

# Tyne Bridge Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

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## Newcastle Warm Zone Launch

I was joined Newcastle's Lord Mayor as she launched 500 balloons to mark the start of the **Newcastle Warm Zone Project** at **Atkinson Road Primary School**. This is the largest fuel poverty project in Britain to date and aims to ensure that no-one in the city is spending more than 10% of their income on heating their homes to an adequate level - currently about 29% of the city's households. Under the scheme - run jointly by the council, Scottish Power and Transco - thousands of households will qualify for free energy efficiency improvements, with many more getting improvements at a discounted price.

## March for Jobs

**Ashok Kumar MP** and I joined representatives from **Amicus**, the **GMB**, **T&G** and **Unison** in a march from the Quayside to the City Centre.



## MPs Back to School Day

As part of the **National 'MPs Back to School' Day** on 23 April, I attended **Brighton Avenue School** in Gateshead and **Hadrian School** in Newcastle to talk about the importance of education, and especially to children in poorer countries who don't have the same opportunity to attend school. It gave me great faith in the future to hear the youngsters expressing such concern for others.



(above, discussing politics with Brighton Avenue students, and right with Hadrian School children who used food technology to compare life with a child who had no such access to education.

## Comment

The 'big news' this last month was of the Prime Minister's so-called U-Turn on the question of a **referendum on the new European Constitution**.

After months of stories screaming for a referendum and Tony Blair's intransigence in refusing to agree, the press now have their *new* story - that the Prime Minister has reversed his previous policy.

Personally, I think the episode demonstrates two things - one, that the Prime Minister recognises political reality when he sees it (surely a good thing?) and two, that most sections of the media are determined to attack a successful Labour Government one way or the other.

(I was amazed to hear that the Express had decided to withdraw its support from the Government. Call that support? (*'Not as we know it, Jim'*))

It's also pretty rich to hear calls for referendums coming from the Tories, a Party not renowned for holding any referendums on any subject when in power - including joining the EU in the first place and the more far-reaching Maastricht Treaty - and opposing the regional government referendums in Parliament.

The other news this month has been the **continuing difficult situation in Iraq**, exacerbated by the publication of photos firstly showing American soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners, but then some very suspect photos of British soldiers carrying out similar abuses. Investigation of the authenticity of the allegedly British photos are continuing, but there can be no-one who was not horrified and appalled by the casual insouciance towards the Iraqi prisoners' rights as human beings. *This was not why we liberated Iraq.*



## Parliament

**Statements** made this past month have, of course, included the Statement from the Prime Minister about the new **Europe** which, on 1 May, grew from 15 to 25 countries and which will unify Europe for the first time since the travails of Communist dictatorship in eastern and central Europe. This included the announcement that the UK would hold a referendum on the new European constitution. Subsequent Statements from Ministers clarified the position of the Accession nationals vis a vis UK benefits and access to social housing - which is, broadly, that they **must** be in work (in which case they might have access to tax credits) but that there will be **no** entitlement to UK unemployment benefits or income support.

Other Statements included one on the **Middle East Peace Process**, and on **Council Tax Capping**. This outlined the Government's plans for action against the local authorities that have set budgets that 'impose unreasonable burdens on council tax payers'. Whilst there is no local council in the northern region, the **Cumbria police authority** and the **Durham Fire authority** have been given notice for next year.

Other business included the conclusion of the **Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill**, the Second Reading of the **Finance Bill**, and the remaining stages of the **Scottish Parliament (Constituencies) Bill**.

I have also met with constituents taking part in a lobby about the **Incapacity Bill**, attended the usual **PLP** and **Northern Group** meetings and meetings of the **ODPM Select Committee**.



## Constituency

It was a sad day, truly the end of an era, when S&N announced the closure of the **Tyne Brewery** and the acquisition of the **Federation Brewery** in Gateshead. But times change, and the fact is that only a handful of clubs now buy their beer exclusively from the Fed and there is more Newcastle Brown Ale sold in Washington DC than Washington Tyne and Wear.

Whilst I am relieved that the brewing industry will continue on Tyneside - even if only in a reduced form - there will inevitably be some redundancies. I have therefore had meetings with both S&N and Federation management and Federation union representatives in a bid to smooth out and clarify potential problems. I have also tabled an Early Day Motion, and done several radio and newspaper interviews on the subject.

Together with colleagues from the Northern Group, I have also attended a meeting with members of the **North East Assembly** to discuss the forthcoming referendum on regional government and met with representatives from **Elswick Mosque**. I joined Newcastle's Lord Mayor in a balloon launch to publicise the start of the **Newcastle Warm Zone Project** at Atkinson Road Primary School, and went back to school myself - to Gateshead's **Brighton Avenue** and Newcastle's **Hadrian School** - by taking part in an event organised by Oxfam to highlight the complete absence of educational opportunities open to half the world's children.

*Finally, good luck to all candidates standing in the forthcoming local elections. Let's keep Tyne Bridge a Lib Dem free zone!*