



Westminster Report

from **Caroline Spelman, MP for Meriden constituency**

Winter/Spring 2003

www.carolinespelman.com

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SCHOOLS COME TO WESTMINSTER



Caroline Spelman MP visits Bishops Wilson Primary School, Chelmsley Wood, which scored highly in its latest report from Ofsted.

THE PAST YEAR has seen a number of local schools visit the Houses of Parliament or receive visits from local MP, Caroline Spelman.

Under the auspices of the National Curriculum, students now study a course in Citizenship. A visit to Parliament provides students with a first hand look at how Parliament works. Mrs Spelman is able to arrange tours for schools which may include sitting in on a live debate in the House of Commons.

Commenting on the visits to Westminster by students, Mrs Spelman said, "I welcome invitations from schools to come and visit Parliament and I do my best to arrange my diary so I can meet the students when they come.

"It is vitally important that as these students come up to voting age, they understand how the political system works and how they can be effective

citizens. A visit to Parliament - the heart of British politics - brings this to life and makes it real for them".

Mrs Spelman has also visited a number of local schools where she has taken part in lively question and answer sessions, attended speech and presentation ceremonies and in one school spent the day teaching Year 9 students as part of their citizenship course! "I meet informally with head teachers, school staff and students on a regular basis. It is so important for me to be kept informed of the educational needs and successes of the Borough and, by keeping a finger on the pulse, I am in a better position to raise your issues as a priority in Westminster."

If you would like to arrange a school tour of the Houses of Parliament, or would like any further information on how Parliament works, please contact the office of Caroline Spelman MP on 020 7219 4189 or email caroline@carolinespelman.com



Welcome to the October edition of Westminster Report. The heatwave in August is distant in my memory as attention now turns to Christmas, which seems to come upon us quicker every year.

With the last parliamentary year dominated with international issues such as Iraq and national issues such as hunting, we wait with anticipation the State opening of Parliament in November where the Government will set out its agenda for the forthcoming year.

No doubt Iraq, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe and many other "hot spots" will continue to impact on my role as Shadow Overseas Development Secretary. However, on a domestic level, amongst other things, we anticipate new legislation to tackle domestic violence. The Government keeps promising

to find parliamentary time for a High Hedges Bill, something many of you have contacted me about, but it remains to be seen whether this will appear on their agenda for the year ahead.

This is a jam-packed edition of Westminster Report including information about the new Pension Credit, which now affects all pensioners; an update on the airport and the regeneration of Chelmsley Wood and surrounding areas.

I welcome this paper as a means of keeping in touch with constituents and keeping you up-to-date with some of what is going on locally and in Westminster.

Spelman warning: pensions are in crisis

Caroline Spelman has warned local residents that pensions are in crisis. "Some reasons for this are under Government control," said Caroline, "some are not. But where the Government does have influence it needs to do better."

The Government is about to introduce a new change in state provision. Pension Credit, which began earlier this month, replaced the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) and is designed to lift older people out of poverty by guaranteeing a minimum income and topping up savings.

Caroline commented: "My concern is the increasing dependence on means-tested benefit. It is predicted that the new credit will extend means testing to over half of all pensioners."

The Pension Credit has two elements: the Guarantee Credit and the Saving Credit. The Guarantee Credit replaces the MIG by providing a safety net level of income below which no pensioner should fall. The major change is the Savings Credit which rewards pensioners who have a second pension or modest savings and is worth up to a maximum of £13.80 a week for single pensioners and up to £18.60 a week for couples.

"Figures show that 670,000 eligible pensioners lost out on up to £820 million last year because they did not receive the Minimum Income Guarantee which the Pension Credit is going to replace," said Caroline Spelman MP. "I fear that the same problems will inflict the Pension Credit resulting in pensioners not receiving the support they deserve."

"My heart goes out to Britain's pensioners. Having watched both my parents struggle on a fixed income in retirement, I realise how disappointed many people feel that the State does not give adequate provision."

You can telephone The Pension Service to apply on 0800 991234 and will need National Insurance details, information about any income and any savings or investment you have. If you do have problems please contact me.

MP SLAMS DENTIST CRISIS

Four years ago, the Government pledged that everyone would be able to see an NHS dentist within two years. Four years later people are still waiting for the Government to deliver on its promise and still waiting to see an NHS dentist.

Caroline said: "The Government prides itself in a world-class health service which is free and accessible to all. But the evidence clearly shows that these principles do not extend to the dental services available on the NHS and Meriden is no exception to the rule."

