

# JOURNAL OF LIBERAL DEMOCRAT HISTORY

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## Ten Years On

The Legacy of the Alliance  
and Merger

*Bill Rodgers*

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*Michael Meadowcroft*

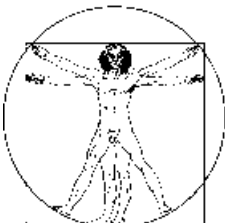
*Dick Newby*

*Tim Clement-Jones*

*Graham Watson*

*Stuart Mole*

*Dr Tudor Jones*



LIBERAL DEMOCRAT HISTORY GROUP

# Issue 18: Spring 1998

Special issue:

## The Legacy of the Liberal-SDP Alliance

- 4 **The SDP's Ideological Legacy**  
*Dr Tudor Jones*
- 8 **The Merger Debate in the SDP 1981–87**  
*Bill Rodgers*
- 12 **Alliance Days**  
*Richard Holme*
- 14 **The Alliance: Two-Party Cooperation in Practice**  
*Dick Newby*
- 17 **The Alliance: Parties and Leaders**  
*Michael Meadowcroft*
- 32 **The Merger Process: An SDP Retrospect**  
*Willie Goodhart*
- 36 **The Two Davids**  
*Graham Watson*
- 38 **The Alliance and After**  
The Travelling of a Necessary Road  
*Stuart Mole*
- 41 **One Man's Pride**  
Owen and his Impact on the Alliance  
*Tim Clement-Jones*
- 43 **Merger Hopes and Fears: Were they Realised?**  
*Alan Beith MP*
- 45 **Reviews**  
*Greaves and Pitchford, Merger: The Inside Story*  
*Sykes, Losing from the Inside*
- 48 **Research Notes**  
Chronology of key Alliance dates  
Bibliography: sources on Alliance history

## The Journal of Liberal Democrat History

The **Journal of Liberal Democrat History** is published quarterly by the Liberal Democrat History Group.

The History Group promotes the discussion and research of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party and the SDP.

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# Editorial

## The Alliance Years

This issue of the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* goes to press as the Liberal Democrats prepare to celebrate their tenth birthday.

It aims to explore the question: what did the new party inherit from the old, Liberals, Social Democrats and Alliance? What is the legacy of the seven years, from 1981 to '88, during which Britain experienced the phenomenon of two separate and distinct political parties fighting elections on a common platform, with agreed policy positions? What are the lessons to be learned from that unique period of cooperation? Above all, why did a political force that was regularly perceived as a serious contender for power with the Conservative and Labour Parties consistently fail to achieve its promise, and collapsed with such speed into mutual recrimination and internal conflict?

Our contributors write from many different backgrounds and perspectives. Most of them share certain beliefs: that the Gang of Four and their followers were right to leave the Labour Party and found a new political organisation; that, once the SDP was formed, it would have been electoral suicide for it and the Liberal Party to fight each other (though that was not the universal

view at the time); that the experience of working in alliance brought Liberals and Social Democrats together so closely that for most, merger seemed an inevitable and desirable destination; that far and away the biggest drawback of the Alliance was the hours spent – and wasted – in painful internal negotiations, over seats and policy positions; that, more than anything else, it was the ambition and judgement of David Owen that undermined the Alliance and made the merger process so unnecessarily painful.

Most, but not all. Michael Meadowcroft powerfully argues the case that involvement in the Alliance actually held back the Liberal cause in Britain, that the Liberal Party would have prospered more in the 1980s if the SDP had never been formed, and that David Steel must

bear at least as much, and possibly more, of the blame for the failures of the Alliance and of merger than should David Owen.

We hope that these contributions – in the longest *Journal* the History Group has produced – will spark interest, controversy and debate. Bearing in mind our mission to promote the research of historical topics, we have also included a new section, 'Research Notes', with a concise bibliography and chronology of the Alliance period. Additions to these, and responses to any of the articles, will be – as ever – very welcome.

*Duncan Brack (Editor)*

A Liberal Democrat History Group Fringe Meeting

## The Struggle for Women's Rights

with

**Johanna Alberti** (Newcastle University)

and

**Shirley Williams**

8.00–9.30pm, Friday 13 March  
Royal Clifton Hotel, Southport

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# The SDP's Ideological Legacy

What was the ideological inheritance of the Social Democratic Party? And what did it bequeath to the Liberal Democrats? *Dr Tudor Jones* analyses what the SDP stood for.

