

Gateshead Constituency Labour Party **Parliamentary Report**

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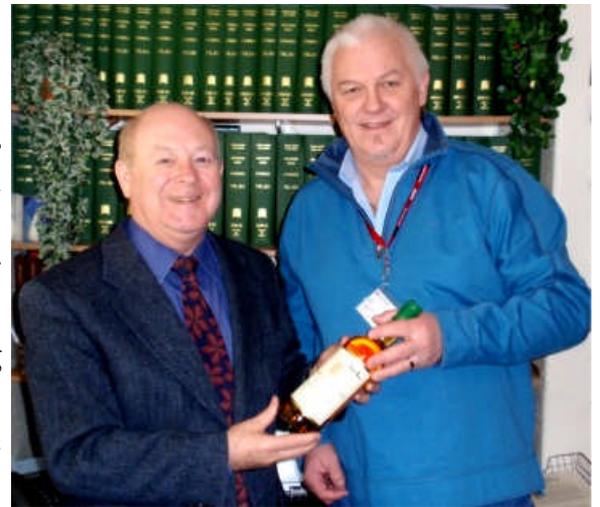


Gateshead College - Continued Success

With an 83% success rate putting it in the top 10% of colleges in the country, officially named top college in the region for the delivery of apprenticeships and now also described as 'outstanding' by Ofsted, Gateshead College can justifiably claim to be one of the best in the country. I recently visited to meet the new Principal, Richard Thorold (pictured left to right with Vice Principal Kim Davies and Richard Thorold)

Gateshead Youth Visit to Ghana

Gateshead's Youth and Community Learning is sending a group of 8 young people to Ghana in West Africa to help build a school in a small village. As well as a chance to make a real contribution, it's a chance for young people to experience a vastly different culture, and I was delighted to be able to help their fund-raising activities by donating a bottle of House of Commons whisky signed by the Prime Minister. (pictured left with Gateshead Youth Worker John Bell)



The Northern Way



Our transport system is crucial if the £30bn annual productivity gap between the three northern regions and the rest of England is ever to be closed. The Northern Way is a bold initiative, set up to enable the northern regions to work

together by producing plans such as the Strategic Direction for Transport, launched in the House of Commons. (above, with the Report's author Professor David Begg and Transport select Committee Chair Louise Ellman MP)

Open University

I am delighted that the Open University decided to locate its regional office here in Gateshead's fast-growing Baltic 'knowledge campus' and met with Regional Director David Knight and Student Services Manager Mick Golding to talk about future plans.



Comment

With the worst economic situation since the crash of 1929, and a bloody war unfolding in Gaza, 2009 did not have an auspicious start.

Grim financial news comes in almost daily - car sales down 37% from a year ago; icons of the high street have either gone bust or announced job losses; Nissan, previously thought of as the backbone of the regional economy, has announced 1200 job losses; house prices have slumped to a two-year low; the pound has fallen to a 13 year low against the euro.....the list goes on. Interest rates now sit at a historic 1.5% but even this could be just a brief stop on the way down to virtual zero.

But against the background of doom and gloom, the British government is working furiously to make sure that the economic downturn does not turn into a full-blown recession. Gordon Brown is The Man With The Plan, and I welcomed his interventionist approach such as income tax cuts, VAT cuts, schemes to help homeowners threatened with repossession, schemes to help the long-term unemployed and graduate employment, and I expect to see more such initiatives in and running up to the spring Budget.

I also expect to see more compulsion on the banks to unlock the credit squeeze - the original bank bail-out did prevent a catastrophic implosion of the financial system but has failed to completely unlock the credit markets (house prices are unlikely to recover soon when first time buyers, for instance, find it so hard to actually get a mortgage; businesses can't expand if banks won't lend the money) but the government has recognised the need to encourage the banks to

release credit - hence the scheme to guarantee loans to small and medium-sized businesses. After all, it's us - the tax payer - who ploughed in the money to save the banks' hides!

I also welcome the Prime Minister's plans for economic stimulation, for spending on infrastructure projects such as super-fast broadband, high-speed rail links and renewable energies, which I hope we will see benefiting the northern region.

2009 also started with a horrific attack by Israel on Gaza. Israel has had, without doubt, suffered from the rise of Hamas and its intransigence but there can be no excuse for the brutality of Israel's invasion. Israel can have had no doubt about the civilian casualties that would inevitably result from such a heavy military operation in such a densely populated area. And I am sure that members will be as appalled as I was to learn of the accusations from both the Red Cross and the UN itself of Israeli breaches of humanitarian law during the conflict.

This is a conflict that can only be resolved through international diplomatic pressures, and it was disappointing - although not entirely unexpected - that America should abstain from the UN resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire. I hope that the incoming Obama administration will move in a more enlightened direction - the international community has an important role to demonstrate that the threshold of unacceptable behaviour has been transgressed.

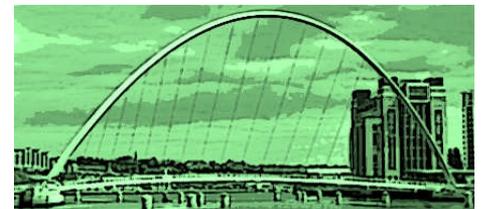
The alternative is the almost certain revival of extremist groups, disillusioned by an apparently western-centric ineffectual political process and empowered by the message of violence and conflict.



Parliament

Some of the Bills announced in the Queen's Speech - the Banking Bill, the Saving Gateway Accounts Bill, the Business Rates Supplement Bill - introduced into the House before Christmas for instance received their Second Readings this last week.

I was also able to raise the case of a constituent who, despite suffering from prostate cancer, has been found 'fit for some work' and must sign on for JSA even though he is 63 and highly unlikely to ever work again. I suggested in the Welfare Reform debate that people like him should be allowed to 'self-certify'.



Constituency

Before the Christmas recess, I had the opportunity to meet with the new Principal of Gateshead College. It's great to see that its achievements have been recognised in the recent Ofsted report, and I congratulated all involved when I visited.

I also visited the Open University's new regional headquarters next to Gateshead College and I was pleased to be able to donate a bottle of whisky signed by the Prime Minister for auction by young people from Gateshead, who are busily raising money to fund a visit to Ghana where they will help to build a much-needed school room in a small village.

*Best Wishes to all for
2009*