Commenting on the severe shortage of NHS places, local MP Caroline said, "Many of my constituents are suffering from the lack of investment in dental services and have written to me because they cannot find an NHS dentist and simply cannot afford to pay to go private."

"Our local dentists are good but many have

decided to close their books to NHS patients because the way the Government has organised this service makes private working more attractive. People are faced with the choice of travelling further to find an NHS dentist, registering on long waiting lists or just not going at all. This is bad news for the dental health of our nation and completely unacceptable in the 21st century".

Following scenes in Carmarthen, West Wales, when 600 people queued outside a dental practice in the hope of claiming one of three hundred new NHS places, the Government announced a shake up in dental services, promising to provide £10 million to a scheme to help Primary Care Trusts

take over funding and commissioning of local dental services by 2005.

"The scenes in Carmarthen were like that in a Third World country where you have to queue to access what ought to be part of NHS care," said Caroline Spelman. "Thankfully we have not reached that situation yet in Meriden, but I truly hope the changes in dental provision will make a difference, although it is ridiculous that we will have to wait until 2005!"

"In the meantime many of my constituents will be denied access to the NHS treatment which they have paid for through National Insurance contributions. This is completely unacceptable and I have written to the Health Minister, Rosie Winterton and raised these concerns with her".

Caroline calls for a fair deal for poor on world trade

Friday 24th June saw the start of this year's Trade Justice Movement 24 hour lobby of Members of Parliament. The campaign calls for a radical overhaul of the rules governing international trade so that the poorer nations get a fairer deal.

Local MP, Caroline Spelman, held a special Trade Justice Surgery at Knowle Parish Church with many constituents attending. In response to the lobby, Mrs Spelman said, "I congratulate the Trade Justice Movement and my constituents for taking the time to raise with me the issues surrounding world trade and poor countries. It is vital we secure a fair deal for developing countries concerning world trade. One only needs to look at the last trade rounds where Haiti had no representative compared with 500 plus from the European Union to see that urgent reform is needed".

To coincide with the lobby, Caroline, Shadow Secretary of State for International Development, pushed for one of the special days allocated to the Conservative Party to hold a debate on, 'A fair deal on world trade'. This was welcomed by Members from all parties and proved to be a well-attended and high-quality debate. The need to reform the Common Agricultural Policy is crucial to securing fair terms of trade for poor farmers, but also our own farmers need to see a reform of this policy which no longer serves them well.

The nationwide lobby also provided the perfect opportunity for Mrs Spelman to launch the proposal for an Advocacy Fund, which would enable developing countries to have access to high quality legal and economic advice during trade negotiations to bring them on to an even playing field with developed countries. The Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer have agreed to consider the proposal.



MP visits troubled hotspots

The past year has required Shadow International Development Secretary, Caroline Spelman, MP for Meriden, to make visits to developing countries to see how UK taxpayers' money is being spent and what more needs to be done. Amongst other things, Mrs. Spelman has met peace negotiators in southern Sudan, UK government funded projects in Malawi, mine clearance units in Afghanistan and has made a couple of trips to Kuwait to meet those injured in the recent conflict in Iraq.

Ali Abbas, one of the victims of the conflict in Iraq lost both his arms and suffered severe burns. The bomb attack also claimed the lives of his parents, other family members and his home. "Ali's picture stuck in my mind," said Caroline, "I was determined to do everything possible to help him. We decided to launch the Ali Fund in the House of Commons. The response was amazing and the Fund raised enough money to support Ali and other children in similar situations to him."

Caroline helped to bring Ali and another Iraqi boy, Ahmed, to the UK to receive specialist prosthetic and rehabilitation treatment in the London Roehampton hospital. "Ali and Ahmed are doing really well under the specialists. However, there are many Iraqi people in similar situations but without access to the same world-class medical care. What is desperately needed now is a specialist centre to be set up in Iraq and I am urging the Government to establish one as a priority."

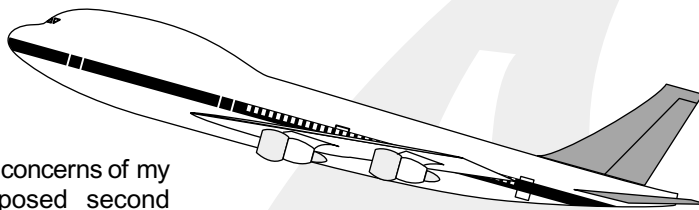
TOP: Caroline campaigning to end Third World Debt with athletics champion Steve Cram.