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Although at its foundation in 1981 the Social Democratic Party was the first significant new party in British politics since 1945, it inherited a long ideological tradition. The core values and beliefs and distinctive themes of that tradition – British social democracy – were to shape the character and broad policy approach of the new party and were thus to influence, too, the Alliance which the SDP was to form with the Liberal Party.

## The social-democratic tradition since 1945

Most of the 28 former Labour MPs and many of the other new members who joined the SDP in the early 1980s had been influenced by the assumptions and values of British social democracy. Since 1945 this term had gradually come to mean, in Hamilton's succinct definition, 'a non-transformative type of socialism or social reform' in the sense that it offered an ideological approach that sought 'amelioration of injustice and the promotion of common welfare and a measure of equality ... rather than transformation of the economic and social structure'<sup>1</sup>.

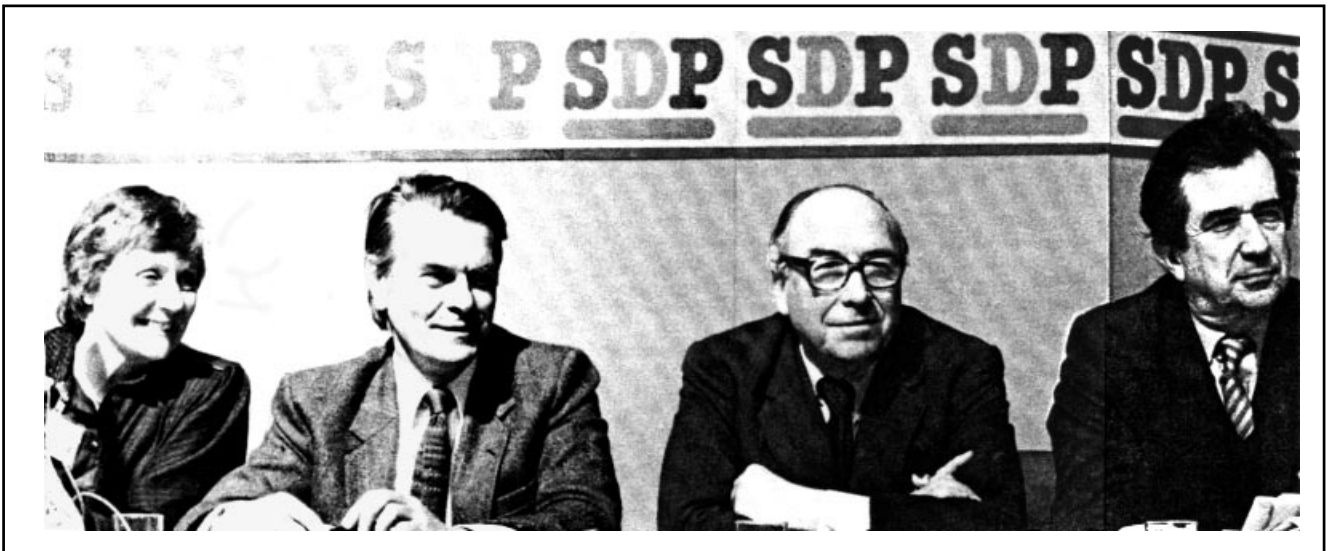
During the 1950s and early 1960s this social democratic approach in Britain became synonymous with the revisionist tendency within the Labour Party. This amounted to a deliberate attempt, most apparent after 1956 following Hugh Gaitskell's accession to the party leadership, to reformulate the principles of democratic socialism and to revise Labour policies through a new analysis of economic and social changes in postwar Britain.

Developed mainly by Gaitskell's parliamentary supporters, revisionist socialist thought found its most coherent expression in Anthony Crosland's major work *The Future of Socialism* (1956). The analysis which underpinned Crosland's principal arguments focused both on major changes in the pattern of economic power in Britain since 1945 and on the achievement during that period of full employment and sustained economic growth by means of Keynesian macroeconomic intervention. Such developments, Crosland persuasively argued, had removed many of the deep flaws of prewar capitalism.

