

Gateshead Constituency Labour Party Parliamentary Report

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School Visit

It's always a joy to meet the electors of the future, and I was delighted to have the chance to talk to Year 6 pupils at Oakfield Junior School about democracy in general and the way in which Parliament works in particular. I was impressed both by the searching and detailed questions posed by some of these youngsters, and their concern about their own communities - definitely some future politicians here!



Carers' Rights Petition

The Government has already helped carers - by increasing the Carers' Allowance and by increasing the earnings limit to £95 per week. But 7 December was Carers' Rights Day and, to help mark it, I presented a petition to the House of Commons signed by just under 3000 people in

Gateshead calling upon the Government to introduce a taper so that working carers did not forfeit their entire Carers' Allowance when their earnings went pennies over the earnings limit, and allow pensioners to benefit from the Carers' Allowance.

North East Economic Forum

I spoke to Communities and Local Government Minister Hazel Blears about funding for councils when she was in Gateshead recently. The government have now lifted the 'double damping' on social services spending but this has not improved the financial position of Gateshead council. More needs to be done to inject fairness into the local government finance system.



Arctic Star

I was very pleased to be able to attend the formal presentation of the Arctic Star to my good friend and former Parliamentary colleague, Gordon Bagier (*left*), who

served in the merchant navy keeping supply lines open during World War II



Gateshead Diwali

Last month I attended the Muslim Eid celebrations that marked the end of Ramadan, and this month (*left*) I attended the Hindu Diwali (*festival of light*) celebrations and enjoyed

the food and the excellent display of traditional dress, the music and the dancing in Gateshead Civic Centre.



Lung Cancer Awareness Month

I visited Lobley Hill Pharmacy to show my support for the campaign by pharmacists to raise awareness of the importance of the early detection and diagnosis of lung cancer. Pharmacists have an important role to play in improving the health of the local community. As well as a rather sinister display of healthy lung/diseased lung, the Lobley Hill Pharmacy also has a gadget that measures the level of carbon monoxide in the blood and, watched (*left*) by pharmacist Sami Hanna and Gateshead PCT director Tony Atkinson, I gave it a go and got a clean bill of health.

Comment

Personally, I think the media frenzy has completely spiralled out of control. It almost borders on hysteria that so many column inches should be devoted to David Abrahams - a Martian watching our media would think he was a cross between a mass murderer and child rapist instead of a bloke who's only crime was to try to give his own money to the a political party anonymously. And with the press now crawling over every inch of his life, it is perhaps understandable why he sought anonymity.

The Northern Rock situation certainly posed a financial crisis - but it was scarcely the government's fault that a smarty-pants whiz kid created a precarious financial house of cards that virtually collapsed when the American economy hit hard times. Nor was it the government's fault that a clerk in the child tax credit office decided to entrust sensitive data cds to the post. But the hyenas are now circling with *retired* Army officers criticising the government's commitment to the armed forces and the Tory media taking full advantage.

Perhaps the recent political donation problem was an accident waiting to happen. And it's true that none of this would have happened under a Tory government. There would be no continuing Northern Rock crisis - because they would have let it go under back in June. There would have been no problem with missing cds - because they would not have created a child tax credit system to help Britain's working families. There would have been no criticism of a Tory government from the retired colonels - why would they criticise their mates? And there would have been no political donation problem because

Tories would never have brought in an Electoral Commission and rules governing transparency of funding. And considering the role and status of Tory benefactor Lord Ashcroft, and £2.5m the Lib Dems received from jailed fraudster Michael Brown, the opposition parties are in no position to criticise

But, in the end, the loser will be democracy. 'Politics' has now been attacked for so long by a cynical and manipulative media that the public is losing all trust and faith in all politicians. And in the long run that will be very damaging to our democracy - but hey! that will be another good story for the press.



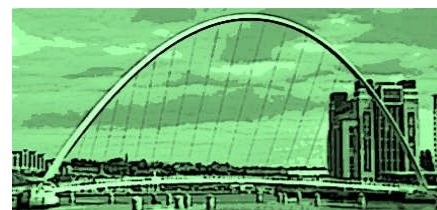
Parliament

Meanwhile the real work of government goes on and legislation in the Queens Speech has now been introduced - the **Housing and Regeneration Bill**, the **Child Maintenance Bill** and the **Health and Social Care Bill** received Second Readings in the Commons, whilst the **Climate Change Bill**, the **Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill**, the **Children and Young Person Bill** and the **Local Transport Bill** have all started the legislative process in the Lords.

Debates - predictably - included a debate about party funding. Like many colleagues, over the past few days I've done my best to try and balance the 'dodgy donation' press coverage, via my web site and on local radio, and I also took the opportunity to do so again in the Debate.

I've also been able to ask Questions about Northern Rock, and raised with the Prime Minister the point that a region-wide concessionary travel scheme for

young people is a good way of helping them access the many further education and training opportunities that are available across the North East..



Constituency

As well as events on the front page I have had meetings with the Leader of Gateshead Council, the North East Chamber of Commerce and representatives from Tyne Tees television.

I have also been in contact with Gateshead's NHS Trust chief executive to discuss the future of Dunston Hill hospital - a review has been necessitated because the building, already hindered by poor public transport links, needs a considerable amount of costly modernisation work and the safety of staff and patients is at risk. It is proposed that a health facility will remain on site, limited to weekdays and 9am until 5pm, and the services currently provided will be relocated to the QE and also to the new community health facility proposed for Blaydon.

I also attended the annual Remembrance Day Service at Gateshead Cenotaph.

It is with the deepest regret and sadness that I report the death of Dave Padgett. I attended the funeral at Saltwell Cemetary. Dave was a staunch trade unionist and Party member for many years. He was a good and loyal friend and was committed to the last fibre of his being to strive for the good of his community and his colleagues. He will be sorely missed but always remembered.