

Britain's Haltemprice and Howden by-election: Guardian divided on response to David Davis

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The decision by David Davis to resign and force a by-election based on opposition to the Labour government's erosion of civil liberties has produced divisions within what passes for Britain's liberal milieu. A conflict over whether or not to support Davis, based on his campaign against the extension of detention without trial to 42 days, is being fought out in the pages of the *Guardian* and the *Observer*.

The issue for some goes beyond simply deciding whether or not to register a protest against 42 days detention and other measures undermining democratic rights. What is being fought out is whether to remain loyal to Labour while nodding occasionally towards the Liberal Democrats, or to transfer political allegiance to the Conservatives.

The *Guardian's* Sunday sister paper, the *Observer*, was initially cautiously supportive of Davis, describing his resignation in its June 15 edition as "A wild move but the principles are correct."

"Opinion polls show broad public support for the government's position on 42 days," the *Observer* claimed, before adding, "Mr. Davis hopes, and it is a decent aspiration, that a by-election campaign will change minds more effectively than parliamentary debate. But, meanwhile, the business of passing or rejecting this bad law falls to the Lords. They must heed the principled arguments that should have defeated the government in the Commons last week."

The belief that the public backed the government was quickly proved to be wrong. It soon became clear that Davis had more correctly judged the national temper.

A number of *Observer* and *Guardian* feature writers were far less cautious and began openly speculating about whether Davis and even the Tory Party itself could be supported against Labour.

Chief political commentator Andrew Rawnsley wrote in the same edition of the *Observer*, "David Davis is vainglorious, mad and really rather terrific."

"It tells you quite a lot about David Davis that his nose has been broken five times," Rawnsley declared. "David Davis is no saint. There's truth in some of the accusations that are being hurled at him by furious Tories.... In tabloid cliché, he is usually described as a bruiser. I see a man who is actually a romantic, not least about himself.... So, yes, there is ego here ... But there is also an extremely strong element of fiercely held belief."

Finishing his eulogy to Davis, the man of action and principle, Rawnsley opined, "In the background, there is a serious and significant philosophical and political divide in the Conservative party which will matter hugely if and when they return to power. It is a tension about whether the Conservatives are essentially a libertarian or

an authoritarian party."

Others commissioned by the *Guardian's* "Comment is Free" seemed to have lost their heads and even their hearts to Davis. Jan Morris wrote breathlessly on June 25 how, "In defending 800 years of hard-won political rights, this rebel is also standing up for a crucial part of the national spirit.... It is not just a matter of those 42 days, of habeas corpus or even of human rights in the political sense of the phrase: it is an elemental struggle that is dividing the British again into two nations, as Benjamin Disraeli saw them long ago."

Morris accused half of the British people of having been "Brainwashed by a tabloid press of brilliantly insidious techniques, then, numbed by the relentless mediocrity of television," "willingly forfeited the right to make up their own minds, and mutely accept[ed] indoctrination."

In contrast, Davis is hailed for defending "not just political liberty but liberty of the mind, of the identity, of the spirit—even, patriots might sententiously say, of the national soul.... So perhaps Davis is a prophet as well as a politician. When he talks of habeas corpus he is echoing ideas far older and more profound, reaching back to the earliest yearnings of antiquity, the first glimmerings of human individuality, when our ancestors began to break from tribal disciplines and devise preferences of their own."

The coverage in the *Observer* and the *Guardian* never again reaches these levels of hero worship, but on occasion its own writers have come close.

On June 27, the *Guardian's* G2 supplement ran several pages on Davis by Nicholas Watt under the heading, "Maverick or freedom fighter?"

Watt begins by describing how, "Narrowing his gaze with the poise of a former SAS officer, David Davis shifts slowly in his armchair and points through his sitting room window to a line of trees in the distance. 'The key to security is the line of sight' ... Davis will take no lectures about failing to appreciate the threat of terrorism. 'I was on an IRA death list,' he says. 'We'll have none of that nonsense about being soft on terror.'" "

Like a passage from a 1950's *Boys' Own* comic, Watt describes Davis as "A Tory bruiser," known to some as "the Knuckleduster." We learn yet again of how Davis frequently succeeded in breaking his nose, while playing Rugby, swimming and intervening "to save a friend who was being mugged on Clapham Common." In addition, "The Davis clan have all been taught to be toughies, thanks to an imposing climbing wall in an outhouse."

The most explicit political exposition regarding the significance of

supporting Davis is made by Henry Porter, who writes regularly on civil liberties.

He insists in the June 29 *Observer*, “We can’t leave David Davis to carry the fight on his own.”

It is when he explains who he means by “we” that Porter asks, “So who is to answer those questions?”

