

View from the House – 10th January 2011

As the New Year and a new Parliamentary session begins, it is a good time to reflect on the closing session and on what to look forward to in the New Year.

December was indeed an eventful month. In Westminster, there were protests on the streets as Parliament debated raising the cap on university tuition fees. Added to that, there was a cut in Government funding to the teaching grant to universities by 80%. So the Universities have to raise their fees to provide their courses.

The vote took place on the 9th December. I voted against the increase in fees. I believe this policy is not necessary and not fair. Universities should remain public institutions, accessible to everyone irrespective of their ability to pay. The country needs an educated workforce. And students should not be burdened with a huge debt at the start of their working life nor have it hanging over them while they work.

On the same day, after the vote I was pleased to present a Petition to parliament from the residents around the Kings Hill area to bring back a bus service. Many are senior citizens who have concessionary fares but they are not counted when the number of users of the service is calculated. This gives a distorted picture of how many people use the service.

As a member of the Health Select Committee, we had a busy time in the run-up to Christmas. On 14th December the Committee published a report into Public Expenditure. The scale of savings being demanded is unprecedented, and new forecasts for inflation show that the NHS budget will be facing a cut. The Prime Minister had promised there would be no cut and no top-down re-organisation for the NHS – there will now be both.

The Committee will report on Commissioning shortly, which addresses Health White Paper. PCTs duties are handed over to GPs. £80 billion for which the Secretary of State for Health is accountable to you the taxpayer will be transferred to GPs who are not accountable. Already some PCTs are handing out redundancy notices.

Most GPs do not want these changes. And the Secretary of State confirmed to me that he had not asked GPs if they wanted this responsibility for which they are not trained. There was no mandate from the electorate to reorganise the Health Service. If these proposals are not stopped, this could be the end of the NHS.

The people of Oldham will be the first voters to cast their opinion on these Con-Dem coalition policies in the by-election next week. The House awaits their response with close interest.

Valerie Vaz