

Paul Holmes Maiden speech

Paul Holmes (Chesterfield): 22 Jun 2001

I am very pleased to be able to speak in the debate on the Queen's Speech and pleased but somewhat nervous to be making my maiden speech. I am nervous, first, because I have spent my whole adult life so far as a historian studying and teaching the history of this country, the development of our democracy and the workings of the Chamber. Actually to sit on the green Benches and contribute to the debate is more than a little awe-inspiring. I thank the voters of Chesterfield who have placed their trust in me by returning me as the first Liberal Democrat MP for Chesterfield and the first Liberal MP since 1929.

Secondly, I am nervous because I am more than conscious that I follow in the footsteps of one of the leading political figures of the past half-century. Tony Benn, the previous Member for my constituency, was highly regarded in Chesterfield as a good constituency MP who helped a great many local people with a huge variety of problems. He was always willing to take up any cause and never reluctant to tackle his own local Labour councillors when he thought that they were wrong. He extends that approach, of course, to his party nationally and to the present Labour Government. He is a passionate and eloquent advocate of his beliefs to which he always remained faithful, however controversial they were.

I was privileged to hear Tony Benn speak many times in Chesterfield and on occasion, over the years, to put questions to him and debate with him. I disagreed with him on much of what he said but no one could ever doubt the sincerity and passion with which he holds his views. I hope that we shall hear much more from him in years to come, and that he has indeed, as he said, stood down to spend more time on his politics. His place in the political history books is assured, beginning with his first entry when he rewrote constitutional law by establishing the right of peers to renounce their title to stand for election to this Chamber.

My constituency was described during the election by Matthew Parris of *The Times* as a hard-bitten town. I can forgive Matthew much as he was the only national print media journalist to spot and predict openly that we were on course to win Chesterfield, but as an honorary Chesterfieldian--I have lived there for 22 years although not for my whole life--I must defend it against that description. Chesterfield was an engineering and mining town as well as a market town. Stevenson, the great railway engineer, made it his home in the 19th century and is buried in the church around the corner from where I live. The mines have all gone now, although I had the privilege of going down Markham pit as the guest of Chesterfield miners about two years before the pit was finally closed. Much of the heavy engineering has regrettably gone too, including Markham Engineering, which built the channel tunnel boring equipment. More recent blows have fallen in the past few months on old industries such as Donkins and Dema Glass. However, although the town suffers higher than average unemployment, it is beginning to recover from those blows. New industries, especially light engineering and high-tech computer firms, are locating and expanding in the area.

Chesterfield also has a great deal to offer as a market town, with the largest open air market in the country in continuous use since the middle ages. A new shopping centre opened last year. The world famous crooked spire is still there. It did not straighten up in shock at the election result as Matthew Parris predicted it might. Chesterfield has its own place in history with the Revolution House museum. In 1688, it was a small isolated country inn where the Duke of Devonshire and others met in secret to plot the revolution of that year--a revolution that although it contributed to some religious bigotry was none the less a landmark in the development of democracy in this country.

Chesterfield is an excellent tourist base as a gateway to the splendours of the Peak district and to the wonders of Chatsworth house, Hardwick hall and Haddon hall. Wherever one stands in Chesterfield, one can look up and see fields and moorland surrounding the town, giving it a pleasant and open aspect. We also have an excellent football team, which has done remarkably well in recent years despite problems with its management, its finances and the previous Minister for Sport. Its success in recent years has done much to boost the town's morale and community spirit.

I should like to reassure the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) that all Liberal Democrat Members oppose the national missile defence system. It is based on technology that does not work and that will be immensely expensive to develop to a point where it still could not work 100 per cent. The very process of developing that technology will destabilise the 1972 anti-ballistic missile treaty and the many advances that have been made in the past 10 years in the cause of nuclear reduction and world peace.

I almost prefer the system of nuclear-free zones, in which I used to live--first, in Sheffield in the 1970s, and then in Derbyshire in the 1980s. We could always rest secure in our beds in the knowledge that we would somehow be exempt in the event of nuclear war because our road signs told us that we lived in a nuclear-free zone. Perhaps I should write to President Bush with my suggestion; he might take up the idea. Like NMD, it would not work in the slightest, but it is far cheaper and does not destabilise world peace.

I hope that the House will indulge me slightly if I return to yesterday's lead debate, in which I had hoped to make my maiden speech.

For the past 22 years, I have been a secondary school teacher. For 12 of those years, I was the head of a sixth form. I also have three children of school age, who are currently at school in Chesterfield. I have some knowledge of our state education system from both sides of the fence--as a teacher and as a parent, or in the horrible words that Governments prefer to use about our public services these days, as a producer and as a consumer. Two of those who opened Wednesday's debate emphasised that they had not attended public school. I would add my own disclaimer to their comments, and I think that that matters because more than 92 per cent. of our children are educated in the state system, not in the public school sector. As the former Member for Islwyn, Neil Kinnock, said so passionately, they owe their life chances to the state system. I was the first member of my family, living on a large council estate in Sheffield, ever to go to university, and it transformed my life. I very much doubt whether I should have been able to take that opportunity, back in 1975, if my then unemployed father and I had been faced with the prospect of yearly tuition fees and a £10,000 to £14,000 debt on graduation. I have spent the last two thirds of my teaching career working in what have been controversially described as bog standard comprehensive schools. Hon. Members can imagine how my teaching colleagues and I felt about that description of our life's work. However, as I am supposed not to be controversial in my maiden speech, I shall leave the details to hon. Members' imaginations on this occasion.

There is an often-professed vision behind the Labour Government's approach to education, education--a vision that I can share and applaud, even if I have doubts about the reality of its implementation. I suggest that all Governments would do well to spend a little more time consulting the work force before

Paul's maiden speech continued

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launching into schemes that sounded good when their advisers drew them up, but which revealed their flaws when imposed too quickly and without consulting those who have to deliver them. The recent problems with the introduction of AS-levels are a classic example. Long-suggested and generally welcomed by teachers as a valuable way to widen our over-narrow and prescriptive academic curriculum, AS-levels were introduced far too quickly and without enough practical planning. Last summer, I had to scrap a successful and innovative A-level course, and then at very short notice and with no extra money to buy brand new textbooks, which had not even been written for a brand new course, a colleague and I had to prepare and teach the new AS-level. It was February of this year before I attended an exam board course that gave me the final information on how the course would be taught and examined, yet we were already 70 per cent. of the way through teaching it and the course work exams were imminent. If we as teachers had problems, hon. Members can imagine how the students felt. They have been the guinea pig generation for the national curriculum, for SATs and now for AS-levels, none of which was planned, introduced or funded properly. Of course, hon. Members do not have to take my word alone on that. Nick Tate, the then head of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority said recently that the AS-level scheme, which he helped to devise, seemed like a good idea at the time. Having just completed his first year as head of a school, he now says that he can see the problems and the miscalculations, which could have been avoided. That lesson should have been learned after the rushed introduction of the national curriculum, which has had several major rewrites since the late 1980s. Like managers in industry, Governments of all parties would do better if they carried their work force with them after consultation rather than regarding staff as an enemy within who inflict scars upon one's back. In principle, I welcome the secondary schools review. We should never be complacent; we can always improve. However, I hope that the Government will work through and with teachers and public sector workers rather than imposing measures on them, regardless of their professional judgement.

Overworked and overloaded AS students

Paul intervened in the highly controversial subject of AS levels on 26 June

"I respect the contribution made by the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Paul Holmes), on the basis that he has direct experience, having been a classroom teacher before entering this place." **The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis)**

I (Paul Holmes MP) thank the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the Minister for allowing me to contribute briefly to the debate.

In my maiden speech on Friday, I said that as a teacher for 22 years, a head of a sixth form for the past 12 years and, until about seven weeks ago, a teacher of an AS-level course, I thought that AS-levels had been introduced far too quickly. They should have been introduced next September at the very earliest, rather than last September. There are various reasons why teachers, students and universities think that the experiment with AS-levels has been rushed and not properly thought out. Students have been over-worked and overloaded. They have had no time for the extra-curricular activities in which they used to participate in schools and to which they used to contribute so much.

The exam timetable has been very badly planned in recent weeks. On several occasions, students have had two or three exams on the same day, often necessitating staying overnight with teachers because exams clashed the next day. The whole thing should have been more carefully thought through from that point of view. Universities have made it clear that they are not interested in the key skills qualification, and they are even starting to say that they will not consider the AS-level qualifications but will wait for the full A-level results, as under the old system. There has been no time for the sort of extra activities and the development of course work that normally took place in year 12 in sixth forms. Finally, planning has been far too rushed and there has been a lack of funding for the new courses. I had to scrap an innovative A-level course that had run very well for 20 years. I had to introduce a brand new one, with no extra money to buy new text books. The new text books were not even on the market because they had not yet been written for a course that had only just been introduced. The whole thing has been rushed, as the national curriculum was in the 1980s.

Paul condemns "Fat Cat pay increases for Railtrack & opposes pay increases for MPs

Local Chesterfield MP, Paul Holmes, has spoken out against the latest fat cat, pay rise announced for Railtrack chief Steve Marshall.

"To increase his pay from £400,000 to £450,000 is incomprehensible" he said. "This is a 12.5% increase which is massively above the level of Inflation. How can a company which has such a poor record and which is heavily dependant on taxpayers money possibly justify this? After giving a £1 million pay off to Gerald Corbett the previous boss of Railtrack this is just adding insult to Injury"

"Taxpayers money should not be used to reward failure in this way. Liberal Democrats believe that **Railtrack should become** an independent, publicly owned company"

"Many MP's have complained about Railtracks use of public money in this way. But last week MP's voted themselves a very much smaller but still above inflation pay rise of £2,000. I voted against that last Thursday and supported an alternative proposal to link future pay rises for MP's to the average awarded each year to Teachers, Nurses, Doctors and Dentists"

"It is true that British MP's are paid below the levels of their counterparts in Western Europe or the USA. But so are British Nurses and Teachers. I don't see why MP's should be treated better at taxpayers expense than other public sector workers are when it comes to above Inflation 'catch up' pay awards."

"Although teachers and nurses had a better pay settlement this year it was election year and the Government were keen to try and keep the voters happy. I know from bitter experience as a teacher for the last 22 years that such generosity' is not likely to last now that the election is safely out of the way."

JOB LOSSES

Commenting on the latest news of job losses at local firms Fusion, Robinsons and Dema Glass Paul Holmes MP for Chesterfield said:"This is yet another blow for the Town which over recent years has suffered badly from the closure of traditional industries such as the Mines and Heavy Engineering. With unemployment already higher than average Chesterfield people have been hit hard by the most recent job losses at Biwater and Dema and now have been hit again by the latest announcement."

"Things simply have not got better under New Labour who seem to sit on the sidelines helplessly looking on while Britain suffers a record Trade Deficit due to the artificially high value of the pound against the Euro. Any company in Britain which exports its products is being hit by this and that includes many Chesterfield companies such as Fusion, Robinsons and Dema. When Dema Glass first went into receivership some months ago they specifically quoted the high value of the Pound as a factor hitting their exports and Chesterfield jobs."

"Gordon Brown must come off the fence on this issue rather than allowing these job losses to continue in towns like Chesterfield. It is also a disgrace that British workers, as some in Chesterfield have discovered recently, have far less job protection and rights to consultation than do their counterparts in Europe. It was no surprise that the Conservatives refused to adopt EEC Directives protecting workers rights but that a Labour Government has continued to drag its feet on this issue is appalling."

CAMPAIGN TO SAVE LOCAL HEART-LUNG TRANSPLANT CENTRE FROM CLOSURE.

12/7/01

Chesterfield MP, Paul Holmes, along with MP'S from Yorkshire joined local transplant patients today in a delegation to lobby John Hutton Minister of State for Health.

The deputation was part of an ongoing campaign to save transplant facilities at Sheffield's Northern General Hospital.

Paul said "The Government is considering closing a number of Transplant Centres, possibly reducing the original eight to as few as four. The local centre at the Northern General is one of those being considered for closure. We think this would be a bad decision because:

1. It would leave local patients and their families travelling anything from 90 - 200 miles to the nearest remaining centre.
2. The expert team in Sheffield would be broken up and lost to the area.
3. The Transplant Centre in Sheffield has one of the best records in the country for post transplant survival (97% for heart and 100% for lung transplants). It has the shortest waiting time for pre transplant assessment, an excellent after care service and is based in a brand new £20 million unit."

Following today's meeting Paul said " I was privileged to listen to the eloquent case put by the four members of the the Sheffield Heart and Lung Transplant Patients Society. As a result of the points they raised I have submitted eight written questions to the Minister to help move their case forward."

PAUL HOLMES APPOINTED TO PRESTIGIOUS SELECT COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS.17/7/01

Chesterfield MP Paul Holmes, a local teacher for 22 years has been appointed to the prestigious Select Committee for Education and Skills. He said, "I am delighted and honoured to be the Liberal Democrat representative on this committee. Select Committees allow MP's to work together on non party political lines to scrutinise Government policy and to call it to account when necessary. Education has become a more and more important and controversial area of Government policy over recent years and this Committee has grown in importance as a result. As a teacher for 22 years, a Head of Sixth Form for 12 years and a parent of three school a, children in Chesterfield I have a lot of experience, knowledge and interest that I can bring to this job." he appointment was confirmed last night in the same series of votes that so dramatically saw angry Labour Backbenchers rebel against their own Government and inflict a humiliating defeat on it. Paul said, "The Government's control freak tendencies showed through again when they threw out respected Labour Chairs of Select Committees. They were annoyed that Qwyneth Dunwoody and Donald Anderson had led Committees that embarrassed the last Labour Government by highlighting failures in their policies. Yet this is precisely what Select Committees are supposed to do. They are not supposed to be cheerleaders for whichever Party happens to be in Government." "Over a hundred Labour MP's, already annoyed at the direction the Government is taking since the June 7th election, joined Liberal Democrat and other Opposition MP's in voting the Government down and reinstating Mrs Dunwoody and Mr Anderson to their previous committees by 308 votes to 221

MP CALLS FOR SAFER STATION 28 August 01

Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for Chesterfield, Cllr Paul Holmes, has written to the Manager of Chesterfield Railway Station urging him to apply for secure station status. Paul was reacting to figures showing that only 110 out of 2,500 UK railway stations have been accredited to date under the Secure Stations scheme, which does not include Chesterfield. The figures, obtained in a Parliamentary Question, show an increase of just under 2% in accredited stations since August 2000, when the Liberal Democrats last questioned the Government over the scheme. Paul Holmes MP, said: "The Government must stop dragging its feet on secure stations. Transport Secretary Stephen Byers must now explain how he intends to encourage train operators to get more stations accredited. "Up to now the scheme has been voluntary. It may be that the time has come for the Transport Secretary to include targets in train operating franchises across the board. "If we are serious about getting people to make more journeys by train, railway stations must be safe. Women, older people and children in particular deserve a guarantee that they will be safe before, during and after their journey. With all the money that has been spent on our station recently I would hope that money has been spent on making our station secure."

Hospital Meeting

Chesterfield MP, Paul Holmes, met with senior managers at the Royal Hospital on Friday 21st to discuss recent reports of problems at the hospital. SEPTEMBER 24TH 2001

Paul said, "The meeting was a very open and frank exchange of views. We did not go into detail on individual causes – I am writing separately about those. We had a thorough and detailed discussion lasting almost two and a half hours."

"The hospital management accepted that there were sometimes problems in delivering the levels of everyday care that staff wanted to provide because,

1. The Royal Hospital was only funded for staff at a level twenty-five nurses below the average for the area. The North Derbyshire Health Authority had agreed four years ago to increase this funding but had so far been able to provide less than half the money agreed upon.

2. The Hospital was also under pressure everyday due to the shortage of beds. They had asked for funding for three new wards and were being allowed the money to build two. But work would not start until 2002 and the wards would be open until 2003."

Paul said, "We also discussed how the Hospital complaints procedure worked. I was reassured to learn that they did review complaints regularly in order to identify and deal with any common problems that were occurring."

"I will be following up on all the individual cases that have been passed on to me and I will be visiting the Royal again later this autumn." "I would like to express my support and thanks for staff who do their best under difficult circumstances. My own family have certainly had cause to be grateful over the years for the excellent care they have received at the hospital."

"It is a disgrace that in 2001, our hospitals are still under-funded, short of beds and short of nurses. It is outrageous that staff and patients have to face such problems."

Hospital complaints are taken up by MP

Hospital chiefs are set for an emergency meeting with Chesterfield MP Paul Holmes after the treatment of a dying cancer victim triggered a flood of complaints.

Hospital chiefs are set for an emergency meeting with Chesterfield MP Paul Holmes after the treatment of a dying cancer victim triggered a flood of complaints.

Other horrified patients told Mr Holmes of poor treatment at Chesterfield Royal Hospital after the Derbyshire Times revealed how Lily Marshall (78) was allowed to fall out of bed and later died on a public ward.

Liberal Democrat MP Mr Holmes had threatened to take the matter to Parliament if the under-fire hospital failed to answer his calls for an emergency meeting to resolve the matter.

He said: "There is something clearly wrong because I have received a number of complaints about the level of everyday care.

"One patient was not provided food and was forced to go to the canteen, while another struggled just to get a glass of water.

"Bed sores have been allowed to develop in others and not been treated and another patient being treated for lung cancer complained about the lack of cleanliness and fears of infection."

The hospital explained Mrs Marshall, of Walton Drive, Chesterfield, was left on an open ward as there were no private side rooms available.

The Royal is investigating the matter, but Lily's relatives say they were told the ward was under-staffed.

Mr Holmes feels that if under funding is causing the hospital's problem, the Government should be targeted but if it comes down to careless staff then the hospital should be brought to book.

Hospital Chief Executive Avril Johns said: "We have an excellent complaints procedure and visitors must tell us if they aren't satisfied so problems can be resolved.

