

Gateshead Constituency Labour Party **Parliamentary Report**

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Budget 2008

Offered the chance of a private pre-Budget chat with Alistair Darling, I naturally took it! I was able to speak to him about the Carers' Allowance, the Metro re-ignivoration plans, the problems encountered by the Council with the British Rail Residuary Body's intransigence over their Felling by-pass site, the future of Northern Rock's staff and the Northern Rock Foundation.

Question Time

I have had the opportunity to ask several Questions to Ministers this month. I asked the Prime Minister, to intervene in the problems Gateshead Council has encountered with the Freightliner site on the Felling bypass. I then asked the Chancellor about Northern Rock and the Liberal plan to nationalise before even trying to find a suitable alternative, and the Tories' proposal which would have let it sink. Last week I asked Transport Minister Ruth Kelly when she would be making a decision on the much awaited go-ahead for the reinvigoration proposals for the Metro system. I was encouraged by Ruth Kelly's reply to the latter and expect an announcement on this soon.



Temporary and Agency Workers (Equal Treatment) Bill



I was proud to support Andrew Miller's Private Members' Bill which addresses one of the most important employment issues since the implementation of the Minimum wage.

How can it be right for people to work alongside one another with the same skills, doing precisely the same task, yet one employee is valued less than the other?

Contrary to the Tories' spin, this Bill is not opposed in principle to the employment of agency or temporary workers but argues that they should not be routinely used to dodge the cost of sick pay, holiday pay, pensions or any other part of the package available to permanent employees, and considered basic employee rights. Interestingly, the Liberal benches in the Commons were almost totally empty - not a lot of support there for the working man! Following the vote Labour MPs met for a photograph and sang the 'Red Flag'.

Comment

The ripples of Derek Conway's unique interpretation of 'jobs for the boys' continue, with the House authorities bringing in new rules about MP's staff, their salary levels, public declarations that will have to be made by MPs employing family members and a new raft of regulations governing the use of MP's allowances.

Most of the latter seems to me to be usual good practice - I have no problem with submitting yet more receipts with my claims - but I bitterly resent the implication that employing my wife suggests some improper and corrupt practice. I also wonder just how many more administrative staff will be needed to examine, question and collate all these new pieces of paper that will be flying around and how much time MPs will have to spend book-keeping every month.

The barrage of media attention appears now to have largely coalesced around the Speaker of the House of Commons and the '*outrageous expenditure*' by his wife of the equivalent of the taxi fare from Kings Cross to Westminster.

Another interesting factor in this is that not one single constituent has written to me about this whole issue.

That might be for a number of reasons, not that it does not resonate with the electorate, but I suspect that one reason is that this is a *media-led* attack - especially now - with the concentration on the Speaker because the media snobs cannot come to terms with a working class man becoming speaker. This is one of the highest positions in the land an ordinary citizen can attain - yet the media denigrate and belittle it while in other parliaments it is respected for its importance regardless of the background of the office holder.

In the end democracy will be the loser as voters are increasingly turned away and turned off politics.



Parliament

'**Europe**' has been another big topic this month in the 'when is a Treaty not a Treaty' debate. I've had a very small postbag on this too. There has been no betrayal of manifesto promises as alleged. The promised referendum was on a constitution that was killed off when the French and Dutch rejected it. *It is dead, it is no more, it is an ex-constitution.* The truth is that the Tories and the anti-Europe brigade have been playing political games instead of engaging in meaningful debate.

Gordon Brown's first **Budget** as Prime Minister has, of course, been the big news item. Alistair Darling has not been dealt a good hand - within days of becoming Chancellor and delivering 2007 Pre-Budget report, he has had to contend with fire-fighting at Northern Rock, missing tax discs, a slowing world economy, rising inflation and, underlying it all, the down turn in the global financial market.

The Government's long-term objective is to maintain economic stability in order to achieve the objective of a fair society with security and opportunity for all.

The UK economy has continued to perform strongly, better than other G7 nations, employment is at a record high and unemployment lowest for 32 years.

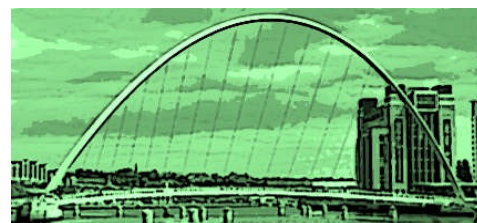
So, **Child Benefit** has increased, the Child element of the Child Tax Credit has increased, and over 60s will get an extra £50 **Winter Fuel Allowance**, £100 for the over 80s. **Alcohol duty** has also increased as has **tobacco duty**, but the **fuel duty increase** has been postponed.

A £200m package over the next 3 years will bring forward the government's ambition for at least 30% pupils in every school achieving **5 A-C grades at GCSE**, including Maths and English. This was a 'green' Budget that also introduced **5 year carbon budgets** and new car tax bands from 2009 to reward 'clean car' drivers as well as threatening action to **eliminate single-use carrier bags**.

The Budget also includes measures to deliver decent and **affordable housing** for all, and includes short-term measures to help small and growing businesses,

Other Parliamentary business has included Northern Rock's **Temporary Ownership Bill**, and the decision about shareholders' compensation.

Other legislation has included the remaining stages of the **Health and Social care Bill**.



Constituency

Since the last GC meeting, I have attended the new Constituency's first ever social occasion addressed by the Foreign Secretary David Milliband. The event was a huge success and my congratulations to all who worked hard to make it an enjoyable and memorable event.

I also attended the first ShiNE awards held in Gateshead Hilton Hotel marking local government achievements in the region.

This weekend the Tories hold their **Spring Conference** at the Sage. I am glad to see the Tory pound boosting our local economy but I doubt they will boost their pathetic showing in local elections here.