



My update this month explains my new role as Shadow Rail Minister, gives my response to key questions about the much vaunted 'northern powerhouse' and the problems in our NHS that the government seem determined to aggravate....

New Year and a new parliamentary brief

My predecessor Jonathon Reynolds MP decision to step down from the job has given me the opportunity to now become Shadow Rail Minister.

This will immediately require me to take the HS2 Bill through its remaining parliamentary stages in terms of its passage through the House of Commons.



Nicola Shaw (CEO of HS1) will be reporting shortly on the future of Network Rail and it is imperative that we do not go back to the bad old days of the privatized RailTrack .

Many will remember the dark days of that terrible episode and the colossal health and safety failures that had to be corrected by the subsequent Labour Government.

The overarching objective for Labour is, of course, to bring the railways back into public ownership and I am looking forward to the challenge of developing our policy.

That will not prevent me from championing important local issues such as the London Link from Middlesbrough, the electrification of the main line from Northallerton, the replacement of outdated rolling stock and, of course, the renovation and restoration of Middlesbrough Railways Station.

I believe in a state owned railway. That does not have cross-party support in Westminster but it does have cross party support out in the country.

For me, it is essential we reclaim the economic and social benefits of an efficient publicly run national railway network.

In the UK we have the absurd situation of contracts for UK rail services being let to the state owned railway companies of Germany, France and the Netherlands.

Why is this tory government guaranteeing huge public subsidies to private rail operators and other nations state owned networks?

Why do they endorse inflation busting fare hikes on passengers that only serves to boost the profits and shareholder dividends without an appreciable benefit to passengers or rail infra-structure?

I intend to be vigorous and forensic in holding the government and ministers to account on these matters as well as for their mis-management of our railways and their incompetent, budget-busting planning.

I will be equally dedicated to developing Labour Party policy on rail. That means being engaged and working closely with all industry sector stakeholders and passenger groups to get the best deal for passengers and tax payers.

A Labour Government in 2020 will make it so.

In the meantime, there is a huge amount of work to be done and I am looking forward to getting to grips with my new brief.

This will also ensure there is joined up policy across other key transport areas such as airport expansion, road transport, other public transport systems as well as promoting such things as cycling, electric powered vehicles, passenger access and safety.

All this, of course, will directly improve prospects for our economy, for regeneration and prosperity locally, regionally and nationally. Rail is fundamental to the success of our economy and speaking from the front bench will enable me to press Labour's case for a better deal for business, commuters and communities alike.



Key Questions for Teesside -there is another way

The last quarter of 2015 was devastating for Teesside as we lost thousands of jobs in our steel-making and mining industries, with the impending closure of HMRC offices and the postponement of work at the Air Products site.

I read with interest what Stockton South MP and Northern Powerhouse Minister James Wharton had to say in a Q&A article published in the Gazette on 5th January 2016. It is mostly a triumph of optimism over experience in my view and more aspirational than of real substance to try and reassure those families whose lives have been thrown into chaos and uncertainty.

As we enter 2016 I believe there is another way for Teesside to be competitive and successful. I am responding to James Wharton by addressing the same questions.



Q. Does the loss of SSI mean Teesside no longer has a role to play in the Northern Powerhouse?

The loss of SSI was and is still devastating but Teesside remains ambitious.

We have a range of industries, some of which are established and some which are of more recent origin. So we are still a powerhouse in our own right and we have a major role to play in the northern and national economy.

Our Chemical, Polymers and Process industries remain mightily significant, as do the companies engaged in advanced engineering, oil & gas, decommissioning, digital industries, etc as well as the research and development institutions in the process & metals industries - and more besides.

Teesside University will continue in its pivotal role in the growth of our economy and the ambitions of local Further Education colleges right across Tees Valley (who are currently undergoing an Area Review) in bringing through young people with the necessary skills are crucial for sustaining and developing our businesses and communities.

