

Haltemprice & Howden by-election

Britain: Socialist Equality Party cheated of at least 50 votes

Our reporter
12 July 2008

Socialist Equality Party candidate Chris Talbot received 136 votes in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election. However, his official tally as announced by the Returning Officer is 84.

The discrepancy is the result of administrative incompetence, which a presiding election official refused to rectify, announcing the result after rejecting several complaints by the SEP.

The total number of votes involved is small, but means that over a third of those who cast their ballot for the SEP have effectively been politically disenfranchised with their votes added to those of a candidate for whom they did not vote. Under conditions in which there were 26 candidates on the ballot paper, it meant that the SEP would have achieved the tenth highest vote, rather than fourteenth.

As there were so many candidates, the ballot papers were first sorted numerically by the candidate's position on the ballot paper. Each candidate's ballots were placed in piles on tables around the room, in full view of the candidates and their representatives, before being taken to a central area to be filed in boxes according to the candidate's name. During this stage of the count at Haltemprice Leisure Centre, the SEP had at least three and sometimes as many as five people witnessing its vote come in.

Votes were removed from the counting tables whenever a total of 50 had been reached, with a yellow slip of paper being attached to each bundle of 50 papers when it was placed in the candidate's named box.

The SEP passed the 50 total twice. There was also a remaining pile of ballots for Talbot, which initially totalled 34, this number being written on a slip of paper attached to the bundle. Finally, an additional two

ballots marked for Talbot were added to this pile, and the number was amended to show 36.

As the count was taking place, SEP members sent a number of text messages and emails reporting the progress of the event, and the growing total of votes for Talbot. These contemporaneous messages, sent from a mobile phone and a BlackBerry, can be produced to confirm the number of ballots cast for Talbot that were witnessed by SEP members present at the count.

Once all the ballots had been counted, all the candidates and their agents were gathered together by Nigel Pearson, the chief executive of East Riding of Yorkshire Council and the Acting Returning Officer, to check and agree the spoiled ballots. He then showed the candidates the official result, as it had been collated by his staff. The English Democrats, whose candidate had been narrowly beaten into third place by the Green Party, demanded a recount, which immediately proceeded.

It was at this same moment that the SEP was shown their official vote tally of 86. Talbot and his election agent, Richard Turner, registered an official complaint and insisted that one bundle of 50 votes must have been wrongly assigned to another candidate's box. Pearson promised to check to see if that was the case.

When the partial recount of the vote for the Green Party and the English Democrats had taken place, Pearson approached the table where some of the candidates were gathered. He then told Talbot and Turner that there was no wrongly allocated bundle of 50 ballots for the SEP and that the party's official vote was being reduced by two and would now stand at 84, but no explanation for this was given. The SEP members again protested that they had witnessed two

piles of 50 ballots being counted for Talbot and a remaining pile of 36 votes, making a total of 136.

Another candidate, Jill Saward, standing next to Talbot, said that she believed she had received 50 votes more than she had expected, based on watching her own vote being counted.

Despite further protests from Talbot, Pearson immediately said that he would call the vote and moved away.

The Socialist Equality Party has no means by which it can confirm whether or not Saward erroneously received a bundle of Talbot's votes, and we make no claim that this is the case in reporting her comments. We do not know where they went.

Nor are we suggesting any deliberate malpractice on the part of Pearson or anyone else involved in the count. The incorrect allocation of the bundle of 50 votes was most likely a mistake made under conditions of a record number of candidates being on the ballot.

What then took place, however, in refusing to carry out a proper check to locate the missing ballots was not a mistake. It was a decision that demonstrates contempt for the democratic process, and which the Socialist Equality Party intends to officially protest.



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