

Gateshead Constituency Labour Party **Parliamentary Report**

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2009 Election Results

The direct consequence of the MPs expenses scandal was Labour's pitiful showing in the county council elections, equalled only by a dreadful performance in the European elections. Trailing humiliateingly behind UKIP, Labour polled a dismally low 16/17% of the vote. Voters angry about the expenses scandal either voted for the smaller parties or simply stayed at home - the Tories certainly did not make the break-through they were expecting, coming first only by default of doing less badly than Labour. And even though the BNP won 2 seats, it actually polled fewer votes than it did five years ago. The Lib Dems also performed poorly - victims of a classic squeeze, they fell back in their rural south west heartland coming third behind the Tories and



UKIP, with Tories making gains over Lib Dems in Devon, Cornwall and Somerset county council elections. The tragedy is that so many good people, working so hard for their communities, have lost at the polls through no fault of their own. The economic crisis has been magnified a thousand times by the parliamentary crisis and the result has shown deep failings in our political system. It's tempting to dismiss the Euro results as an aberration, a protest in unusual circumstances in an election to an institution that few of us care about. But is it perhaps more deep-seated?

Chelsea Flower Show



I was so proud to see Gateshead Council's entry - a Window of Opportunity - scoop Second Prize at the Flower Show. It was a fabulous entry, a clear demonstration of sustainability, opening up new possibilities, including bicycle-power to operate the watering system, which is what I am doing above.

Carers' Allowances

I appeared on the BBC Politics Show, pushing my suggestion that the Carers' Allowance should be awarded on the same basis as child benefit - if you have a child, you are eligible for the benefit, and it seems to me that if you have a caring responsibility, you should get the allowance. I raised this again in Treasury Questions and was delighted by the very positive response from the new Minister - I shall be taking carers from Gateshead to meet with the Minister when they present a petition on the subject to 10 Downing Street. I've also joined carers marking Carers' Week at the Gateshead Carers' Association,



Comment

A week may be a long time in politics - the last three weeks of revelations about duck houses and moat clearances seem like an eternity. The consequences are catastrophic - 4 MPs suspended from the PLP and facing police questioning, the resignation of the Speaker and several Ministers, and the seething anger from the public that resulted in such disastrous results in the county and Euro-elections. There has not yet been a suicide - much to the Telegraph's regret no doubt - but I feel that British politics has been destabilised, and I fear it will take some time to return to normality - if ever.

Like any right-minded citizen, I have been appalled by the Telegraph's daily revelations of expenses abuse, excess and downright fraud. However, I also agree with the Archbishop of Canterbury that this has become akin to a witch hunt, lacking any sense of perspective and proportion. There's been a huge focus on *Labour* MPs' wrongdoings - but how much condemnation of the second jobs which virtually the entire shadow cabinet hold?

Parliament has to get back on its feet and has to demonstrate strong and decisive leadership *now* and I was glad to see Gordon Brown come out fighting, with a ministerial reshuffle restructuring government around public services reform, constitutional reform and the economy. I admit that there were some aspirant egos in the PLP apparently ready to topple Gordon as Leader but I personally believe that the 'email operation' could well have been invented by a journalist given it was completely anonymous.

The Prime Minister has now announced the immediate creation of a new Parliamentary Standards Authority to regulate the

allowances system and apply appropriate sanctions in cases of financial irregularity and agree a code of conduct for MPs in a Bill to be introduced shortly. There will also be new means of dealing with the gross financial misconduct we have seen in both the Commons and the Lords'.

We will now complete the Lords' reform by ending hereditary peerages, and devolve more power to local communities - there will be more discussion about this in the coming months as well as about lowering the voting age.

The public, right now, are angry about the expenses scandal but will rightly be furious if we continue to allow ourselves to be deflected from the real challenges - the world-wide economic recession, the loss of jobs and financial insecurity. There is a job to do, and Labour should be getting on with it.

As a personal footnote, the Telegraph now lists it's accusation against me as criticism for the legal costs of securing the sole ownership of my London flat, a bit less emotional than the lurid headlines about costing the



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taxpayer thousands of pounds.

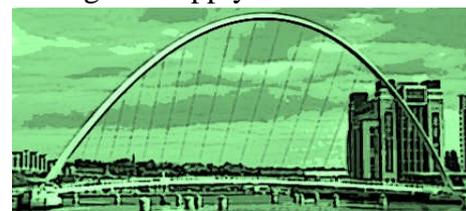
Almost amazingly, given the virtual meltdown of traditional politics, the Commons has actually got some work done in the last four weeks.

Bills receiving their Second Reading included the **Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill** which implements the proposals set out in the White Paper 'Communities in Control', promotes economic recovery and strengthens local democracy by giving councils new duties to promote democratic engagement and civic participation, gives local people stronger rights and more opportunities to have their say

through - for the first time - legal rights to get a response to a petition; the **Health Bill** - this contains good, sound ideas for improving public health but also the controversial proposals to hide away displays of tobacco products. I am not convinced that the move is based on sound research - a point I made in the Debate - but I *am* convinced that it will hit small shopkeepers, already facing serious financial problems as a result of the recession and who will be faced with the costs of removing display cabinets.

The **Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill** also received a Second Reading - this Bill helps strengthen our borders and control migration by fully integrating Customs staff with the UK Borders Agency whilst the **Policing and Crime Bill** (which included the controversial debate on the retention of DNA samples) received its Third and Final Reading and has now progressed to the Lords'

Statements included a very welcome one from the Home Secretary giving former **Gurkhas** the right to apply to reside in the



UK.

Constituency

Since the last GC, I have joined parliamentary colleagues in a meeting with Gateshead Council's Leader, discussing a range of subjects, including the impact of the threat to funding for the North East Institute of Sport, possible future use of the former Tyne Marshalling Yard for train manufacture, and the future waste management strategy.

I also joined carers at Gateshead Carer's Association at their celebrations to mark Carers' Week