

Haltemprice & Howden by-election

Britain: Election official rejects complaint about missing SEP ballots

Chris Talbot
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The official in charge of counting the votes in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election has refused to take any action over missing Socialist Equality Party ballot papers following a letter of complaint I wrote to him as the SEP candidate.

Along with other members of my campaign team, I was present as the votes were being counted on July 10 at the Haltemprice Leisure Centre. I witnessed 136 votes being counted for the SEP and dispute the figure of 84 announced by Acting Returning Officer Nigel Pearson.

I repeated these facts in my letter of complaint. In his reply, Pearson states that the SEP “did not specifically request a further recount.” In fact, I did demand that the election counting team look again at all the bundles of 50 ballots to see if one bearing my name had been placed in the wrong box.

However, Pearson continues, “I would have refused in any event a request for a second recount as the election team had carried out a thorough recount of your votes and it was very unlikely that any additional votes would have been found in your name. I also took into consideration the fact that even had a second bundle been found that this would have made no difference whatsoever to the outcome of your election nor indeed on you losing your deposit. I concluded that it would be unreasonable to delay the declaration any longer given that it was already fast approaching 3.00am on Friday morning.”

The Socialist Equality Party does not accept this approach to elections, which demonstrates only contempt for the democratic process.

Elections are not simply about who wins, but also provide a record of the political preferences of the

electorate. Although the total number of votes involved was small, it still means that over a third of those who cast their ballot for the SEP were effectively politically disenfranchised, their votes being added to those of a candidate for whom they had not voted. As we pointed out: “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.”

Because of the large number of candidates, the votes for each candidate were collected in individual piles on tables around the room. This meant it was possible for myself and several other SEP members to closely watch my ballot papers being counted. Each time the total reached 50, the bundle of ballots was fastened together and taken to a central area to be placed in a box bearing the candidate’s name. At the counting table, I observed that I had received 50 ballots on two occasions, leaving a final pile with the number 36 pinned to it, which was then taken to the central area.

After the count, Pearson 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 time that the SEP was shown their official vote tally of 86. My election agent, Richard Turner, and I 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 were 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 us that there was no wrongly allocated bundle of 50 ballots for the SEP and that the party's official vote was being reduced by 2 and would now stand at 84. No explanation for this was given. The SEP members again protested and called for my vote to be recounted.

Another candidate, Jill Seward, standing nearby, said she believed she had received 50 votes more than expected, based on watching her own ballots being counted. Despite lodging further protests, Pearson immediately said he would call the vote and moved away.

The Socialist Equality Party does not know to whom our 50 votes were attributed. But we insist that our party received 136 votes. But to take our complaint further would have meant challenging the result through lodging an election petition in the High Court. This is an extremely expensive process, as it entails depositing a security of £5,000 in the Court Funds Office and employing expert legal representation at a cost likely to reach into tens of thousands of pounds. We have therefore decided to take no further action.



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