

Gateshead Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

David Clelland MP

www.david-clelland.org.uk

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Remembrance Day

Last weekend the nation remembered the sacrifices made by previous generations of our armed forces, the courage and the dedication of the brave men and women who have given their lives to the service of this country. The war in Iraq and the conflict in Afghanistan gave a particular poignancy this year - the 93 soldiers killed this year represent 93 families whose lives will never be the same again, who will have an empty place this year at the Christmas table and, like many, I felt acutely aware that 'over there and them' has shifted to 'here, us and now'. I joined the Mayor at the service at the Gateshead Cenotaph to pay my personal tribute to those who have died and those who have been wounded serving our country.

Bae Systems Lobby



Faced with over 200 job losses from the Scotswood Road site, I arranged an urgent meeting with Defence Minister Quentin Davies, followed by a meeting with Regional Minister Nick Brown for a joint trades unions delegation from the plant.

(above with the delegation in the House of Commons)



Felling Social

An excellent night out - good entertainment, good food and good company - and my congratulations to Felling ward for good organisation.



The Thomas Hepburn lecture is an annual event, providing the perfect opportunity to celebrate the life and achievements of Thomas Hepburn whose work had such an impact upon the lives of working people in the region during his lifetime and whose ideas resonate to this day. This year's lecture was a thought-provoking 'Local democracy and engaging people in decision-making' by Baroness Joyce Quin.

Pictured left with Joyce Quin and Gateshead council leader Cllr Mick Henry

Health Through Warmth

I attended a reception organised by National Energy Action (NEA) to highlight the work of Health through Warmth, a project established in 2000 by Npower, the NHS, Eaga and NEA to help tackle fuel poverty, as well as cold-related illness and excess winter deaths, by facilitating the installation of energy efficiency measures and heating where needed by vulnerable people.

Above with Housing Minister John Healey and Eaga's Ann Toms



Japanese Garden in Saltwell Park

Gateshead Council has been twinned with Komatsu City since 1991 and, in preparation for the twentieth anniversary, a team of gardeners from Komatsu City have built a beautiful Japanese garden in The Grove. *Right, with Deputy Leader Cllr Ian Mearns*



Comment

Remember 'It was the Sun *wot* won it'? The Sun - and most of the rest of the media - think they can do it again, and are doing their best to bring down this government and/or Gordon Brown.

Rupert Murdoch has now decided to revert to type and support the Tories. Hence the vicious attacks on Labour and Gordon Brown by **News International's** Sun newspaper quickly followed up by Sky News and in turn by the BBC still smarting from the Kelly affair.

The latest attacks, featuring criticisms of handwriting and reporting of secretly recorded private phone calls is an indication of the depths to which they will sink. However, it appears on this occasion to have back-fired as most decent people are repulsed by such unwarranted personal attacks.

Most decent people will make their own minds up how to vote when the time comes and, as the **Glasgow North East by-election** has shown, the outcome is not necessarily as gloomy for Labour as many predict. The war in Afghanistan, the increased unemployment figures, particularly amongst young people and with the economy only slowly moving out of recession, the sacking of the government's drug advisers, the banking system and the row about the Territorial Army - all are being turned into direct criticism of Gordon Brown's leadership *despite* actual progress and improvements.

On **Afghanistan**, the Prime Minister clearly set out why the mission is so important to Britain's national security. Either we fight extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan - or we wait for them to carry out more terrorist attacks here. Frustratingly slow though it might be, the Allies (and don't forget, 43 countries are fighting together in Afghanistan) are making progress - the mentoring/partnership approach must continue until we reach the goal of 134,000 Afghan troops trained by the end of 2010;

President Karzai must lead the fight against corruption, and there must be an inclusive political settlement.

Our forces can certainly do without the *fifth communists* in the British media who are collectively undermining the morale of our troops and giving succour to the enemy. British newspapers must be preferred reading by Al Qaida and the Taliban who will be greatly encouraged by the comments they read there.

There has also been criticism of cut-backs to the **Territorial Army**. Pre-deployment training for the TA is not being cut back and no soldier is sent to the front line without proper training and equipment.

As to **MPs expenses**. I don't expect any sympathy from the public, and certainly not the press, at either Sir Thomas Legg's decision to create new rules and then back-date them, or Sir Christopher Kelly's recommendations on MP's expenses and allowances. But I am concerned that, in the fervour to appear to be doing something radical, we are in danger of allowing the development of a system that once again favours the wealthy and makes it more difficult for ordinary working class people to become MPs.

The old 'allowances' system, flawed as it was, was at least a 'leveller' and meant that MPs whatever their background were of equal status in the House of Commons.

It is important, in my view, that there is no barrier to anyone who wants to be a candidate, and pay and allowances should ensure that is the case. In the long run it will be the people who will suffer if their choice of candidates is restricted to those who can afford it.

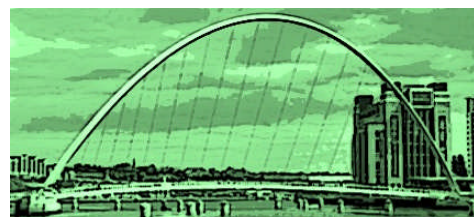
Too much power to too many quangos is not healthy and, as history shows, such bodies tend to favour people 'like themselves'.



Parliament

Legislation passed by the Commons this month which will be of interest to members included the **Health Bill**, the **Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill**, the **Coroners and Justice Bill**, and the **Marine and Coastal Access Bill** received final readings, as did the **Welfare Reform Bill** and the **Policing and Crime Bill**. There was also a statement on the next generation of **nuclear power stations**.

I met with local representatives from the **FBU, One North East** as well as the **Bae Systems** delegation. Questions I have asked in the Commons include one to Energy Minister David Kidney about the **Health through Warmth** project, one to Transport Minister Sadiq Khan about the government's priorities for **High Speed Rail**, and I expressed my support to the Education Secretary on the appointment of Gateshead's Learning and Children's Director as the new **Children's Commissioner**.



Constituency

In addition to a meeting with a local councillor to discuss local housing association rent levels, I was delighted to be able to attend the **Thomas Hepburn Lecture** - an added bonus was that the lecture was in the beautifully restored St Mary's church.

I have also attended the **Gateshead Youth Assembly** meeting, the Gateshead Visible Ethnic Minorities' **Diwali** celebrations - a wonderful evening as usual - and the **Felling ward** party social.