"We have written to Mr Holmes and offered to meet him and would welcome an opportunity for him to visit the hospital to see how we can work together to improve the service we provide." A date for the meeting has yet to be fixed.

Paul speaks up on student grants - 8th November 2001

On 8 November in a speech on Higher Education Paul said “ since the general election, the Government have accepted that they have got it wrong on student debt, access and retention. In a different area, they have admitted that they botched the rushed introduction of AS-levels, which will also have adverse effects on access to higher education, although those effects may only be short term. With the funding of students and further and higher education back in the melting pot, it is vital that the Government go back to the two reports. The evidence in them clearly shows that student debt and fear of debt are preventing full access by all social groups to higher education at under-graduate and post-graduate level and causing retention problems. That evidence has been further reinforced by the Cubie report in Scotland, and its implementation, and by the publishing of the Rees report on student finance in Wales. Labour Back Benchers may well tell us that the problems of student debt, access and retention are exaggerated, that only 50 per cent. of students pay fees because of means-testing and that loans are cheap and easy to repay. That would be pre-emptive spin from the Treasury, which, like the Prime Minister, must have been told by plenty of voters during the recent election campaign that debt and fear of debt are major problems. I was certainly told that on the council estates of Chesterfield. Let me give some personal examples. In 1975, I was the first member of my family to go to university. When I was offered a place, my father was unemployed and my mother was a part-time home help. I doubt that I would have gone to university if I had thought that I would leave with a debt of between £10,000 and £14,000, which is the average range of debt now. Twenty years later, I became a secondary school teacher and, for my last 12 years in teaching, I was a head of sixth form, or years 12 and 13. That involved guiding sixth form students through their higher education and job choices. The school at which I worked for the last 10 years took quite a number of children who were the first generation of their families to enter post-16 education, let alone higher education. It was difficult to persuade some to take that step. Some said that they had to go to work to contribute to the family budget. Some children of single parents said that they had to work to help with younger brothers and sisters. Other children and young adults had experienced family breakdown and could not rely on parental contributions, even if Government means-testing showed that their parents should contribute. For many reasons, people were put off higher education, and there was a noticeable increase in their numbers after the introduction of the 1997 regulations on paying fees and abolishing maintenance grants. The Government must review the overwhelming body of evidence on the issue. If students are to be asked to pay for the benefits of higher education, they must pay post-graduation, while they are earning, and not up front, while they are studying. The Government could consider a system of taxation that has been tried and tested, for which the bureaucracy already exists and which is fair and related to ability to pay. A graduate who became a low-paid nurse, social worker or teacher would not then be required to pay back the same amount as a graduate who became a highly paid lawyer, accountant or company director. I have heard it rumoured that such a system exists--it is called income tax. ”Earlier this week, I talked to students from the university of London. They told me that student friends of theirs had been denied further funding or loans because they were so much in debt with their previous student loans and tuition fees. Many people said that the problem would begin to bite in the next few years as the level of student debt rose from the average figure of between £10,000 and £14,000. Indeed, one or two such cases have been highlighted by the press during the past few months. If universities are suffering major problems in the recruitment and retention of postgraduate students as well as of undergraduates, the Government need to take action. The Government need also to consider other aspects of higher education expansion. It must be funded properly if the present 33 per cent. level is to be maintained, let alone increased to 50 per cent. It cannot be done by robbing one side to pay the other. One cannot rob the students to fund higher education, and one cannot rob higher education to pay the students; if one tries, neither will be done satisfactorily. The past few years have seen a 36 per cent. drop in the funding per student. There are more students in the system, and less is being spent on their education. The Taylor report showed that £900 million a year more is needed to provide adequate teaching resources. A crisis in staffing for universities and further education is imminent; unless the Government take action in advance rather than waiting until the crisis hits them, it will match the crisis that already exists in schools. I shall now comment on some aspects of university education for disabled students. The last school where I taught was very good on social inclusion, and over the past 10 or 12 years I have taught a wide range of children with various disabilities in mainstream classes. The youngest of those children is now a second-year student at university. She is registered blind as a result of three astigmatisms. When she came to look for a university place, she found that many seemed to offer good facilities for disabled students. However, on visiting them she found that the facilities often fell short, although not, I hasten to add, at the university where she now studies. I know that organisations involved with various disabilities are very concerned about some aspects of that problem. Amendments to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 which come into force next September will tackle quite a few of those problems, but still leave some pockets untouched which need to be tackled by appropriate legislation. Finance for disabled students also needs to be considered. They face the same rules on finance as other students, but they face extra difficulties. For example, the present system assumes that, these days, students will work their way through university. Disabled students find that much harder, although it depends on their disability. Some will not be able to get part-time work as easily as able-bodied students. Other disabilities, such as ME or multiple sclerosis, cause problems with fatigue; such students cannot work many hours, and if they are working on their degree and supposedly working to pay their way through university, they will face a double bind. Some of the rules on benefits and disability student allowances may cause problems for disabled students on part-time courses. Compared with able-bodied students, they may have difficulty moving in and out of the benefits system as they move between work and full-time education. It takes too long for the system to catch up with their movements. Many who receive the disabled student allowance find that the money paid to provide for extra facilities and transport requirements comes on stream only several months after their course has started, which creates major problems. A number of problems that specifically affect disabled students need separate attention, even though many of them are closely linked to the general issue of student finance

CONCERNS RAISED OVER IMPACT OF EMPLOYMENT BILL ON PARTNERS OF DISABLED

Paul Holmes MP, Liberal Democrats spokesman on Disabled Issues, has asked the

Government to reconsider the impact of the new Employment Bill. The requirement (clause 47) for partners of beyond claimant (such as invalid care Allowance, Severe Disablement and Incapacity Benefits) to attend work-focused interviews could be counter productive: Forcing the partners of disabled people to work may cause undue stress and worry especially where they have childcare responsibilities too. Forcing the partners of disabled people to work could also result in **more** paid care having to be provided during the partners absence at work. Paul said – “At the very least the government must review the training of those officials who will conduct partner interviews.”

PAUL ATTACKS THE GOVERNMENTS PLANS FOR A MAINLY UN-ELECTED HOUSE OF LORDS

Cllr. Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield has criticised the Government’s controversial plans for the second stage of House of Lords reform, Paul said, “Having entered Parliament as the new MP for Chesterfield in the Twenty First Century I am quite appalled to find that in many ways Parliament itself has barely entered the Twentieth Century. How can a modern democracy continue with one half of its Parliament being mostly un-elected? How can Labour politicians possibly face themselves in the mirror when their Government proposes to have as few as 20% of the House of Lords elected while 80% continue to be appointed to join the band known as ‘Tony’s Cronies? These plans are an affront to the basic principle of democracy, namely people’s fundamental right to elect their representatives.’

PAUL APPOINTED AS LIB DEM DISABILITIES SPOKESMAN

Cllr. Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, has been appointed Liberal Democrat Spokesman on Disability Issues in the House of Commons. Paul said, “I am delighted to have been appointed as the Liberal Democrat spokesman in the Commons on this important issue. “Over the last twenty-two years I have taught children at secondary school level with a wide range of disabilities from deafness and partial sight to Cerebral Palsy and Down’s Syndrome. “This experience as a teacher, along with my years of campaigning for local people as a Councillor, and as the Member of Parliament for Chesterfield, means I have already come into contact with many disability issues as they affect people in Chesterfield and Derbyshire. “The Government’s controversial moves to force those claiming disability benefits to take compulsory work-focused interviews, backed by the threat of benefit loss, have brought disability issues to the front of people’s minds within the last few days. This is an issue on which we will continue to challenge the Government in Parliament.”

PAUL CALLS FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION OVER PENSIONS SCANDAL

Following the loss of pensions by many of the workforce at UEF Chesterfield Cylinders and Dema Glass, local MP Paul Holmes has demanded: A Government review of the Pensions losses at UEF and Dema Glass in Chesterfield Better information to workers about the trading position of their Companies when paying into Company pension Schemes Clearer guidance on the disadvantages as well as the advantages of the Final Salary Pension Schemes A major Government review of the Financial Services Industry.

Paul Called upon Pensions Minister Ian MacCartney to honour his commitment in Parliament on 12th November to provide, “better information for current and future pensioners and better regulation of the pensions industry”

A COMPLACENT STATEMENT FROM A COMPLACENT CHANCELLOR

Chesterfield MP, Paul Holmes, commenting on today’s Pre-Budget report said;

On the Report:

“This is a complacent statement from an extraordinarily complacent Chancellor. In the face of British manufacturing collapse, the NHS in crisis and pensioners in poverty – we get tax fiddles and spin on spending figures. Areas of concern such as Schools and Transport are not even mentioned.”

“There is little in this statement for the people of Chesterfield.”

On Industry:

“In the face of half a million job losses in manufacturing since 1997, falling investment and a record trade deficit the Chancellor had nothing to offer Chesterfield people whose jobs and businesses are under threat.”

On Pensions:

“After the 75p Pensions insult the Chancellor is offering a small increase that does nothing to restore the State Pension to an adequate level. Half a million pensioners do not even get the minimum income guarantee because the means test is too complicated and humiliating – yet the Chancellor is increasing the number of means tested pensioners to nearly 50% of all pensioners.”

On the NHS:

“Yesterday Charles Clarke, Chairman of the Labour Party, admitted that parts of the NHS have got worse under Labour since 1997. Today the Chancellor has finally admitted that he needs to look at how real investment can be paid for to bring the NHS up to European levels of health spending.”

“But this does not help the Royal Hospital at Calow which is TODAY short of Nurses and which is TODAY short of beds. Three new wards are needed today, but only two are to be allowed to be built – starting in 2002 and not opening for another two years until 2003. Investment and training was needed in 1997 not in 2002 or 2003. Instead we got more years of Conservative cuts.”

PAUL WELCOMES GOVERNMENT PROPOSALS TO SPEED UP THE REMOVAL OF ABANDONED CARS

Cllr. Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield has welcomed the Government measures to speed up the removal of abandoned vehicles. **Paul said**, “The problem of dumped cars becoming an eyesore and a dangerous playground for children is one that I raised earlier in the year during the election in Chesterfield. At the moment cars can be left for several weeks before being towed away. This just encourages more vandalism and dumping of stolen cars.

But if the council is to take advantage of these possible new powers it will need money. With the price of scrap metal falling and the costs of recycling items such as batteries and tyres rising scrap-yards will no longer take cars away for free.”

MINISTERS LAMENTABLY VAGUE ABOUT ILA MESS 28/11/01

Following the evidence session on ILAs with John Healey MP, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Adult Skills, Paul Holmes MP, Education Select Committee Liberal Democrat representative, said: “At recent committee meetings, education Ministers have been singing from a different hymn sheet. It’s a case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing.

“Today John Healey seemed lamentably vague about the future of the valued ILA scheme. “He was unsympathetic to the plight of both learners and training providers, left in the lurch by the Government’s total mismanagement of the scheme.

“For these reasons I have written to the Secretary of State to demand an answer to these urgent questions – the current situation is frankly unacceptable.”

Rt Hon Estelle Morris MP
Secretary of State for Education and Skills
28 November 2001

Dear Estelle,

The termination of the Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs), two weeks earlier than originally announced, has clearly caused a great deal of confusion, not least amongst your own ministers.

Following a number of unsatisfactory answers by the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Adult Skills to the Select Committee today, I would be grateful if you would clarify the following as a matter of urgency:

Were ILAs ‘suspended’ because they had “exceeded expectations beyond capacity” (DfES press release 24 October), or were they were suspended because of “alleged fraud and theft” (DfES press release 23 November)?

Why was the notice regarding the termination of the ILAs released at 6.30pm on a Friday, the timing of which prevented providers or participants acting upon this announcement until the Monday morning?

What assessment has been made about the impact of the suspension on training providers, and in particular small businesses for whom ILA related funding was a major source of income?

When will you announce whether ILAs are to be re-introduced or replaced, and in what form any replacement scheme may take?

With whom does the primary responsibility lie for failing to provide adequate safeguards against fraud in the establishment of the ILA scheme?

Given that ILAs are continuing in Scotland and Wales, what discussions have you had with colleagues in the devolved administrations?

Yours sincerely

Paul Holmes MP, Chesterfield
Liberal Democrat representative on the Education Select Committee

Campaigners Welcome MP's Vote Pledge 03/12/01 New law to outlaw cold & Dangerous homes

Campaigners today welcomed local MP, MP Paul Holmes's pledge to be in Parliament to vote for a new law to outlaw cold and dangerous homes. The new law would require a licensing system to ensure that the worst housing in England and Wales is made warm and well-insulated and is brought up to proper fire safety standard. The Bill comes before Parliament on 30 November 2001 and at least 100 MPs must be there to ensure it can become law. The Home Energy Conversation Bill 2001 has been introduced Des Turner MP (Labour, Brighton Kemptown) and is backed by a cross-party group of MPs. It builds on former Liberal Democrat MP Baroness Maddock's 1995 Home Energy Conservation Act which required local authorities to achieve big improvements by 2010 in the energy efficiency of houses in their area. The new Bill will give back to councils powers removed from the original Act by the then Conservative Government, thus enabling them to make big strides towards eradicating cold and badly insulated homes. The Bill will also require houses divided into several units to meet minimum standards in order to obtain a licence. Government Minister have dubbed such houses "death-traps" and pledged action to improve them.

The Bill has the support of a broad coalition of organisations, including, including Shelter, Friends of the Earth. The Association for the Conservation of Energy, the National Housing Federation and many others.

Sponsor of the Bill, Des Turner MP said: "We welcome Paul Holmes's pledge to vote on 30th November – a good turn out of MPs is crucial if we're to give everyone the guarantee of a warm, safe home."

Paul Holmes MP said: *"This is a very important Bill and I hope by being there to vote I can help it on its way to becoming law. Diana Maddock's Home Energy Conservation Act was a great – and this new Bill give it real "teeth". The sooner it's passed, the better – cold, dangerous homes must be outlawed without delay."*

Chesterfield MP Tackles Chancellor of the Exchequer Over Collapse of Manufacturing Industry 6th December 2001

Speaking in Parliament today Chesterfield MP Paul Holmes challenged Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer at Question Time in the Commons, over the collapse of manufacturing industry. He told the Chancellor that three longstanding Chesterfield firms had closed (Sterling Tubes and Dema Glass) or gone into administration (Chesterfield Cylinders) this year alone. This was just part of the recession in manufacturing which has lost 400,000 jobs under this Chancellor's complacent policies. Paul told the Chancellor that Managers in Chesterfield have told him that the highly over-valued Pound cripples the export trade. Toyota have said they cannot plan on expanding their highly successful plant at Derby unless Britain moves towards the Eurozone. Commenting afterwards Paul said, "the Chancellor and the Government are incredibly complacent. They seem to think that a few tax credits for research and development will end the collapse of manufacturing across Britain." "When the Conservatives devastated the Chesterfield and North Derbyshire area by closing the Pits local people said, "what do you expect from the Tories?" "But they cannot understand why a Labour Government is prepared to see 400,000 jobs going this way." Whatever the other arguments over Europe, it is a simple fact that we export 60% of our trade to Europe and less than 20% to the USA. While the Pound remains so over-valued we will continue to lose manufacturing jobs and the Chancellor is doing nothing to stop this."

CHESTERFIELD MP WELCOMES PAUL MARSDEN MP'S DEFECTION FROM LABOUR

Commenting on the news that Paul Marsden MP is joining the Liberal Democrats, the Chesterfield MP Paul Holmes said: **(10/12/01)** "I am very pleased to be able to welcome Paul Marsden to the Liberal Democrats. He is a principled and dedicated politician who has had enough of a Labour party unwilling to listen to the consciences of its MPs. "It is clear that Paul Marsden feels that the interests of his constituents' interests are no longer represented by a Labour Party that is so comprehensively failing to deliver on its promises. The Liberal Democrats are the Party he now trusts to work in the best interests of the British people.

"After almost five years in government Labour is failing the National Health Service. While secondary school class sizes are now higher than they have been for years. Police numbers are lower now than in 1997. Our rail system is in a shocking state and getting worse. The Liberal Democrats are the effective opposition to this New Labour government. Unlike Labour we fought this year's General Election by telling it straight to the British people saying that if you want better schools and hospitals then you may have to pay a little more for them. Labour fought a dishonest campaign and is only now admitting that they have to increase taxes to fund a health service which has declined so much since they came to power." "This morning we also welcomed the news of the Pro-Euro Conservatives who have switched to the Liberal Democrats. Together these new supporters from Labour and the Conservatives send a powerful signal. The Government is no longer trusted; the Conservatives are too extreme and the Liberal Democrats are now the party of the future in British politics. "I welcome Paul Marsden as the fifty-third Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament."

Campaigners welcome Paul Holmes's support for new law to achieve ENERGY TARGETS AND OUT-LAW DEATH TRAP HOMES 13/12/01

Campaigners have welcomed Paul Holmes MP's support in Parliament for a new law to outlaw cold and dangerous homes. The new law will require energy efficiency targets to be met and also will set up a set licensing system to ensure that the worst housing (houses in multiple occupation is made warm and well insulated and is brought up to proper fire safety standards.

Paul was on of a number of MPs who stayed in Westminster on 30 November to register their support for the Home Energy Conservation Bill 2001. Because of that support the Bill has now been given a Second reading – its first crucial Parliamentary hurdle on it's way to becoming law. The Home Energy Conservation Bill has been introduced by Des Turner MP (Labour, Brighton Kemptown) and is backed by a cross-party group of MPs. It will require Energy efficiency targets of 30% improvement by 2010 to be met in every local authority area.

Co-ordinated national and local action to end the scourge of fuel poverty and houses divided into several units to meet minimum standards in order to obtain a licence. The Government Ministers have called them "death traps" and have pledged action to improve them.

