

SEP candidate Katie Rhodes addresses Glasgow Central Mosque hustings

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Socialist Equality Party candidate Katie Rhodes attended a hustings last week held at the Central Mosque in the Glasgow Central constituency she is contesting.

It was organised by the Muslim Lobby Scotland. According to the chair of the meeting, around 12,000 Muslims live within the Glasgow Central constituency area. There were around 300 in the audience, consisting largely, but not exclusively, of Muslims associated with the mosque.

Only the five “main” party candidates were invited to speak from the platform—the Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish Greens and the Scottish National Party (SNP).

This rule was maintained, despite substitutions for the Conservative and Liberal Democrat candidates with candidates from other constituencies. Tory Simon Bone, who said he was unable to attend through illness, was replaced by Dr David Montgomery, the Conservative candidate in Renfrewshire East.

Although not allowed to speak on the platform, Rhodes asked for permission to address the audience following set questions answered by the five platform candidates. This was accepted, but then not enforced by the platform chair. Thus an official stood up as Rhodes mounted the platform to try and stop her from speaking. The official stood up in front of Rhodes and tried several times to take the microphone from her hand, eventually snatching it away before she had completed her pre-agreed two-minute presentation.

Rhodes began by saying; “You will agree that exercising your democratic right to vote requires that you are familiar with the programme and policy of all parties.

“Everywhere I have spoken during this general election campaign I have stressed that the Socialist

Equality Party is unique. It is not a party of big business. It doesn’t defend or advocate austerity and it is against the drive to militarism and war.

“We are against all forms of nationalism, including both British and Scottish nationalism, and we seek the unity of the international working class regardless of ethnic origin, religion or place of birth.

“We stand for a workers’ government pledged to socialist policies. The common enemy of working people is the criminal layer of the super-rich, bankers and corporate heads who dictate the ongoing destruction of jobs, wages and social conditions. Any party that claims to defend working people that doesn’t insist society must be freed from the grip of these parasites is lying.”

At this point the election official took away Rhodes’ microphone. Without a microphone, Rhodes finished by appealing “to all those here to reject the false promises made by these candidates and their rotten parties and build a genuine working class party.

“I’d like to make a special appeal to contact the SEP, vote for our party and take part in the international online May Day rally on Sunday, May 3 under the banner: Down with capitalism and imperialism! Against war, dictatorship and poverty! For peace, For equality, For socialism.”

Her statement received a warm round of applause, especially from younger audience members. After the meeting closed a woman thanked Rhodes and patted her on the back for addressing the plight of the working class under the onslaught of austerity, raising a fist and shouting, “Up the workers!”

An older South Asian man congratulated her on being the only candidate speaking the truth at the hustings.

The questions put to the platform members related to Islamophobia, civil liberties, immigration and

Israel/Palestine.

In their replies the candidates repeatedly attempted to distance themselves from the official policies of their own parties.

On the question of Islamophobia and civil liberties, the chair asked Labour candidate and sitting MP Anas Sarwar if he agreed with its call for a harsher approach to anti-terrorism. Sarwar responded that he had been the victim of both Islamophobia and police stop and searches. He said he could see the problem from both sides and that legislation was only part of the answer; that all parties should get around the table to talk.

Sarwar called the war on Iraq a mistake, saying he had personally marched against the decision to go to war, and that the tardiness in releasing the Chilcot report was “regrettable.”

In relation to immigration, the current Tory policy is to adhere to the target figure on net migration they set out when the Conservative Liberal Democratic government took office in 2010 and to re-negotiate the “free movement” of EU citizens’ entry to the UK, along with restricting access to welfare benefits.

Montgomery attempted to soften this by stating he was “okay” with immigration from within the EU, and, while calling for a cap on numbers of immigrants, allowing entry from outside the EU.

On questions posed around the recognition of a Palestinian state, Montgomery called it a “complex challenge” and said the parties must get round the table to solve the problems.

Responding to the question on how to tackle Islamophobia, the Liberal Democrat Gary McLelland stated baldly and without challenge that “freedom of belief” was a fundamental right, whereas, “Freedom of expression is not a fundamental right” and must be balanced with responsibility.

Liberal Democrat immigration policy states they will “bring back proper border checks... create visible security and firm control...count everyone in and...out.”

McLelland said he was pro-immigration and against any perception of the “other”.

After the set questions and Rhodes’ address setting out SEP policy, questions were taken from the floor. The hustings rapidly degenerated into a fractious duel between Labour Party supporters and SNP supporters in the room—with the questions being mainly directed to their candidates. SNP supporters in the audience

repeatedly raised Scottish Labour leader Jim Murphy’s former role as Chair of the Labour Friends of Israel, along with other issues, in an effort to promote the SNP as a “left” alternative to Labour.

Following the meeting an SEP campaign team distributed around 50 copies of the SEP manifesto as participants departed.

For further details visit www.socialequality.org.uk



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