We cannot sit back and say others can produce things more cheaply. We can compete. We need to invest in research and development. We've done it before and our productivity has surged. We can do it again.

Q. How can we ever be a major player against the likes of Manchester and Newcastle without steel, one of our key industries?

We are a major player but we can play a very different role to those cities. We have wholly unique and exciting opportunities on Teesside which Government can help bring to fruition if they had the will to do so.

Whilst Steel hasn't completely disappeared from the local scene, and there will undoubtedly be challenges ahead for the remaining Teesside operations, there are opportunities for us to utilize the existing land, plant and assets and of course the skilled labour force to bring steel production back to Teesside but in a different guise.

Steel has an important future. Teesside could and should be part of it. For example by way of electro arc furnaces producing new steel from recycled steel as part of a circular economy.

We do have to have a different approach here in the UK in terms of steel production, one which is much more integrated and strategic.

It's no good shipping steel across the globe or across the country at massive expense for different stages of production. But all of that needs Government to recognize the crucial importance of strategic and core industries such as steel and to align its policies of energy, economic development, infrastructure and skills on a long term basis to give these industries the ability to plan and invest as well as the massively important supply chains that flow from them.

There are also opportunities in Carbon Capture and, not only Storage, but also recycling of carbon in the creation of new products. Industrial CCS alone would make Teesside a magnet for inward investment given the prospects of slashing carbon emissions with the commensurate cost savings and, of course, a massive contribution to the Climate Change agenda.

Again we have massive reserves of coal in the North Sea – over 400 years' worth - which can be gasified and decarbonised in situ - so leaving the carbon where it is, with no emissions and cheap Gas and feedstocks for our critical industries.



Q. The European Commission has confirmed that the UK Government could have given state aid support to Redcar steelworks for a number of reasons, for example to support training and employment. Why did the Government no step in to help?

Ultimately it was a matter of political will or rather the lack of it on the Government's part.

There were opportunities to intervene on the grounds of regional assistance, environmental issues as well as research and development given SSI's participation in the Teesside Collective Industrial CCS project.

I went to Italy to discuss their Government's response to the crisis at the Ilva plant in Taranto. The bottom line was the Italian government recognised the strategic importance of that industry and the economic and social damage that would be caused by allowing it to go to the wall.

Sadly, that we have a Secretary of State who doesn't believe in having an industrial strategy and a Government ideologically wedded to the supremacy of market forces no matter what the circumstances, ends up with plants like SSI failing and communities such as ours on Teesside bearing the brunt.

I learned of two trainee Nurses who had to abandon their career plans following their husbands losing their steel jobs. These are the devastating consequences when a government fails to act.

Q Lord Heseltine has visited Teesside to discuss plans to drive forward investment opportunities. How can his input help the Northern Powerhouse?

I hope that if Lord Heseltine listens to the incredibly committed Teesside industrialists, who understand their multinational industries and the potential for Teesside to be at the leading edge of industrial developments and innovation, as well as the local authorities who know the region intimately and whose commitment to economic development is beyond question, he might be able to persuade the Government to see and understand our massive potential and the huge contribution we can make to UK PLC whilst at the same time creating prosperous and successful communities right across Teesside.



Q. What can we expect from you in 2016?

I'll continue to make the case for Middlesbrough and Teesside and whilst as an opposition MP, my job is to hold the Government to account,

I'll happily work with my neighbour James Wharton MP the Minister for the Northern Powerhouse and any other Government Ministers in making shared ambitions for greater prosperity come to fruition but that greater prosperity has to benefit of all sections of our community.

It has to be real and not just an aspiration. As it is I am greatly worried that all we are getting is rhetoric, re-packaged announcements and promise of good times ahead and absolutely no action.

We have too many fellow Teessiders who are struggling and they need not just our compassion but our support, advocacy and decent treatment. I'll do my best to stand up for them and for those facing prejudice and intolerance.