Fortified by this theoretical analysis, revisionist social democracy proceeded to challenge entrenched Labour orthodoxies in two ways. First, it repudiated the traditional view that socialism could be identified, above all, with the public ownership of the means of production. It thereby questioned the established Labour commitment to extensive public ownership as the precondition for achieving all major reformist objectives.

Second, Labour revisionism presented a distinctive ethical interpretation of socialism in terms of core values such as personal liberty, social welfare and, in particular, social equality, ideal ends that could be pursued, it was now argued, within the context of a mixed economy. Moreover, from this ethical perspective the traditional doctrine of public ownership – as enshrined in Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution – was viewed as merely one useful means among several others for realising enduring socialist values and ideals.

Throughout the 1950s and early '60s revisionist ideas on public ownership, economic strategy and social policy were further developed and promoted – notably by Crosland,



Five years after the Limehouse Declaration: Shirley Williams, David Owen, Roy Jenkins and Bill Rodgers at Bath, 25 January 1986.

Gaitskell, Douglas Jay and Roy Jenkins – and incorporated into party policy documents such as *Industry and Society* (1957). The economic foundation on which those ideas rested was a firmly Keynesian one since that creed offered the techniques by which future Labour governments would, it was hoped, seek to achieve economic growth and full employment and hence secure the economic surplus that could be redirected into higher social expenditure. Built around this Keynesian foundation was the distinctive strategy of Croslandite social democracy – namely, the promotion, within a mixed economy, of social welfare and greater equality by means of high public expenditure and redistributive taxation and upon the basis of sustained economic growth.

This revisionist social democratic model was a major ideological influence on Labour thinking and policy for about 20 years – from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. But in the face of the inflationary pressures of the 1970s, the intellectual and political appeal of Keynesian social democracy began to fade. Intellectually, its confident assumptions were undermined by the economic stagnation, sterling crises and bitter industrial conflicts of those years, and consequently by the strains of office exerted on the Wilson and Callaghan governments between 1974 and '79.

Politically and ideologically, too, British social democracy seemed an increasingly marginalised force by the late 1970s. On its left flank it found itself challenged within the Labour Party by the revived fundamentalist socialism of Tony Benn and his supporters. On its right flank, meanwhile, it was confronted after 1975 with the revived market liberal doctrines of an increasingly Thatcherite Conservative Party. The growing isolation of social democrats within the Labour Party at this time was also greatly increased by their strong identification with the cause of British involvement in the European Community. Their predicament deteriorated further with Roy Jenkins' departure from British politics in 1976 to become President of the European Commission and with the deaths of Crosland in 1977 and John Mackintosh, another iconoclastic thinker, in 1978.

In the face of their declining influence some social democratic politicians, notably Mackintosh, David Marquand and Evan Luard, had begun to develop a critique of the centralist and corporatist tendencies inherent in state socialism.<sup>2</sup> Both Mackintosh and Marquand had also stressed the need to revise Croslandite social democracy in the harsher economic and political climate of the late 1970s, and thereby to work out what Marquand called

the purposes of 'a new-model libertarian decentralist social democracy'.<sup>3</sup> Although little systematic progress was made in that direction, both Marquand, by implication, and Roy Jenkins, more explicitly, indicated that a new political vehicle might be needed for a revised social democratic theory and strategy.<sup>4</sup> In his 1979 Dimpleby lecture, 'Home Thoughts from Abroad', Jenkins thus welcomed the possibility of a new party of the radical centre which would support state intervention and market forces in equal measure.

## Social democracy in the SDP

When that new party did eventually emerge on the political scene in March 1981, its new launch statement, 'Twelve Tasks for Social Democrats', together with books by three of its founder-leaders – David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams – sought to provide the Social Democratic Party with a clear political and ideological identity.

At first this undertaking appeared to be inspired by the pantheon of major British socialist thinkers of the past – G.D.H. Cole, R.H. Tawney and Evan Durbin, to whom Owen, Williams and Rodgers respectively paid homage.<sup>5</sup> But it also became evident that the SDP's political lead-

ers were engaged in developing a critique of the bureaucratic centralism and statism of established Labour policy. For they demonstrated a shared commitment to the principle of political and economic decentralisation previously affirmed by Marquand, Mackintosh and Luard in the late 1970s.

