

Gateshead Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

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Parliamentary Democracy

I thought that things couldn't get much worse, with a Labour Party funding row involving local millionaire David Abrahams which led to the resignation of the Party's secretary plus questions over donations misplaced by Peter Hain, to say nothing of the loss of the personal details of half the population by Revenue and Customs and the first run on a British bank for more than a century. Then came Derek Conway, with his unique interpretation of jobs for the boys. The Commons Standards and Privileges Committee came very close to saying that Mr Conway had fiddled his staffing allowances by employing his sons whilst they were actually at university at the other end of the country. Mr Conway is not the only MP to employ family members, and I am no exception to that - but I



take great exception to the way in which the media has depicted all MPs who employ their wives as implicitly corrupt. Mr Conway's activities may have made many a journalist ecstatic, combining as he did financial jiggery-pokery with a good dose of homophobia, but the consequence is to the eventual detriment of democracy itself. Journalists embrace such stories with glee but the drip drip drip of hints of corruption and sleaze simply add to the dismal reputation of politicians and undermine the public's faith in our democracy. Some MPs do employ their wives - in my case, long before she became my wife - and so long as they are doing a genuine job and are paid according to the rules of the House, there is nothing wrong with that. Indeed I believe our way of working is a positive benefit to my constituents.

Carers' Association



Shortly before Christmas, I had the opportunity to call in at the Gateshead Carers' Association Christmas celebration. I've passed on details of the Government's response to the petition that I presented to the House on behalf of carers - broadly, the Government is conducting a review of the National Strategy for Carers, looking at all aspects of the carers' role including the Carers' Allowance, which should be published in spring.

BAE Systems Scotswood Road

Jim Cousins and I met with BAE Systems Chief Executive to talk about the FRES army vehicle programme. is a huge contract, for some 30,000 vehicles,



that would secure employment at the Scotswood factory for many years to come plus creating employment and training opportunities for of about 100 apprentices.

Jim and I then arranged a meeting with Baroness Taylor, the Procurement Defence Minister, to impress upon her the absolute importance of this contract not only for the Scotswood Road plant but also for the peripheral related industries as well as the wider point that it is only by securing this sort of design and manufacturing work that we can retain and extend our skills base here in the north east

Comment

My views about the fragile health of our democracy are detailed overleaf. I remain pessimistic about the future of our democracy - we are already all too familiar with depressingly low turn-outs at election time, with voters' increasing disillusion about the political system, local and national and I see no prospect of that improving, especially when fuelled by a heady media cocktail of cynicism.

But I am also concerned about the direction of the Labour Party itself. Gordon Brown is concentrating on the economy - rightly, for the world faces a difficult and turbulent economic future, with the American economy showing serious signs of strain as their interest rates edge up, repossessions increase and a credit crunch bites. Hopefully, tough decisions in the past - taken by Gordon as Chancellor - will maintain a stable British economy.

But the old campaigners amongst us will remember the motivation we drew from fighting the evil of unemployment, particularly amongst our young people, and the burning sense of injustice about our poor health services and long waiting lists.

We've beaten them both - our health services are good, waiting lists are right down (despite media stories) and employment is at its highest level for 30 years. We need a new inspiration, a cause to feed our souls as well as our intellect. And I'd suggest a focus on our skill shortage. The jobs are out there, but too many people still don't have the skills, whether practical or academic, they need to access them. I want to bring back apprenticeships, I'm not denigrating universities - but perhaps its time we stopped

placing such an emphasis on the importance of having a degree in Media Studies? So, yes, three cheers for McDonalds and FlyBe's new training courses - practical, on the job training for young people that will equip them for the world of work and to play their part in the community. And three cheers for Gateshead's new Skills Academy offering modern state of the art training for 1500 students studying plastering, joinery, plumbing, gas servicing, electrics, painting and decorating.

And on the subject of media spin, Housing Minister Caroline Flint gave an unfortunate spin to her speech in which she asked if we couldn't do social housing better. There is nothing wrong with promoting progress and prosperity, with local authority landlords offering help and advice with training, childcare and employment and giving young people in council housing a better start than we do now, which brings me back to training...but to give the impression that unemployed council house tenants might lose their homes was, to say the least, unfortunate.



Parliament

Much of the period since my last report has been taken up with the **European Union (Amendment) Bill** which always excites the Tory Europhobe anoraks.

Discussion on other Bills have included the **National Insurance Contributions Bill**, the **Education and Skills Bill**, the **Health and Social Care Bill**, the **Pensions Bill** and the **Planning Bill**.

Third Readings of Bills have included those on the **Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill**, the **Counter-Terrorism Bill**, the **Sale of Student Loans Bill**, and the **Child Maintenance and Other Payments Bill**.

There have been Statements on **Northern Rock**, and Debates on the impact and benefit - or lack of - 2012 Olympics on the region as well as on the **Revenue Support Grant Settlement** for local councils. I spoke in this Debate, querying why Gateshead, a 4 star authority, often held up by Ministers as an example of good Labour local government, should so consistently be given such a poor settlement.

I also asked the Prime Minister if he would help to resolve the impasse between Gateshead and the British Rail Residuary Body over land that is needed for new house building plans - I have since also discussed this with Minister Tom Harris - and earlier in the month I drew the Prime Minister's attention to the gap that still exists between the north east and other regions.

I have also quizzed the Transport Secretary about the region's road problems.

I've attended meetings with Northumbria Police Federation, and Newcastle's Cyrenians. I've also chaired a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference, and attended an Overseas Territories meeting as well as meeting with representatives from Passenger Transport Authorities and the Showmen's Guild.



Constituency

Since my last report, I have met with the leader of Gateshead council to discuss issues of common concern, and attended the Deckham and Bridges ward party meeting.