

# Gateshead Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

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## ***Discrimination against blind people ends***

After a two and a half year campaign to change benefit rules, I was delighted to support the amendment to the Welfare Reform Bill to end years of discrimination against blind people by changing the rules for Disability Living Allowance to entitle people with severe visual impairment to claim the higher rate mobility component of DLA. This will allow around 26,000 people in the UK with severe visual impairment to receive an extra £29 per week, helping them to get out and about safely and independently. The exclusion of the visually impaired was an unintended consequence of previous legislation and its good that its now be rectified. *(left with Steve Wynyard, RNIB head of policy and campaigns)*

## ***The Importance of Transport to the North East***

Transport is an issue of vital strategic importance to the north East and our economy, probably particularly crucial in these economic hard times. I hosted a North East Business Forum meeting which brought together local business leaders, representatives from the transport industry and politicians to hear Transport Minister Lord Adonis' thoughts on the way forward and to discuss proposals on a range of topics - new forms of transport such as the maglev rail system, cleaner fuels, the impact of transport on the environment for instance.

*(right, speaking at the meeting, Lord Adonis far left)*



## ***New Bus Strategy for Gateshead***

Together with Transport Minister Lord Adonis and Gateshead Leader Cllr Mick Henry, I joined Cllr Dave Woods, Chair of the Integrated Transport Authority to launch a three year action plan that will see improvements to punctuality, accessibility and customer satisfaction for the 24 million passengers every year using buses in Gateshead by setting specific targets for Nexus, bus operators and the council. Access to good public transport is a key issue for residents across Gateshead and this plan will help ensure a high quality service

## ***Warm Front in Tyne Bridge***

I visited a Saltwell resident who had recently had a new, more energy efficient boiler installed under the Warm Front scheme. Before her new boiler, she - like so many others - had struggled to heat her home affordably but had noticed a difference in both her bills and her heating since getting the new boiler. To be eligible for grants up to £2,700, households must either own their home or live in rented accommodation and should be in receipt of a qualifying benefit. A £300 heating rebate is available for people over 60 towards the cost of central heating or related repairs if they do not receive benefits.

*(Ann Toms, of Eaga, and I inspect the new boiler)*



## Comment

Even the intensely personal attacks on Neil Kinnock in the early 80s pale into insignificance in comparison with the viciousness of the attacks on Labour politicians and Gordon Brown in particular from the media. No one ever said politics was fair, but there are moments when events seem to take an even more unjust turn. For instance, Alistair Darling's Budget - which was always going to be a tough call, in the middle of a global credit crunch - was completely overshadowed by yet more leaks about malfunctions in the MPs' allowances system and, just when you thought it couldn't get any worse, Gordon Brown's performance on UTube, and then the fiasco about the Gurkhas - where, ironically, we have a good story to tell but the Tories and the Liberals, who never let a bandwagon pass without jumping on, and who both showed no interest in the Gurkha issue whilst Tories were in power, leapt to the front of the campaign. So Labour was pilloried once more even though it was the *Labour* government which gave Gurkhas the right to reside in the UK, the *Labour* government which increased Gurkha's pensions, the *Labour* government which gave free medical health to retired Gurkhas living in Nepal...

The Budget is a Budget for jobs and recovery, calculated on the principle that you can't cut your way out of a recession, you have to grow your way out and it will cost us more if we don't act now to support people and businesses. Now is not the time to cut investment in apprenticeships or housing, or help for people to get into work, as the Tories would have us do.

As for MPs allowances, and the Telegraph's early publication of all receipts, I've already stated my position - either we recognise that any MP whose constituency is more than 30 miles away from Westminster is going to need

somewhere to stay, and therefore also accept he/she will need a bed, chair, fridge etc, or we revert to the system where our communities are represented by the landed gentry living in London, only occasionally visiting the peasants in the north. Unpalatable though it may seem at times - and voters are, understandably repulsed by some of the items for which taxpayers money has paid - democracy comes with a price.

Instead of jockeying for political advantage Party leaders should shut up and wait until Sir Christopher Kelly's committee reach their conclusions - although I noted Committee members themselves are allowed a £240 daily allowance, £120 nightly London allowance and up to £40 for lunch and £50 for dinner for each of their working days! Which perhaps puts the subject in context.

But, I have never know politics brought so low and my greatest fear is people will respond in a way that leaves the door open to extremist groups and factions.



## Parliament

Apart from the debate on the **Budget** and Members' Allowances, the House considered two of the 'flagship' pieces of legislation - the **Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill**, and the **Equality Bill**. Age discrimination is the most common form of discrimination in the UK, in part due to the failure to place it on the same legal footing as other forms of discrimination. The Equality Bill represents a milestone in achieving equality for older people although I personally feel it is a pity that the government missed this opportunity to abolish forced retirement at 65.

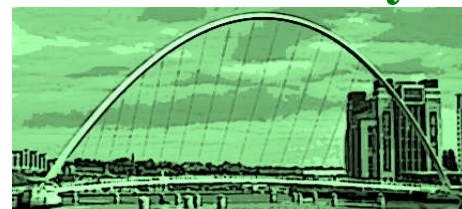
The Apprenticeships Bill is a key part of the government's long term solution to the current economic downturn, bringing in significant reforms to post-16 education and

training by transferring responsibility for 16-19 education, including young offenders, to local councils, overseen by a new Young People's Learning Agency.

I've also raised with Ministers my concern that UK Sport's new funding formula may threaten the future of state of the art facilities like Gateshead Stadium. As money to support elite athletes now goes directly to each sporting body, it is being allocated to the immediate areas in which they are located. As neither Gateshead nor the region is the centre for any major sport, this funding is no longer coming our way.

I have also continued to raise the subject of the Carers' Allowance with Ministers in questions on the floor of the House.

## Constituency



In addition to the events listed overleaf, I have met with **Gateshead Carers' Association**, enjoyed the spectacle of the Gateshead Ethnic Minorities' **Vaisakhi** celebration, welcomed Cllr John Eagle as **Gateshead's new Mayor** and taken part in the **BBC Politics show** debate on Carers' Allowances. I was also thrilled to be at the stadium when **Gateshead Football Club** won promotion.

### *Howay the Lads!*

With great sadness I report the death of a colleague, friend and comrade, Ian Mason.

Ian served the Party and his community well both as a Tyne and Wear county councillor and a Gateshead councillor, diligently representing the interests of his ward and helping shape the borough that he so loved. Ian will be sadly missed.