

View from the House

Parliament returned after the summer recess for two weeks and has now risen for the Conference season.

Those two weeks have been intense. First there was speculation around Westminster as to what the Boundary Commission would come up with to equalise the size of seats. In my view there is a fundamental flaw in this exercise because it is based on the registration of electors as at December 2010. There was not enough time to ensure the registration of all those people who live in Walsall South but who may have forgotten to do so.

There is not a problem with electoral fraud in the UK yet the government proposes that from 2014 every individual in a household will have to register to vote individually. There will be new requirements to provide identification. It will be more important than ever to ensure that you are included on the electoral register. The Electoral Commission estimates that voter registration could drop dramatically, to as low as 65% of current rates. This is a serious attack on democracy, and brings echoes of the USA where working class communities become disempowered through low voter registration.

The Health Bill had its Third Reading and the Health Select Committee on which I sit reported on Monitor and the Care Quality Commission. Monitor will oversee the competitive process and the Care Quality Commission (CQC). It is still unclear exactly what Monitor's new role will be but bizarrely will have the power to fine hospitals 10% of their turnover for working collaboratively, and enforce competition.

Our report criticised a "distortion of priorities" at the CQC. The focus on administrative tasks such as the registration of dentists had been at the expense of inspection of care homes. We emphasised the importance of an open culture where professionals are able to raise concerns about failures of standards.

I also sit on the Bill Committee looking at the clauses in the Public Bodies Bill. This Bill gives far reaching powers to Ministers to abolish, merge or modify the structure or function of certain bodies.

Many of you contacted me about the abolition of the Forestry Commission. The Government removed this public body from the Bill but there are others such as the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, the Rural Commission and the Regional Development Agencies still in the Bill. Advantage West Midlands has done much to promote and invest in Walsall South but will be abolished.

Valerie Vaz MP

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