MIDDLE: Dangerous work at the Halo Trust Landmine Clearance in Afganistan. BOTTOM: Caroline welcomes brave Ali and Ahmed the the UK.

Solihull redevelopment plans *update*

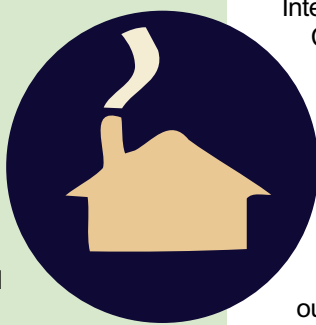
Eighteen months have passed since the Government announced proposals for a second runway at Birmingham Airport. The local MP, Caroline Spelman, continues to receive letters from worried constituents whose properties are blighted by the threat of expansion.

Mrs Spelman said, "I share the concerns of my constituents about the proposed second runway to Birmingham International Airport and continue to raise these worries at every possible opportunity. I have met the Secretary of State for Transport, Alistair Darling, and relayed our concerns. I have also forwarded him hundreds of letters I have received and taken part in debates in Parliament".



Improving housing for Solihull residents

SOLIHULL IS TO receive up to £63 million over the next five years to improve Council Housing. Solihull is one of only thirteen councils in England awarded a place on the Government's 'Arms Length Management Organisation' Programme.



A new organisation, Solihull Community Housing, will be responsible for carrying out the day to day management of housing, and making improvements to people's homes, including new bathrooms and kitchens, wiring and heating. Solihull Council will continue to own the properties and act in a 'landlord capacity.'

Welcoming the additional funding, local MP Caroline Spelman said, "The extra funding is long overdue. It has always been difficult to persuade Whitehall of the special needs of north Solihull. Civil servants in London tend to look at statistics for the borough as a whole. My constituents: the residents, will welcome the extra investment which is so desperately needed to bring some of the housing stock up to a higher standard."

She added, "This is just one example of the rejuvenation and regeneration currently happening in Chelmsley Wood and the surrounding area with plans for the redevelopment of Chelmsley Wood town centre already in motion. We could see redevelopment underway next year. This extra housing money will be available at the end of 2004 and not a moment too soon".

So, how does the current situation stand? It is one of uncertainty. On 30th June, the Government's consultation period closed. This leaves everyone concerned, facing an anxious wait for the Government's announcement on the future of air travel which has once again been delayed and is now expected early 2004.

Interestingly, at the end of July, the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee produced a report which questioned the Government's predictions of the growth in air travel and described the proposed growth in emissions by the Aviation Industry as 'unsustainable and unacceptable'. In response to this report, Mrs Spelman said, "the environmental effect does not outweigh the economic benefit as many of you have outlined in your letters. Let us hope the Government heeds this advice when

making its decision".

As well as the possible airport expansion, the widening of the M42 is on many people's minds. A new traffic pilot scheme on the M42 will commence in January. An Active Transport Management Scheme will come into operation with the intention of improving traffic flow. It will include initiatives such as the use of the hard shoulder in peak times.

Local MP Caroline Spelman remarked, "we have all experienced the frustrating feeling of being stuck in gridlocked traffic on the motorway in what seems like a giant car park. The Active Transport Management Scheme is definitely worth a try for this reason alone. But it could have been tried much earlier. This constituency has suffered historically from piecemeal decisions about the transport infrastructure and nothing seems to have improved".

Everything you wanted to know about ... The State Opening of Parliament

The main ceremonial event of the parliamentary year, the State Opening of Parliament, will take place next month and marks the start of the parliamentary session. The Queen delivers a speech from the throne in the House of Lords in the presence of members of both Houses. The Commons is summoned by 'Black Rod' and in a symbol of the Commons' independence, the door is slammed in his face and not opened until he has knocked on the door with his staff of office. State Opening has to take place in the Lords because the Queen is not allowed into the House of Commons Chamber. This dates back to the time of Charles I during the power struggle between the King and Parliament which ended with civil war and the King's execution.

Before the State Opening, the cellars of the Palace of Westminster are still searched by the Yeoman of the Guard (Beefeaters) - a precaution dating back to the Gunpowder Plot of November 1605.