I'll continue to work alongside the local authority and other players in our joint endeavour to bring us more jobs and better paid jobs; to give our young people better and more relevant educational opportunities so they can secure a better future; and for the elderly a dignified retirement with their care needs met and to continue strive to achieve a sense of hope, pride, optimism and security for everyone.

Following my recent appointment as Shadow Rail Minister I'll be focussing on the key issues of electrification, improved connectivity and improved services and a better deal for passengers.

The growth in rail over the last several decades has been huge but we need to invest for the future and it is a real privilege to be able to help shape the rail policies which I'm sure will be very much welcomed.

Supporting Junior Doctors and Nurses - fighting to save our NHS

I just wonder who the Tories were speaking to when they said the NHS would be safe in their hands. Not to Junior Doctors, that's for sure - or patients it seems.

The Government is content to force a head-on collision with Junior Doctors (bearing in mind most of them are not 'junior' at all, but in postgraduate training to become a consultant or a GP) and to impose new contracts despite the clear consequences. This is not a good deal for Doctors or the people in their care.

Let's bear in mind that of the £3.8 billion that NHS will receive next year, £3.4 billion is new money from Treasury and £400 million will come from cuts to existing Department of Health allocation. Chancellor George Osborne confirmed plans to make £22bn worth of efficiency savings in the NHS by 2020.

No-one in the NHS seriously believes you can make efficiencies on this scale without harming patient care.

The Junior Doctors strike is everyone's fight to save our NHS and I support them in this dispute. Of course it is more than disappointing that Doctors feel compelled to strike but let's face it, the BMA is not an organisation to take such action lightly and the battle they are having is to keep patients safe and doctors fit to work.



The other group of NHS workers set to take the brunt are student Nurses and midwives. From September this year the Government plans to stop their training bursaries.

That measure will force nurses into £50,000 of debt and make them pay for the whole of their training while spending 50% of their training time working for the NHS on clinical placements - and this on a starting salary of £22,799.

The student nurses and midwives took their campaign to the streets of Middlesbrough on the 11th January and I was happy again to turn out and support them.

Let's be under no illusion about what is going on here. We all know what the outcome is going to be.

The Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt is simply pressing ahead with the Tory agenda to demoralise and fragment the NHS ahead of further privatisation and also do that by demeaning the people who work there.

Private Members Bill

My *Negligence and Damages Bill* was heard on 22/1/2016 and scheduled for a Second Reading on 11th March.

This Bill seeks to make it possible for more than just a restricted group of victims to pursue claims for psychiatric injury and the Bill also seeks to amend the law relating to bereavement damages in fatal accident cases.

At the moment there are significant restrictions on the categories of people who can claim when they are psychiatrically injured and my Bill aims to lift those restrictions.

On bereavement: the loss of a loved one, particularly a spouse or child, is a massively traumatic event in anyone's life. It can be even more traumatic if that death is caused by the negligent act of another person or party.

The law as it currently stands treats some members of bereaved families very badly. Scotland has a much more civilized approach to the issue. This Bill isn't about money but the changes I am proposing will bring England and Wales much more into line with Scotland where, for example, the parents of a single adult child can pursue a case in negligence and have their own terrible loss acknowledged in a modest financial acknowledgement.

As the law is now, parents in such terrible circumstances, as well as other family members, can only seek to recover funeral expense in circumstances where their loved one has been taken from them because of the negligence or foolishness of someone else be that on the road in the workplace or elsewhere.

At the moment, bereavement awards vary considerably between Scotland and the rest of the UK and I want to see that harmonised.

If my Bill passes through parliament it will also extend the range of relatives who would be eligible to claim and increase the amount payable by removing the current £12,980 cap on compensation.

I believe there is a fairer and more sensible way to do things and this is what my private members bill aims to do in terms of firstly psychiatric injury and secondly in terms of bereavement damages in fatal cases.
