

Tyne Bridge Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

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Post Office Closures

I was very concerned to learn that the Post Office is planning to close 9 sub-post offices in Tyne Bridge. The Post Office case for rationalisation on the basis of accessibility completely ignores the hilly terrain of Tyne Bridge, located as it is on the steep banks of the Tyne Valley with consequential difficulties for the elderly and infirm, or those pushing prams. And, it plans to close two Newcastle post offices simultaneously to get round the regulation that says if either were closed separately, the other would be protected under the half-mile rule. There is no doubt that changes are taking place that mean fewer people rely on the Post Office for some services. However, many still do and they are often those who are least able to adapt to alternatives.



Launch of 'Yes' Campaign

I joined Parliamentary colleagues and others - 'celebrities' like Sir John Hall pictured right - at the London launch of the campaign for a positive vote in the referendum for an assembly for the North East. This marks the beginning of a year of political campaigning, for local and European elections, and that will conclude with the regional government referendum scheduled for next October.



Meeting with YHA

Joyce Quin and I met with the Chief Executive of the Youth Hostels Association to discuss the Association's plans for a hostel in Gateshead Old Town Hall. The planned 120 bed hostel would replace the 60 bed hostel currently located in Jesmond.





Parliament

The proceedings of the House of Commons before Christmas were dominated by the Chancellor's **Pre-Budget Report**.

In a world downturn, Britain has achieved growth with low inflation and with high employment - inflation is at its lowest for 30 years; interest rates at their lowest since 1955; more people are in work than at any other time in our history; and we have an economy that has grown, free of recession, in every quarter since 1997 as opposed to American and half the Euro area countries that are struggling with recession.

So, the challenge of this PBR is to lock in our financial stability, fund our additional obligations to the war against terrorism and in Iraq; secondly to step up the pace of economic reform to strengthen Britain's enterprise culture, British science and the flexibility of the British economy and thirdly, an additional investment in Britain's children to ensure that all British children have the best possible start in life.

Broadly, in addition to a raft of economic measures - such as the introduction of a new consumer prices index as an assessment of inflation, which the Chancellor has pegged at an upper limit of 2%, extensions of tax relief on investment in research and technology, exploration of North Sea oil fields, employer study and skills training schemes - the PBR heralded additional help with childcare by allowing tax free childcare costs of up to £50 when provided by an approved carer in the child's own home, and an increase in the child element in the new tax credit from April by 13%, an extra £3.50 per week.

And **maximum help for the first child, £27 per week in 1997, will rise in April to £58. For two children, from just £44 per week in 1997 to £100 per week.** Finally 'to help alleviate the worries of council tax payers', the Chancellor also allocated an extra £406m - in England £340m - for local authorities, free of ring fencing. Unfortunately, as he used the same skewed formula that drove down Gateshead and Newcastle's allocation the first time round, neither authority received the levels of help meted out elsewhere.

The week before Christmas saw the introduction and First Reading of the **Traffic Management Bill** which then received its Second Reading this last week; The **Human Tissue Bill** was also introduced just before Christmas, and the **Higher Education Bill** was introduced this week which outlines the Government's proposals for students' funding and will be debated later in the month. The House gave Second Readings to the **Child Trust Funds Bill**, the **Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Bill**, the **Horseshoe Betting and Olympic Lottery Bill**, and the **National Insurance and Contributions Bill**.

Statements to the House included those from the Prime Minister on the **European Council**, the Defence Secretary about the Defence White Paper and Operations in **Iraq**, and from the Foreign Secretary on **Libya**.

General

I attended the Northern Group of Labour MPs and the PLP. As chair of the Select Committee inquiry into coalfield communities, we visited Easington and Dearn Valley to see how effectively government policy is working. I took a delegation of North east **Neighbourhood Youth Officers**

to meet Children Minister Margaret Hodge to discuss the effectiveness of government programmes for young people. This was a useful meeting that I hope leads to the more effective use of government resources as they affect young people. I have also met with the Sports Minister to discuss the greyhound racing industry, and the Crown Prince of Bahrain to discuss the emergent democracy in his country as well as wider Middle East issues. I was also able to meet representatives from SIGOMA, from commercial radio companies in the north east, and from the Youth Hostels Association.

I attended the London launch of the **'Yes North East'** (regional government referendum) Campaign and the inaugural meeting of the newly formed **Amicus Parliamentary Group** that has arisen out of the amalgamation of the AEU and MSF unions..



Constituency

I was delighted to be able to present certificates of achievement to students at **Newcastle's Oakfield College** just before Christmas, and I was also very pleased to be able to attend the **Eid celebrations** in Gateshead Civic Centre (below) organised by the Gateshead Ethnic Minorities Group.



The Tyne Bridge and Gateshead East Christmas Social launched the festive celebrations. Many thanks to all who organised a very successful event and contributed to an enjoyable evening.