

**10 Jun 1997 : Column 1036**

9.31 pm

**Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to make my maiden speech tonight. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker) and I have sat on the Government Benches for many hours of debate on the Bill over the last couple of weeks, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on his own excellent maiden speech.

It is a privilege to have the opportunity to make my maiden speech. Like my predecessor, Gordon Oakes, who had a long and distinguished career in the House for more than 30 years, I was born and brought up in my constituency. Gordon Oakes became the Member for Halton when the seat was created in 1983, but was first elected to Parliament in 1964 as the Member for Bolton, West. He lost his seat in 1970, but won another at a by-election at Widnes in 1971.

Gordon was an able Member of the House, and served as Parliamentary Secretary at both the Department of the Environment and the Department of Energy. He was promoted to Minister of State, Department of Education and Science in the previous Labour Government, and was made a Privy Councillor in 1979. He was also an excellent constituency Member of Parliament, and helped many thousands of people during his career. I wish him a long and happy retirement.

It is right for me to mention, too, that the constituency produced another excellent Member of Parliament--Jack Ashley, now Lord Ashley, whose work on behalf of the disabled is well known.

Halton is not a town in itself, but an area based on local government boundaries drawn up in 1974. It comprises the proud towns of Widnes and Runcorn and the beautiful village of Hale. Most of the original town of Runcorn is in my constituency, although most of its new town area is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mr. Hall).

Mine is a constituency of many waterways--the river Mersey, the Manchester ship canal, the Bridgewater canal and the St. Helen's canal.

The early pioneering chemical industry had its roots in my constituency, and that industry is still the largest local employer today. There are few household goods which do not contain components produced by the chemical industry in Halton.

One of the legacies left by the chemical industry was massive land contamination, especially in Widnes. However, through the fantastic efforts of the borough council and the local community, that situation has been transformed by a large land reclamation programme over the past 20 years. Where once were the most polluted tracts of land in the country, we now have a superb shopping centre, a golf course, open spaces and parkland.

With a much improved environment and excellent transport links, Halton is now a popular place to live. It is also the home of one of the most imaginative and interesting museums in the country--the national chemical industry museum, Catalyst.

Our most famous landmark is the Runcorn-Widnes bridge, similar in design to the Sydney harbour bridge and dwarfing the Tyne bridge. It is a stunning sight when lit up at night. Unfortunately, the bridge has now reached capacity, and we face regular congestion and queuing to get over it. I feel sure that this Government will adopt a much more positive approach to working with Halton borough council and the Merseyside and Cheshire local authorities to come up with a solution for a second crossing, which is crucial to the economic and social development of the area.

My constituency has a great sporting tradition, as the home of Runcorn football club and Widnes rugby league club, now known as Widnes Vikings. Widnes rugby league club is the second most successful club in the history of rugby league. Indeed, given the size of the town, it has done even better than Wigan.

I mentioned earlier that the chemical industry is our largest employer. Over the past 20 or 30 years, it has shrunk significantly, and there is a need to continue to bring more diverse industries into the constituency. Our biggest challenge is high unemployment: real unemployment is running at 24 per cent. and youth unemployment is more than 40 per cent. A recent survey of local employers showed a 40 per cent. skills shortage--which explains why I wanted to speak in today's debate.

Education and training are crucial to my constituency. The Prime Minister was right to make education our No. 1 priority, and I know that the new Halton unitary authority, due to take over next April, will make education its top priority so as to help to regenerate the towns of Widnes and Runcorn by producing a skilled and flexible work force and improving the cultural and social lives of its citizens.

We must get things right at the very beginning. Lifelong learning starts in the early years, and I am pleased by the commitment to extending early years provision. I welcome the Bill and the move to end the assisted places scheme and to use the money to cut class sizes for five, six and seven-year-olds. That is very important to primary schools in Halton, where there are 141 classes of 30 or more. That means 4,464 children, or 40 per cent. of the total. Our children deserve better individual attention from their teachers, and small classes can help to achieve that.

Although this is only one component in the strategy to raise standards in education, it is a crucial one. In Halton, 54.6 per cent. of 11-year-olds fail to reach the required standard in maths, and 50.6 per cent. fail to reach it in English--hence the importance of this measure to my constituency.

I also believe that the breadth of the curriculum that primary teachers have to deliver is onerous. It does not leave enough time to spend on teaching the basics: reading, writing and arithmetic. I welcome today's announcement by the Minister in that regard.

It is clear that the early years are a crucial part of a child's education. An 11-year-old who is not properly equipped for secondary school will quickly fall behind, making the job doubly difficult for teachers in secondary schools. Many secondary school teachers have told me that they despair at the poor numeracy and literacy skills of some of their pupils. Those pupils then struggle throughout the rest of their time at school.

I also welcome the Labour Government's commitment to improved teaching standards. Most teachers do an excellent job and deserve the highest praise. Many have their jobs made much more difficult by the immense problems of social deprivation and poor parenting in some areas; but there are also teachers who are not up to the job, and they should not be anywhere near a classroom. Some schools are clearly failing their children. Although there may be poverty and poor discipline in some homes, that should not be used as an excuse for poor teaching and poor schools. There are plenty of examples of good teaching and good schools in similar circumstances. I therefore welcome the commitment to deal effectively with incompetent teachers, and the publication of the names of failing schools, as clear signs of our determination to raise standards.

As a further element in improving standards, I hope that the Secretary of State will publish much more information about the performance of schools. The current league tables are flawed and do not accurately reflect the true achievements of many schools. Nor do they give parents enough information.

Finally, I thank the people of Halton for electing me. It is a great privilege to sit in this House as their Member of Parliament. They are hard-working and generous people who have waited a long time for a Labour Government