

Haltemprice and Howden by-election

Britain: SEP campaigns in Cottingham

Our reporters
2 July 2008

A team has been campaigning for Socialist Equality Party candidate Chris Talbot in the historic Yorkshire village of Cottingham, where they were received with interest and a serious desire to discuss political issues.

The Haltemprice and Howden constituency is to vote in a by-election on July 10, after Conservative candidate David Davis resigned as an MP in protest against Labour's extending detention without trial to 42 days.

Although the constituency as a whole has a high average income, Cottingham, lying just to the northwest of the city of Hull, is characterised by sharp social divisions, by no means conforming to the media presentation of the constituency as a wealthy rural farming area. Campaigners spent days talking to working people of all ages outside charity shops and cheap food retailers. Hundreds of copies of the SEP election statement were distributed.

The response to the SEP from Cottingham residents stands in sharp contrast to the mainstream media's orchestrated refusal to take the by-election seriously. While a number of people expressed support for Davis, the media presentation of the campaign as a walk in the park for Davis bears no relationship to reality, certainly in this working class corner of the constituency.

Many social questions were discussed. Cottingham was one of many areas hit by serious flooding last year. Thousands of homes across the UK were damaged and destroyed, as a consequence of decades of neglect of flood defences and the starvation of funds from drainage and sewerage systems due to privatisation. Several people commented about what this had meant for their lives. An entire year had been lost in pursuit of adequate housing and compensation. Hundreds of families are still living in caravans, while their homes remain uninhabitable.

People complained about the consequences of the economic crisis, in terms of relentless pressures on jobs, health, schools and social services. An older woman, commenting on the escalating cost of food and fuel asked, "Do they want to kill us?"

But what also emerged was a desire to grapple with complex political issues.

Alongside general hatred for the Labour government, many expressed their abiding distrust of the Tories. One woman recalled how her husband had been a miner. Following the 1984-1985 miners' strike, he had been forced to become a contract worker in private mines. She had seen the SEP candidate reported in the local press and was intending to vote for the SEP.

Some had particularly bitter experiences of Davis. Fred, a former merchant seaman, who had also read the SEP manifesto and agreed with it, brought a press cutting from the local *Hull Daily Mail*, November 18, 1988, to the SEP stall. The article, sub-headed, "We could crush strike", reported Davis's paper, "Clear the Decks," written for the right-wing Centre for Policy Studies, in which he outlined a plan to provoke, and then break, a strike amongst dockworkers.

Davis, now championed by senior figures on the British left, including Tony Benn, explained in 1988 how a dock strike could be triggered just after Christmas, when workers had least money. A final date could be put for the dismissal of strikers to increase pressure on them. Davis's intention was to break up the National Dock Labour Scheme, which at the time provided a regulated framework of working conditions for thousands of dockworkers in most British ports.

Margo, an unemployed woman, described Davis as a "well-known back-stabber, who was not even loyal to his own party. If he is not loyal to his own party, who is he going to be loyal to? He just wants to be leader of

the Tories.”

“I figure, go for the candidate who is against 42 days, who is not David Davis.”

Margo thought it was “ridiculous” that Labour would not defend its own policies. Of Tony Benn’s support for Davis, Margo said that “he was in a bind. Davis is marching in front, and they all have to go behind him. Otherwise we’ll have to vote for the Labour Party, who appear to be turning into a bunch of fascists.... What we have now are two and a half Conservative parties.”

There are further indicators that the campaign of the lefts in support of Davis has had an impact. While there was some surprise at Tony Benn’s fervent support for Davis, several people, while deeply hostile to the Tory party as a whole, expressed support for Davis’s stance because he believed he was defending democratic rights.

One council worker, concerned at the Labour government’s anti-democratic measures, was considering voting for Davis and was particularly concerned over Labour’s plans for ID cards. Others considered he was making a stand on principle.

But many who expressed deep alarm over the erosion of democratic rights did not support Davis. One woman approached the SEP stall, noting that she had been driven to launch her own investigations that revealed that 60 organisations have the right to enter individual homes in pursuit of personal data, without requiring the occupant’s permission.

Ann-Marie, a former special needs teacher who had enthusiastically campaigned for Labour in 1997 and had not expected Blair’s right wing trajectory, was “horrified” when she heard of Benn’s support for Davis. “They had totally different politics. Benn was my hero, he was a big socialist. I don’t believe in this Labour government. I don’t believe they are Labour at all.”

Jenny, who approached SEP campaigners, said she was supporting Davis’s stance but still wouldn’t vote for him. “I admire him standing in the forefront over 42 days’ detention without trial and issues around that.” However, she noted, “I feel about 42 days the same I felt about 28 days’ detention, which he supported. I am also concerned about ID cards and the legal status of refugees and asylum seekers.”

“He supports the death penalty, there are lots of other things I have read about him. I can’t see myself voting

for him,” she said.

Jenny spoiled her ballot paper at the last election, and was now considering voting Green.

One small-business owner who described himself as a liberal in favour of strong punishment, supported Davis’s stance on 42 days, but noted that for “someone like Benn, with such deep Labour roots to support Davis, is a major event.”

Michael, a health professional, who said he previously voted for both Labour and the Tories, was asked whether he believed that Davis was in fact defending democratic rights. Michael initially felt that democratic rights had to present a balance between rights and protecting freedoms but added, “If we had not invaded Iraq and Afghanistan, we would not be introducing such legislation now.”

Michael had been following the deepening economic crisis and said, “All these things are interrelated, so if capitalists are trying to protect economic interests at the expense of other countries, then that is going to produce wars, and capitalists invading other countries and so forth. I can only see this getting worse until these issues are dealt with on a global scale.”



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