

Gateshead Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

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Spartan Steel - Good News for Manufacturing



I stood on the picket line when the former owners sacked the workforce and it was good to meet the new owners who have revived the business and won an award for one of the region's fastest growing firms. We discussed future prospects and local concerns about noise and pollution and I was pleased to be assured that these issues were being addressed. (Left, with new Chief Executive Ian Hardy)

On the Buses

As a member of the Parliamentary Transport Select Committee, I was heavily involved in its investigation into the operation of bus services and took part in radio, television and newspaper interviews to talk about the Committee's report and the ways in which I believe services can best be improved to the benefit of the people and the local economy. Efficient, convenient and affordable public transport is the key to fighting congestion. (right - the Politics Show studio)



Stadium Visit



As committee chair involved in the original decisions to develop and expand Gateshead Stadium, its been fantastic to see how the Council have continued to encourage the Stadium's growth, to benefit local athletes and local residents alike. I joined other Honorary Aldermen for a visit to the new state-of-the-art training facility.

New Freemen of the Borough



I have stood shoulder to shoulder with Joyce Quin and Tom Burlison on many issues affecting the region and Gateshead, so I was delighted to be able to do so again when Gateshead council awarded them the highest honour, the Freedom of the Borough.

Trinity Centre

As Honorary President I chaired Gateshead Trinity Community centre's AGM and, as usual, have nothing but admiration for people like Treasurer Ken Middleton (left with me and Cllr Angela Armstrong) who devote so much time and effort to helping this valuable community resource. I was also able to help the Centre's funding problems a little by hosting a National Express seminar about their cross-country rail franchise bid (right National Express' Malcolm Pheasey, making a donation, and centre workers Kath and Gina)



Comment

Impossible not to make comment about the Saddam Hussein 'guilty' verdict. Such is the state of disintegration in **Iraq** that it is impossible to say how matters will now develop - Saddam's death will remove a defiant symbol but may equally create a martyr for Sunni insurgents, Arab nationalists and Islamist extremists everywhere. If a new Iraq is ever to emerge, replacing judicial murder by national reconciliation might be a good place to start, no matter how understandable the thirst for revenge.

In the meantime, both the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary have reiterated that troops will be withdrawn as soon as possible - but that will not be until the Iraq police and armed forces are able to maintain stability and security. And before that can happen, allied forces have to remain to help restore the law and order so evidently missing now.

Climate Change hit the headlines this month, with the publication of the **Stern Review**. The science of climate change is undisputable and the costs of inaction will be far higher than tackling climate change now. Urgent action is needed, in the UK and internationally, points I made when I spoke last month at the Friends of the Earth Newcastle Conference on the subject. I welcome the proposed **Climate Change Bill** which will, amongst other things, create a new domestic legal framework for emissions reduction and establish an independent Carbon Committee.

Many people like a bet now and then, but gambling can get out of hand and I was pleased to see the UK taking a lead on **online gambling** by hosting an international summit to ensure safeguards for children and vulnerable people.

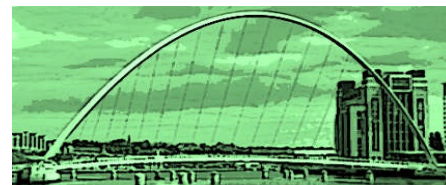
Parliament

A busy few weeks in Parliament as amended legislation came back from the Lords' for Commons' consideration. One such was the **Education and Inspections Bill**. I originally voted against this bill. I do not want Gateshead's children educated in schools run by Tory millionaires and radical evangelists. I maintained my opposition by refusing to support some of the government amendments to the Bill - one of which gives faith schools the right to discriminate against staff on religious grounds.

Other Bills included the **Animal Welfare Bill**, the **Police and Justice Bill**, the **Road Safety Bill**, the **Fraud Bill**, the **Violent Crime Reduction Bill** and the **NHS Redress Bill**. Please contact my office for detailed briefings on these.

Statements included one on the **Local Government White Paper**. Good in parts - a reduction in the targets set by central government and a promise of more power devolved from the centre - councillors would have greater freedom to speak up for their communities, and local citizens would be empowered by a new Community Call for Action. But I'm dubious about the benefits of some of the rest. The 'elected mayor' school of thought reappears - authorities can choose between an elected mayor, or a leader with executive powers on a 4 year mandate;

I met with constituents who travelled to London as part of the **NHS Together** campaign. I support the Early Day Motion that recognises the additional resources pumped into the NHS but also says budget cuts in some trusts are hindering the ability of health professionals to deliver the best possible health service, and urges a closer working between health unions and trusts.



Constituency

The Report into **bus services** published by my Transport Select Committee excited considerable interest. We must have a much greater degree of local control over bus routes, and I will do what I can to ensure that comes about.

The Passenger Transport Authority, **Nexus**, already hard hit by the cost of providing pensioners' free bus travel, may face a second year of cuts unless funds are available to cover concessionary travel and I am meeting with Ministers to try and avoid further deterioration.

Whilst low paid workers rejoiced when the **Minimum Wage** went up to £5.35 per hour, it spelt bad news for many carers. That extra £1.60 in her pay packet meant one of my constituents lost entitlement to the Carer's Allowance of £46 because it put her over the weekly earnings threshold. I have been trying for some time to persuade Ministers to review rules for the **Carers' Allowance** so that working carers only lose the Allowance on a sliding scale when they earn over the £84 per week threshold, and I have discussed this with the Secretary of State who has promised to look again at this issue.

In addition to constituency engagements the front page, I also met with **Gateshead Leader Mick Henry**. I was pleased to be able to report a successful meeting with **Local Government Minister Yvette Cooper** which led to government agreeing to Gateshead's request for funding for the former **freightliner site**, off the Felling by-pass, which is integral to the Council's regeneration plans.