



Valerie Welcomes Minister to Joseph Leckie Academy



I was pleased to welcome the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb MP to Joseph Leckie Academy earlier this month so he could see for himself the conditions of the Academy's 1939 main teaching block. Accompanied by the Academy's Principal, Keith Whittlestone, and other senior staff, I told the Minister that there was an urgent need to secure funding to replace the block. I showed him water damage in the Library and damp in the stairwells, as well as a toilet block, closed owing to its state of disrepair and classrooms with damage from leaking walls and ceilings.

I explained that the Academy had previously secured funding for a complete rebuild under Building Schools for the Future which was cancelled in 2010. The Academy is currently bidding for £3.9 million to construct the second new teaching block which will enable it to put the 1939 main teaching block out of use. The outcome of the bid will be known in March this year.

Pleck Library Demonstration



Thank you to those of you who responded to my invitation in the December edition of my eNews and came out on Saturday 9 January 2016 to demonstrate against the proposed closure of Pleck and South Walsall Libraries. There was a large demonstration which showed the strength of feeling in the local community against the closures.

The Library is very well used by the community in Pleck. One of the people who came to demonstrate told me that she works at a local school and many pupils use Pleck Library for their homework. Libraries are a crucial investment in our children's future. The library is also used for an over 50s club, a knitting club and a Beginners' IT club amongst others. Walsall MBC has unallocated reserves of more than £10 million. Just a fraction of this would secure the future of the library for years to come.

NHS and Social Care Commission Debate



I spoke in the Backbench Debate on the NHS and a Social Care Commission on Thursday 28 January 2016. I spoke against the Motion which was calling for a Commission on the long term future of the NHS and Social Care.

In my view, the evidence that health and social care must be integrated has already been presented in numerous reports of the Health Committee which I was a member of from 2010-2015. During my time on the Health Committee I witnessed integrated care in Torbay and Greenwich. I was not persuaded that a Commission is necessary to make further progress on this issue. Ultimately it is for the Government to listen to the evidence from the Health Select Committee and other organisations like the King's Fund and the Nuffield Trust.

Bill Madeley, MBE RIP



I attended and read the funeral on Tuesday 26 January 2016 of Bill Madeley MBE, Councillor for Bentley and Darlaston North for 40 years from 1971 to 2012. He had served as Mayor of Walsall and as Leader of the Council. More recently, he was made a Freeman of the Borough. The picture to the left shows Bill with the Reverend Jesse Jackson and myself in 2013. Bill's legacy can be seen every day in Darlaston. He was instrumental in the opening of the Library and the Swimming Pool. He was appointed MBE in 2006 and made an Honorary Freeman of the Borough in 2010. Bill was so popular in Darlaston that he became known as "Mr Darlaston." He won not only the support but also the affection of the electorate.

BBC Sunday Politics



I took part in a debate on the BBC Sunday Politics West Midlands on 10 January 2016. We discussed whether Birmingham Airport should be able to offer lower rates of Air Passenger Duty; I pointed out that Wales and Scotland have reduced Air Passenger Duty at their airports, which puts English regional airports at a disadvantage in comparison. On the EU referendum, I argued that we should have the referendum sooner rather than later as the current uncertainty is unhelpful. We also discussed Council reserves, I pointed out that much of the funds councils hold in reserves are already allocated for specific future expenditure on areas such as health and social care. But unallocated funds can be used to protect frontline services. The programme is available to watch whenever on the BBC iPlayer until 9 February 2016.

Maintenance Grants Scrapped



Once again, the Government attempted to sneak through important sweeping changes through the parliamentary procedure of a statutory instrument, in order to avoid proper parliamentary scrutiny. HM Opposition Labour Party held a debate to annul Government proposals to scrap maintenance grants. These changes target students from the lowest income families and it is disabled, ethnic minority and older students who will primarily be affected. There was no mention of these proposals in the Conservative Party Manifesto 2015. Unfortunately the statutory instrument was passed. The results were Ayes 292: Noes 306.

