

GP wins Tory 'open primary' race

A GP has been named as the Tories' next parliamentary candidate for Totnes after thousands voted in an "open primary" selection process.

Dr Sarah Wollaston will represent the party at the next general election, as current MP Anthony Steen steps down.

She got 7,914 votes, Nick Bye got 3,088 while Sara Randall-Johnson got 5,495.

All 69,000 voters in the Devon seat were sent a postal ballot, a first for a political party in Britain. It is estimated to have cost £40,000.

Dr Wollaston's rivals were both local government leaders - Ms Randall-Johnson is a district council leader while Mr Bye is mayor of Torbay - while she has admitted she has little political experience.

'Ordinary person'

The contest allowed everyone in the constituency, regardless of party affiliation, to take part in the selection process.

Dr Wollaston told the BBC she was delighted and "very surprised" at the outcome and she would be playing to her strengths in the election campaign, focusing on community hospitals, local healthcare and solutions for alcohol-related crime and violence.

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Frank Field Labour MP

She said the process had been "a great way forward": "Take myself, I have no political background or experience and I hope in other constituencies people who, like me, have very ordinary jobs will come forward and see if they can be a candidate."

The Tories have held "open primary" contests before in which non-members have been invited to take part in public meetings. But this time the party has gone a step further and sent out ballot papers by post to all registered voters and a freepost envelope.

'Nail in coffin'

Party chairman Eric Pickles had said a 15% turnout, about 10,000 voters, would be considered a good turnout. Usually several hundred party members would attend a traditional selection meeting.

The cost of the exercise - an estimated £40,000 - means it is very unlikely to be used in every constituency.

But Labour MP Frank Field told BBC Radio 4's World at One programme: "I think it's a hugely important breakthrough and I think this trend will follow - quite where it will lead I'm not sure.

"There are clearly problems and a big debate, but we have to face the fact that political parties are dying in this country."

He said while parties were important in offering voters' choice, most people would "rather have their right arm taken off than join a political party".

The Totnes contest had "opened the windows to a new world" he said, arguing Dr Wollaston would not have won the candidacy under the old system.

But John Strafford, who chairs the Campaign for Conservative Democracy group said it was another "nail in the coffin for party membership and party democracy" and was "more interference from Conservative central office".

"It's a gimmick, frankly, because at a cost of £40,000 I can't even think of half a dozen constituencies in the country that could possibly afford that kind of money," he told the BBC.

Retiring MP Anthony Steen stepped down from the seat after details of his expenses claims over four years were published in the Daily Telegraph.

The paper reported how he had claimed £87,000 over four years for his country home, including paying a forestry expert to inspect his trees.

Later he was reprimanded by party leader David Cameron over an interview with the BBC in which he said people were jealous of his "very very large house".

Mr Steen apologised, saying he had been "deeply upset" at the time of the interview and had overreacted in the "heat of the moment".

Mr Steen has been an MP in south Devon since 1983, first for South Hams and then for Totnes when the seat was created in 1997.

At the 2005 general election he won with majority of 1,947 over the Liberal Democrat candidate.

The Lib Dems have already chosen their candidate for the constituency, Julian Brazil, while Carole Whitty will fight the seat for Labour.

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