

'New politics' claim a sham, senior Conservative MP warns David Cameron

The party's attempts to gag Sarah Wollaston over her criticism of government health reforms have been roundly condemned

A senior Tory MP has launched a stinging attack on David Cameron and party whips after a fellow Conservative – who worked for 24 years as a doctor – complained that she had been told "to say nothing and vote with the government" over its controversial health reforms.

Bernard Jenkin, chairman of the Commons public administration select committee, said the treatment of Dr Sarah Wollaston, the newly elected MP for Totnes in Devon, showed that Cameron's claim to be ushering in a "new politics" was a sham.

Wollaston, who has raised concerns about specific elements of the NHS bill while broadly supporting its overall aims, has stunned the party over the past 10 days by speaking out on two occasions about the way it has tried to force her into unquestioning loyalty.

The *Observer* has learned that last Monday Dr Wollaston told a closed meeting of the 1922 Committee of Tory backbenchers that when she asked to sit on the committee that will scrutinise the health and social care bill she was informed by a government minister that she could only do so if she remained completely loyal. She told this newspaper: "It is made very clear to you that if you are on a bill committee you support the government. I was not prepared to accept that."

It is understood that Dr Wollaston wanted to table a range of amendments to the bill, which will hand GPs responsibility for commissioning NHS services, in the biggest shakeup in its history. But she was warned that the only changes she would be able to put forward were ones suggested by, and acceptable to, the government.

In a speech in parliament 10 days ago, Dr Wollaston said: "I profoundly object to the fact the people have to make a choice and always vote with the government." She added: "I believe – I hope that hon members agree with this – that there is something profoundly toxic in that."

Wollaston, who entered parliament at the last election after a career in the NHS, was one of the first Tory MPs to be selected after Mr Cameron threw open the selection process following the expenses scandal, calling for people from all walks of life to apply to be candidates.

At the time the prime minister declared that he wanted MPs with expertise in the real world away from Westminster – in order to bring a new breadth of experience to politics and the scrutiny of legislation.

In May 2009 Mr Cameron said: "There are far too many laws being pushed through, with far too little genuine scrutiny from MPs. And excessive 'whipping' of MPs by party hierarchies further limits genuine scrutiny. This, too, has to change."

Mr Jenkin said such statements had been exposed as hollow. "The way the whips are operating at present makes a complete nonsense of David Cameron's pledge before the election about strengthening parliament and improving scrutiny of legislation and the executive.

"And the Sarah Wollaston case raises very fundamental questions about what the House of Commons is for and how it operates. We all know that persuasion is an important part of politics, but the style of whipping – particularly of new members – has become so disrespectful and demeaning that it betrays an attitude that we must surely question."

Mr Jenkin said the choice of who sits on standing committees that scrutinise legislation line by line should no longer be left up to "stooges and whips" on the committee of selection.

"The committee of selection should be freely elected like a normal select committee," he said.

Wollaston said that she supported most of the health and social care bill, though she had particular concerns *about the role of Monitor, (the independent regulator of NHS foundation trusts), the scrutiny of GPs, and the need for a wider group of NHS professionals to become involved in commissioning treatments rather than just GPs.*

But she agreed that political leaders could not claim to be ushering in a new, more open and transparent form of politics when old ways of operating still prevailed.

"You can't say you want to have 'new politics' but not change the way the system works," she said.

She has also said that many of those who have been selected to sit on the bill committee have little or no direct experience of the NHS.

Tory ministers and whips are worried by the level of opposition to the health and social care bill from NHS professionals and experts. Many backbench MPs fear the plans to hand the commissioning of services to GPs will not work and that the reform represents a gamble that could harm their chances at the next general election.

Several Tory MPs, angry at the role of the whips, have encouraged Wollaston to continue to highlight her concerns. Bill Cash, the Tory MP for Stone, said: "Sarah Wollaston is a complete star and knows what she is talking about. She should be listened to."