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KATE KNOWLES • 03.05.2026 |  8

Exclusive: Why did Shabana Mahmood vote using the wrong ballot in 2004?



Original illustration by Jake Greenhalgh.

A new postal vote discrepancy – and two very similar signatures

Barbara Holland, 76, and Raghib Ahsan, 79, live in a neat terrace in Handsworth overlooking the park. When I visit, they are both wearing house slippers and colourfully patterned sweaters. Ahsan ushers me into the living room then briskly heads to the kitchen to make coffee while Holland joins me on the squishy sofa. She reaches for a large folder.

It is one of many that they have lugged down from the office upstairs, where they keep reams of meticulously organised paperwork. Much of it is left over from their careers — Raghib is a solicitor and Barbara is a retired teacher and play worker. But several files hold documents relating to a notorious case of vote-rigging that shook Birmingham in the summer of 2004. It is known in Birmingham as “the banana republic” trial, a reference to the memorable phrase used by the judge.

Back then, Ahsan was secretary of a small party called the People’s Justice Party (PJP). The PJP drew considerable support from the Kashmiri community in north and east inner-city Birmingham. He had served as a Labour councillor for Sparkhill in the 1990s before parting ways with the party. In 2003, an employment tribunal ruled that Labour had discriminated against him in not selecting him as a candidate from 1997-2000. Holland was, and remains, a member of the Labour Party.

When the PJP took three Labour councillors in Bordesley Green to election court in 2005, Holland’s habit of meticulous record-keeping proved crucial in securing their win. Justice Richard Mawrey KC wrote in his judgment of the case that he placed “considerable reliance” on her documentation. Mawrey found “widespread fraud” in the ward’s 2004 election and banned three Labour councillors from office for five years (as well as three from the neighbouring ward of Aston, although one was later cleared of personal guilt).

Much of the case turned on voter signatures that didn’t match. Mawrey found that in Bordesley Green more than 1,600 votes had been tainted because the signature on the application to vote by post did not match the signature on the declaration of identity that each voter completed to submit their ballot.

As The Dispatch exclusively reported yesterday, evidence presented at that trial included postal-vote documentation submitted by the now-home secretary Shabana Mahmood. Two of her forms bore strikingly different signatures, but a spokesperson for Mahmood said “she signed both of these documents, which are clearly in her own handwriting.”

When we first approached Mahmood about this story on Friday, her special adviser explained the discrepancy by saying that Mahmood used to use two different signatures. We have repeatedly asked why she would have used a different signature in a situation like this, where the declaration of identity document exists to authenticate that the right voter is returning the ballot, but we haven’t received a response.



Barbara with her ‘schedule’. Photo: The Dispatch.

In her living room, Holland carefully opens the “schedule”, her comprehensive database of evidence used in the trial. At the time, she pored over the clues within to develop her hypothesis about what really happened with the mismatching Mahmood signatures. To this day, she believes she knows the truth.

“We could see that there had been a massive fraud, and the decision of the judge brought that out when it did eventually come,” she says,

referring to the case as a whole. But, to her mind, there is still more to be uncovered.



Sign up to The Dispatch to support our ongoing investigation into Shabana Mahmood and the 2004 “banana republic” election fraud trial.

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The avalanche

In 2004, the drama began before anyone had voted. Labour was facing a backlash — particularly in Muslim communities — because of Tony Blair’s decision to join the US invasion of Iraq the previous year. Three years earlier, the government had introduced new legislation that made voting by post much easier with the aim of improving voter turn-out in general. Now, you didn’t need a strong reason such as being house bound to vote by post — you could simply opt in.

Thinking that more people might vote if they didn’t have to haul themselves down to their local polling station, Labour activists set about encouraging them to apply for postal ballots. Applications surged. More than 70,000 postal ballots were issued in Birmingham, compared to 28,000 the previous year. The bureaucracy, which hadn’t been designed to handle this avalanche, creaked. Two wards became the focal point of what would become a major scandal: Aston and Bordesley Green.

In Aston, the Liberal Democrats became suspicious that the Labour candidates and their agents were rigging votes, as were the PJP of Labour in Bordesley Green. Here, there had been a 900% increase in postal ballot applications — up from 900 the year before to 8,647. There were 18,000 people who were registered to vote in the ward.

The police investigated complaints by postal workers that they had been threatened and bribed to hand over their sacks of ballot papers to campaigners. The tension peaked the night before the election, when officers had to break up a colossal street fight in Small Heath between 200 supporters of Labour's Shah Jahan and the PJP's Shaukat Ali Khan. The PJP group accused Labour campaigners of cheating, while the Labour supporters alleged intimidation.

On election day, 10 June 2004, the PJP were watching closely for signs of tampering. "The ballots were Tipp-Exed," says Ahsan, one of the many forms of fraud that were later exposed at trial..

When the results came in and all three Labour candidates in Bordesley Green won, he and other PJP members were convinced they were the victims of electoral theft. For weeks afterwards, they traipsed the neighbourhood knocking doors and collecting around 260 witness statements from voters.



Raghib and Barbara at home in Handsworth. Photo: The Dispatch.

“I remember people being very angry,” Ahsan recalls. The PJP workers met residents who had gone to the polling station only to be told they had already voted. Some said they had received ballot papers in the post despite not applying for them, then had strangers knock on the door to collect them. One woman found that someone else had cast a vote for her and that her signature was given as a witness for another voter in her house. Chaos reigned.

