

Parliament will debate law change on assisted suicide

By John Bingham, Social Affairs Editor

MPs are to consider allowing terminally ill people to end their lives in the first serious attempt to change the law on assisted suicide.

Rob Marris, MP for Wolverhampton South West, is to use a guaranteed slot for backbench legislation to put forward proposals that Lord Falconer set out before the House of Lords last year.

Lord Falconer, Labour's former Lord Chancellor, took a Private Members' Bill through its initial legislative stages before running out of parliamentary time.

The proposals would allow patients, thought to have no more than six months to live and who have demonstrated a "clear and settled intention" to end their lives, to be prescribed lethal drugs on the authority of two doctors.

Peers unanimously backed amendments in the Falconer Bill giving a High Court judge a role in any system of assisted suicide, an extra safeguard against pressure on vulnerable people.

The Bill to be put before the Commons will include those amendments, a move likely to strengthen potential support.

It will be the first time in almost 20 years the Commons has taken a vote on the topic. This latest attempt will have a full debate as Mr Marris came top of this year's ballot for backbench legislation. It

means there will be a second reading debate for his Bill on September 11.

Downing Street voiced concerns yesterday that the proposed change in the law would leave vulnerable people feeling "unfairly pressurised" into ending their lives but signalled that Conservative MPs would have a free vote.

The Supreme Court, the final court of appeal in the UK for civil cases, issued a direct challenge to Parliament last year to give the possibility of legalisation proper consideration or risk judges stepping in.

A panel of nine Justices said they potentially had the power to declare the law, which criminalised acts actively helping someone to take their own life, "incompatible" with human rights.

They issued the warning as they turned down a challenge by Jane Nicklinson – widow of Tony, the "locked-in syndrome" sufferer, who campaigned for assisted suicide – and disabled Paul Lamb.

Mr Marris said: "Alongside the vast majority of the public, I am in favour of terminally ill people who are of sound mind having choice at the end of life."

Sarah Wootton, of campaign group Dignity in Dying, said: "With one person a fortnight travelling to Dignitas, and over 300 terminally ill people per year taking their own lives in this country behind closed doors, it is vital that Parliament no longer turns a blind eye."