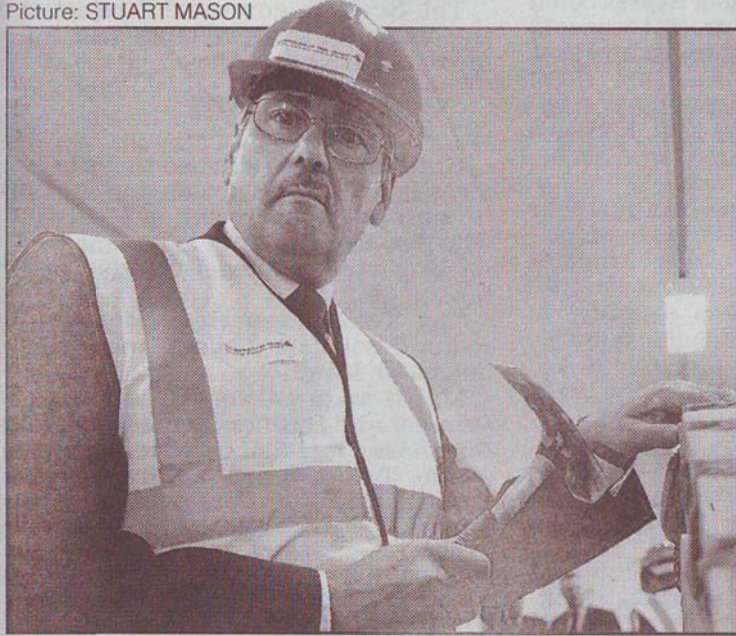


Don't mention the war says Bob

Picture: STUART MASON



Bob the builder – Mr Ainsworth lays some paving yesterday

DEFENCE Secretary Bob Ainsworth came under fire last night over a visit to Blackpool where he tackled every topic but defence.

The embattled minister stayed off the rollercoaster at the resort's Pleasure Beach yesterday and despite fears he would face a barrage of tough questions was given an easy ride by the handful of guests who turned up to his question-and-answer event.

The MP for Coventry North East chose not to speak at length about Afghanistan but insisted the Government needed to show "the same mettle as our armed forces".

Last night, Shadow Defence spokesman Gerald Howarth MP said: "What a wonderful opportunity for the people of Blackpool to ask the Secretary

By **Sally Guyoncourt**

of State for Defence questions he refuses to answer in Parliament.

"How very disappointing that he failed to answer burning questions to which the public wants and deserves answers.

"Not least, why the Government has failed to publish the report which we understand constitutes a devastating indictment of their failure to provide forces with the equipment they need."

The Defence Minister has already faced heavy criticism this week for his part in a cost-cutting measure to slash allowances given to severely injured servicemen who return from the frontline unable to work.

And while the death toll in

Afghanistan rises almost daily, officials at Mr Ainsworth's Ministry of Defence admitted badly needed Chinook helicopters were grounded because of a gaffe over their computer software.

After taking up his post in June, more soldiers were wounded and killed in Afghanistan in the first two weeks of July than in any other full month during the conflict.

And he came under renewed fire this week when a leaked file suggested soldiers on the frontline in Afghanistan are being provided with inadequate kit.

His visit yesterday was intended to promote the Government's Building Britain's Future plan and before the Q&A session he laid block paving alongside trainees.