

# MPs' expenses still haunt Totnes Tories

Conservative gaffe over jealous constituents leaves party's candidate fighting to hold off Lib Dems and independents



Conservative party candidate for Totnes, Sarah Wollaston, campaigning in Brixham, Devon. Photograph: Mark Passmore/APEX

The Conservative candidate for Totnes is expressing the sort of doubts not often heard from a politician in the middle of a general election campaign.

"Of course there are times when you have your low moments," says Dr Sarah Wollaston, who will give up her GP practice on beautiful Dartmoor if she is elected. "You wonder why you are giving up the nicest job in the world to do a job where it feels some days that everyone thinks you must be in it for the wrong reasons.

"I can't tell you the difference between knocking on someone's door as a GP and knocking on someone's door saying you'd like to be their MP. Sometimes you feel a wave of hostility."

It is not surprising that there is hostility to candidates, especially the Tory one, in this Devon constituency. The previous incumbent of the seat, the party grandee Anthony Steen, announced his retirement after suggesting amid the expenses scandal that constituents were jealous of his "very, very large house".

Suddenly a majority of almost 2,000 did not feel quite so comfortable for party strategists. The [Liberal Democrats](#) are sensing they could cause an upset and Ukip, which can play on the antipathy to all things Europe felt by many of the commercial fishermen and farmers in this area, may also take votes from the Tories, having done well at the European elections here.

Which is why, actually, it might be a good thing that Wollaston, who won the right to stand through the first full open primary (which gave every voter in the constituency, regardless of

political persuasion, the chance to be involved in the selection process) does not come over like a polished, old-school candidate.

"Four years ago I'd never been to a political meeting," she says over a cup of tea at the Fishermen's Mission in Brixham. "The disadvantage could be that you have somebody who doesn't know the ropes, doesn't know their way around if they are elected.

"On the other hand I think it's very refreshing. In parliament we have very few people who have a background in medicine, very few people with a background in science. I think that's got to be an advantage. People don't want to have professional politicians who've been through a sausage machine."

Wollaston admits that Steen's comments "haunt this campaign" but she hopes that after the election, politics can move on from the expenses scandal. "I think it's our last chance," she says.

It was thought the expenses furore could also pave the way for independents to do well at this election. Totnes has a couple of interesting ones.

First to Dartmouth, the gorgeous riverine town where the illustrator and cartoonist Simon Drew is to be found. Not surprisingly he is putting his artistic talents to good use in his campaign for the Totnes seat.

People strolling past his gallery smile when they see his cartoon of "Michelangelo's Dave", a photograph of a puzzled-looking David Cameron plonked on to a sketch of the "real" David's muscular body.

He has also produced what must be one of the most beautiful election leaflets: a House of Commons populated by waterfowl, suggesting most MPs are "lame ducks" and recalling the duck house controversy emblematic of the saga.

Drew says he is "disgusted" with the main parties and the lack of choice.

"I decided the best thing I could do was stand myself. I'm finding it very interesting and getting quite a lot of support, I think. It helps having run the shop for 29 years – people know who I am. It helps that I've never been connected to any of the parties before."

If elected he would fight for local issues that have national resonance such as the problems faced by the fishing industry and soaring business rates. He is also a supporter of proportional representation.

"But I've no axe to grind about a particular issue. I just want to be an alternative to the main parties."

Stephen Hopwood, another independent candidate, does have many axes to grind. A complementary medicine practitioner, his literature declares: "I will be standing on the single issue of Truth." (His capital letter.)

"Only independents can truly represent the people," he says. "Any politician signed up to a party by definition has greater allegiance to the party and the whip rather than the people. If

people want democracy they have to vote for an independent, otherwise you get party whips and party politics and the influence of the bankers that dictate party policy."

As he talks on the balcony of his home on the edge of Dartmoor, the MI5 renegade David Shayler wanders out. It turns out he is helping Hopwood's campaign. Local issues are not foremost in either man's mind – rather, the "truth" about bankers, globalisation, 9/11 and the assassination of JFK.

The Lib Dem and Ukip candidates are focusing on the local rather than the global. Julian Brazil, the Lib Dem candidate, says he is hearing anger about a lack of investment in the more urban parts of the constituency (that "urban" is a relative term in this bucolic corner of Britain). In the countryside, the issues include affordable housing and lack of jobs. Bovine TB is a big deal for the many dairy farmers.

He believes people are still "very angry" about expenses. "It's a plague on all your houses is how they look at it. They are still going to vote. I hope they can channel that anger into voting for something different."

Brazil is more of a conventional politician. He is leader of the Lib Dem group on South Hams district council and has worked at Westminster with the former leader Charles Kennedy. (His biography also reveals he plays euchre – a card game – for the Pigs Nose Inn in East Prawle.)

He admits he would like to see more independent MPs in the Commons and might even have voted for Drew were he not standing himself. But he's not convinced it pays to be as nice as the Tory candidate obviously is. "Politics is about getting things done, not being a lovely person and making friends. It is, after all, one of the oldest professions."

At the Fishermen's Mission, Wollaston goes off in search of a bacon sandwich (there is not much fish on the menu, which may tell a tale). So is she enjoying it, really?

She sounds a little as if she is still trying to convince herself. "Actually it's very interesting. Every day I have to remind myself this is a really interesting job."