Owen thus advocated a revival of 'the concept of fellowship and community within a participatory democratic society' in place of the 'deeply centralist' tradition of Fabian collectivism which had dominated the Labour Party for so long.<sup>6</sup> In practice, he argued, that process would require 'a detailed programme of legislative and administrative reforms to diffuse power in Britain'.<sup>7</sup> That goal was supported, too, by Williams who

ity of opportunity and treatment. There were thus, as Owen admitted, 'genuinely conflicting arguments and attitudes ... posed within the centralist/decentralist dilemma'.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, this emphasis on political decentralisation, welcomed, of course, by the new party's Liberal allies, had become established as an essential element of early SDP thought. As part of the developing social democratic critique of an over-centralised and bureaucratic state, associated both with traditional socialism and with the postwar collectivist consensus in general, the idea was reinforced by an eagerness to embrace a market-oriented mixed economy. For Marquand such a commitment constituted one of the most distinctive and important prin-

nounced by the party's rank-and-file activists. By 1983, however, David Owen had discarded the term itself, favouring instead the idea of a 'social market economy' or 'social market'. For in his view, the 'mixed economy' had become a broad, descriptively imprecise term to which virtually anyone in British politics could subscribe. From September 1983, therefore, after succeeding Roy Jenkins as SDP leader, Owen increasingly employed the concept of a 'social market economy' as a means of defining his party's ideological position.

The term 'social market' had first been used by German economic liberals after 1945 and taken up by Christian Democrats, particularly by Ludwig Erhard. It originally meant a market economy in which the state's role was restricted to ensuring that market forces operated without distortion. The term entered British political discourse in 1975 when it was enthusiastically adopted by Keith Joseph and his free-market Conservative Centre for Policy Studies. Within the SDP, however, Owen revised the meaning of the concept so that it implied, in Peter Jenkins' definition, 'that wealth should be created by market forces but redistributed according to social principles'.<sup>11</sup> This interpretation suggested that the operations of the market economy were to be supplemented by government intervention of various kinds – by an industrial strategy, for instance, that would promote skills training and research and development; by an incomes policy; and by the redistribution of incomes and resources by means of taxation and a more generous welfare system.

Owen elaborated his interpretation of the social market economy in the opening chapter of his book *A Future that Will Work* (1984), as well as in a succession of articles and speeches.<sup>12</sup> Further theoretical justification for the idea was provided by Owen's economic policy adviser Alex de Mont and by the social policy specialist Nick Bosanquet, who stressed the need to combine

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What remained, however, of the SDP's original social democratic legacy, apart from enduring egalitarian and welfarist ideals, was perhaps more a political style and approach – pragmatic, flexible, favouring cautious reformism with the aid of active government and an enabling state.

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favoured both an extension of industrial democracy and wider popular participation in public policy-making and on public bodies.<sup>8</sup>

This decentralist approach was endorsed by official party statements of principle and policy. The original Limehouse Declaration of 1981, for instance, affirmed the new party's support for 'the greatest practical degree of decentralisation of decision-making in industry and government'. Embedded in all this, however, as Owen and Williams recognised, were some problematic issues, including the possibility of disparities in, say, health care provision between different localities and regions. In that instance, decentralisation might well clash with the social democratic commitment to equal-

principles of social democracy. A few months after the new party's foundation he thus depicted the mixed economy not just as the source of prosperity and personal freedom but also as 'neither a staging post on the road to full socialism nor a regrettable compromise between economic sin and economic virtue, but an entity in its own right, positively desirable in and for itself'.<sup>10</sup>

In the Labour Party from which Marquand had recently departed such a stance remained ideologically contentious. For support for the mixed economy had become Labour's 'official heresy', as the political journalist Peter Jenkins neatly described it, reflected in official policy documents and in the conduct of Labour governments, yet de-

competitive markets with government action to provide public services such as health-care and education and to correct market failures such as, for instance, the omission of the costs of pollution from the market price of a good or service.<sup>13</sup>

By 1984 the concept of the social market economy had become closely identified with Owen's leadership and was officially adopted as a central SDP policy at the party conference of that year. In spite, however, of its elevated status in SDP thinking and policy it did not feature prominently in the Alliance programme in the run-up to the 1987 general election. The detailed Alliance policy statement, *The Time Has Come*, whilst endorsing the broad underlying approach of the social market economy, contained no references to the phrase itself. It merely stated that the Alliance parties 'bring together ideas which the Conservative and Labour Parties believe to be mutually exclusive: enterprise and welfare, a market economy and social justice'.<sup>14</sup> This omission of the term was repeated in the 1987 Alliance election manifesto *Britain United*, although Owen himself did try to revive his emphasis on the social market during the election campaign.