The Bill has the support of a broad coalition of organisations, including Shelter, Friends of the Earth, the Association for the Conservation of Energy, the National Housing Federation and many others

Paul Holmes said:

"This Bill will transform the lives of people at present living in cold, dangerous houses. Meeting energy efficiency targets is crucial if we are to end the scourge of fuel poverty. A proper licensing system will put an end to HMO death traps and give the most vulnerable members of our society the chance to live in safe warm and properly maintained homes. The sooner this Bill becomes law, the better."

Life Long Learning Speech 11/12/01

Lifelong Learning is about addressing the needs of those failed by the school system in the past About equipping the workers our society and our economy needs And about allowing individuals to enrich their personal knowledge It is about all of these things, but helping those with little had to be of paramount importance. Lifelong learning must bring those adults who currently lack basic skills and qualifications, back into a learning environment. A system of Individual Learning Accounts, based on the original Liberal Democrat proposals, rather than the version launched by the Government, would have provided good foundations for life-long learning. Our ILA's would have allowed everyone access to an ILA from birth. It would have allowed parents, individuals, employers and the Government to contribute to an ILA throughout a person's lifetime. It would have allowed that individual to access their account to pay for any of their learning requirements. The Liberal Democrats did and still do support the concept of ILAs. This why the Government's mismanagement and scrapping of their scheme is so serious – it undermines the very credibility of such a system. The rapid dissolution of the ILA scheme has left large numbers of participants and providers disillusioned, confused and concerned in its wake. And while people watch their businesses collapse around them, the Government remains almost silent about what help they can offer those who have been caught up in this terrible mess. Almost silent because I asked the Minister at the Select Committee of 28th November if any compensation would be available to those legitimate businessmen who had invested money and effort to make the scheme a success and some of whom now faced financial ruin. “No” he said. I then wrote that afternoon to the Secretary of State sometime ago to get clarification of some of the concerns of these people, I have yet to hear anything. The whole of the Governments handling of ILA's has been a shambles. They set up a scheme with serious loopholes allowing it would appear considerable fraud to take place. Although Scotland and Wales appear to have done a better job. They announced they would terminate the scheme with effect from 7th December. Then at 6.30pm on a Friday evening they announced they would close the scheme two weeks early with immediate effect. On the 24th October the Secretary of State said the ILA programme was to be suspended “as it had exceeded Government expectations and has quickly expanded beyond its capacity” with a footnote about some concerns over some of the companies producing poor value for money. Yet on 28th November, the Under Secretary of State for Adult Skills told the Select Committee it was all to do with fraud, not exceeding capacity. However he also told the Select Committee (and I am interested in the Hon. Members' higher figures he received only yesterday) 13 days ago that the ILA budget had gone up from £56 million to £71 million and had now been exceeded again although the government did not know by how much. Yet he insisted it was fraud and not Treasury Pressure over finance that led to the schemes closure. He would not even tell the Select Committee when the scheme or a replacement would be re-introduced. The Secretary of State told Parliament on November 6th that the police had charged four providers and thirty individuals. The Under Secretary told us on the Select Committee on 28th November that “sustained and serious allegations of theft” in County Durham justified the early closure. Yet according to the Times Educational Supplement on Friday, five days ago, Durham Police say there was no criminal investigation on their patch. A DFES spokesman also said that the Secretary of State for Education had been mistaken to tell Parliament on November 6th that charges had been brought as none had. It really does seem that the Government have not had a clue what they are doing from the beginning of this scheme. Apart from the taxpayer, the people hurt by all this are of course the legitimate companies and the legitimate users of the ILA scheme. As a member of the Select Committee I have had representations from all over the country but one from Chesterfield is typical of all them, “As a reputable service provider, we have been totally committed to the training development and encouragement of local people to enable them to develop their full potential. Our area, as you are more than aware, has been hit hard over the past few years by the decline in the steel, mining and manufacturing industries. We have worked hard to encourage learning and addressing the skill deficiencies in our area, offering knowledge, skills and recognised qualifications that are of the highest quality, cost effective, timely and affordable. We are devastated and embarrassed for the loss incurred by each learner and potential learner, who has suffered as a result of this decision made by the department for Education and Skills. Whilst we appreciate that it is to protect of individual learners who are putting their own money alongside the Government's contribution, the fact that there were substantial loop holes in the system in the first instance to allow fraud to happen is not good enough and to add insult to injury the “plug is pulled” on reputable centres with students eager to learn and fill gaps both locally and nationally. As regular taxpayers we (the provider and the students) hold the government responsible for ensuring that our money is invested wisely and accounted for, this has not happened in this instance.” Just under 200 people have lost out in this one instance alone. With the collapse of the ILA's, the question is what is the government going to do to widen participation in adult education? If the Government implement the scheme they say they will investigate in the Pre-Budget report, then I welcome the Level 2 Entitlement as a step to reducing the unacceptably high number of adults lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills (the 7 million British adults who cannot find a plumber in a phonebook, or do the simplest calculations). But the Government should go further – as the Liberal Democrats propose and extend the entitlement to level three qualifications too. And why this could not have been introduced when it was recommended by the Government's own National Skills Task Force, or when we raised the idea is beyond me? But what was the motivation behind the government's change of heart? Well the Treasury view is summed up in the title of the chapter of the Pre-Budget Report, “Meeting the productivity challenge”. Are we to infer from this that their view of “life-long learning” is the means to the creation of an army of technocrats ready to work in whatever sector the Government deems preferable? Or will this entitlement help tackle the social exclusion caused by so many adults unable to read, write or add up properly and also encourage learning for learning's sake. **We need some fast, decisive actions from Government now, if we are not to see progress towards lifelong learning and entitlements for adult education slip back ten years, and I call upon the Minister to give us some answers to these questions today – both about the appalling catalogue of failures and confusion over the governments failed ILA scheme and what about what is going to replace it and when?**

Draft Social Security (Loss of Benefit) Regulations 2001 13/12/01

The case against the regulations was made eloquently and in detail by my colleagues in both Houses when the legislation was passed, and I do not propose to repeat all that was said. However, it is important to summarise concisely why the Liberal Democrats oppose the regulations in their present form.

Social security fraud is a crime that steals from the taxpayer money that could otherwise be spent on needy people, health, education or public transport. We all agree that crime should be deterred and punished. However, punishment for any crime should be appropriate and proportionate, as article

A.2 of the European convention on human rights requires. The sanctions might well be neither. First, when we send people to jail for serious offences, we do not deprive them of shelter, of food or of warmth. In some cases, that could be the effect of some of the benefits sanctions.

Secondly, we should consider possible negative effects on the children of those who might be punished by the loss of benefits under the regulations. Do the Government really aim to punish children for what their parents have done? If the sanctions are to hurt Column Number: 8 and be a deterrent, as the Government say that they will, they will affect the children of those who are punished. A 20 to 40 per cent. benefit cut would inevitably have that effect. The legislation is based on little research, but the former Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Social Security published research report 86, which studied a small sample of 30 claimants. That research showed clearly that those hit worst by the benefit sanctions were the children of the people involved. Should the sins of the fathers or mothers be visited on the children in that way? Parents should not commit fraud, but should their children be punished if they do? The Government should think again about the legislation and undertake more research into the effects of benefit sanctions before they introduce them. They should consider alternative sanctions, from community service upwards.

MEN AGED 60-64 BETWEEN 1997 AND 2000 ARE YOU OWED MONEY BY THE GOVERNMENT?

Chesterfield MP, Paul Holmes, says: "700,000 men who were aged 60-64 in the winter of 1997/98, 1998/99, 1999/2000 are still owed £98 million in unclaimed Winter Fuel Payments"

"The Government used to discriminate against men by only paying the Winter Fuel Allowance to men over 65 compared to women over 60. A European Court of Justice ruling on 19th December forced them to end this discrimination. But of 1.9 million men nationally should have received payment from the winter of 1997 through to the winter of 2000 nearly 700,000 have not claimed their money and the Government cannot track them down."

"If you think this might apply to you in Chesterfield then you should phone the Helpline on 0845 9 15 15 15 to check if the Government owe you money." "From the winter of 2000/2001 onwards the Government have changed the rules so that you can no longer make a retrospective claim if you missed out at the time, but from 1997/98 to 1999/2000 you can still claim retrospectively."

Paul said, "This is Government bungling of the first order. They are introducing ever more complicated and bureaucratic hoops for pensioners to jump through with Minimum Income Guarantees and Pension Tax Credits. Yet they cannot even do a simple thing like pay pensioners their Winter Fuel Tax Allowance. It's no wonder that half a million pensioners don't even claim their Minimum Income Guarantee because the system is complex." "If they would just restore the state Pension to a decent basic level they could scrap all these incredibly complicated, confusing and bureaucratic barriers that prevent pensioners getting the money they need to live on." 18/12/01

MP CALLS FOR VOTES AT SIXTEEN

Commenting on the Lib Dem campaign to allow young people to vote and stand for elected office at 16 Paul Holmes MP said, "It is time to empower a group currently unable to make its voice heard. It would allow young people to vote and stand for elected office at 16, the stage in life at which they are able to begin full-time work and pay income tax." "I cannot understand the current situation in which a young person is old enough to place his life on the line in this Country's Armed Forces yet is barred from participating in its democracy. Lowering the voting age would be an important step toward combating growing apathy among the young." Paul added, "many 16-17 year olds are just well informed and articulate as many older people are. I can see no justification for treating them like adults in other ways but not allowing them to vote."

MP condemns "cowboys' charter for fraud"

At the first Education Select Committee Hearing into ILA Scandal (23 Jan 2002) Paul Holmes has condemned the clear evidence of negligence by the DfES in setting up the ILA scheme, labelling it a "**Cowboy's Charter for Fraud**" Evidence provided by the senior civil servants who set up the scheme confirmed that no checks were built into the system to establish the quality of the training providers. The Training Enterprise Councils who piloted the scheme had used existing providers. But the DfES expanded the scheme opening it to potential providers without even checking whether they had computers. Legitimate training providers who gave evidence this morning were **scathing in their condemnation of the mishandling of the Government scheme**. Paul said, "*This was a cowboy's charter. It was open house for any fraudster to abuse the system. The Director of Adult Learning told me he 'couldn't recall seeking advice from the Department of Social Security or the Treasury on how to safeguard against such fraud.' Serious questions were also raised about the quality of Capita's software system. ...disturbing evidence... of the wide number of companies who are owed money for trainees who were not registered with the DfES by 23rd November when the scheme was scrapped without warning. Most companies were working towards the 7th December date as the Government had told them to.*" Paul told the Select Committee, "*this is a clear breach of contract by the Government.*"

MP CALLS ON CARERS TO TAKE UP NEW RIGHTS

Local MP Paul Holmes has called on the estimated 9125 in Chesterfield who care for someone who is ill, disabled or frail to check whether reforms introduced this year may help them. The changes mean that local councils have the power to provide services – or payments instead of services – based on the needs of carers. The services can be provided direct to the carer or to the person they care for. There have also been improvements in two carer benefits – the Carer Premium has gone up by £10 per week and the earnings limit on Invalid care Allowance has been raised from £50 to £72 per week.

Paul said: "Carers save the country a fortune every year and are entitled to support. Sadly, there is evidence that many carers are not aware of their rights and do not claim the benefits or services that are available. Carers' Rights Day is welcome initiative, which will help increase carers' awareness of the help they can get.

FIG LEAF OR FRAUD ASKS PAUL OVER CLOSURE OF ILA SCHEME

Speaking after today's Select Committee Inquiry into the ILA scandal Paul Holmes, Liberal Democrat MP, called for Government honesty on the issue.

"Today witnesses suggested that allegation of fraud were a fig leaf to cover up to cover up the real reasons for reasons for the Government suddenly pulling the plug on the scheme. They suggested this was purely and simply a consideration of cost." Paul said, "If these allegations are true then the Minister responsibly John Healey, would be guilty of **deliberately misleading Parliament and this Select Committee on a number of occasions**. He has repeatedly insisted that it was fraud not cost that led to the schemes close. But few people have so far been charged and only one convictions has been achieved."

"Yet Estelle Morris's first statement of closures emphasised cost over runs with fraud being relegated to a final sentence in her statement." "Its time Ministers came clean on this issue."

Notes

Stuart Ingleson, Principal of Preston College, said the ILA scheme was a "**licence to print money**" and that he doubted that massive fraud was the reason the scheme was so suddenly shut down. He believed was much more likely to be due to the Treasury closing the scheme because it was **too successful and costing too much** as they had closed other schemes, such as Franchising in previous years, for this reason". Hugh Pitman of the Association of Learning Providers told the Select Committee the "**ILA programme was a victim of its own success.**"

ILA SCHEME EQUALS FAILURE AND FRAUD

Speaking after today's (30/01/02) Select Committee inquiry into the ILA scandal, Paul Holmes MP said "the evidence we been given today confirms that **the Government scheme is best summed up the words Failure and Fraud.**"

"**Fraud because 27% of account** holders in a Government survey had not used their accounts even though CAPITA argument the money had been paid out

"If this figure was reflected across the whole scheme it would mean **£65 million of taxpayers money lost to fraud.**"

"Failure because although the scheme was very popular the **key group** being aimed at, those with no formal qualifications or no recent qualifications, **were largely missed by the scheme.**"

"Controls were so lax that money meant for IT and numeracy training ended up paying in some cases for **Feng Shui courses!**"

CALL FOR END TO LOOPHOLE IN CHILD SEX OFFENCE LAWS

Paul Holmes, MP for Chesterfield, today (4 Feb 02) asked the Government at Question Time to close an appalling loophole in Child Sex Laws.

He referred in the Commons to a recent case where the Crown Prosecution Service and Avon and Somerset Police were unable to bring charges against a volunteer sports coach who persuaded two 11-year-old girls to undress in front of him.

"Because he did not touch them or threaten them with violence he escaped charges through a loophole in the law" said Paul.

Paul Holmes urged the Secretary of State for the Home Office "to bring in urgent legislation to close this appalling loophole in child Protection Laws".

Although the Minister said he would look at closing the loophole he gave no further details.

LOCAL MP HELPS LAUNCH NEW PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON MARKETS

Chesterfield MP, Paul Holmes, was a founder member this week of a new group of MP's and Peers dedicated to helping protect and develop Markets around Britain. Paul said, "As a resident of Chesterfield for 23 years I know how vital its large open air market and Market Hall is both for the atmosphere of the Town for its attraction as a shopping centre." "I have worked with Chesterfield market traders on several occasions in previous years they have been battling against excessive council rent increases. I am delighted to now be able to fight their cause at the highest level nationally." The inaugural meeting of the new All Party Parliamentary Group was held in the House of Lords on Tuesday 5th February. The Three major trade groups who represent Market Traders are working together with each other and the All Party Parliamentary Group, to fight for the interests of Markets across the country. The three trade groups are the National Association of British Markets Authorities (NABMA), the National Market Traders Federation (NMTF) and by the Association of Private Market Operators (APMO)."

PAUL CONDEMNS CAPITAS ILA SCHEME 13/02/02

In response to a question from Paul Holmes MP at today's DfES Select Committee hearing, Capita representatives admitted that the ILA system was wide open to abuse by "rogue training providers."

Paul Holmes asked how a CD containing legitimate ILA account numbers could have been for sale on 21st November. Mr Simon Pilling, Executive Board Director of Capita Group, replied that Training Providers once on the system could have obtained these numbers. But earlier in the hearing Capita Director, Paddy Doyle, had told the committee that there were no checks at all on the bona fides of Learning Providers who registered with the scheme.

Commenting after the meeting Paul said "Capita admitted this morning that they did not warn the Government loudly enough of the potential for abuse in this scheme as it was drawn up by the Government." "But Capita then failed to build safeguards into the misleading the system." "Why did the Government pay this company £50 million to mis-manage the scheme in this way?" "How could the Government be so incompetent as to draw up a scheme that was so wide open to fraud?"

The CD containing legitimate ILA account numbers was obtained by the DfES on 21st November and led directly to suddenly closing the whole scheme down on 23rd November.

LEAK INQUIRY WHITEWASHES CONDEMNED 15/02/02

Paul Holmes MP, Lib Dem member of the Education Select Committee **has condemned another Government Whitewash over the leaking of sensitive information during the week of September 11th atrocity**. The internal DfES report was into the leak of a fall in Key Stage Two results in the days immediately after Jo Moore's infamous message advising Government Departments to use 11th September as a cover for releasing bad news. **Paul said**, "Not surprisingly the report is a total Whitewash stating that the culprit cannot be traced. Yet today (14th February) Jo Moore is reported to be once again practising the Dark Arts of Spinning by planning to use Princess Margaret's funeral as a cover to bury news of embarrassing figures on the rise in train delays. "The Government must be held to account for hiding the bad news about the Key Stage Two results in this way." Paul Holmes asked Estelle Morris, Secretary of State for Education, to launch an inquiry when she came before the Select Committee on 24th October. On December 18th he asked when the enquiry would report. The report's findings were finally sneaked out on 24th January in an answer to another parliamentary question. On 24th October 2001, Paul Holmes asked Estelle Morris if she would honour David Blunkett's 1997 commitment to resign if KS2 targets were not merely 2002. Estelle Morris said she would not.

Paul backs Mothers' Day quitting aid for mothers-to-be

Paul Holmes today (15/02/02) joined leading health campaigners in welcoming a new resource for mothers-to-be in Chesterfield to quit smoking in time for Mothers' Day (10 March 2002).

Paul added: "I am delighted to join all the members of the Smoking Control Network in welcoming the new guide for midwives to help women stop smoking, launched by the Royal College of Midwives this year." "The guide: *'Helping Women Stop Smoking: A Guide for Midwives'* will be an invaluable aid to help women in Chesterfield to quit - for their own long-term benefit and that of their children."

