

View from the House

Since my last column the vote in Parliament on the Assisted Dying Bill was an overwhelming majority against it. Given the size of the defeat 330 to 118 and 69% of MPs voting, it is unlikely to be debated again this term.

Gradually the Government is removing the support for services. I met with a delegation from Wolverhampton University Students Union who raised concerns about the cut in maintenance grant for students from less privileged backgrounds. Now all students no matter what their circumstances will have to pay back a loan rather than be supported in higher education. The income of their households could become a barrier to higher education.

For local authorities the Government considers that a Combined Authority is the way forward. There has been no mandate for this idea. Many local authorities already work together. But enabling a Metro mayor to make decisions across local authority boundaries covering Birmingham to Dudley will in my view increase the democratic deficit. Birmingham voted against the proposal to have a directly elected mayor in 2012 with 57.8% of voters opposed. Of the ten cities where referenda were held, only Bristol voted for a directly elected mayor.

My concerns are that decisions are made far removed from local communities. And often decisions are made by unelected officials who do not have to justify their actions. It puts more power in the hands of officers rather than those who are elected.

Already it is difficult for local people to get their voices heard. For example, agencies such as the Highways Agency making a decision about the closure of the slip road. Local residents and I have been battling to get their views heard on Walstead Road and on a recent planning issue which was deferred for consultation the residents have not been consulted to find a way forward at all.

There is talk that the Police and Crime Commissioner will be subsumed into this amorphous jelly and later it will also include health. So the government have cut the grants to local authorities and said they will get the funds if they support the combined authority. No debate, no discussion, no choice.

Finally, the Saddlers did Walsall proud. The result of the Walsall FC v Chelsea was disappointing but encouraging that at half time the score was 2-1. And with the Saddlers currently second in the league, this has been a very impressive start.

VALERIE VAZ MP

28 September 2015