

# Miss Keays 'nearly the Bermondsey candidate'

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By Richard Dowden

Miss Sara Keays, Mr Cecil Parkinson's former secretary who is expecting his child in January, narrowly missed becoming the Conservative parliamentary candidate in last February's by-election in Southwark, Bermondsey, after the local party executive was persuaded to reopen the selection process.

Before the by-election was called, Miss Keays had sought the nomination but lost by one vote to Mr Peter Davis. A week after that selection conference, Mr Robert McIlhish, the Labour MP, resigned, and forced a by-election. Mr Davis decided that business commitments prevented him from fighting the by-election and resigned.

Some members of the local party executive, some sources say a majority, wanted Miss Keays to assume the candidature. However, at a meeting of the nine members of the executive on November 2, attended by the party agent, Miss Rose Freeman, and an official from Conservative Central Office, it was decided to go through a full selection process.

A short list was drawn up with three names: Mr John Maples, Mr Tony Patterson and Mr Robert Hughes. Mr Hughes, the eventual candi-

date, had been asked to put his name forward by Mr Ian MacLeod, the area party chairman. Miss Keays's name was not on that initial list but was added to it after the party had interviewed between 30 and 40 potential candidates.

The first shortlist included Miss Keays but in the end Mr Hughes was selected.

Miss Betty North, chairman of the Southwark and Bermondsey Constituency Conservative Association, said yesterday that she could not remember whether the representative from Central Office had argued in favour of reopening selection or simply adopting Miss Keays.

Among the reasons given by local party members for Miss Keays's failure to secure the nomination are that they did not want a woman to stand against Mr Peter Tatchell, the Labour candidate; that she did not know enough about inner cities; that she was using the candidature to gain experience and that she intended to move on.

However, her supporters felt that she was the "local" candidate of a constituency party that was strongly independent and this should have earned her the nomination.

Mr McLeod stressed the need for a strong candidate in urging Mr Hughes to run. He pointed out that the Conservative party had had two bad by-election results, at Crosby and in Peckham, where weak candidates were thought to have played a part.

Mr McLeod said in Blackpool last night: "At no time did the local party receive instructions from me that anything other than the proper procedures for reselection should take place.

"There was no question of any second-placed person, whoever that might be, being offered the chance to fight the seat.

"In accordance with National Union model rules a complete reselection would be necessary. Constituency parties jealously guard their autonomy. It is common knowledge that any 'direction' from Central Office is tantamount to a kiss of death."

● The continuing division of opinion within the Conservative Party as to whether Mr Cecil Parkinson should stay in office or resign was painfully exposed yesterday (Julian Haviland, Our Political Editor, writes).

His achievements as chairman were warmly applauded by most representatives on the

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opening day of the party conference. But he was chastised as "a self-confessed adulterer and a damned fool" by Mr Ivor Stanbrook, Conservative MP for Orpington, who said he should have insisted on resigning.

Mr Stanbrook said he was provoked by "the evident determination of the party establishment to pretend that nothing is wrong". He did not agree with the Prime Minister that Mr Parkinson's conduct was not a matter of public concern.

Earlier there had been a carefully planned effort to prepare a friendly reception for Mr Parkinson,

Mr Peter Rees, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, in the first speech from the platform, made an early reference to Mr Parkinson's "brilliant organization". Soon afterwards, Mr John Gummer, the new chairman, paid his predecessor a golden tribute.

On both occasions the representatives responded as required, with long and loud applause but minority did not applaud.

No one yesterday echoed Mr Stanbrook's severe judgment, although he said other MPs shared his views and many of his constituents had written to him complaining that Mr Parkinson had not resigned.