



Minimum wage rise for a million workers

More than a million workers, two thirds of them low paid women will benefit from a rise in the National Minimum Wage from £5.35 to £5.52 an hour from October it was announced on Wednesday.

It is right that in the East Midlands we will see 90000 workers benefit. The National Minimum Wage is one of the proudest achievements of this Labour Government. Since it was introduced in 1999 it has gone up by almost 30% more than inflation with the number of jobs increasing by almost 2m in the same time.

It is shameful to think that just 10 years ago home workers could be paid as little as 35p an hour, cleaners £1.30 an hour and security guards £2.25 an hour. It's not only bad for families but just plain wrong.

I've spent 10 years in Parliament campaigning for a Labour Government to bring in a rising minimum wage. If you know someone who isn't getting what they're owed, make sure they get in touch with me on **01536 443325**.

What's it worth?

- **Wednesday's announcement will also see increases from £4.45 to £4.60 for 18-21 year olds, and from £3.30 to £3.40 for 16-17 year olds.**
- **Since 1999 the Government has helped tens of thousands of workers recover £22.6 million in unpaid wages.**
- **Employers who fail to pay the minimum wage can face prosecution, risking a criminal record and a £5,000 fine.**

Tories in total confusion over tax breaks for married couples

The Tories are now clearly in total confusion on tax breaks for married couples.

First, David Cameron said their pledge for tax breaks for married couples was an absolute commitment. But a few hours later, George Osborne's spokesman said it was merely *'being considered'*. Then last week, George Osborne said it was a *'value'*, not a commitment, only to be contradicted later by Francis Maude's promise to extend transferable tax allowances to all married couples regardless of whether they are bringing up children.

And last Sunday, confronted by the confusion in their own ranks, the Tories can only say that *'it is still being worked out'*.

The fact is that Shadow Chancellor, George Osborne has no idea how the Tories' pledge on tax breaks for married couples will be paid for. The Shadow Chancellor is scrabbling around trying to work out why he has lost control of his party's economic policies because he's got half his shadow cabinet colleagues going around making unaffordable spending commitments, and the other half promising massive tax cuts.

The Tories' sums simply don't add up.

Celebrating International Women's Day

Thursday marked International Women's Day - an important celebration for everyone committed to gender equality. Its values mirror the Labour Party's principles of social justice. The opportunity to make the most of our lives and our potential whilst being free from discrimination.

Labour has done more than any other Government in history to support the choices made by women in the UK. Women under Labour now have the National Minimum Wage, fairer and higher pensions, and opportunities to balance work and family life that were hardly talked about 10 years ago.

So what have we done since 1997? Well, take flexible working: more working women choose to work flexibly than ever before. Since Labour gave women this right in 2002, over a million parents of young children nationwide have used it, for example switching to term-time working or taking one day off a week.

We've also doubled maternity leave and pay – so a new mum gets 9 months paid time off work. Tax credits help with the cost of bringing up kids and of childcare. And quite soon, local councils will have to make sure there's enough childcare available for everyone who needs it.

And, by the way, since 2003, dads have had the right to take 2 weeks paternity leave around the birth of their baby, now paid at over £100 a week. And we know dads want to be more involved with their kids. Come on, dads! Why not think about asking your employer if you could finish early or start late one day a week so you can do the school run that day? Flexible work isn't just for women!

Tory Men 14: Tory Women 0

14 male candidates in a row from David Cameron and Tory leader is still a member of all-male White's Club

The Tories marked International Women's Day by electing its 14th man in a row to stand as a candidate at the next general election. David Cameron's warm words about making his party more representative and inclusive are not being matched by his actions and that of his party.

In spite of his posturing and platitudes, the only thing David Cameron's party is doing consistently is selecting men as candidates to stand for election.

David Cameron says one thing and does another. Last year he said: 'We want to make sexual inequality history', but he has taken no action to stop the overwhelming selection of male candidates. And he is still a member of Whites - an exclusive, all-male club.

If he really is committed to achieving genuine change for women in his party, he should start selecting women and cancel his membership of Whites.

Without action his words cannot be trusted as anything more than a PR stunt.

Even shorter hospital waits

On Tuesday the Department of Health published plans to cut long waits across the country for hearing services.

The plans aim to help audiology services deliver the following:

- By December 2008 all patients with hearing or balance problems that require care from a hospital consultant will be treated within 18 weeks
- All other patients with routine hearing loss should be assessed within 6 weeks by March 2008.
- For the subsequent hearing aid fitting to be carried out soon after or at the same time as assessment.

This is just another example of Labour reducing waiting times to make a maximum wait of 18 weeks from referral to treatment possible for all patients.