The PJP and their supporters and solicitors brought a petition — a written application requesting court action — against the victorious Labour councillors. They didn’t know then that they were initiating one of the most serious election fraud cases in Britain in a century.

Voting with the wrong ballot

When the High Court ordered a special election trial in November 2004, Birmingham city council released the Bordesley Green postal-vote documents for the petitioners to photocopy so that they could build their case. The documents included the list of the 7,000 voters in Bordesley Green who had cast their ballots by post – and next to each name was the number of the ballot the voter had used.

The council allowed the petitioners to review the actual ballots – on which voters had cast their vote – in the presence of scrutineers. They did not make them available for copying. The council did allow the petitioners to copy two other forms that each voter had to complete:

The application to vote by post: Issued by the Birmingham city council elections office, voters used this form to obtain a postal ballot. “Each person has to sign their own form,” it read. And: “It is an offence to make a false statement on this form — maximum fine £5,000.”

The declaration of identity: After receiving and marking a postal ballot, voters used this form to submit their vote to the elections office. Each declaration and corresponding ballot paper carried the same identifying number. The declaration required two signatures: one by the voter and one by a witness.

Holland began the painstaking process of pairing up each voter’s forms. She would begin with a ballot number from the list and find the declaration bearing the same number. She then looked at the name on the declaration and found that person’s application.

When Holland examined the documents associated with ballot 554, she found two anomalies. The hand that signed “Shabana Mahmood” on the declaration of identity did not appear to be the same hand that had written “Shabana Mahmood” on the postal-ballot application. That discrepancy [has been a trending topic](#) on social media since we broke our story about it yesterday.

Application to vote by post

Signed

Shabana Mahmood

In case we have a query, please give daytime telephone numb

Declaration of identity

Part 1

003996

I am the person to whom ballot paper(s) numbered 000554

Signature of Voter:

Shabana Mahmood



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Shabana Mahmood's signatures. The ballot number – 554 – appears in the lower image.

The second problem was the number. According to the list provided to the petitioners by the elections office, Shabana Mahmood had been assigned ballot number 556, not 554. But Holland held in her hands the evidence that Shabana Mahmood — then 24 years old and training in London to be a barrister — had voted using ballot 554.

Holland then found the paperwork for ballot 556. The corresponding declaration of identity had apparently been completed by Shabana's brother (whose full name The Dispatch is withholding at the request of the Home Office on the grounds that the brother is not a public figure). He had voted using the ballot assigned to Shabana.

What accounts for this mix-up? It's hard to say. The spokesperson for Shabana Mahmood told us: "We have been presented with no evidence of this claim. If true, it appears to be an administrative

error. This kind of administrative error occurred routinely in the administration of postal votes during this period.”

Holland looked closely at the signatures on the brother’s application and his declaration and determined his was a borderline case. At the time, she erred on the side of caution and recorded them as matching. Looking at them today, Holland believes that they do not match.

Holland also reviewed the postal-vote documentation for Shabana’s sister, whom we are also not naming in full. The sister had used the ballot assigned to her – unlike Shabana and their brother – but the discrepancy in the signatures on the application and declaration was pronounced. Holland recorded them as not matching, as she had done with Shabana’s signatures.

Something else was curious about the applications, the form needed to obtain a postal ballot. The signatures of the two sisters, in particular, looked as though they had been written by the same person. Both were signed on the same date: 19 April 2003. Here they are, with the redaction of the sister’s first name:

Shabana Mahmood

Signed

Shabana Mahmood

Date

19/4/03

To: [redacted] please give daytime telephone number

E-mail address

Shabana Mahmood's sister

Signed

[redacted] Mahmood

Date

19/4/03



The signature on Shabana Mahmood's postal-vote application (top) and her sister's (bottom).

“We think the same person in the household made all three applications on the same date,” Holland says.

Agent and witness

The most politically active member of the household was Mahmood Ahmed, Shabana's father. When it came time for the three children to vote, Ahmed witnessed and signed each of their declarations of identity.

He was also the election agent for the three Labour councillors in Bordesley Green whom Mawrey disqualified after he found that “there were corrupt and illegal practices committed by the Labour Party Respondents and their agents” that likely affected the

outcome of the election. Ahmed went on to become the chair of Birmingham Labour.

The spokesperson for Shabana Mahmood said: “False allegations that her father signed these documents were dismissed, with no adverse finding, over twenty years ago.” Mawrey’s lengthy judgment makes no mention of Mahmood Ahmed or the Mahmood family signatures, and it’s unclear what the spokesperson means when they say that the allegations were dismissed.

These aren’t the only questions that remain outstanding. Our reporting in the last few days has linked the home secretary to a major vote-rigging scandal that took place in two of the wards she now represents in parliament. Her special adviser Joshua Williams responded to our questions about the case by threatening us with lawsuits in defamation and privacy as well as a high court injunction to prevent us publishing.

Williams may have thought these threats would suppress the story, but in fact they seem to have amplified it. We would still like to know if the home secretary approved the menacing letter sent by her special adviser on Friday night, which various leading journalists have described as “extraordinary” and highly unusual.

Dispatch readers will want to know why Shabana Mahmood used two different signatures on these crucial documents, as her adviser claims, and when it was that she first became aware of the electoral scandal engulfing three local councillors for whom her father was Labour’s election agent.

Britain goes to the polls on Thursday, with local elections taking place in Birmingham and across the country. Voters might appreciate more clarity from their home secretary before that.

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