Although the speech is made by the Queen, the content of the speech is entirely drawn up by the Government and approved by the Cabinet. It contains an outline of the Government's policies and proposed legislative programme for the new parliamentary year. The final words of the speech "other measures will be laid before you" give the Government flexibility to introduce other legislation as necessary.

Caroline Spelman MP speaks at the Despatch Box at the House of Commons



Caroline is often asked by constituents to sign Early Day Motions (EDMs) on a variety of issues. But what are they?

EDMs are a way for MPs to put on record their opinion on a subject and canvass support from MPs from all parties. Rarely debated on the floor of the House of Commons but the more signatures an EDM has the more notice is taken of it.

Caroline has signed 196 EDMs in the last parliamentary year, including:

- 1563 Hallmarking
- 1532 Alzheimer's Awareness Week 2003
- 1521 HIV/AIDS and Children
- 1480 Fair Trade Food and Drink Products
- 1442 Food Supplements (England) Regulations
- 1421 Trade Justice Movement
- 1316 Human Rights in Burma
- 1315 Democratic Republic of Congo
- 1258 Fluoridation of Public Water Supplies
- 1074 Doorstep Recycling
- 1068 British Farming Campaign
- 966 Food Supplements Directive
- 923 Carers Week 2003
- 815 Community Pharmacies
- 720 Future Development of Air Transport in the UK
- 685 Ambulance Waits at A & E Departments
- 630 Post Office Card Account
- 628 Winding up Arrangements for Pension Schemes
- 603 Impact of Foot and Mouth Disease
- 534 Famine and Debt Relief in Ethiopia
- 470 Angola

Your MP supporting local charities

RIGHT: Caroline helps at the Pets in Need of Vets (PDSA) stall at the Solihull Carnival held in June this year.

BELOW: Caroline takes part in the Knowle Fun Run.



CALLING ALL YOUNG PEOPLE GET YOUR VOICE HEARD!

We hear a great deal about voter apathy and young people being 'turned off' by politics, but one cannot make such a blanket statement. Solihull has a Youth Council which meets regularly and is dedicated to helping young people in the borough with local issues and concerns by offering advice, funding and a voice.

One of the members, Matthew Bond commented, "Thanks to the support of organisations such as Solihull Council and young people willing to give up their time, we can help make this borough a better place for young people to live".

Matthew was recently elected as a member of the UK Youth Parliament along with James Doris, another member of Solihull Youth Council. The UK Youth Parliament, which meets annually and is open to young people aged between 14 and 18, is now in its second year and is starting to get fully recognised by Government and local councils as the voice of youth across the UK.

Local MP, Caroline Spelman recently met Matthew, James and other members of the Solihull Youth Council in Westminster. Caroline commented, "I am impressed by their commitment and interest in the wider community. I hope more young people will go on to participate in politics more fully. Politics can be fun and there is no harm in starting early!"



Need to contact your MP?

Caroline Spelman

Member of Parliament for Meriden



If you need help or advice about an issue that is concerning you, contact me at one of these addresses:

House of Commons,
London
SW1A 0AA
Tel: 020 7219 4189
Fax: 020 7219 0378
caroline@carolinespelman.com

or

Meriden Constituency Office
2 Manor Road
Solihull
West Midlands
B91 2BH
Tel: 0121 711 2955
Email: meridencon@clara.net

Alternatively, surgeries are a good opportunity for me to meet constituents and help with any problems you may have. Here are the forthcoming dates for surgeries in the constituency:

Saturday 1st November

9am-10.30am, 11am-12pm
Chelmsley Wood Library, Arden Hall,
Castle Bromwich

Friday 14th November

4.30pm-6pm
Balsall Common Library

Saturday 29th November

9am-10.30am, 11am-12pm
Chelmsley Wood Library, Arden Hall,
Castle Bromwich

Friday 12th December

4.30pm-6pm
Balsall Common Library

MP's new website launched

Meriden MP, Caroline Spelman recently relaunched her website, with new features including a more user-friendly layout, information about Caroline's work in Meriden and Westminster and a new search facility.

Speaking about the new website, Caroline said,

"I feel it is very important to be accessible to my constituents and the Internet is an excellent tool to facilitate this. It is a way of engaging people of all ages in politics with the work their elected representative is undertaking. As more and more people go online, this form of communication is becoming increasingly important.

She added, "It is amazing that since I have had a website more of my constituents have felt able to contact me. I welcome the opportunity to provide an additional means of contact in this new 'information age'. You can log onto my new website at www.carolinespelman.com"

www.carolinespelman.com