Ultimately, then, the idea of the social market economy exerted little direct influence on Alliance strategy, even though it had been one of the few distinctive political ideas to emerge from SDP thinking between 1983 and 1987. It had proved useful, in terms of both policy and rhetoric, in helping to widen the gap between a more market-oriented SDP and the more collectivist and interventionist approach of social democrats such as Denis Healey, Roy Hattersley and John Smith who had remained loyal to Labour. But as its critics argued, both at the time and later, the Owenite concept of the social market economy lacked either a precise meaning or intellectual coherence. It was unclear, for instance, whether the emphasis lay on the 'social' or the 'market' factor within the

equation. It could thus be interpreted as meaning a market economy accompanied either by a minimal state that intervened only to ensure competition and end monopolies or by an active, enabling state that intervened to correct market failures and promote social welfare and justice. It was also unclear, largely for that reason, what exactly the economic and social policy implications of the idea were for the SDP's programme and strategy.

## Conclusion

As a consequence, Owen's innovative use of this distinctive but imprecise idea failed to provide a clear ideological redefinition of social democracy towards the end of the SDP's political life. In other respects, its doctrinal and strategic platform was built upon ideas and attitudes – political and economic decentralisation, constitutional reform, selective government intervention within a market economy – which helped to cement the Alliance with the Liberals after 1981, marking out a broad common ground of principle and policy.

What remained, however, of the SDP's original social democratic legacy, apart from enduring egalitarian and welfarist ideals, was perhaps more a political style and approach – pragmatic, flexible, favouring cautious reformism with the aid of active government and an enabling state. But what had given British social democracy its distinctive character in the period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s – namely, its central strategy of egalitarian redistribution through the use of tax and welfare systems and upon the basis of Keynesian economics – had by the late 1980s largely declined as a major political influence.

When, therefore, the newly formed party, the Liberal Democrats, painfully emerged in 1988 from the collapse of the Alliance, it, too, like the SDP in 1981, faced the task of establishing a distinctive political and ideological identity that would re-

tain its appeal and value in the face of the economic and political changes sweeping through Britain and the Western world during the 1980s.

*Dr Tudor Jones is a senior lecturer in politics at Coventry University. His publications include Remaking the Labour Party: From Gaitskell to Blair (Routledge, 1996) and 'Liberal Democrat Thought' in The Liberal Democrats (ed. D. MacIver) (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996).*

### Notes:

- 1 M.B. Hamilton, *Democratic Socialism in Britain and Sweden* (Macmillan, 1989), pp. 11, 12.
- 2 See, for instance, D. Marquand, 'Inquest on a Movement', *Encounter*, July 1979; E. Luard, *Socialism without the State* (Macmillan, 1979); D. Marquand (ed.), *John P. Mackintosh on Parliament and Social Democracy* (Longman 1982).
- 3 D. Marquand, 'Inquest on a Movement', *Encounter*, July 1979, p. 18.
- 4 See Marquand, *op. cit.*; R. Jenkins, 'Home Thoughts from Abroad', Dimpleby lecture, 1979, published in *Partnership of Principle* (The Radical Centre; Secker & Warburg, 1985), pp. 9–26.
- 5 See D. Owen, *Face the Future* (revised edition, Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 3; W. Rodgers, *The Politics of Change* (Secker & Warburg, 1982, p. 4); S. Williams, *Politics is for People* (Penguin, 1981), p. 23–24.
- 6 Owen, *op. cit.*, pp. 3, 27.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 27.
- 8 Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
- 9 Owen, *op. cit.*, p. 27; see also Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
- 10 D. Marquand, *Russet-Coated Captains: The Challenge of Social Democracy* (SDP, 1981), p. 12.
- 11 P. Jenkins, *The Guardian*, 14 September 1983.
- 12 See also, for example, D. Owen, 'Agenda for Competitiveness and Compassion', *Economic Affairs*, 4:1, October 1983.
- 13 See A. de Mont, *A Theory of the Social Market* (Tawney Society, 1984), and N. Bosanquet, 'The "Social Market Economy": Principles, Behind the Policies?' *Political Quarterly*, July–September 1984.
- 14 D. Owen and D. Steel, *The Time Has Come* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), pp. 22–23.
- 15 See, for instance, L. Andrews, *Liberalism Versus the Social Market Economy* (Hebden Royd, 1985); D. Brack, *The Myth of the Social Market Economy* (LINK, 1989).