Smoking Control Network – Marianne Yarwood – tel: 01477 544 545

QUIT - Glynn McIntosh or Caroline Burnett – tel: 020 7251 1551

Royal College of Midwives - Charles Willis – tel: 020 7312 3565

Royal College of Nursing – Jennifer Percival, Tobacco Education Project - tel: 0870 74 23456,

National Asthma Campaign Press Office – tel: 020 7704 5841

MINISTER'S TUBE REASSURANCES WELCOME 15/02/02

Paul Holmes today welcomed the reassurances given by Mr David Jamieson MP, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Transport and the Regions, that the new PPP contracts would not threaten the pursuit of greater disabled access to the Tube. In written questions, Paul asked if the PPP contracts as drafted would allow lowering of the current standards of disabled access being provided by London Underground Ltd. when carrying out new building and refurbishments; and why the new draft public-private partnership contracts grant the infrastructure companies the right to challenge London Underground Ltd.'s implementation of its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, Part 3, access to goods and services. Paul said, "London Underground have had a record in modernising and adapting their stations for disabled passengers, and this must not be jeopardised by the plans for the part privatisation of the tube. Paul added, "Mr Jamieson's answer to the questions is a reassurance that whoever wins the Public Private Partnerships will not be able to stop providing appropriate disability access when modernising underground stations. "I fully intend to hold the government to Mr Jamieson's reassurances."

EXPLOITATION OF WHEEL-CHAIR USERS

Paul Holmes, has spoken out against the cynical exploitation of the disabled and elderly by some companies who sell assistive mobility equipment such as stairlifts, mobility scooters and powered wheelchairs. Paul said, "People are sometimes being sold equipment which has been faulty, overpriced or inappropriate for an individual's needs. I have cases brought to my attention from Chesterfield, Birmingham and North Norfolk. I am particularly concerned about 'pushy' sales techniques used by some dealers, and the refusal of one company to refund the customer of a motorised wheelchair, or take it back, when the buyer found that it was totally unsuited to his needs.

"As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for disability issues, I will continue to press for effective action to be taken. I have supported an Early Day Motion to bringing this issue to wider attention within Parliament, calling on the Government to promote the introduction of a mandatory Code of Practice for vendors of these products. "It is simply not acceptable for people who are desperately in need of extra mobility to be sold inappropriate or faulty equipment. More independent advisory centres should be set up, to whom people could turn for assistance." Early Day Motion on this subject follows.

ILA Failures: Healey Blames CAPITA - CAPITA Blames DfES

Giving evidence at today's Select Committee hearing into ILA fiasco Minister John Healey said he was "unhappy with CAPITA because of shortcomings in their security and their performance and management of the system."

But at the last committee hearing CAPITA said that the lack of security was the Government's fault as CAPITA simply designed and implemented the ILA system according to DfES specifications.

Paul Holmes, Liberal Democrat member of the Committee commented:

"No one is willing to accept the blame for a scheme that was open to fraud and scams from beginning to end. Companies have gone bankrupt people have lost the jobs, unknown tens of millions of pounds of public money have been lost. But no one it appears is to blame."

"This is totally unacceptable. Given the experience of Housing Benefit fraud or the Franchising scams quality assurance and safeguards should have been built in from the start. If the DfES failed to spot this their CAPITA (paid £50 million) should have warned them."

Cowboys' Charter Not Good Enough says Paul Holmes MP 04/03/2002

Speaking after today's final evidence taking session on the ILA scandal, Paul Holmes MP, Liberal Democrat member of the Education Committee said: "In looking into the future of a new ILA Mark 2 scheme Capita bosses, like John Healey yesterday at long last came up with a list of safeguards to prevent the fiasco reoccurring."

"But they again commented on the need to avoid deterring new training providers. The idea that quality assurance can be down played is ludicrous and is what gave us the "Cowboys Charter" that assumed this mess in the first place."

"We do not allow just anyone to walk in off the street and teach our children, or our College and University students. Why then should the Government be so keen to avoid quality checks on providers of ILA training?"

"Coming from the Department that has imposed the excessive over regulation of OfSTEAD, SATS and League Tables of schools – this desire to have no regulations at all of ILA training providers seems bizarre."

LOCAL MP INVESTS IN SPIRITES

Chesterfield MP Paul Holmes has joined CFSS and invested in their share issue. Paul, who lives just three streets away from the ground, is urging more fans and local businesses to give financial support to the club too.

Paul said "I am a very irregular attender at football matches but I went to a most enjoyable game on Saturday when Chesterfield beat Bury. Like everyone who lives in Chesterfield I can remember the absolutely electric atmosphere in the Town a few years ago during the famous cup run. The fans have pulled off an amazing success story in rescuing the Club and returning it to the community. Now they have recently cleared all the legal obstacles out of the way its up to the community to invest in the club and give the finances it needs to move ahead." "They have excited the interest of small clubs all over the country. I have been contacted at the House of Commons by London fans asking to be put in touch with CFSS because they want to learn from Chesterfield's experience. I have supported two motions in Parliament on the issue. The earliest was one I co-sponsored in January recommending the successful Chesterfield model to York City and other smaller clubs who are facing similar problems. The more recent one was one I supported when it first appeared on the House of Commons Order Paper last Tuesday." "Clubs like these provide part of the heart and the atmosphere of smaller local communities like Chesterfield. But to survive in this era of wealthier Premiership clubs they must have the active financial support of the communities they represent. There has already been a good response to the CFC 2001 share issue but with the legal doubts about ownership removed for good the way is open for many more fans and well wishers to give practical financial support."

Most Students to pay even more? – Asks Paul Holmes

Speaking after Margaret Hodge, Minister of State for Lifelong Learning and Higher Education addressed a special late evening sitting (13th May 2002) of the Education and Skills Select Committee regarding the Government's Review of student finance, Liberal Democrat Committee member **Paul Holmes MP** said:

"I welcome the likelihood of more provision for financial support for students from poorer backgrounds, because they have been the most deterred from entering Higher Education since the Labour Governments introduction of Tuition Fees and scrapping of Grants after 1997. But the extra money must come from somewhere. General Taxation has been ruled out by the Treasury, so I fear higher loan repayments and Tuition Fees for the majority of students. The result will be a real two tier system in Higher Education as the Government are doing by other means in our schools."

Paul Holmes MP condemns Government's inept Disability Medical Testing 09/04/02

Paul Holmes MP, Liberal Democrat Disability Spokesman, commenting on today's report published by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee on the medical assessment system for disability benefit, said:

"Controversial private firm SEMA have been regularly criticised for their inefficiency and their target-driven drive to get people off disability benefit. The Public Accounts Committee report provides hard evidence that confirms the negative impressions expressed by disabled groups of the Government benefits system. "It's no wonder disability groups are suspicious that the Government's New Deal for the Disabled is putting unfair pressure on some disabled people to return to work before they are ready and able to do so".

40% of appeals against rejected claims prove successful

25% of successful appeals are the result of Benefits Agency mistakes

16% of all SEMAs are substandard

30,000 unnecessary medical examination per year

17,000 turned away because appointments had been over-booked

TAX PAYERS TO FINANCE POST OFFICE CLOSURES 29/04/02

The Liberal Democrat Post Office Campaign has been launched in response to Consignia's closure programme, which would axe 3,000 of the total network of 8,500 urban post offices. A leaked document from Consignia suggests that the Government will finance these closures with tax payers money, but the outcome will benefit only Consignia. Commenting on the launch, Paul Holmes said: "These closures will impact most on the elderly, the disabled and those in poverty. In fact, the needs of vulnerable groups are not being addressed in the decision making process at all." [More](#)

GOVERNMENT PLAN TO MAKE TAX PAYERS FINANCE POST OFFICE CLOSURES 29/04/02

Paul Holmes MP continued...“Postwatch is the only body which could champion the needs of customers, but so far the watchdog’s actions have been nonexistent. Effectively, there is no one looking out for the interests of those who will be most badly affected. Public confidence is not likely to be raised by the knowledge that the Chief Executive was previously Railtrack’s head of government relations.” “Whilst rural closures are subject to a vetting procedure to assess the impact to the community involved, what is profoundly unsatisfactory about the urban programme is that we’ve had no guarantee of public consultation and no one knows where the axe will fall.” “For too long, there has been a climate of uncertainty within the post office network, making it impossible for sub postmasters to make informed decisions about their future, and to invest accordingly. Automatic Credit Transfer, combined with the closure programme, has removed any notion of long term security.” “To compound all of these problems, the Government is promising to pay the post office network £180million, to encourage post offices to close down. Not only that, but a leaked memo suggests that it would make better economic sense to keep the post offices going for another ten years, instead of pushing through an unsatisfactory closure programme which would inflict serious cuts.”

Summary of leaked document:

The document received by the Lib Dems implies that the Government is funding the closure of Urban Post Offices: Figures suggest that the Taxpayer – the people who will suffer from the closure of these post offices - are being asked to foot the bill for these closures - even though the benefit is to Consignia only. This leaked document from Consignia shows that the profitability of closing these post offices is wholly dependent on the Government picking up the tab, to the tune of £ 180 million. Post Office Closures - Neighbourhood Reinvention Programme

The proposals cover a review of the 8500 sub-post office outlets in urban areas. This amounts to approx. 45% of the total number of sub-post offices and 75% of the revenue. The document implies that there will be a reduction of 3000 outlets, the closure of which will be funded by the Government’s £180million. (In reality some of the 3,000 outlets have already shut without compensation becoming available). The anticipated cash flow of the project assumed that Government funding of £180m for the compensation package, for the anticipated closures, would be available by January 2002 but clearly this is already late. The cost/benefit analysis within the document can be summarised as follows:

Year	Costs	Benefits	Net Benefit
2001/02-4.20	2-4.02	0.28	80.62
2002/03-8.28	8.01	7.59	52
2003/04-8.01	7.59	5.20	23
2004/05-7.12	4.31	7.22	29
2005/06-1.02	6.52	5.52	1.00
2006/07-0.92	6.52	5.60	0.08

These figures show that Consignia will be making money out of the closures as they have not included the £180million package that will be provided by the government. The above figures do not include £1.4m of costs that Consignia has already incurred. National Federation of Sub Postmasters “NFSP is the only organisation recognised by Post Office Ltd to negotiate on behalf of subpostmasters nationwide. A team of negotiators works throughout the year to improve the pay and conditions of service for subpostmasters. NFSP negotiates with Post Office Ltd the payment for every item of work that goes over a subpostmaster’s counter.” Obviously, the National Federation is in place to look after the interests of the sub postmasters. With this in mind, it’s understandable that they are supportive of the closure programme. However, this must be seen in context. Sub postmasters have not been able to plan ahead and invest in their businesses. Automatic Credit Transfer will take away a large proportion of their turnover. A climate of economic uncertainty is not conducive to keeping sub postmasters in the sector. Post offices, Customers and Communities (NFSP website) <http://www.subpostmasters.org.uk/>

Page 2 Customers in urban deprived areas use Post Offices as a source of cash, either pensions or benefits. 91% of urban residents agreed that “Post Offices have an important role in my local community.” NFSP recommends that the future Post Office network and Postwatch need to ensure a systematic examination of the effect of closures on customers.

Postcomm’s proposals for Promoting Effective Competition in UK Postal Services, national Federation of Sub-Postmasters’ Response Page 5 The Countryside Agency reports that the closure of a post office, in a typical settlement of 500-1,000 people, is likely to impose an economic resource cut of £52,000 per annum to the local community.

Postwatch site <http://www.postwatch.co.uk/index2.html>

“We are here to help all customers, both business and individual. We also particularly represent the interests of the disabled or chronically sick, pensioners, people on low incomes and those who live in rural areas.” So far, no one has undertaken any impact studies to find out how the proposed closure programme of 3,000 post offices out of the total 8,500 will affect urban communities. Postwatch, the only properly dedicated consumer watchdog body, which should be championing the consumers, have done nothing so far.

Disabled People Denied Primary Health Care Services 23/05/02

Paul Holmes, has called on the Government to improve access to primary health care for disabled people, after a report by leading disability charity Leonard Cheshire found that disabled people face greater difficulties than the general population in accessing primary health care services. The survey also raised concerns over the levels of poverty faced by many disabled people.

The survey found that:

Four times more disabled participants than was the case in the general population found dental practices inaccessible

21% found access to accident and emergency units inadequate. This is over 50% higher than for the general population

12% of wheelchair users found doctors' surgeries inaccessible, whilst 60% of profoundly deaf people found them so

Leonard Cheshire's 2002 Social Exclusion Report also contrast disabled people's levels of poverty and social exclusion than the general population. The findings show that disabled people face far higher levels of poverty and social exclusion than the general population:

One third of the disabled people surveyed cannot afford to meet the extra heating costs arising from their disability.

20% of disabled people cannot afford personal care

21% feel it necessary to have personal support for work, education or training but afford it.

John Knight, Head of External Policy at Leonard Cheshire and co-author of the report, commented:

"This report starkly illustrates that the poverty and social exclusion disabled people face is much greater than the general population." Paul added "Until disabled people are given the economic, educational and civic opportunities to exercise their rights and responsibilities in society, then social exclusion is more or less guaranteed. This avoidable and must be avoided."

Leonard Cheshire recommends that:

The new Strategic Regional Authorities should be given specific responsibilities and powers to ensure that all health service, primary and secondary, are fully accessible to all disabled people.

The Government should abolish charges for personal care for all disabled people, regardless of age.

Accessible, affordable transport is vital in enabling disabled people to participate in society. The forthcoming report from the Government's Social Exclusion Unit must address where public transport is failing to do this.

On new trains, stations and other related facilities, the Government and the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) should ensure that the highest standards of design for equal access are applied.

An end date should be set for existing inaccessible trains to be replaced as a matter of urgency.

For a copy of the Social Exclusion report, costing £10 copy for organisations and £5 for individuals, please call 0207802 8200 or e-mail on info@london.leonard-cheshire.org.uk.

Medals for our Merchant Sailor Heroes - 22/05/02

Chesterfield MP, Paul Holmes today tabled a Parliamentary Motion, and wrote to Tony Blair demanding that tens of thousands of merchant-seaman receive Jubilee Medals.

Paul said, "This insensitive failure to acknowledge the tremendous sacrifice of these brave men continues a shameful tradition of ignoring the vital contribution the Merchant Navy made to guaranteeing the independence and liberty of this country. "These men were always the "heroes" in conflict, yet feel rejected in the peace. "It is no exaggeration to say that the Merchant Navy convoys played a decisive part in the Second World War, quite literally keeping both Britain and Russia in the fight against Hitler. "As we get closer to the Jubilee, a unique opportunity to honour those who made tremendous sacrifices for their country is in grave danger of being lost."

1. Paul Holmes took up this issue on behalf of a local constituent.
2. About 36,000 British Merchant Seaman died in the Second World War.
3. 9 Merchant Seaman gave their lives in the Falklands War.
4. Merchant seaman were only given permission to take part in the Remembrance Day Parade at the Whitehall Cenotaph in 1999.

PAUL BACKS MENCAP CAMPAIGN TO MAKE EMPLOYMENT WORK FOR PEOPLE WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY 23/05/02

Paul Holmes MP has signed up to Mencap's Charter on Employment as part of its campaign to get more people with a learning disability into work. Only 10% of people with a learning disability are in paid work even though they are acknowledged as being hardworking and loyal employees. Mencap has published three new employment guides 'Making It Work' to improve employment opportunities for the 1.5 million people with a learning disability in the UK.

Paul says: "*I support Mencap's campaign to remove the barriers to employment which prevent people with a learning disability from enjoying full, active citizenship, achieving their true potential and contributing their skills to local communities.*"

David Norgrove, Trustee, Mencap said: "*People with a learning disability want and need jobs. Employment brings the chance to live independently and earn a wage just like everyone else. Mencap's challenge is to dislodge negative perceptions and highlight the many benefits of employing people with a learning disability. People with a learning disability have considerable talents and skills that they can bring to the workplace. We are asking employers to think twice when recruiting and give people with a learning disability a chance.*"

Seven years after the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act the number of people with a learning disability in work remains low. People with a learning disability are particularly disadvantaged in employment because of discrimination and employer's attitudes. Yet research shows that many people with a learning disability want to work and given the chance of employment they have proven to be loyal and committed employees, bringing many skills and abilities to their jobs. Mencap wants to break down the barriers to employment whether these are a result of employers' lack of understanding about learning disability or lack of knowledge about the support mechanisms available to both employers and employees. The *Making It Work* guides have been endorsed by a number of leading organisations including Sainsbury's, Marks & Spencers, Body Shop, Centrica and the BBC.

Richard Lowe, Equality and Diversity Manager, Sainsbury's Supermarkets Ltd said: "*Our experience of employing people with a learning disability has brought tremendous benefits. They have many valuable skills and abilities, as well as being very hard working and loyal employees.*"

Naomi Colson, Sales Assistant at Marks & Spencers said: "*It's nice to have a job to go to where I feel needed. I feel happier now that I am working. I have learnt new skills which I didn't think I could do before and it feels nice, that people appreciate my hard work. It would be good for other employers to give people the opportunity that I have been given.*"

Stephen Alambritis, Head of Parliamentary Affairs, Federation of Small Businesses, "*The Federation of Small Businesses fully supports this guide, which will be an invaluable resource to employers. We strongly encourage employers to recruit from the widest pool of talent, and to take positive measures to ensure that opportunities are not denied to marginalised groups. The inclusion of people with a learning disability can bring great benefits to any workforce and to society at large.*"

Facts about employment and disabled people:

87 per cent of the public believe that people with a learning disability are employable – yet only ten per cent have jobs

A disabled employee has: 86% above average attendance record 90% above average job performance 97% above average safety record

Disabled People Denied Primary Health Care Services 23/05/02 [full story](#)

Paul Holmes, has called on the Government to improve access to primary health care for disabled people, after a report by leading disability charity Leonard Cheshire found that disabled people face greater difficulties than the general population in accessing primary health care services. The survey also raised concerns over the levels of poverty faced by many disabled people. The survey found that:

Four times more disabled participants than was the case in the general population found dental practices inaccessible

21% found access to accident and emergency units inadequate. This is over 50% higher than for the general population

12% of wheelchair users found doctors' surgeries inaccessible, whilst 60% of profoundly deaf people found them so

Police Specials Quit in Droves 23/05/02

The number of Special Police Officers in Derbyshire has fallen by over a third in the last five years, from 414 to just 263. The dramatic reduction has been revealed in the House of Commons following a Lib Dem question. Paul Holmes has written to Home Secretary Mr David Blunkett to ask what measures he will take to reverse this decline in Special Constables numbers, which is mirrored across the country.

