

Notes on the funding of Parish Council Secret Ballot Elections

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The 1948 Representation of the People Act introduced mandatory secret ballots for parish council elections. Prior to this election to a parish council had been by a simple show of hands at the parish meeting. It was recognised at the outset that there would be problems for small parishes bearing the costs of holding a secret ballot itself. Indeed the 1947 report of the Committee on Electoral Law Reform (that led to the above act) said;

"We regard some form of poll as the only satisfactory and practicable method of election [for parish councils], and we do not think that the exercise of the right of a parish to this method of electing its council should depend on its possessing sufficient financial resources."

Initially the organisation and the costs of parish council elections were matters for the parishes themselves. This caused considerable financial difficulties for some small councils who struggled to resource the new secret ballots. These problem were discussed in the House of Lords in 1952 where Lord Merthyr said,

“...what was not foreseen was the cost of this method as it fell upon small parishes. The cost is occasioned by the payment of fees to returning officers, and very largely by printing and stationery, and the situation which has now arisen in some parts is really little short of absurd.”
He went on, *“So it comes to this. You have here actual instances of parish councils spending in one year on electing themselves more than double what they have the power to spend on their own initiative in that year”*

Lord Merthyr then goes on to list the difficulties being caused by the high costs of PC elections I enclose a section here, but it is worth reading the whole debate, which I attach.

“Briefly, what are the results of this state of affairs? What is happening on an ever-increasing scale in the country to-day is that before the election takes place certain negotiations go on in the parish. Some attempt is made to make the number of candidates fit the number of vacancies. The sort of conversation that might very easily take place is that when a man has taken all the necessary steps to put his name down for election as a parish councillor, he may be told by an official—and it would be quite true in many cases—“If you stand, the election in this parish will cost £30; if you do not stand it will cost nothing.” That is surely most undesirable. It has about it a ring of the East European variety. The presentation of a single list of candidates is not something which I think we in this country should encourage. It is, in fact, just what we do not want, and it will certainly result in an ever increasing number of uncontested elections. Again I ask—is that really what we want?”

I haven't followed the whole history trail in Hansard, but it seems that there was a general concern about this issue, leading to the 1983 Representation of the People act where the costs of parish council elections were moved to district councils.

In other tiers of government the cost of elections are born by that tier, however this was recognised as impractical for parish councils due to the costs of a secret ballot and the modest financial

resources available to them. Thus it was decided that the parent district councils should organise the election and bear the cost of so doing.

The 1983 act includes the provision for this.

“All expenditure properly incurred by a returning officer in relation to the holding of an election of a parish councillor shall, in so far as it does not, in cases where there is a scale fixed for the purposes of this section by the council of the district in which the parish is situated, exceed that scale, be paid by the district council, but any expenditure so incurred shall, if the district council so require, be repaid to that council by the council of the parish for which the election is held”

There was naturally a concern that if elections were free, Parishes might abuse the system and so district councils had the power to recharge costs to parishes if they wanted to. It is important to notice that the setting of a “scale” of charges for elections that fixed contributions of parishes is written into the act itself.

In recent years many district councils have reviewed their policies on parish election costs and have reached a wide range of conclusions. Some councils now pass on the full costs of elections to parishes, some only a token sum and most stages in between.

I suggest that Parliament’s intention of assisting small parishes by making secret ballots affordable is being undermined by those councils who are passing on high percentages of election costs to parishes.

Indeed recharges of the whole election costs put those parishes in some ways in a worse position than they were in prior to 1983, as they have no control of the costs incurred by the district council, but are liable for those costs.

In our case, the suggested cost of the recent election is at least 25% of our annual precept and funding the election is going to cripple the activities of Sampford Courtenay parish council. The council has already written to parishioners warning against elections, because of the cost, in exactly the way warned of by Lord Merthyr in 1952.

Summary

Parish councils have no control over the calling of elections or parish polls, but are liable for the costs of these events whilst similarly having no control over the way the election is organised and the subsequent costs.

There is a large fixed element to the cost of secret ballots and this means that the recharge to a small parish can be much the same as the cost and recharge to a large parish or town council resulting in a much higher per-capita cost being charged.

The budget impact of this for small councils is severe as they have in effect an open ended exposure to costs that they cannot predict ,that could easily require a 20%, 30% or higher increase in precept to provide adequate reserves.

The costs of any election is in any event borne by the rate payer and recharging parish councils with election costs could be seen as just a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul.

I would like to suggest that West Devon adopts a scale of charges for election expenses. in particular so that the cost per voter in a small parish is the same as the cost per voter