# The SDP and Merger 1981–1987

*Bill Rodgers traces the history of the SDP-Liberal relationship, from beginnings to alliance to merger.*

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In January 1980 I wrote a letter to Roy Jenkins, as much to clear my own mind as to convey a message. Hitherto I had been concerned only to find a way of saving the Labour Party from itself. Now I was hesitantly considering the possibility of helping to launch what I called ‘a fourth party.’ I was not sanguine about the prospects but reflected on the scope for an understanding with the Liberals. For the moment I favoured a cautious and discreet approach to them.

As the Labour Party continued to slide towards disaster, I had given it a year, no more, to come to its senses. Unlike Roy Jenkins, who had set out his stall very clearly in his Dimbleby lecture, I was locked into the party I had joined over 30 years earlier, and as yet had no coherent view on realignment. I was ready to concede the possibility of a new party but my energies were still devoted to the rescue of an old one.

David Steel was aware of this, but on several occasions tried to open a dialogue. We had worked together during the European referendum campaign of 1975 and I had acted as a conduit between him and the Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, in the early days of the Lib-Lab Pact. I was in no doubt that he was a man we could do business with. For the moment, however, that was a bridge too far. The position of both Shirley Williams and David Owen was similar: it was too soon to discuss what relations we would have with the Liberal Party if it came to a break.

What is strange, looking back, is that we had not discussed the matter much between ourselves even by the beginning of 1981 when the Limehouse Declaration and the formation of the Council for Social Democracy – which led two months later to the SDP – was immi-

nent. We took for granted that a partnership of a kind would be essential. There was, however, no collective view of what form it should take, not because of disagreement within the Gang of Four but because it was absent from our agenda. It follows that any idea that two parties – one not yet launched – might eventually merge was very far away. It may have crossed Roy Jenkins’ mind but it never crossed mine.

The first hint that there might be serious differences of opinion in the Gang of Four about relations with the Liberals came on the day of the launch on 26 March 1981. The four of us sat together on the platform at the Connaught Rooms, off Kingsway in central London, each to make a short statement and to answer questions on an allocation previously agreed between us. Apart from the largest con-

A new party is launched: the Connaught Rooms, 26 March 1981.





tingent of UK press, radio and television I had ever seen, there were reporters from most of western Europe, the United States, the Commonwealth and the rest of the world. One of these was Bonnie Angelo, head of *Time* magazine's London bureau and she asked how many Parliamentary seats the SDP would fight. This fell to me to answer and I said without hesitation, 'About half, at least three hundred.'

Had I been asked this question before the Limehouse Declaration, I might have suggested about 60 seats, the figure I had in mind in my letter to Roy Jenkins a year earlier. But the immense enthusiasm we had aroused and the skeleton of a nationwide organisation for which there was already a blueprint, made me confident in my announcement. David Steel might not like it, but if the Liberals and the SDP each fought half the seats it would be a measure of our equal partnership.

My answer was given on the spur of the moment, but it did not occur to me that exception would be taken to it within our own ranks. I was mistaken, and soon David Owen was arguing that I had made a serious error in 'giving away' half the seats to the Liberals. I should, I was told, have threatened to fight all seats as a measure of the dominance the SDP proposed to achieve. We might even choose to fight the elections or in saying they were perceived by the public as representing failure. Thus the lines were drawn up which were to persist to the decisive merger vote of 1987.

Relations with the Liberals remained a constant theme in the two years that led to the 1983 general election. For the most part, Roy, Shirley and I saw no point in restraining a closer partnership, but David Owen was constantly on the alert to anything that might compromise the SDP's identity either by open decision or by stealth. I remained more cautious than Roy, and occasionally found myself sharing some of David Owen's reservations. My essential theme was of 'natural convergence', a bottom-up growing



'What do you mean, can't we slow down a bit? We haven't even started the motor yet!' (2 February 1981)

together of the two parties with activists setting the pace. But merger was not then part of my vocabulary.