Paul said: "Clearly the Government's policies are failing to retain and recruit Special Constables. The Specials provided a vital back-up for the full-time Police particularly at weekends, evening patrols and for crowd control **at events such as football matches. I shall be urging the Home Secretary to consider measures to encourage more** people to volunteer to join the Specials, not as substitutes for the regular force but to support them."

No to penalty for industrial compensation welcome 28/05/02

Paul Holmes, used a speech to the House of Commons on 23rd May to welcome the Government's decision not to penalise those with industrial compensation, either from injury or industrial diseases, such as Asbestosis and Vibration White Finger, in the granting of Pension Tax Credits.

Paul said, "I am sure that other hon. Members like me, welcome the Statement by the Minister for Pensions about disregarding compensation for industrial injuries. Many industrial workers in my constituency come to me with problems such as vibration white finger and asbestosis, so I am especially aware of the importance of this statement. Later Paul said, "The original legislation proposed by the government was needlessly mean. I am very glad that, on this issue at least, they have decided to act with more compassion. I am very disappointed that the government refused to accept my amendment to their Bill which would allow pensioners to earn the equivalent of the Minimum Wage **without being taxed at the equivalent of 40p in the pound, as opposed to the Standard Rate of Income Tax of 22p in the pound.**"

GOVERNMENT MUST DELIVER FOR THE DISABLED 27/06/02

Paul Holmes MP, Liberal Democrat Disabilities Spokesman, commenting on the Audit Commission's report "Fully Equipped 2002", which reveals that £210 million of public money promised for disabled services has not been delivered, said:

"The Government's obsession with spin and targets has thwarted the improvements in the quality of life for disabled people recommended by the last 'Fully Equipped' report. "Little if anything has changed for the better and in some cases problems of access to disabled equipment have got worse. It is disappointing that so little priority has been given in Whitehall to securing greater independence for disabled people. "There have been positive developments in audiology, both on screening at birth and on digital hearing aids. But too many people across the country are still missing out on the benefits of digital hearing aids. "The Government must now deliver on the recommendations in this report. Disabled people in need of services do not want another year of Government inaction and investment that doesn't materialise."

Note: Even by March 2003, only one third of eligible people in Britain will be receiving digital hearing aids. Due to insufficient funding, the modernisation of audiology services is progressing far too slowly and in some places waiting times are being pushed up.

MP pushes for more Government support for disabled people 29/05/02

Paul Holmes MP has supported a parliamentary motion which calls on the Government and local authorities to provide greater assistance to disabled people so that they can enjoy full independent living.

The motion favours the establishment of a programme to increase the amount of accessible housing, the abolition of charging for all personal care. It also demands that the Government address the shortfall in centrally provided social services funding so that local authorities can play a full part in the drive towards greater social inclusion for disabled people.

Paul Holmes comments: "More must be done to further the integration of disabled people in our society and I fully support any campaign to provide the disabled with the maximum of independence, and thus lead 'normal' lives to the most possible extent. The Government has too long allocated meagre funds for the task of providing disabled people with the services and support they need to take their place in society. It is now necessary for the Government to deal with this issue and fulfil their responsibility."

Lib Dems celebrate MP's 1 year Anniversary

Chesterfield Liberal Democrats last week celebrated Paul Holmes's one year anniversary in Parliament.

Mr Holmes beat Reg Race to win Chesterfield for the Liberal Democrats for the first time in 72 years on June 7th 2001.

Lib Dems gathered to mark the event at a special party at the Market Hall where Mr Holmes thanked the party faithful for their support and gave an insight into life in Parliament. Paul also highlighted the fact that Labour support is continuing to fall across Chesterfield and the Country. "***You only have to look at recent local election results to see that people are beginning to see through Labour's spin and arrogance and see a catalogue of broken promises. Everybody is now beginning to question Labour's ability to hold on to control of Chesterfield Borough Council next May,***" said Paul.

1. Paul won Chesterfield with a majority of 2586.

2. Recent by-election results in Staveley showed massive switching from Labour to the Lib Dems.

3. Lib Dems only need 5 more seats to take Chesterfield Borough Council next May.

4. Lib Dem Agent for Chesterfield Stuart Bray has produced a special report about Paul's year in Parliament

Trudi Mulcaster recognised as your ‘Local Hero’

Paul Holmes MP today (27 June 2002) joined The Experience Corps to honour Trudi Mulcaster for her outstanding contribution to the Samaritans, Children’s’ Contact Club, a bereavement group and her local church in Chesterfield at a national award ceremony at Central Hall in London.

At the ceremony in Central Hall, Westminster Paul Holmes MP presented Trudi Mulcaster with a ‘Local Hero’ award certificate to mark her achievement. The presentation was part of the *Beyond Volunteering* Fair organised by The Experience Corps.

In all 90 awards were given to people who have made a valuable contribution to their local communities. All local heroes were nominated for these awards as recognition of the hard work and support that they give to those in their communities through their voluntary work. *Beyond Volunteering* attracted over 70 exhibitors, from children’s, animal and cancer charities to others such as orchestras, zoos and multi-cultural organisations, providing an exceptional variety of voluntary opportunities to the over 50s. Whatever skills people bring, The Experience Corps aims to identify a suitable opportunity for each individual enabling them to bring their full potential to each project. The Experience Corps has over 110,000 imaginative and innovative volunteering opportunities for over 50’s on its database.

Speaking about Trudi Mulcaster, Paul Holmes MP said:

“A few years ago Trudi “retired” from her job in Birmingham. But since retiring to Chesterfield she has filled every minute of every day with a huge range of voluntary work I hope I still have the same amount of energy as Trudi when I retire.”

Maggie Semple, Chief Executive of The Experience Corps:

“People over 50 make an enormous contribution to their local communities, sharing their expertise and skills with others. The ‘local heroes’ have made a significant contribution to their local communities and this award is a recognition of their work. *“Beyond Volunteering* has been the largest ever volunteers fair for the over 50s, bringing together over 80 organisations providing innovative and exciting volunteering opportunities in their local communities.”

The Experience Corps is an independent, non-profit-making company, funded by a grant-in-aid from the Home Office, set up to encourage people, aged 50 and over, to offer their skills and experience to benefit others in their local communities. The Experience Corps hopes to contribute significantly to the government’s overall aim of helping one million people to become active in their communities by 2004.

“Don’t employ CAPITA” call by Paul Holmes, Education & Skills Select Committee Member

Speaking in a House of Commons debate (26th June 2002) on the ILA fiasco Paul Holmes MP, Liberal Democrat Member of the Education Select Committee, listed CAPITA’s “appalling failures” in delivering the ILA scheme. Paul described CAPITA’s failure to provide even rudimentary software security, to warn the Government the scheme was wide open to abuse or to even run a competent call centre. He then urged the Government the Government **not to employ CAPITA to run the new ILA scheme** when it was eventually introduced. Paul also attacked the Government for creating a scheme with no quality controls at all – **“a Cowboy’s Charter for the unscrupulous to plunder taxpayers money.”** He called upon the Government to pay the money owed to those colleges and other Training Providers who had lost millions of pounds because of the sudden closure of the scheme on 23rd November last year.

Speech extracts: As a member of the Select Committee on Education and Skills, I am pleased that the importance of the report has been recognised by our debating it on the Floor of the House. The permanent secretary at the DFES said only yesterday that the report was very accurate and very good. The Government's recently published response accepts a good many, although by no means all, of its findings and recommendations. The report is an important illustration of the key role that Select Committees can play in scrutinising the Executive, even though they do not as yet have enough independence or resources to do the job properly. It is also worth noting that the former Minister for Adult Skills, now the Economic Secretary, and his departmental officials were, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) said, in the main refreshingly open and forthright in giving evidence to the Committee about what had gone wrong with the planning and delivery of the ILA scheme. It has to be said that that approach could be commended to other Departments, some of which are less willing to admit to their mistakes. In principle, ILAs are an excellent scheme with wide support throughout the House and the country. Many reputable and capable training providers use them to deliver high-quality training to a very large number of learners. It is therefore all the more regrettable that the report had to be a damning account of what went wrong with their design and delivery at even the most basic levels. First, the DFES devised a scheme that had absolutely no safeguards for the legitimacy or quality of those who were registered as training providers. It provided a cowboys' charter for the unscrupulous to rip off the taxpayer and the learner alike. All that people had to do was fill in one side of A4 with their name and address and details of the bank account to which taxpayers' money could be sent. That was it; there were no quality controls whatever and no prior registration or inspection system to ensure that a company was legitimate, or that it could deliver quality training with qualified trainers or provide quality distance learning materials. The scheme was a licence for the unscrupulous to print money. DFES officials told us that they were trying to be innovative and to avoid bureaucracy to attract non-traditional learners and new learning providers. They certainly did that; by throwing the baby out with the bathwater, they created a scheme that soared past its 1 million user target in record time, but also exceeded its £201 million budget by 50 per cent. We will probably never know how much of that £300 million was lost to fraud and scams. The question also remains whether the main reason for the scheme's sudden closure was massive budget overrun, massive fraudulent abuse or a combination of both. Secondly, Capita a company that was supposedly expert in such work—failed to warn the DFES of the glaring scope for abuse in the scheme. It went on to run a scheme that was widely criticised by legitimate and experienced training providers because of its poor complaints system, a call centre that often could not cope with the volume of work and computer software systems with inadequate security built in. Capita, which was paid more than £50 million for the contract, boasts in its annual reports of its experience in handling Government and local government projects, including housing benefit schemes with complex systems designed to try to prevent fraudulent claims. Not once, however, did Capita warn the Government that, although it could implement the scheme as the Government had devised it, there was no quality control on purported training providers, which left it wide open to abuse. Worse still, Capita went on to devise software that assumed that training providers were all genuine and which had inadequate safeguards. Mr. Simon Pilling of Capita told the Committee that "an authorised learning provider with their authorised user ID and password could go on the system and draw out information from the system." Mr. Paddy Doyle of Capita admitted to the Committee that it was "a very open scheme". How far the fraudulent abuse went is unclear. York Consulting was given 1,500 account holders' numbers by Capita, which said that they belonged to people who had used their accounts. When York Consulting contacted those people, however, 27 per cent. of them said that they had not used them. That shows one of two things—staggering incompetence on the part of Capita, whose records were so inaccurate, or a level of fraud that if repeated across all users would amount to up to £65 million or more lost to the fraudulent plundering of accounts. The Committee's evidence was damning on all those issues, but the Department's own internal investigations, which were published yesterday in response to the Committee's report, make equally damning reading. The special internal audit review said: "The target to achieve one million ILAs by March 2002, meant that the ILA Team were under severe time pressure to establish a . contract with Capita .. The time pressures contributed to the problems experienced by the programme and were further exacerbated by the fact that some other key areas of ILA development and operation did not demonstrate consistently good practice. These included: . . . No business model was developed to help identify strengths and weaknesses in the policy options available as the programme was developed . No decision log was set up to record and track decisions made . Although a great deal of management information appears to have been collected by Capita, it was not provided to the Department in a sufficiently helpful format to indicate possible abuse of the system . or to provide the information for Ministers to decide upon action needed . Departmental guidance to learning providers did not clearly specify the requirements and expectations of the programme." Cap Gemini Ernst and Young was asked to carry out a security report on the Department's and Capita's operation of the scheme. It says: "The contract made no clear mandates or stipulations regarding the assessment of the security requirement or the ongoing security management." "No requirement was specified with regard to the determination of the security requirement, nor were existing Government guidelines regarding Security Risk Analysis followed." "No structured mechanisms and procedures were established to identify promptly trends and patterns of access and usage of the system that might have indicated misuse." "No procedures were established to ensure that the requirements of the Security Policy were being adhered to." "No procedures or plans were established for ongoing testing of the system". "No procedures were established for the archiving of relevant log files for retrospective analysis." So the reports go on—damning list after damning list of things that were not done by the Department or by Capita. Thirdly, the Government mishandled the closure of the scheme. When the level of fraud and abuse eventually became evident, the scheme's sudden closure led to financial loss by legitimate training companies. **Mr. Andrew Turner:** Before the hon. Gentleman moves on to the closure of the scheme, which was clearly a problem, he may be surprised to hear that in response to the Committee's recommendation No.30 that there should not be an automatic assumption that Capita should be the provider to

[continued](#)

[Back](#) “Don’t employ CAPITA” [speech continued](#)

take forward any new ILA scheme, the Government said: "We are continuing to work closely with Capita"—to wind down the scheme. I understand that, of course, but they go on to say: "A successor scheme will be a major test for Capita". That suggests that it has already been decided that those who failed last time will get a second chance, which the small private providers that have gone bankrupt will not get. **Paul Holmes:** I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman about the effect on small providers and about the fact that the Government are ignoring the Committee's recommendation that Capita should not go on to run the second scheme. I shall return to that later. As a result of the sudden closure of the scheme, legitimate training providers lost jobs and money, and some went bankrupt. Some companies are pursuing claims for compensation by various means and have complained to the ombudsman. A particularly legitimate claim for payment can be made by companies and further education colleges that continued to complete and deliver courses that learners had begun before the sudden closure of the scheme last November despite the fact that the DFES would not honour the ILA payments for those legitimate bodies to provide that training. On 30 November, seven days after the plug was pulled on the scheme, the Association of Colleges surveyed its members. Of the 105 colleges that replied, 84 expected to lose more than £1.25 million between them, because they were continuing to provide training to honour commitments that they had made to students, but the DFES would not provide the money for that training. Surely we can rely on further education colleges to provide the documentation to show that they have legitimate students, who receive legitimate training, and that the Government should therefore pay. The Government wrote to all training providers—more than 9,000—and learners, to tell them that they had until 7 December until the scheme closed. They warned learners not to panic, and emphasised the date. However, they closed the scheme, with no notice, late in the afternoon of 23 November. Critical Skills, an excellent training company in my constituency, consequently lost out. It completes its accounts at the end of each month and therefore intended to send the paperwork to the Government at the end of November. That would have left it a clear week until the announced Government deadline. It could supply documentation, which I have seen and has been sent to the Government, to show that it provided legitimate training to more than 190 trainees. Yet the Government will not pay for it. Many small training firms throughout Britain are in the same position. However, I understand that the Derbyshire learning and skills council stepped in to support the legitimate training that not only Critical Skills but other companies in Derbyshire provided but for which the Department for Education and Skills would not honour its commitment to pay. If Derbyshire learning and skills council can do that, why cannot the Government? What happens next? There are many unanswered questions and I hope that the Minister can enlighten us about some when he replies to the debate. I shall begin with some well-worn questions. How many charges for fraud have the police made? How many convictions have been secured to date? Has anyone been charged over the famous disk of fraudulently obtained ILA numbers that led to the scheme's sudden closure on 23 November? Has any file been passed to the Crown Prosecution Service about the infamous disk? When will the replacement scheme be introduced? Small training providers throughout the country await the start of a new scheme, but many are going under or bankrupt while they wait. How will the new scheme work? Will it be confined purely to information and communications training? Will it aim only at those below level 2? Who will run the new scheme? That brings us back to the comments of the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr. Turner). The Select Committee recommended that it should not be Capita; its record in administering the ILA scheme was appalling and thoroughly documented by the Department's inquiry and the Select Committee report. However, do the Government remain bound by their previous ILA contract to work with Capita, despite its shortcomings? I look forward to the Minister's answers.

PAUL HOLMES AGAIN TACKLES MINISTERS IN PARLIAMENT OVER CHESTERFIELD CYLINDERS AND DEMA GLASS PENSIONS SCANDALS

Paul Holmes, spoke in a six and half hour Commons debate on Government Pensions Policy, to challenge Government inaction over the loss of pensions at UEF (Chesterfield Cylinders) and Dema Glass.

Paul condemned the way in which both firms used their pensions funds to buy off workers with early retirement when the firms hit economic problems. This left the pensions funds short of money so that many workers have lost a large percentage of retirement pensions for which they have saved for decades.

Paul said, *“Having raised the issue in Chesterfield in letters and questions to the minister during the last year I have still not received any response from the Government to say that it will change the rules to prevent this kind of legalised robbery. “If workers at two firms in Chesterfield have been robbed like this it must be happening to*

Paul Holmes Speech: We have heard a great deal about the Government's overall pensions policy and its failings. By contrast, I want to focus on a specific aspect of pensions policy—what happens to company pension schemes when a company hits financial difficulties and perhaps goes into receivership? How transparent are those schemes and are they adequately regulated? I shall give two examples from my Chesterfield constituency, which are relevant to every individual who pays into a company pension scheme anywhere in the country. They are also relevant to Government policy, which aims to encourage greater reliance on private pensions while running down the inadequate basic state pension.