Google Tax Settlement Question to Minister



The Chancellor tweeted that the Government had reached an agreement with Google for the repayment of unpaid taxes. Some experts estimate the payment to be equivalent to a 3% tax rate. Quite rightly people are outraged by this settlement. At Urgent Questions, on the settlement I asked the Financial Secretary to the Treasury to clarify the misinformation about Google's theoretical tax liability under the law. He responded that "the statutory rate for Google is exactly the same as the statutory rate for everybody else". I was disappointed with this response. The Minister did not acknowledge that other taxpayers ultimately have to pay more to make up the difference or suffer the consequences through spending cuts.

Science and Technology Committee



The Science and Technology Committee published its second report of session 2015-16, *Science in emergencies: UK lessons from Ebola*. This report analyses how the Government communicated on Ebola to the UK public and the structural weaknesses in the UK's capacity to absorb and withstand shocks to the systems arising from the unlikely but possible domestic outbreak of Ebola.

On 18 January 2016 we received the Government's response to the Report which is now published. The Committee heard evidence from Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Sajid Javid MP. I asked the Secretary of State for a timeframe of when the Government is likely to respond to the Paul Nurse Review and whether Innovate UK and Research UK will fit together or whether they will be two separate forms of governance. The Secretary of State responded that the Government will formally respond to Sir Paul Nurse's review in the coming months with further details of our plans to create Research UK.

English Language Tuition



Earlier this month, the Prime Minister announced a £20m fund for English Language Tuition. This was a clear admission that the Government got it wrong in July when it withdrew funding worth £380,000 for English tuition at Walsall Adult and Community College (WACC). I raised this at Business Questions to the Leader of the House and have written to the Prime Minister to ask for this funding to be restored to WACC.

When I visited WACC's Weston Street Centre in December and spoke with students and their tutors a tutor told me about a former student who had arrived with little or no English but following tuition at WACC had gone on to establish a successful business as a driving instructor. This shows the difference English tuition can make to people's lives. I wrote to the Skills Funding Agency on 30 July 2015, immediately after funding was withdrawn to ask for this short-sighted decision to be reviewed. I also raised the matter in a question to the Leader of the House on 17 September 2015 and wrote to the Skills Minister on 23 November 2015.

Operation Black Vote Celebrate Record Number of BAME MPs



On 13th January 2016 I attended a reception to celebrate the historic number of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) MPs. The event was hosted by Operation Black Vote, an organisation which formed in 1996 when only 5 MPs were BAME. The current number of BAME MPs is 41, which is still just 6.3% of all MPs despite Britain's population being 12.9% Black & Minority Ethnic. BME councillors present 4.1% and BME Lords are at 5.3%. OBV has played a great part in encouraging people to register to vote, and to vote, and to encourage BAME candidates.

Whitehall Nursery and Infant School visit to Westminster



I was delighted to meet Whitehall Nursery and Infant School on Wednesday 6 January 2016 for a Tour of Parliament. I told the children the story of Emily Wilding Davidson, a Suffragette campaigning for votes for women, who over the night of the 1911 census hid in a cupboard by St Mary Undercroft Chapel, near Westminster Hall where we were sitting, so she could say her address was the House of Commons.

News in Brief

I asked these questions to Ministers in the Chamber:

- To the Foreign Office Minister if he will take on board the 36 points of action agreed at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting Women's Forum which I attended to ensure that women are not left behind.
- To the Home Secretary at the Statement on the Litvinenko Inquiry, whether she would join me in thanking British Scientists whose work uncovered the truth of what happened.
- To the Health Minister at the Statement on Infected Blood, given medical records, what evidence will be required from people applying to the new scheme.
- To the Education Minister what support will be given to help schools accommodate the extra intake from the provision of 30 hours free childcare to parents of 3 and 4 year olds.

Westminster Hall chairing:

The Second Delegated Legislation Committee on the Draft national Minimum Wage (Amendment) Regulations 2016 On Monday 11 January 2015.