

View from the House

My view from the House has been rather different since my last column. I was delighted to accept the position of Shadow Leader of the House from The Leader of HM Opposition and a place in the Shadow Cabinet. The view from the front bench is different.

Every week on Thursdays at Business Questions, I call for debates or statements on current or future business of the House. The first week back after the conference recess was a bad week for the Government as the PM faced her first Government defeat in the Lords which voted through new laws to compensate phone-hacking victims. Quite rightly in the age of legal aid cutbacks, victims should have access to justice and protected costs.

There has been a series of U-turns. I called for the Government to clarify the policy of the Home Secretary's proposals for firms to provide a list of foreign workers whom they employ. The PM said that was not the aim, so why did more than 100 business leaders write an open letter to the Home Secretary, calling for the idea to be abandoned?

The Chancellor announced a U-turn on six years of Government policy. The policy of the former Chancellor George Osborne to balance the nation's books by 2020 was cancelled. Instead, the Government will invest their way out of the deficit and would now borrow to invest. That sounds remarkably like the Opposition's policy.

Only an urgent question brought the Minister for Health to the House to explain the cuts to the pharmacy budget. Despite the pharmacy negotiating committee rejecting the Government's proposals, they have continued with a cut. And there is no impact assessment on how many pharmacies will close. Pharmacies are a lifeline for local people. Having visited many, I know they play a role in helping people to stop smoking among other services.

The reversal on the sale of annuities was the biggest U-turn. Announced in the Budget in March 2015, the Government now say that after extensive research a secondary market would not be able to offer this; I asked when the research was done, at the time of the Budget or more recently.

Walsall's New Art Gallery is in danger of becoming another victim of this Tory government's austerity approach to local communities. It looks like we now have a fight on our hands to save NAG. Please sign the online petition.

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