full-time education. Public transport massively affects the choices young people make on education, jobs and training - it cannot be right that a young person cannot afford to travel to their first choice college. I have also written the foreword to the Youth Assembly's report to Ministers on this.



## Comment

The drip, drip, drip of information about the **cash for peerages** scandal continues. It poses, I fear, a potential problem for us in the local elections in May, as does incessant press interest in when will Tony go, and will it be Gordon?

So, much rests on Gordon's Budget later this month. He has to reverse recent opinion polls, the most recent showing the Conservatives - for the 11th consecutive polling - well in the lead, and suggests that if Britain was on the brink of a General Election, the Tories would be preparing for government albeit in a minority government.

This would have been unthinkable even 2 years ago before the 2005 General Election, even with the burden of the Iraq war. Uncertainty over Tony Blair's departure, plus the addition of 'senior voices' calling for a 'full debate' on the Party's future - which is taken as shorthand for 'anyone but Gordon' - makes for a heady cocktail. Add a few unpopular issues such as the looming possibility of road charging - whichever bright spark put that particular petition on the Downing Street website should be shot - and the mixture becomes lethal. Unfortunately, it is primarily lethal for those hard-working Labour councillors up for election on May 3, and those 'senior voices' in Parliament do councillors and activists, the back bone of the Party, a huge dis-service by fuelling such speculation.

Sadly, 'senior voices' have disregarded the importance of the Party's foot soldiers in the past and choosing 2 months before the elections to discuss Trident shows little has changed.



## Parliament

A review of the benefits system has just been announced, to mixed reactions. My personal view is that this is an area where Government, eager to sound tough to win the

support of the skittish middle classes, tends to underplay its achievements.

We now accept that children in lone parent families are twice as likely to live in poverty. Employment is the answer for many. In 1997, just over 40% of lone parents had jobs: today that figure is almost 60%, an increase greater than the overall increase in employment levels and arising from expanded childcare provided by this government, the new deal, tax credits and the minimum wage. Similarly, bringing together benefit payments and employment programmes within Jobcentre Plus has been hugely helpful.

It would be a pity to put these successes at risk by trying to appear the toughest - some people are unemployable because they lack even basic skills, not the will to work.

Legislation since my last report has included the **UK Borders Bill**, the remaining stages of the **Offender Management Bill**, the **Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Bill** and the **Income Tax Bill**.

Debates included **House of Lords reform**, designed to reveal 'the thoughts of the House' which have ranged, passionately, from a completely elected Second Chamber to a completely appointed Second Chamber, with various permutations in between. The House voted to finally **abolish the hereditary principle** by getting rid of the remaining 92 hereditary peers.

I spoke up for a reformed but non-elected House, but in the end voted for a fully elected House rather than a hybrid of 80% elected. This is an indicative vote and legislation will have to follow when crucial questions like 'how' votes will take place as well as 'who' will vote will have to be addressed. Personally I favour regional electoral colleges made up of councillors, business, unions, voluntary and religious organisations.

Next week their noble Lords will have their say on this - a different outcome is not difficult to predict.

The full text of my speech on this is on my web-site.

As always, please contact my office if you seek further information on this or any Bills etc.



## Constituency

In addition to the events on the front page, I attended the Memorial Service for trade union colleague, **Len Edmondson**. Len was a staunch and tireless worker for his union, 'old' Labour through and through, and I was proud to have known him. I am fully involved in the debate about **regional transport**. Had the Downing Street petition been worded differently (ie; do you a/ want to endure worsening congestion or b/ think there should be some regulation of traffic growth) it might have had a different response.

People aren't stupid - they know the country is grinding to a halt, they know if we simply build more roads, we lose more precious open land, create more pollution and worsen climate change. But we must offer better alternatives to the car and much improved public transport before talk of **road pricing**.

And while I agree that we cannot build our way out of congestion, we do need important and urgent improvements to our regional transport infrastructure, especially bringing our road network up to national standards.

This is important for our regional economy, for providing new homes and in attracting new business and employment opportunities. Help rather than hindrance from the Highways Agency would be a welcome and a refreshing change.