The Minister for Pensions, for example, told Parliament on 12 November:

"We are committed to encouraging private saving to meet the long-term demographic challenge of an ageing population."—[*Official Report*, 12 November 2001; Vol. 374, c. 568.] The Minister said that that would be achieved with a package of measures, better information for current and future pensioners and better regulation of the pensions industry. The experience of United Engineering Forgings and Dema Glass in my constituency, however, show that at the moment, company pension schemes are not transparent enough and are not adequately protected. If those examples are added to the scandalous mis-selling of pensions in place of SERPS, the mis-selling of endowment mortgages and the failures of Equitable Life, it is clear that people's private investments and savings for their retirement are not adequately protected. How can the Government expect private individuals to invest more and rely more on private schemes? At UEF and Dema Glass in Chesterfield, the final salary pension schemes were initially in surplus (by 120 per cent in UEF's case) and were used to fund early retirement with an enhanced pension as a way of streamlining the work force. When the companies began to experience economic difficulties, causing a shortfall in the pension funds, the work force were persuaded, through misleading information, to continue and even increase their payment into the funds, with assurances that that would safeguard the schemes for the future. When the companies closed or went into receivership, the funds were inadequate to pay pensioners the money that they were owed from pensions that they had paid into (in some cases, for nearly 40 years). To add insult to injury, the administrators of the respective schemes took their extensive fees and costs from the dwindling and inadequate pension funds. I shall give some examples of the way in which people in Chesterfield were hurt by those scandals. On 11 September 2001, I visited a constituent on her 60th birthday. She was not celebrating, however, as she had discovered that far from retiring at 60 with a lump sum from the Dema Glass pension scheme, she would not be paid that money and would only be paid a reduced pension after she reached the age of 65. She told me: "The Government preaches, 'Take out a private pension,' but they have failed to put into place legislation that prevents the employer from taking the employee's money. After the Maxwell shock, the employer should never again be allowed to do this." My constituent's daughter was also present at our meeting. She is in her early 20s, exactly the person, we are constantly told, who is being targeted by the Government to save for retirement. She was about start paying into a company pension scheme run by the reputable international retail firm for which she worked in Chesterfield. However, she asked me what was the point the company, which seemed successful, might not be able to pay out in 30 years' time, just as Dema Glass, once a major Chesterfield company, had seemed a safe bet for many years, but was now bankrupt and could not pay out from the pension funds. So much for the Government encouraging more private pension savings, especially among the young. An employee at UEF Chesterfield Cylinders wrote to me:

"The loss of pension will cost my family, based on the last company pension statement I received, thousands of pounds per annum at sixty-five. These figures apply to most people approaching thirty years' service. How can it all disappear? We wait to see what the final figure will be, but estimates vary widely between 50 and 70 pence in the pound . . . We hear all the time that people must stand on their own feet and make provision for their retirement, which is totally opposed in my view to the actions of the same Government who seem bent on destroying the whole system of company pensions." Finally, another employee of UEF Chesterfield Cylinders branch—a Labour councillor, by the way, which shows that this is not a partisan issue told me of his disillusionment at the fact that after nearly 40 years of paying into the company pension scheme to guarantee a secure retirement, he had effectively been robbed, when it was too late in his working life for him to do anything about it.

I have raised these matters in detail on a number of occasions. For example, I wrote at length to the Minister for Pensions on 26 November, and I asked him a question on the Floor of the House on 28 January. On those and other occasions, I have simply received assurances from the Government that measures already existed to protect such pension schemes.

Department for Work and Pensions Department for Work and Pensions

Paul Holmes: The Minister speaks of misrepresentation. If he is referring to the debate in Westminster Hall, I was there and I took part. On the occasions to which I referred, and others, and in several letters to two Ministers, I received assurances which I can read out word for word, if the right hon. Gentleman wishes, as I have them with me that measures already existed to protect such pension schemes. However, the point that has been made repeatedly by me and by other Members of Parliament who have UEF-owned firms in constituencies from Scotland to Lincoln to London is that no law was broken in either the UEF case or the Dema Glass case. In both cases, clever use of existing regulations allowed the company pension schemes to be legally plundered. That was legalised robbery. The regulation and public transparency of such schemes must be improved. Again, I ask the Secretary of State or the Minister for Pensions to consider the suggestions and questions that I put to them, for example on 26 November. What action do the Government intend to take to ensure that company work forces receive much clearer guidance on the dangers, as well as the attractions, of final salary pension schemes? In both the Chesterfield cases quoted, the work force were persuaded to keep the schemes going last year, and even to increase their payments into the scheme in the case of UEF. Had they known the real business position and financial situation of their companies, they probably would not have agreed to that. What action will the Government take to ensure that work forces are provided with all relevant financial information in similar situations? Should the actuary for a company pension scheme provide annual reviews, rather than just three-year forecasts? In the UEF case and the Dema Glass case, the forecasts seemed to suggest that if workers continued to pay into the scheme or increased payments by 2 per cent., the scheme would be safeguarded. When the figures finally became available, after the firm went into receivership or closed down, it became apparent that that was not the case. Should actuaries be required to make new forecasts whenever a new issue arises that could seriously affect the viability of the pension fund—for example, when a company faces financial problems, when a company encourages workers to take early retirement as an easy form of redundancy, and so on?

Following the Maxwell affair, the mis-selling of endowment policies, the Equitable Life problems and now the examples related to company pensions, it is imperative that the Government undertake a major review of the financial services industry, if they are to restore public confidence in the schemes on which the Government insist people should rely to look after them in their old age.

SAFEWAYS MUST STOP SHUTTING DOWN ITS CRÈCHES

Paul Holmes, Liberal Democrat MP for Chesterfield, today wrote to Safeways's and tabled an Early Day Motion at Parliament, calling on Safeway not to close the crèches at many of their stores and to show its commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility by reversing its policy.

Paul said: "I fear that in my Chesterfield constituency Safeways will ignore the enormous numbers of letters and petition signatures against the proposed closure of the crèche. "Safeways have so far proposed the closure of thirty-two in-store crèches following a period of consultation, so the prospects of survival don't look good for the remaining hundred. **"A reversal of the closure of so many in-store crèches would go a long to demonstrate a genuine commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility by Safeways."**

Safeways Closure of Creches

This House notes with concern that Safeway plc are currently consulting over the proposed closure of the crèche at their Chesterfield store; that despite the overwhelming number of letters and petition signatures against the scheme the proposed closure seems to be part of a predetermined nationwide process which has already seen 32 out of a 132 crèche's at Safeway Stores closed in order to provide more retail space; and calls upon Safeway plc to show its commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility by reversing this short sighted programme of closures and instead continuing to provide these highly valued crèche's including the Special Needs provision which until now have both attracted custom to the Stores and reflected very well upon the Corporate Image of Safeway Stores in the Communities they serve.

An open letter to Safeway Plc

Dear Sir,

I am writing as the local Councillor, the local Member of Parliament and a customer, with regard to the current 'consultation' you are carrying out over your plans to close the popular crèche facility at your Chesterfield store in order to free up more floor space for retail sales.

While I quite appreciate that you are a private, profit making organisation and not a public service I believe your proposal is wrong, short-sighted and counter productive.

Firstly major profit making, private sector organisations like yours are supposed to be signing up to the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility. If this is to be more than pure window dressing it should mean a genuine commitment to taking community views and needs into account. Your crèche facility is a very real and positive example of this approach in action and it would be a travesty to close it.

Secondly, I assume (you will correct me if I am wrong) that the crèche either does not run at a direct commercial loss or that any subsidy you do provide is so small as to be dwarfed by the large profits you make. If this is the case then the loss of custom and goodwill that will result from closure of the crèche will more than outweigh the financial boost you clearly anticipate from increasing your sales area.

If your consultation is anything but a sham you will already be getting the clear and overwhelming message from local people that they do not regard closing the crèche as being in any way an 'improvement' in the service offered by your store – but quite the reverse. You say you are "consulting and listening carefully to what the staff of the crèche and the customers of the store have to say." If you are then the message is loud and clear, the crèche should stay open. Yours sincerely

INVESTMENT IN YOUNG PEOPLE IS NOT MONEY WASTED 11/07/02

Paul Holmes MP, Liberal Democrat member of the Education Select Committee, commenting on the Select Committee report published today, said:

"The Committee's support for increasing tuition fees flies in the face of the Government's so-called commitment to increasing participation in higher education to 50 % of our young people by 2010.

"The Welsh and Scottish administrations have got a far better grasp of what exactly encourages young people to take up places at university. Twenty years of debt and three years of scraping by, strangely enough, does not appeal to many of our young people." "An end to tuition fees, and the reintroduction of maintenance support for their student years are the incentives a lot of young people need, particularly those from less affluent homes. It is a shame that neither the Labour nor Conservative members of the Select Committee could see this." "Top up tuition fees for elite universities would further entrench a two tier higher education system, where a number of universities would find themselves an enclave of rich students." "Although the Committee says it is analysing all options and recommends that the Government considers all evidence, it also maintains that the Government should not look at the Cubie or Rees reports nor how the devolved administrations have implemented them. **This is illogical, inconsistent and also says that the Labour Party in Scotland and Wales have got it all wrong.**

"It is essential that the Government looks closely at the Scottish and Welsh reports and policies concerning tuition fees. The Scottish policy has ensured that Scottish universities have seen an increase in the number of home students applicants. **If England wants the same results then the Government has to make the same investment. Investment in our young people will never be a waste of money."**

Notes: 1.) Paul Holmes MP presented a minority report (of one) opposing four key recommendations by the Select Committee, which were:

- Not to recommend Cubie/Scottish example to the Government
- Not to recommend Rees/Welsh example to the Government
- To support Tuition Fees;
- To seriously consider 'Top Up' Tuition Fees for elite universities.

He moved the following four amendments (The Labour and Conservatives MPs on the committee opposed them unanimously) Education and Skills Select Committee 4/7/02

1.30pm Wilson Room I oppose and seek to formally amend paragraphs 43, 45, 62 and 115 (page and paragraph references apply to report published today)

Page 16, para 43: Replace with: We believe that the findings of the Cubie Report and the system of student finance subsequently introduced by the Scottish Executive have much to commend them and are worthy of serious consideration in reviewing the system of student finance in England.

Page 16, para 45: In place of recommendation in bold -We believe that the Rees report and the system of student finance subsequently introduced by the National Assembly for Wales have much to commend them and are worthy of serious consideration in reviewing the system of student finance in England.

Page 20, para 62: Replace with: We believe that a system of up front payment of any proportion of tuition fees is a counter productive deterrent to Higher Education, as evidenced in the Cubie and Rees Reports and by the sharp increase in applications to Scottish Universities since the abolition of Tuition Fees there.

Page 30, para 115: Replace with: The introduction of 'top up fees' would be likely to exacerbate the existence of a clear two tier system of Higher Education with an 'Ivy League' of elite institutions drawing their students in increasing disproportion from higher socio economic groups. This would be counter to the Governments declarations of intent in terms of widening access to lower socio economic groups.

2.) The Cubie Report was published in December 1999. The Rees Report was published June 2001

PAUL HOLMES SPEECH TO PENSIONS CONFERENCE 16/07/02

Thank you very much for inviting me here to outline why I think we find ourselves in a Pensions crisis - the steady erosion of the basic pension; the current assault upon final salary and occupational pension schemes; and the miss selling of private pensions. And also to explain how the Liberal Democrats' policies would allow us to navigate a way through this crisis to a situation in which we are all able to make adequate provision to enjoy comfortable retirements.

I also welcome this opportunity to offer my thoughts on the publication this week of the government commissioned Pickering Report.

Firstly, the Flawed Government Pensions Strategy- Basic Pension

The truth is that the Government has short changed existing pensioners. This it seems is not something that even the New Labour government can deny. Despite coming to power in 1997 with a manifesto which boldly claimed,

“We believe that all pensioner should share fairly in the increasing prosperity of the nation.”

The shameful reality is that New Labour have never thought it necessary to put their money where their mouths are. Rather they have spent a smaller proportion of the nation's wealth on pensioner benefits than the last Tory Government. No wonder Jeff Rooker MP, then Social Security Minister, when giving evidence to the Social Security Select Committee in July 2000, said, “if you ask me could I live on £78.45 no, I could not. I would have real trouble living on £90 per week - the government has to do more for the poorest pensioners”

In the same year, this Government increased the basic pension by a derisory 75p, the smallest yearly increase since 1972 and nothing more than an insult to pensioners, and by 2000 prices, the smallest yearly increase ever. This at a time when the Government's finances were in good health. This is all the less excusable given the fact that if, in 2000/0,1 the spare £8.8 billion that the Government had in the National Insurance Fund-the pot that is used to pay for pensions, had been directed into the state pension it would have produced not a 75p per week increase, but a £15 per week increase.

Twice Labour MPs chose not to join the Liberal Democrats in voting against the derisory 75p increase, and it was only pressure from pensioners' groups around the country and from the Liberal Democrats in Parliament that shamed the Chancellor into giving way the next year. Nevertheless, as Mr. Brown made clear the £5 increase-made prior to the General Election- was merely “transitional”, and not a long-term change of heart. As this Government continues to pursue the running down of the Basic State pension, so the number of those pensioners in poverty continues to grow. Despite Labour's advertised belief “that all pensioner should share fairly in the increasing prosperity of the nation” their first term in government actually saw an additional 300,000 pensioners plunged into poverty. The latest official Government poverty figures show that in 1996/97, there were 2.6 million pensioners living in poverty. This represented 28% of pensioners. By 1998/99, the figure had grown to 2.9 million, representing 30% of pensioners. You will find a regional breakdown of these figures in my handout notes.

Moreover, while in Opposition Labour loudly promised to “end the means test for our elderly people” (“I want the next Labour Government to achieve what in fifty years of the welfare state has never yet been achieved-the end of the means test for our elderly people.” Gordon Brown in a speech to Labour party Conference 27th September 1993)

Instead, their pension strategy in Government has forced half of Britain's current pensioners onto the means test, as benefit increases from April 2001 saw the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) rising at a faster rate than the pension pulling a further 200,000 pensioners onto the means-test. Indeed, the Government has admitted that the introduction of the Pension Credit will increase the number of pensioners on the means-test to 50%.

The introduction of the Pensioner Credit will lead to more form filling, bureaucracy, and is very likely to have a low take-up. Already, approximately 500,000 pensioners that are entitled to the means-tested Minimum Income Guarantee do not receive it. One of the main reasons they cite is the stigma of receiving a means-tested benefit.

In sum, what extra-money this Government makes available to Britain's poorest pensioners is mostly made bound to bureaucratic and stigmatising means-tests, which a third of those who are entitled to do so, do not claim.

Secondly.

If the Government's approach to running down the basic state pension is flawed, their reliance on private pensions as currently provided also gives great cause for concern. Take up of the new stakeholder pension is faltering, and fewer than 90,000 out of 490,000 employers have so far set schemes up with the October deadline looming. The Government has also had to partly admit to an embarrassing over statement of the level of private pensions saving, reducing it from £86 billion in 2001, to £51 billion.

The past track record of miss selling of Personal Pensions, and of Endorsement Mortgages has left many suspicious of the Private Pensions Industry. As a former Teacher Union Representative, I certainly received evidence of such blatant miss selling in the persuasion to many teachers to opt out of their Teachers' Pension Scheme. One colleague came back into teaching, at a lower salary, from the Pension Industry because he could not live with the way in which he was expected to mislead people in order to maximize his commission. The saga of Equitable Life has not helped and of course, many Final Salary Pension Schemes are faltering. There is also a greater need to protect Company Pensions from abuse. After the Maxwell Affair, when R. Maxwell stole £400 million of pension money, action was taken, but there is still scope for legal methods to make Company Pensions serve the employers, rather than the employees' purpose:

UEF

Dema. Contributions holidays in good times not made up in days earlier enhanced redundancy.

I asked the Minister for action in a letter, in parliamentary questions and in debate.

Simplifying the complicated and ad hoc rules governing pensions may be needed - as recommended in the Pickering Report and in ministerial statements but better safeguards are still needed.

Pickering Report: Liberal Democrat Response

We believe that simplifying pension schemes is a desirable step, but the Government will have to go much further if it is to tackle the huge shortfall in pensions saving. We believe that the Government should require all employers to make a minimum level of contribution to their employees' pensions, and should reward employers who go further than this. Otherwise, the haemorrhaging of money from company pension schemes will continue. But we are opposed to proposals to water down rules, which currently ensure that company pension schemes provide benefits for widows/widowers when scheme members die. Under Pickering's proposals, companies will be able to offer pensions which pay nothing to widows, and which do not rise in line with inflation. Among today's pensioners, elderly widows are by far the poorest. To scrap rules that offer protection for widows is a step in the wrong direction. And with many people expecting to be retired for 20

[Continued...](#)

years or more, having a pension that does not keep pace with prices could condemn new generations of pensioners to poverty.

The government-appointed review by Alan Pickering, former chairman of the National Association of Pension Funds, recommends that company pensions should no longer rise in line with inflation, reports said.

Thirdly, our alternatives

So what remedies can the Liberal Democrats offer? The basic state pension needs an immediate boost.

We need look seriously at how most effectively to target the poorest in society without resorting to demeaning and counter productive means testing.

A key aspect to such a form of targeting is to give the most to older pensioners (i.e. over 80), who are typically the very poorest pensioners. Many of the oldest and poorest pensioners are women, often widows frequently with very modest entitlements to both state and private pensions. Any savings they have built up have often been used, subsidizing a meager income.

So I wholeheartedly share Age Concerns condemnation of Mr Pickering's recommendations to allow employers to offer pensions that do not offer survivors' benefits.

For the past thirty years, pensioners over 80 have received a derisory 25p a week over and above the basic pension.

Liberal Democrat policy is for an immediate £15 per week increase in the basic pension for the over 80s, £10 per week for over 75s and an extra £5 per week for all.

As with the other main parties, we would not restore the earnings link. However, our immediate boost to the pension would be worth a good deal more than restoring the earnings link over a whole Parliament for many pensioners. This is crucial because, we are talking about people who frankly may not have years to wait, and need to see an immediate increase in their incomes. Average earnings tend to rise by about 1.5% more than inflation, which translates as an extra pound or so per week on the pension each year. This means that to deliver the £15 to over 80s, on top of the promised £5, it could take at least 15 years. Clearly, the over 80s cannot afford to wait 15 years for the pension to recover some of the value which it has lost in the last two decades. Many of them would simply not live long enough to see the benefit.

