

Gateshead Constituency Labour Party **Parliamentary Report**

David Clelland MP

www.david-clelland.org.uk

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Sage Gateshead

It scarcely seems possible that it is 5 years since Sage Gateshead first opened its doors to the public. Now surely one of the most iconic buildings in the north east, this state of the art music facility stands testament to Gateshead Council's foresight and vision. I am also proud to have played even a small part in its development - I remember badgering the then Minister Beverly Hughes (who testily half-accused me of stalking her) and Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott to resolve a funding problem, and I vividly recall the Sunday morning telephone call from John Prescott to tell me 'ok, you've got your funding'. (Above, speaking at the Parliamentary reception to mark the occasion and with Lord David Puttnam and Leader Cllr Mick Henry, right with Cllr Angela Armstrong, Lord Puttnam and Director Anthony Sargent)

Alderman Pat Murray

Feisty, clever and witty, Pat Murray has been both a colleague and a friend since the early 1970s, firstly as a member of the Labour Party and then as a fellow councillor when I was first elected to serve in the Chandless ward in 1972. She was a very strong woman, deeply committed to serving both her constituents and the wider Gateshead community and with a clear vision of what she wanted to achieve in Gateshead. Pat was a true socialist, passionate about her politics and unswerving in her dedication to her principles. But she was also very kind and caring, with a natural empathy towards anyone in trouble, both a wonderful local representative fighting for her constituents and a formidable champion for the borough. We will all miss her.

Pat Murray 7 March 1932 - 22 December 2009



Comment

We'd barely seen the last of the turkey before all parties launched their general election campaigns - apart from Geoff Hoon and Patricia Hewitt, obviously inhabiting a different world to the rest of us and launching their own campaign which was quickly revealed to have no alternative leader, no plan and more crucially, no supporters.

The *real* election campaign will focus on the economy and not on Gordon Brown's personality. Labour's strength is that, under the policies of this *government*, the global recession wasn't as bad as predicted. True, industrial activity plummeted and with it, tax receipts; true that unemployment has grown and true that associated social costs have risen. But most economists believe that Britain's recession will soon be officially over - the economy actually grew slightly at the end of 2009.

This Labour Government has guided Britain through the global economic storm and the question the public need to ask themselves when the election comes will be whether they believe that they'll be better off under a government that wants to use continued state intervention in the form of public spending as a tool to steer the economy back into prosperity, or a Tory party ideologically wedded to laissez-faire politics, keen to embrace austerity and axe public services. Indeed, past experience suggests that the premature retrenchment proposed by the Tories in their pledge for a tough emergency budget immediately following an election, would be a greater risk than renewed inflation.

As I have said on previous occasions, Mr and Mrs Public are both sensible and realistic when it comes to giving their support - which is why we have seen a slight but significant increase in Labour's share over the past 4 months as people recognise that belts are going to have to be tightened and there will be cuts in spending, but it is a question of by how much and where. And whether the exercise is conducted in a fair way, protecting the vulnerable and ensuring future growth.

Certainly, any local government or public sector worker who

contemplates voting Tory would be a turkey voting for Christmas. We've got to get out and about now, spelling out the dangers but also highlighting the opportunities that the recovery can bring to young and old alike.

One of the factors most seriously affecting voters' intentions has been the Parliamentary expenses scandal and I am afraid that it is not over yet. The **Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority** has now launched a consultation document. It is to my mind a sad and even dangerous document. It threatens to undermine the working conditions and authority of MPs in ways that will ultimately reduce their effectiveness to represent their constituents. It may be an unpopular thing to say at the moment but I believe in the long term democracy itself will be damaged by the fallout of the expenses issue and the reaction to it.

And, if the Tories get their way and reduce the number of MPs to 500, the combined effects will be to get back to when MPs had to have their own substantial resources to do the job thereby limiting the choice for the electors and depriving communities of good ordinary citizens' ability to seek and win office.

Parliament

And, sadly, this all detracts from the real and positive legislative programme currently before Parliament.

The Commons has now completed the first stages of the **Personal Care at Home Bill**. This Bill will make it possible for those with the highest care needs - such as those with serious dementia, Alzheimers' or Parkinson's - to receive free personal care in their own homes. This is the first step in over-hauling the care system - a White Paper dealing with care and support will follow soon.

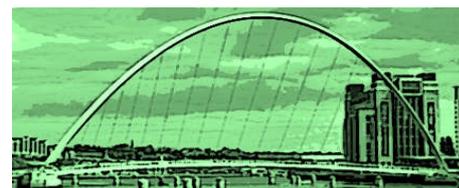
Other flagship policies of the Government introduced into the House of Commons included the **Fiscal Responsibility Bill**, which imposes a statutory duty on the Treasury to meet specific targets for the reduction of government borrowing and debt, and the **Children Schools and Families Bill**. This latter aims to provide new guarantees for parents and pupils, setting out a series

of specific entitlements from the schools system. It will also reform the curriculum and introduce a new licensing system for teachers - which I do have some concerns about.

The **Flood and Water Management Bill** is a response to recent pressure to introduce legislation to address the threat of flooding and water scarcity, as well as enabling water companies to offer welcome concessions to charities and community groups for surface water drainage charges.

Ed Milliband made a statement on the **Copenhagen** conference, the outcome was disappointing in a number of respects. It was disappointing that Copenhagen did not establish a clear timetable for a legal treaty and that we do not yet have the commitments to cuts in emissions that we were looking for. However it did herald the start of a new chapter in tackling climate change across the world and there is a commitment to continue to seek meaningful international agreements.

I have attended meetings of the Transport Select Committee and the Northern Group of Labour MPs.



Constituency

In addition to the celebrations connected with Sage's 5th anniversary I have held the usual monthly advice surgeries.

I have met with union representatives and senior managers from **BAE Systems' Scotswood** factory. Following these meetings **Regional Minister Nick Brown** and I also met with **Defence Minister Bob Ainsworth** to express our concerns about the future of the Scotswood facility and urge him to ensure timely announcements of contracts and to take future local job prospects into account when decisions about the procurement of new fighting vehicles are made.