

Tory defector imposed as Labour candidate in British general election

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Britain's ruling Labour Party was accused of bureaucratic arrogance and ignoring inner-party democracy after the selection of Shaun Woodward as its MP for St Helens South.

Woodward, a multimillionaire by his marriage to an heiress of supermarket magnate, Lord Sainsbury, joined the Labour Party only 18 months ago after defecting from the Conservative Party. In return he was given the safe St Helen's seat with a Labour majority of 23,000. Lord Sainsbury is one of the Labour Party's main financial backers.

Local party members and trade unionists complain that the National Executive Committee (NEC) intervened against local candidates in drawing up the shortlist. On Saturday May 12, the NEC election panel removed from the shortlist Marie Rimmer, the local council leader and a party member for 30 years, and Martin Bond, a union lawyer and favourite of the GMB trade union.

With the NEC having rigged the selection process, Woodward was able to win nomination as the constituency's candidate—defeating Manchester councillor Barbara Keeley, by just four votes, 81 to 77, on a second ballot. Only half the local party's 435-strong membership were at the selection meeting.

Woodward was the Conservative's director of communications in the early 1990s. His election campaign for John Major is credited with securing the defeat of then Labour leader Neil Kinnock in the 1992 general election.

Woodward defected to Labour on December 18, 1999, after he had refused to accept the pro-Section 28 policy (legislation outlawing the “promotion” of homosexuality in schools) agreed by the shadow cabinet. The junior environment spokesman was a rising star in the Tory party, but insisted that Section

28, introduced under the Conservative government, should be a matter of conscience and he should be allowed a free vote on the issue.

Eager to establish his authority as a tough leader and placate the more overt right wing elements in the Tory party, Conservative leader William Hague dismissed Woodward on December 2 as the party's spokesman on London. Reports at the time indicated that in the weeks between his sacking and his eventual resignation, Woodward had met with Prime Minister Tony Blair and his press aide Alistair Campbell.

The latter is said to have had a hand in drafting Woodward's resignation letter, which forthrightly attacked Hague's leadership. Woodward wrote: “I can no longer support the increasingly right-wing policies of the Conservative Party. The party has clearly now abandoned its commitment to a tradition of One Nation politics and embraced what can best be described as the values of possessive individualism. We have become increasingly less tolerant and our attitudes seem to be based more on prejudice than reason”.

Woodward is typical of the privileged upper middle class layer Blair has sought to cultivate as the basis of New Labour. He is something of an electoral liability, however, as he seen as a traitor in Conservative constituencies and hated by many Labour voters for his association with the Thatcher government.

The Blair leadership has therefore decided that it must foist Woodward onto one of the safest Labour seats in the country. St Helen's sits at the heart of what was the West Lancashire coalfield and has suffered the same social devastation as its counterparts throughout Britain. The town's Pilkington Glass' works, which once employed tens of thousand, is now set to close with 700 job losses.

Whilst Woodward's selection may antagonise some of

its former supporters, Labour is counting on the lack of any credible opposition to ensure that it does not lose the seat outright. This is symptomatic of Blair's entire electoral strategy, which hinges essentially on telling working people that Labour is the only choice they've got.



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