Like all our policies this has been fully costed. The money for these big increases in pensions will be funded by setting a new top tax rate of 50p on income over £100,000 a year. The new tax rate would yield £3.4 billion, of which £2.7 billion would be used to completely fund the pensions package. To put this tax increase into perspective, for most of the Thatcher years, the top rate was 60p starting on substantially lower incomes. For a breakdown by age group & region/constituency of the number of pensioners that would benefit from the policy refer to the handout sheet.

In the place of restoring the earnings link we would, after this initial boost, establish an Independent Pensions Authority to guarantee that pensioners do not fall behind the rest of the population, the Authority will report annually to the Government on an appropriate uprating for the state pension. It will take into account levels of pensioner poverty, the growth in earnings and national income and affordability. We will also establish a more stable environment for pension planning by seeking to secure all-party consensus before making future pension reforms.

We would also abolish rules that deny help to those with savings above £12,000. Scrapping this 'upper capital limit' will allow an additional 25,000 pensioners to gain the Minimum Income Guarantee.

We propose removing mandatory retirement ages. This is already the case in the United States. With many people living longer and enjoying good health well into their 60s and 70s, there is much to be said for adopting this policy in the UK. This would not, of course, mean that everyone has to go on working. It would be up to the individual to decide at what age he/she wished to "retire". Early retirement would be just as possible as retirement at 75.

We would continue with a "pivotal" state pension age at 65, but would allow people to draw this pension (at a lower rate) at any point from age 60 (given sufficient available income), or to defer drawing it (at a higher rate) should they wish to do so.

We would introduce greater flexibility into pensioners' choices at the age of 75 with regard to purchasing an annuity. Pensioners should be given a choice, and the arguments about possible loss of tax revenue or increased benefit expenditure do not stand up. We would introduce safeguards to ensure that those who drew down their pension funds did not spend all the money and thereby end up reliant on means-tested benefits. The Inland Revenue's opposition is based on the argument that if people were allowed to keep their money in the pension pot, they might die before ever purchasing an annuity and the Inland Revenue would never get the tax. That concern is unfounded. If people who have begun to draw down income from their pension pot die, their spouse or dependant can convert the pension into an annuity that can be taxed anyway.

EXPANSION OF PRIVATE PROVISION

We would introduce a new Owned Second Pension Account (OSPA)

We believe that the best way to prevent poverty among future generations is to ensure that all people have a second pension of their own to top up the state pension. Over time we would ensure that a growing proportion of the workforce were members either of a company pension scheme or had an OSPA, with the government making contributions for those who because of ill health, unemployment or caring responsibilities are too poor to do so. We do favour the reintroduction of compulsion for those in work.

We would, finally, extend the entitlement to the basic state pension to all citizens who cannot show a history of contributions. This would eventually help around 3.4 million people, mainly women, carers and long-term disabled people. (At present, for example only 50% of women are entitled to the full basic state pension, versus 87% of men.)

In conclusion, we believe that:

1. It is perfectly affordable to give an immediate boost to the basic state pension (just a 10p increase on higher rate tax on income over and above £100,000), and to help pensioners in other ways such as introducing free personal care as we have achieved in Scotland.
2. But in the long term, the state cannot provide a pensionable income at levels that today's younger generations now expect. Private pensions, personal or occupational, are necessary here, but must be simpler to understand and better protected against miss selling and abuse.

PAUL JOINS RNID TO CELEBRATE IMPROVEMENTS TO NHS HEARING AID SERVICES

16/07/02

Paul Holmes MP for Chesterfield, who has been campaigning with RNID for the Government to make digital hearing aids available to all on the NHS, today welcomed two new breakthroughs in the campaign, which will lead to further modernisation of hearing aid services in the UK.

Negotiations with hearing aid manufacturers, led by RNID Chief Executive James Strachan, have dramatically reduced the cost of digital hearing to the NHS from £140-£205 to just £70-75. This significantly reduced price means a further cost saving to NHS Trusts providing digital hearing aids under the Modernising Hearing Aid Services (MHAS) programme. It also makes it possible for all NHS audiology departments to begin fitting digital hearing aids and prepare for modernisation. Prior to RNID's campaign, advanced digital hearing aids were only available from private hearing aid dispensers for up to £2,500 each.

RNID has also just published *Best Practice Standards for Adult Audiology* - the first comprehensive set of standards to provide a blueprint for how audiology services should be run. The Standards are jointly funded by the Department of Health and RNID, and together with the detailed MHAS procedures for fitting digital hearing aids, will help transform the service provided to deaf and hard of hearing people by the NHS.

The Standards have been written by audiology service providers, service commissioners and service users across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and point the way forward for a service that in many parts of the country is still in crisis.

RNID Chief Executive James Strachen said: *"Digital hearing aids now cost the NHS a fraction of their retail price, enabling more to be achieved with the funds already committed and the roll-out of modernised NHS hearing aid services to proceed more quickly across the country"*.

Paul said: "I will be writing to my local NHS Trusts to urge them to take advantage of these fantastic new developments and modernise their hearing aid services.

"For very little money, tens of thousands of my constituents could enjoy a significantly improved quality of life by having well fitted digital hearing aids."

PAUL HOLMES MP CONGRATULATES PUPILS AND TEACHERS FOR A-LEVEL SUCCESS

Paul Holmes, Liberal Democrat MP for Chesterfield, and member of the influential House of Common's Education and Skill's Select Committee commenting on today's A-Levels results (15/08/02), said:

"Credit is due to Chesterfield's pupils and teachers who have achieved excellent A-Level results within the current examination structure. Anyone who thinks passing an A-level is easy is simply wrong.

"As a former teacher and head of Sixth Form I have first hand experience of the hard work pupils and teachers are putting into getting the best possible results and it annoys me when improvements are seen as evidence that exams are getting easier. Unfortunately, until we have a complete review of the system we will continue to face the annual debate over A-Level standards falling. This year's unprecedented one-year rise follows the first major overhaul of A-levels since their introduction 51 years ago. Now that pupils take AS Levels in the first year of sixth form they are able to drop subjects that they are not so good at and instead concentrate on their strengths. As a result are less A-Level entries but better results. All the students receiving results today must be congratulated on their achievements. It is just a shame that they face uncertainty about university prospects as the Government continues to drag its feet over the long promised review of tuition fees and loans."

Note: The latest UCAS figures show that the number of under-21s applying to university this year has actually fallen. This is a further indictment of the Government's failed student finance policy - especially when the poor record in England is compared to that of Scotland where they have abolished tuition fees and restored grants.

LABOUR VOTE COLLAPSES IN INKERSALL

A By-election in Inkersall (22/8/02) saw another collapse in the Labour vote in their traditional heartlands. Chesterfield. Liberal Democrat candidate Ruth Perry won a massive 828 votes over Labour candidate Shirley Flint's 437. The turnout was 38.7% an increase on the 37% in 1999 when the seat was last fought during the full Borough and Town Council elections. The Staveley Town Council By-election was fought on exactly the same boundaries as the Chesterfield Borough Council ward of Inkersall. John Williams, Labour Leader of Derbyshire County Council also represents Inkersall as a Chesterfield Borough Councillor. Cllr Mick Bagshaw (County Cllr for the area and Liberal Democrat Group Leader on Staveley Town Council), said ***"John held his Borough Council seat by just 9 votes in 1999 but Ruth won the same area by a majority of 391 votes. John was looking very thoughtful at the count"***

Three other By elections in Staveley in April saw the Liberal Democrats win all three with a record vote in traditional Labour strongholds. The two former pit villages of Poolsbrook and Duckmanton had never before been won by anyone but the Labour party since the day they were built.

Paul Holmes, Lib Dem MP for Chesterfield said ***"Labour were boasting that the Inkersall election was the start of their campaign to win Chesterfield back from the Liberal Democrats. They also said that it would be a real test of whether they or the Liberal Democrats would win control of Chesterfield Borough Council at next May's all out elections. They threw everything they had into the campaign and their vote fell while ours soared. If Labour can no longer win in areas like Inkersall, Poolsbrook and Duckmanton and Barrow Hill, where they used to weigh their vote rather than count it, then they are finished in Chesterfield."***

First Liberal Democrat MP addresses Ruskin College

Paul Holmes, Liberal Democrat MP for Chesterfield and former teacher became the first Liberal Democrat MP ever to address Ruskin College.

This speech followed a few days after Charles Kennedy became the first Liberal Democrat leader to address the TUC conference.

Last year Paul won Tony Benn's Chesterfield seat from Labour after 72 years.

Paul said in his speech, "A Liberal Democrat MP addressing this traditional training ground for Trade Unionists and Old Labour MP's like John Prescott, is yet another important sign of how years Thatcherism and New Labour have destroyed the old certainties of Labour/Conservative politics.

"When Peter Mandelson insists that "we are all Thatcherites now", it is not surprising that many former Labour supporters feel betrayed and are looking for different, more acceptable, political philosophies."

Paul went on to give a detailed critique of New Labour's regressive and divisive educational policies and the Liberal Democrat alternatives on Student Finance, League Tables, Testing and Teachers conditions which are already being introduced in Scotland and Wales.

MOBILITY FOR THE DISABLED REQUIRES EFFECTIVE ENFORCEMENT 27/08/02

Paul Holmes MP, Liberal Democrat Disabilities Spokesman, commenting on the RNIB report 'Travellers Tales', said:

"The report gives shocking examples of blind and partially sighted people being confined to their houses because of the fear of accidents if they leave. Doubly so, because the remedies in most cases are very simple. It's already illegal to block the pavement with wheelie bins and advertising boards. Local authorities should ensure that their refuse collection staff stick to the rules. The police and local authorities need enforce the laws against illegally parked cars better.

All public transport operators should ensure that announcements at railway stations and on trains are regular and clear enough to hear. The best already do this, and the others should be obliged to do the same as part of their operator's licence.

Extending such a system to bus operators, as is already done on most coach services, would be easy to do.

The report highlights just how simple and cost effective it would be to free blind and partially sighted people from the prison that their home can be."

NGOs welcome Paul Holmes MP's initiative on domestic energy conservation

The HECA Partnership of Non Government Organisations today welcomed Paul Holmes's latest initiative in support of increased domestic energy efficiency.

Paul has responded to an official Treasury consultation on ways to improve energy conservation by supporting the Clean Dozen list of measures to encourage greater energy efficiency being promoted by many NGOs and energy advice centres.

These measures include:

Setting a firm target of a 20% increase in energy efficiency by 2010, as recommended by the recent Performance and Innovation Unit report to Government

Reducing VAT to 5% on energy saving materials, making them cheaper to purchase

50% grants for householders who install advanced technology such as domestic combined heat and power units and heat pumps

Stamp duty rebate for people who install energy saving measures after buying a house.

Said HECA Partnership Organiser Ron Bailey: 'By supporting the Clean Dozen Paul Holmes has demonstrated his support for the environment. CO2 emissions have increased in the last two years so it is very important that MPs like Mr Holmes continue to campaign for greater domestic energy efficiency, both to protect the environment and to enable the millions of people living in cold homes to have decent, warm accommodation. We congratulate Mr Holmes for taking this initiative.'

Further information from: Ron Bailey 07951 761229 Supported by: The Association for the Conservation of Energy, Friends of the Earth, The National HECA Forum, the National Right to Fuel Campaign, Help the Aged, SHELTER, National Campaign for Homeless People, UNISON, National Energy Action, the National Housing Federation, SERA, the Green Liberal Democrats, the Tory Green Initiative, the Green Party, British Energy Efficiency Federation, The Cornwall Local Authority Support Programme, CIGA, TRANSCO

EX-LABOUR COUNCILLOR AND LORD RENNARD JOIN PAUL HOLMES MP TO OPEN NEW OFFICE

Chesterfield MP Paul Holmes and Liberal Democrat Director of Campaigns and Elections, Lord Rennard, officially opened Paul Holmes's new constituency office at 69 West Bars on Friday 4th October 2002. Local Party activists, and Councillors were joined by Euro MP Nick Clegg and former Labour Mayor Ron Jepson. Paul Holmes said, "I am delighted that Chris Rennard and Ron Jepson could join us to mark the occasion of our new office opening. Chris runs all the Liberal Democrats most successful elections. He was keen to return to Chesterfield as his first national by-election campaign was Chesterfield in 1984 when nobody thought Labour could ever lose a seat like this.

"Former Mayor Ron Jepson was a Labour Councillor for over 30 years and like so many others has become so fed up with Labour in recent years he is now supporting the Liberal Democrats."

Notes: 1. Ron Jepson represented Rother Ward on Chesterfield Borough Council until 1999 and has been Mayor of the Town. 2. Chris Rennard (Lord Rennard of Wavertree) is the party's national Director of Campaigns and Elections and has run all the key elections for the party.

BREAST CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

This October, Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Paul Holmes MP joins the charity Breakthrough Breast Cancer in highlighting the importance of “breast awareness for life” among the constituents of Chesterfield. Paul Holmes MP and Breakthrough are concerned that recent debates about the value of breast self-examination (BSE) have contributed to feelings of anxiety and confusion amongst women about what they should or should not be doing. Although following a specific and regular procedure for examining the breasts, usually taught by a health professional - may be of no real benefit to women it is important to remember that women should be encouraged to be breast aware, that is be aware of changes in their breasts and consult a GP if she finds anything unusual or is worried.

Most women associate lumps with breast cancer - however nine out of ten lumps in the breast or armpit are not cancer. Other symptoms may not be so well known. These include;

A lumpy area or any thickening of the breast which does not disappear after a period.

A change in the size or shape of the breast

A change in the skin of the breast, dimpling or puckering

A change in the nipple - in appearance, direction, or any blood-stained discharge

Breast pain that does not go away after your period.

Delyth Morgan, Chief Executive of Breakthrough Breast Cancer said, “what better time than Breast Cancer Awareness Month to start being more breast aware? This doesn’t mean following a complicated routine. You simply need to be aware of changes in your breasts and consult your GP if you find anything unusual or are worried. It is never too early to be breast aware, and to share this potentially life saving information with other women.” Paul Holmes MP added, “as well as being breast aware, women should take advantage of services available that help catch the disease early, for instance the NHS Breast Screening Programme for over 50 year olds.“It is important to remember that early detection greatly increases your chances of surviving breast cancer.”

1. Routine screening invitations are sent to all women aged between 50 and 64 every three years. This will be extended up to women up to age 70 by 2004. Women aged 65 and over are entitled to, and can request, a routine screening appointment every three years, whether or not symptoms are apparent. Your GP can arrange this for you.

2. Breakthrough Breast Cancer is a charity committed to fighting breast cancer through research and awareness and has established the UK’s first dedicated breast cancer research centre. The Breakthrough Toby Robins Breast Cancer Research Centre has 85 world-class scientists and clinicians working in a co-ordinated effort to find a cure for breast cancer. Breakthrough Breast Cancer provides administration and advice to the All-Party Parliamentary group on Breast Cancer, which is supported by MPs from each of the three main political parties. For further information please call Michele Cefai, Breakthrough Breast Cancer’s Press Officer on 020 7557 6654 or out of hours 07778 682 001.

Paul takes Chesterfield's concerns to Blunkett

Paul Holmes met the Home Secretary David Blunkett on 29th October 2002 to discuss a variety of his constituents' concerns. Commenting after the meeting, Paul said, "Discussion ranged across issues of concern to the people of Chesterfield. I was particularly keen to stress the effect of anti-social behaviour on our community, and register my concern at the lack of funds for drug prevention and counselling schemes. I also stressed the urgent need for tighter regulation of airguns and replica weapons. It was a very open and frank discussion, and Mr Blunkett listened for an hour to our concerns."

PAUL TARGETS AIRGUN THUGS 30/10/02

Paul Holmes has sponsored a Private Members Bill in the House of Commons to raise the age for air gun ownership from fourteen to seventeen.

Paul said, "The law regarding air guns is totally out of date, and has long since failed to keep pace with these increasingly powerful weapons. Every week sees new stories in the press about people and animals being attacked and hurt by air guns, and as MPs we have a duty to do our best to protect our constituents and their pets. This is an extremely important issue, people have, in the very worst cases, lost their lives as the result of the reckless use of these weapons."

In 1997 there were 7,506 air weapons offences reported to the police; in 2001 there were 10,227.

The Private Members' Bill is an attempt to amend the Firearms Act 1968, by raising the age of unsupervised possession and use of weapons possession and use of air weapons from 14-17 using air weapons in registered clubs. The Cats Protection League estimates that some 10,000 cats are killed, maimed or injured. Researchers at St. James's University Hospital in Leeds found that one in ten victims of air weapons had to be hospitalised. The Bill will get its second Reading on Thursday 7 November, and

Paul Holmes today (30th October 2002) demanded tougher controls on the sale and use of fireworks."I don't think the authorities should be a killjoy in trying to stop bonfire night festivities. But a tiny minority of louts seem determined to abuse fireworks making the weeks before and after November 5th hell for elderly people, parents with young children, and pets. As a result the emergency services are being put under unnecessary strain, and I have had a large number of people contact my office to register their concerns. There is no doubt that we need tighter controls on the sale and the use of fireworks, to put an end to this anti-social and potentially life-threatening behaviour. I have supported a cross party parliamentary motion seeking strong protection for the community from excessively noisy and dangerous fireworks."

Paul has written to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry calling for the Government to:

Bring forward their proposed legislative ban on air bombs in order to support the British Fireworks Association voluntary code (the code is only operational from 1 January 2003);

enshrine the proposed voluntary code relating to restrictions on the sale and use of more noisy fireworks in legislation; Ensure that local Environmental Health Officers have the necessary powers, funding and guidance to take timely action against anti-social, noisy and disturbing displays;

Introduce provisions in the Consumer Protection Act 1987 to allow local authorities the option of limiting the selling period for fireworks to three weeks before November 5th and a few days thereafter only and also local discretion to permit periods of sale for Diwali and other festivals.