Answering his own question, he replies, “Certainly not Labour, though there are many good people on the backbenches.” The Liberal Democrats are patted on the back for being “ardently for freedom.”

But in reality, Porter insists, “it must be the Tories, right?”

He places caveats on adopting a pro-Conservative stance, but argues for it nevertheless. He goes so far as to compare the democratic and freedom-loving credentials of various prominent Conservatives. Party leader David Cameron is “said to be more libertarian than his friend, the shadow Chancellor George Osborne. Dominic Grieve, who has succeeded Davis as shadow Home Secretary, is solidly libertarian,” and so on.

He then appeals to the Conservatives to “make the big argument, because there are political opportunities here.”

“The first is that Labour has betrayed its mission to champion the poor and vulnerable.... The Tories could surely demonstrate Labour’s failure in this department.

“The second opportunity concerns the traditional Conservative mission to champion the individual and roll back state power.”

To portray the Tories as a party of civil liberties at best expresses an extraordinary level of political disorientation amongst a petty-bourgeois layer who once would have recoiled at such a description. But to some degree it is also a recognition of the direction in which the wind is blowing.

Cameron and a future Tory government would, after all, have need of apologists and converts with a vaguely leftist background if they were to have any chance of maintaining a grip on power. The same phenomenon—former social democrats and liberals transferring their allegiance to the new political order—has already been amply demonstrated in France following the coming to power of Gaullist President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Even so, to even begin to advance Davis and Cameron as defenders of democratic rights is testimony to how far to the right Labour itself has travelled.

Not everyone is quite so prepared to abandon the sinking New Labour ship. But those opposing support for Davis are, if anything, advancing positions more politically grotesque than their journalistic colleagues.

On June 20, with Labour refusing to stand against Davis, the *Guardian* published a comment by Olly Kendal, former adviser to Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy, entitled, “Wanted: an election challenger.”

He appealed for anyone whatsoever to stand “who will seriously challenge the former shadow home secretary.”

Kendall insisted that any high-profile public figure that came forward as a “credible candidate” would do. And he or she certainly need not oppose 42 days, “as important and fundamental to our society as it is.”

Instead he proposed a single-issue campaign on the burning issue of MP’s pay, suggesting as a candidate—“Who better than the man who in 2000 took over the helm of the BBC, promising to ‘cut the crap’ at the corporation”—Greg Dyke.

Kendall closes by acknowledging a small flaw in his proposal, given that Dyke, “refused to stand as London Mayor unless he could stand

as a unity candidate for both the Lib Dems and Tories.”

Nevertheless, the search for a supposedly “credible candidate” was clearly being pursued in earnest.

On June 25, the *Guardian*’s senior political correspondent Andrew Sparrow wrote in his politics blog, “David Davis may find himself facing serious by-election candidate after all.”

The person in question was Jill Saward. Sparrow designated her as a “serious candidate” not merely because she supposedly has a “high-profile” for having “waived her right to anonymity after being raped at her Ealing Vicarage home in 1986, [and] has made her name as a campaigner on behalf of the victims of sexual violence.”

Sparrow is boosting Saward because she intends to use the issue of rape as an emotive argument against Davis and in a way that helps Labour.

He quotes at great length from Saward’s web site, in which she defends the use of closed-circuit TV cameras and the amassing of a national DNA database on the basis that this helps the police track down and convict rapists.

Sparrow adds, as if presenting a profound insight, “Interestingly, she also criticises Davis for not accepting the result of the Commons vote on 42-day detention. ‘Why would anybody want to stand as a member of parliament if they are not prepared to accept the will of parliament when it makes a decision?’ she asks.”

On June 26, Sparrow moved to the *Guardian*’s print edition to again proclaim Saward as “Davis’s most prominent opponent,” devoting an entire article to presenting her views, before merely listing the names of six of the other candidates standing against Davis. (Chris Talbot, the Socialist Equality Party candidate, was omitted, as is the norm.)

Though Saward is standing as an independent, Sparrow makes even clearer that she is being given such preferential treatment in large part because she functions as a proxy candidate for Labour. He writes, “Saward floated the idea of standing as a candidate in an article on her web site on Tuesday. She said that, at that stage, it was her own idea, but that since the article appeared she had received encouragement from party politicians.

“She would not say who was urging her to stand. But it is known that Labour is very keen for a high-profile candidate to challenge Davis.”

The debate being conducted in the *Guardian* and the *Observer* could end with them taking opposed positions on the Haltemprice and Howden ballot or not taking a position at all. But the fact that these two publications respond to the growing threat to civil liberties by discussing whether to continue supporting Labour or to back the Tories is a measure of the profound decay of liberal thought in Britain.



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