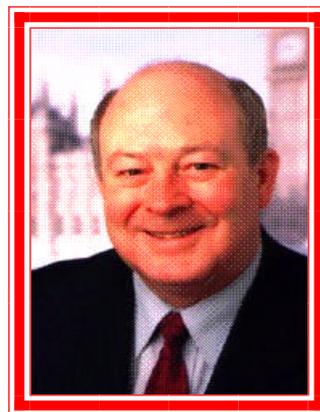


# Gateshead Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

David Clelland MP

www.david-clelland.org.uk

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## *Eslington School*

Together with Cllr Armstrong, I joined staff and pupils to talk about their contribution to the 'Send My Friend to School' campaign. Eslington was one of a number of schools in the area that took part in the World's Biggest Lesson to highlight the number of children in the world who do not have access to education. It's inspirational to see so many young people campaigning for all children to go to school.

## *Dunston Hill School*



I also took the opportunity to visit the school before it moves to a new state of the art building in Dunston. The school, which has occupied its current site for over 100 years, has a great atmosphere and a sense of history - but which unfortunately can't

keep the water out so staff and pupils alike welcome the move.

## *Lobley Hill Summer Fair*



The Lobley Hill summer fair at Beggarswood was a great day out. We were lucky with the weather, and there was a good turnout from the local community to enjoy the bouncy castles, stalls and other entertainments (*above, with the Mayor and Consort, and cllrs Kevin Dodds and Catherine Donovan*)

## *Halifax Branch Opens*

I was delighted to be asked to officially open the new Halifax branch in Jackson Street. The new branch offers state of the art banking but I was particularly pleased that such a prestigious company chose to so publicly demonstrate its commitment to Gateshead Town Centre. It's part of HBOS' strategy to open 100 new branches across the UK in the next 5 years, creating 600 new jobs and offering a better service



## *Komatsu Mayor Honoured by Gateshead*

I was proud to speak on behalf of the other Freeman and Aldermen of Gateshead when the Borough honoured Toru Nishimura by making him an Honorary Freeman of the Borough. Mr Nishimura, Mayor of Komatsu since 1997, is the first foreign national ever to be so honoured, and the award was made in recognition of his work in building cultural youth links between the children of both towns.

(*right, with the Japanese Consul, Leader of the Council, and Mr Nishimura*)



## Comment

.One year on, 20 points down, another by-election to fight in Glasgow - *but my money's still on Gordon to make it work!*

I've always believed that Gordon Brown is socialist by instinct, but saying he shares the pain of the working classes, hit by rising fuel and food prices, is not enough; he's got to do something about it too. The pay restraint policy means 2% pay deals for public sector workers (and that's on top of similar deals in previous years, and similar deals to come in future years) at the same time as we can all see parts of the private sector awarding obscene boardroom bonuses.

We started government in 1997 with a windfall tax to re-distribute wealth to the poorer sectors. With Shell and BP making *billions* of pounds in just months, perhaps it's time we taxed some of those profits and gave it back to the people who can't afford to pay their bills?

These are difficult times for our Government, and the Tory hyenas are circling around, smelling blood. But it's a time when we need our true friends - the trades unions are right up at the top of the list, and my personal view is that we can't afford to alienate our core supporters. So public sector pay restraint has got to be matched by private sector restraint or taxes.

They say that there's no such thing as bad publicity, but I'm wearying of the fall-out from a letter I wrote to a constituent. I received an offensive letter and, for the first time in 24 years, the 'inner Geordie' in me put pen to paper in reply. With very few exceptions, most people have been supportive of my stance but it's led to further stories about my views on MP's pay and allowances, and my 'justification' for employing my wife as my secretary. Are they short of real news? What about my campaign on Carers' Allowance or questions on concessionary travel for young people in full-time education?

Probably more column inches has been devoted to **MP's pay and allowances** than any other subject. I have no problem with scrutiny of any of the expenses for which I claim, and cheerfully submit receipts for expenditure incurred in the performance of the job. I'm fairly confident that the Commons' Finance department already does a pretty thorough job - last week a expenses claim was returned because a lack of concentration had ended with minor errors in the figures. I thought it made no sense to pay hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers' cash to the likes of Price Waterhouse Cooper to do the same job! I therefore voted to keep the current system - which broadly is 'no receipt, no repayment'.



## Parliament

I took the opportunity in Questions to the Leader of the House to ask when we might debate support for carers and the **carers' allowance**. Working carers lose all their allowance if they go £1 over the £95 threshold, and pensioner carers lose the allowance when they retire. The Leader of the House assured me that the carers' allowance was still under review. I also asked the Transport Minister about extending **concessionary travel to young people** in full-time education, and I also used Questions to the Prime Minister to point out that, although the anti-smoking and other recent legislation was well intentioned, it has left **working mens' clubs** struggling under the impact. These clubs are at the heart of our communities, and I asked for a meeting between ministers and my All Party Clubs Group. Communities Minister Hazel Blears is now to meet with us to discuss how we might explore more 'club friendly' policies. Separately, I asked Hazel Blears - who has just announced a **White Paper on Local Government** - to

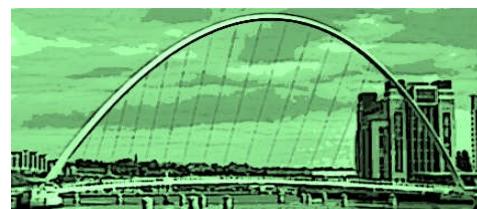
guarantee that the cost of any 'reforms' proposed will be totally and completely funded by central government and not come out of hard-pressed council funds.

Legislation considered included the **Criminal Evidence (Witness Anonymity) Bill** - the Bill to resolve the problems created by the Law Lords' decision that witnesses could not retain anonymity; the **Planning Bill**, the **Sale of Student Loans Bill**, and the **Children and Young Persons Bill**.

In addition to the usual **PLP** and **Northern Group** meetings, I have also had a private meeting with the **Prime Minister** in which we discussed my proposals for the carers' allowance, the impact that recent legislation has had upon working men's clubs and the apparent impasse between Gateshead Council and the British Rail Residuary Body over the development of the former **Freightliner site** on the Felling by-pass for much needed housing.

I have also met with representatives from **Maersk**, the **Showman's Guild** and, as Chair of the **Turks and Caicos Islands group**, with the newly appointed governor to the Islands.

This latter came at a time the Foreign Affairs Select Committee has produced a report alleging corrupt practices in the Islands.



## Constituency

In addition to the engagements on the front page, I have also met with union representatives to discuss the impact of the 'Jamie Oliver' effect on the provision of school meals. I also accompanied Defence Procurement Minister Baroness Taylor on an official visit to **BAE (Scotswood)** at my invitation, and I attended a **Unison Link** reception in Gateshead.