New Employment Role

Paul Holmes has been promoted to number two in the Liberal Democrat Work and Pensions Team, working as Professor Steve Webb's deputy. Paul takes over as Spokesperson for Employment, while retaining the Disability portfolio he has held since November 2001. Paul is also a member of the prestigious Education and Skills Select Committee.

Paul commented, *"I am delighted to have been given the employment portfolio, a subject close to my heart. I am relishing the opportunity to head the Liberal Democrat's scrutiny of the Labour's employment record, and to work closely with my colleague Steve Webb in tackling the increasingly significant issue of pension provision. I know from my experience as MP for Chesterfield of the problems faced by pensioners forced to live on meagre state pensions, and of the loss of final salary pensions by many of the workforce at UEF Chesterfield Cylinders and Dema Glass."*

BURRELL CASE - LEGAL REFORM

4 November 2002

Paul Holmes has called for legal reform in the wake of the collapse of the trial of the late Princess Diana's former butler and local man Paul Burrell. "Given the shaky basis upon which the case against Mr Burrell was built here is now be an obligation on the Crown Prosecution Service and the police to explain to the public why they decided to prosecute. Mr Burrell's treatment graphically illustrates the general need for the most important and serious cases to involve a second opinion at police level and Director-level decision at the CPS, before going to trial. There must also be a change to initiating prosecutions in the name of the Crown Prosecutor or the Director of Public Prosecutions, to bring formalities up to date with reality; and Public interest immunity certificates should be limited by law to the protection of national security, and individual security, so they are no longer used simply to prevent private or public embarrassment. Most importantly, the case of Paul Burrell shows one great merit of trial by jury is that it forces the prosecution to justify and explain its case in detail in front of a panel of ordinary people. The government must scrap any plans it has to reduce jury trial."

Chesterfield and North East Derbyshire Pensioners Action Association

Winding Wheel, Chesterfield, 25/10/02

You asked me to speak on what is - or is not - happening in Westminster on Pensions - with a particular reference to Automatic Credit Transfer and the Post Office.

I spoke last year of the situation at that point:

New Labour's manifesto in 1997 said:

"We believe that all pensioners should share fairly in the increasing prospects of the nation."

Gordon Brown told the Labour conference in 1993:

"I want the next Labour Government to achieve... the end of the means test for our elderly people."

The opposite of both of these is what has actually happened from 1997-2002.

As national wealth has soared pensioners have continued to fall behind - the Basic State Pension is completely inadequate to live on as Geoff Rooker, then the Secretary of State told the Social Security Select Committee on July 2000. This fall in the value of the Basic State Pension was made even worse in 2000 when pensions were given a 75p increase - Labour MP's twice chose not to join with Liberal Democrats MP's in voting against that derisory and insulting amount.

To top up the inadequate Basic State Pension the Government, in 1999 introduced the MIG. This, far from ending the means test for elderly people as Gordon Brown said he wanted to, actually massively extended means testing, instead to over 2 million of the pensioner population. But as the Government have relabelled Means Testing as Targetting that presumably makes it ok?

The problem of course with Means Testing is that

- It is intrusive and demeaning
- 700,000 pensioners fail to claim the MIG because it is too complicated or demeaning.
- It eats up money in bureaucratic admin - money which could be paid into a universal basic state pension instead.

So that was the position up to last year. What is new?

In general - nothing. The Government is not going to change its mind either on Means Testing or on the humiliatingly low level of the Basic State Pension.

Specifically there have been several developments of interest:

Firstly, the Government passed the Pensions Tax Credit Bill which from 2003 will allow pensioners to earn income on top of their full basic pension - but effectively taxed at 40p in the £ - the level of High Income earners. This will extend Means Testing (with all its bureaucracy, expense and indignity) to another 3 million pensioners. Over half of all pensioners will then be Means Tested by October 2003, rising to two thirds in future years. The exact opposite of Gordon Brown's 1993 pledge, and again of course around 1/3 of those eligible will not claim and will suffer accordingly.

I spoke against part of this Bill and moved an amendment, which was rejected by Labour. My colleague Professor Steve Webb moved other amendments - and I have sent some extracts from that debate to a number of you who wrote to me about pensions recently.

Secondly: The last year has also seen the issue of the unfair treatment of Women Pensioners highlighted in Parliament by the Liberal Democrats spokesman for Work and Pensions, Professor Steve Webb. The issue can best be summarised by reading the EDM submitted to Parliament by Steve Webb on 11th July and supported by just over 100 MP's including myself.

[SUPPORT WOMEN AGAINST PENSIONS POVERTY CAMPAIGN](#) 11.07.02 Webb/Steve That this House notes that a majority of today's poorest pensioners are women; further notes that among people coming up to state pension age, the majority of those with poor rights to both state and private sector pensions are women; recognises that many women with poor state pension rights at some stage paid national insurance contributions at the reduced rate for married women; is concerned that many such women report that the consequences of this option were not fully explained at the time, and that the scope for buying back missing years of contribution is very limited; is further concerned that many women only discover that they have very state low pension rights when they are close to state pension age; calls on the Government to write to all women below pension age whose national insurance contribution record is incomplete because of payment of the married women's contribution to advise them of their current and future pension entitlement; further calls on the Government to investigate the historic operation of the system of married women's contributions and to consider whether any form of redress might be

[Cont>>>](#)

Speech to Pensioners Association ([cont. From previous page](#))

appropriate for such women; and welcomes the launch of the Support Women Against Pensions Poverty campaign, whose aim is to ensure that present and future generations of women pensioners do not have to live in poverty in old age.

Regrettably I hardly need to say - the Government's response to this has been a negative one.

Thirdly: The third major issue to arise over the last year is the issue of Private Pensions and Company Pensions.

Government policy is that the inadequate state Pension should remain so and that everyone should rely upon Private Pensions of various kinds. BUT:

a) The Government stakeholder Pensions aimed at the low paid, has been a failure with only 12% of the intended audience taking it up.

b) Private pensions have suffered in the last year from:

Stock Market decline

Five Billion pounds Pensions Tax

Closure of many Final Salary Pension Schemes

c) Increasing number of Company Pension Schemes that fold and pay out a fraction of money paid in, e.g.

UEF/Chesterfield Cylinders

DEMA Glass, in Chesterfield

last year

and ASW in Sheerness and Cardiff this summer

I have pursued this through Oral Questions to Minister letters to Minister and in debate in the House of Commons. The answer every time has been nil, except to say a Pensions Green Paper is coming out in the autumn.

But no specific measures mentioned so far and Green Paper to Legislation can be years in coming to fruition.

Finally you asked me to talk about the payment of Pensions and Benefits from April 2003 to Automatic Credit Transfer.

There are a variety of issues here and relating to Post Offices in general:

a) Of 9,000 urban Post Offices - 3,000 ARE going to be closed in the next few years. The remainder will be upgraded.

b) Automated Credit Transfer WILL happen. Post Office Card Accounts (a plastic card version of the current Giro book) can be used at Post Offices but needing a PIN number. BUT will banks have Basic Bank Account operating in time for next April? Cash will be withdrawn from Post Offices free of charge.

s well as fears over timescale for introduction and the closure of 1/3 of Post Offices there are also fears that Government communications are pushing 'customers' towards Basic Bank Account and away from Post Office Card Accounts.

I have tabled questions to the Work and Pension Department asking what provision is being made for pensions and benefits claimants with learning disabilities and registered sight loss - issues you raised with me.

So as you can see last year has been busy with regard to pensions. As one of the three Liberal Democrat MPs on the Work and Pensions team (Disability Spokesman), I am closely involved with all these issues as well as in chasing up Chesterfield based issues from Chesterfield Cylinders and Dema Glass, and from excellent organisations like yourselves. Do keep up the good work!

Rule out Tuition Fees Holmes tells Government

Paul Holmes has lent his support to a Parliamentary Motion urging the Government to prevent elite universities from introducing top-up fees. Paul said,

"Ministers who benefited from free higher education, now seem content to allow access to our elite universities to be restricted to those who can afford to pay extra. Any move to introduce top-fees will result in a harmful two-tier education system. Tony Blair refused to make clear that as long as he is Prime Minister he will not introduce university top-up fees, yesterday in the House of Commons.

It now seems that students may have to shell out as much as fifteen thousand pounds or be unable to advantage of the exclusive Oxford education which Blair had for nothing."

Notes: The 2001 Labour Manifesto said: "we will not introduce top-up fees and have legislated to prevent them". On 23rd March 2000 David Blunkett as Education Secretary said: "I, and the House, have specifically ruled-out top-up fees." On 26th July 2000, the then Education Minister Baroness Blackstone told the Select Committee on Education and Employment that "Top-up fees would, I think, introduce a free-for-all of a kind that would be very, very difficult to operate in this country".

15/11/02

CLOSURE OF CHILD SEX LOOPHOLE FOLLOWS PAUL'S COMMONS QUESTION

Paul Holmes today welcomed the closure of appalling loopholes in Child Sex Offence laws on which he tackled the Home Secretary in February. Under new legislation announced yesterday as part of the Queen's Speech, saw a new offence of adult sexual activity with a child to deal with behaviour such as persuading children to undress.

Commenting after the Government's announcement, Paul said: *"I am enormously pleased that this disgusting loophole has now been closed. I drew David Blunkett's attention to it back in February following a shocking case in which police were unable to prosecute a volunteer sports coach who persuaded two eleven year-old girls to undress in front of him. Because he did not touch or threaten them he escaped justice. Sensible measures to protect our children from these dangerous paedophiles must be welcome. But this new Bill must be backed up by extra support for the police, if they are going to be able to investigate the massive backlog of suspected paedophiles."*

Paul had asked the Secretary of State for the Home Department, "When he intends to bring forward proposals following the report on the reform of sex offence laws, Setting the Boundaries; and if he will make a statement. 1st supplementary on a loopholes in sex offences legislation to protect children" on 4th February 2002.

Paul's speech to Chesterfield and North East Derbyshire Pensioners Action Association 25/10/02

You asked me to speak on what is - or is not - happening in Westminster on Pensions - with a particular reference to Automatic Credit Transfer and the Post Office. I spoke last year of the situation at that point: New Labour's manifesto in 1997 said: *"We believe that all pensioners should share fairly in the increasing prospects of the nation."* Gordon Brown told the Labour conference in 1993: *"I want the next Labour Government to achieve... the end of the means test for our elderly people."* The opposite of both of these is what has actually happened from 1997-2002. As national wealth has soared pensioners have continued to fall behind - the Basic State Pension is completely inadequate to live on as Geoff Rooker, then the Secretary of State told the Social Security Select Committee on July 2000. This fall in the value of the Basic State Pension was made even worse in 2000 when pensions were given a 75p increase - Labour MP's twice chose not to join with Liberal Democrats MP's in voting against that derisory and insulting amount. To top up the inadequate Basic State Pension the Government, in 1999 introduced the MIG. This, far from ending the means test for elderly people as Gordon Brown said he wanted to, actually massively extended means testing, instead to over 2 million of the pensioner population. But as the Government have re-labelled Means Testing as Targeting that presumably makes it ok? [More...](#)

THANKS FOR HARD WORK

Local MP thanks Chesterfield Sixth Formers for help at House of Commons

Paul Holmes has expressed his gratitude to students from St Mary's and Brookfield schools for their hard work in his House of Commons office. Commenting on the students Paul said:

"I was enormously impressed by the intelligence, application and enthusiasm of these young people. At a time when many young people are turned off politics it is our duty as politicians' to listen to their concerns and to be as accessible as possible.

"I thought that one of the best ways to achieve this was to organise short periods of work experience to local students, and I have been very pleased, with the results. I was delighted to receive a letter from Ian Harrison, the Head of History at St Mary's, thanking me for the quality of the work experience I had provided.

"So far students from St. Mary's and Brookfield have enjoyed work experience in the House of Commons, and I would be very pleased to hear from other students wishing to gain Parliamentary experience." 18/11/02

Ian Harrison, Head of History writes:

"I write to express my appreciation of the quality of work experience provided for the eight students who spent a few days with you at the Houses of Parliament. Everyone, without exception, has returned expressing their enjoyment of their time at Westminster. In their words, they were not simply given things to do to keep them quiet, but tasks that were valid and part of the routine of an MP's office. They particularly enjoyed writing press releases and formulating questions for use in the House. You and your colleagues have managed to increase their enthusiasm for politics, which is no mean feat in these days. Please pass my thanks on to the researchers and various MPs helped to make this experience such a success."

FREE EYE TEST CAMPAIGN

Paul Holmes has launched a campaign for free NHS eye tests as part of the party's agenda for better public and preventive health.

100 people lose their sight every day – many of them unnecessarily. A free eye test would mean that many more eye diseases could be detected earlier and treated, ultimately cutting the cost of social care. Indications of systemic diseases such as high blood pressure, diabetes and brain tumours can also be picked up at routine eye examinations. Paul said: *“Liberal Democrats want more support for better public health. We should be focusing on how we can stop people becoming ill in the first place. Eye tests provide an early opportunity for diagnosis of problems, and in many cases can save people's sight. It is also important to improve the registration and assessment of visually impaired people. Around two thirds of people in the UK do not register their condition, making it difficult to provide adequate care. The Government has allowed preventive healthcare to slip down its agenda. [continued](#)*

The reintroduction and promotion of the free eye test is a necessary and important step forward for public health. Visual impairment and blindness are among the most debilitating effects of disease. We must do more to prevent them, and more to care for people affected by them.” 28/11/02

Factfile

About 500,000 people are legally registered as blind or partially sighted, but the real number could be over one million. 9 out of 10 blind or partially sighted people are over 65. The Patients' Association reveals that: only 1% of Health Authorities/Boards offer patients an appointment with a specialist within a month, which may be crucial to saving someone's sight Only half of Health Authorities/Boards think their ophthalmology service provision is adequate

UK wide (average waiting time for a routine referral is 3-6 months, during which time many patients may lose their vision) Almost a quarter of Health Authorities/Boards offer no treatment for age-related macular degeneration At the last General Election, we estimated that it would cost £75 million a year in real terms to fund free eye checks. The policy would save money in terms of reduced treatment costs if eye diseases were diagnosed earlier, and in preventing blindness, so that the person would not need additional assistance. It would also reduce the number of car accidents, as undetected poor eyesight is obviously linked to dangerous driving.

Lib Dems passed a policy motion at their last conference calling for the widest provision of primary eye care, including reintroduction of the free eye test, an enhanced role for optometrists in providing services to their patients and promotion of the need for regular eye tests in order not only to diagnose and treat ophthalmic conditions but also as a contribution to primary care and health screening. Better access to acute ophthalmic services in hospitals, concentrating on reducing current inequalities in access to operations. Enhanced provision of low-visual aids both in hospital eye departments and in high street locations accessible to those with visual impairment. Consistent provision of support in the community and rehabilitation by social services departments, and support for the voluntary sector in providing services. Amendment of the current process of assessment and registration of those identified as blind or partially sighted.

Chesterfield Liberal Democrats Vote of Confidence in Holmes

Chesterfield Liberal Democrats have unanimously reselected Paul Holmes the sitting Member of Parliament, at a packed AGM at the Chesterfield Hotel on Friday 29th November.

Paul said: *"I am delighted that Chesterfield Lib Dems have placed their confidence in me. Labour are on the run in Chesterfield, in all four by-elections we inflicted humiliating losses on them in their former strongholds, and people are growing increasingly fed up with Labour neglect and incompetence. As for the Conservatives, they have no councillors in Chesterfield, they have no relevant policies for the town and it's no so wonder that they don't even contest local elections any more. We are now well on our way to taking control of the Borough Council, and I am enormously proud of representing the town in Parliament."*

Constituency Chairman Cllr. Keith Falconer said, *"Paul has done a smashing job for Chesterfield, highlighting New Labour's broken promises and arrogance. I am confident that he will be in a position to do so for many years to come."*

Local party member Stuart Bray added, *"There is a real sense of optimism here, we have seen Labour off, and have our first Liberal MP for over seventy years. Morale is very high, and momentum is with us against Labour."*

Government Refusal to Extend Winter Fuel Payment to Severely Disabled People “Callous and Illogical”

Paul Holmes Lib Dem Spokesperson on Disability last night called a Parliamentary debate to demand the extension of winter fuel payments to the severely disabled. Speaking after the debate, in which Government Minister Malcolm Wicks repeated its refusal to extend the payments, Paul said, *“The case for extending winter fuel payment is overwhelming. The cost would be just a fraction of one percent of the total social security budget of over £110 billion. The Government's position just demonstrates a callous disregard toward the needs of severely disabled people. The Minister simply read out previous answers that had been given in the Lords – even through I had already refuted all of these points in my speech - dismissing all the evidence I presented despite the fact that it came from:*

Respected Disability campaigner and Labour Peer Lord Ashley of Stoke.

The recommendations of the Cross Party Trade and Industry Committee in its recent September 2002 report on fuel poverty.

Evidence provided by respected organisations such as the Disability Rights Commission, Disability Now, Leonard Cheshire and Energy Watch.

The Government's own research (Disability in Great Britain 1999)

“Many disabled people feel the cold more intensely than others, especially those who are house-bound and unable to work. I find such Government tight-fistedness especially galling given their decision this autumn to extend winter fuel payments to thirty thousand elderly ex-pats, some living in tropical temperatures. I wholeheartedly agree with those Labour MPs and Peers who have previously described the Labour Government attitude as illogical, anomalous and incoherent. Regrettably no Labour Backbenchers and not one Tory including their Disability Spokesperson attended this highly important debate. Perhaps this is hardly surprising given that of the three main parties only the Lib Dems included an extension of the payments in their fully costed manifesto.” 12 December 2002