

# *Tyne Bridge Constituency Labour Party* **Parliamentary Report**

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## *Parliamentary Labour Party Centenary*

I never thought I'd see or hear the whole Commons Chamber reverberating to 'The Red Flag'. The first 29 Labour MPs elected in 1906 would have been proud!



The 29 MPs of the Labour Representation Committee transformed themselves into the Labour Party following their election. The new Party represented a fusion of several different strands - Trades Unions, the Fabian society, the Co-operative Movement, and the Socialists - all united in their belief that the working class needed its own political party.

Would those early Party members recognise the Labour Party today as their heirs?

The early Party argued for reform rather than revolution - and their philosophy was more that of social philanthropist Robert Owen than the radical militancy of Karl Marx, they recognised the failure of individualism to create a decent life for four fifths of the people, and sought to build a mass democratic socialist society gradually through education and peaceful democratic channels. Methodist lay preacher Arthur Henderson, self-taught dock worker Will Crooks, and of course Keir Hardie, miner and journalist, also self-taught, were typical of this group of radical non-conformists advocating policies first put forward by Tom Paine in his 'Rights of Man' - the vote for all *men* over 21, progressive taxation, family allowances, old age pensions, a minimum wage, maternity grants and the abolition of the House of Lords. Actually Hardie later came under fire from his fellow Party members for his support of the women's suffrage movement, self-rule for India and equal rights for non-whites in South Africa, forcing him to resign from leadership of the Party in 1910.

Just as 'The Red Flag' echoed around the Chamber, so does this fundamentally ethical vision of justice and equality continue to reverberate in the Party today. Some may sneer but the truth is that, thanks to progressive taxation, since 1997 resources have been distributed to the poorest in society via tax credits and child benefit; a minimum income guaranteed for pensioners; a health service offering excellent service fast and free; a decent education for all children; equality of opportunity in employment, education, health regardless of race, religion or sexuality and, finally, it is this government that has ended the outdated system of hereditary peerages that those early pioneers so much wanted to achieve. True, the 1906 intake would not be familiar with the way in which we have achieved many of their aims but yes, I believe Keir Hardie would be proud to sit alongside the men, and so many women, black and white, who are today's Labour Party members in the House of Commons.

## Comment

Yes, **Dunfermline** was a very bad result for us, lets make no bones about it. This was a strong Labour seat and we should not have lost it. But we are the governing party, in government now for 9 years and voters have a nasty habit of kicking the incumbents in by-elections. The election was fought, and won, on local issues. the Tories - despite the much-heralded Cameron Factor - were absolutely nowhere; and the SNP flat-lined. There are lessons to be learned - one is how much personal support Charles Kennedy attracted in the campaign, but perhaps that's more a lesson for the Lib Dems. Now, however, that Cameron has returned from paternity leave espousing truth, beauty, mother/fatherhood, compassion in his party's vision mark four, it will be interesting, especially here, whether the Tories have more impact in the local elections, especially with Menzies Campbell as the new Liberal Democrat leader.



## Parliament

Finally, after considerable debate over the past few weeks about the **Education White Paper**, the Bill was published. There is no argument about a desire to raise standards, particularly for the disadvantaged. But, whilst there have been some concessions, I still have concerns. As both a 'rebel' and a 'dinosaur', I was invited to express my concerns to the PM. There have been changes to the original proposals in the White Paper and there are aspects of the bill that are welcome. Perhaps further examination in committee will produce more improvement?

I am continuing to talk to colleagues about this bill to decide on the best way forward.

I also took that opportunity to raise my concerns with the PM that the financial shortfall following by the decision to grant **free bus travel to pensioners** has still not been resolved. I also raised this point, and others relating to the detail of local government finance, during a debate on the grant settlement and also in Questions to the Leader of the House.

I also spoke in the debate on the **Health Bill**. My position was not to oppose a ban on smoking but to support the rights of non-profit-making members' clubs to regulate themselves. In the event a total smoking ban in public buildings was agreed.

Other legislation debated this month included the **Anti-Terrorism Legislation** and **Identity Cards**, when amendments proposed by the Lords' were considered by the Commons.

The Commons vote on ID cards did not quite go according to the government's plan, thanks to the absence of many Labour members, including the Prime Minister.

Statements included one from John Hutton announcing a **radical redesign of child support** and a package of measures to get tough on parents who shirk their responsibilities.

I was also able, as a member of the Transport Select Committee, to question the Director of the **Highways Agency** as to that agencies 'Article 14' policy which is virtually stifling much-needed economic development along the A1 and A19. He has been told to produce a full report to the committee on this policy and it's consequences for the fight to reduce regional disparities.



## Constituency



### *Elgin Centre*

If there is a single idea that can be said to epitomise the Labour Party's philosophy, it has to be **Surestart**. And nowhere demonstrates the benefits better than the **Elgin Centre** in Deckham. Thanks to government and council funding, the Centre has grown from a tiny community scheme

into a virtually all-encompassing project offering a fantastic range of facilities, services, advice and information to support some of the most vulnerable families in the surrounding community. If the management committee could deal with funerals, it would indeed be a cradle to grave centre. As it is, new parents are supported and helped with parenting skills, there is a crèche, nursery and after-school club, training and re-training facilities, advice and support to encourage people into work and help keep them there, groups for young and the less-young to meet—the list is endless, and I was delighted to be in attendance at the **official opening** of this Centre by **Cherie Blair**.