It was the result of the 1983 election that made it a serious subject for discussion. The Alliance won 25.4% of the vote and was within 2.2% of overtaking Labour. It was first or second in 332 seats and nearly eight million votes were divided almost equally between Liberal and Social Democrat candidates. The SDP had the highest proportion of women candidates and an effective national organisation. The result nevertheless was a great disappointment after the byelection victories of Crosby, Hillhead and Bermondsey; and after the time, in December 1981, when Gallup had recorded 51% of the electorate prepared to vote for the SDP or the Liberals and an average of all polls had given the Alliance 42.1% of the vote. Roy Jenkins' position as leader of the SDP had become untenable with David Owen making clear that he would challenge Roy if he failed to give way. Thus at the moment that merger became a credible option to discuss, the SDP's new leader ruled it out.

From the earliest days of the SDP David Owen had seen it – at least in its central core – as divided into Jenkinsites and Owenites. This was nonsense in the case of the other two

members of the Gang of Four. Although close to Roy, my negotiations with the Liberals in 1981–83 over the allocation of Parliamentary seats – including my public row with David Steel – had won David Owen's approval whilst Roy had been unhappy. Shirley had seen David Owen to be the more acceptable image for a new party and had nominated him against Roy for the leadership. A small group of key people who had kept in touch with Roy during his Brussels years, particularly after his Dimpleby lecture – David Marquand, Clive Lindley, Matthew Oakshott, Jim Daly – were sometimes more royalist than the king. But for the most part even those most active in committees preferred to judge issues on their merits. They wanted a harmonious collective leadership.

This was not the way David Owen saw it. He preferred to label them and balance their numbers on committees and working groups. The Jenkinsites were pro-Liberal and therefore pro-merger. His own troops were anti-Liberal and not prepared to see merger discussed.

Merger by stealth was what he most feared when it came to another agreement with the Liberals about Parliamentary seats. The Liberal Party did not want the prolonged and damaging round of previous

Liberals in a byelection (and, it was implied, trounce them). But within a few days, my approach to the division of seats was agreed by the Steering Committee of the SDP, although not without some argument, and we turned to how negotiations should be conducted. I said in a paper: 'Relations with the Liberals are bound to follow an irregular pattern. In some areas, there will be hard bargaining with little genuine spirit of cooperation; in others, the Liberals and Social Democrats will get on happily together.' And so it proved.

Nine days after the launch of the

negotiations. Nor did most Social Democrats. Under pressure from David Owen, I agreed to take charge of the negotiations once again but, apart from agreed exchanges, hoped to leave the 1983 arrangements largely in place. But the question arose of who should choose the candidates, individual Liberals and individual Social Democrats (each in their own seats) or Liberals and Social Democrats voting together for whoever they thought to be the best man or woman?

Most of us would have left this to local decision with no more than guidance from the centre, but in the

and that the remaining seats should simply choose the candidate they preferred.

David Owen's attitude to merger insofar as it had previously seemed inchoate was firmly articulated in his first few months as leader. Roy Jenkins was not in favour of merger but of keeping the door open to it. I certainly rejected an instant merger but in an article for the *Political Quarterly*, said this was 'quite different from a deliberate attempt to frustrate the organic growth of the Alliance.' 'If', I continued, 'members of both parties wish to turn a loose Alliance into a close day-to-day relationship .... it would be foolish to resist such pressure on the grounds that premature merger might result.' But this was unacceptable to David Owen, and he contrived to ensure a motion for debate at the SDP's Salford Conference in September 1983 that effectively ruled out merger until the end of the Parliament. The Party, always deferential to its leader, agreed and this became a point of reference in the years ahead.

What slowly emerged was a clearer view of David Owen's strategy. Put simply, it was to keep the Alliance together only long enough to win proportional representation for Westminster; and then for the SDP and the Liberals to go their separate ways. This was flawed in two crucial respects. Whatever restraints he placed on coming closer together, there was very little in terms of ideas or policies that separated the two parties. The Alliance itself was a measure of this. For the SDP to turn on its previous allies at some future date and fight the Liberals was quite unrealistic. Even the Salford delegates would have found that unacceptable had it been spelt out to them.

The second objection was even more profound. David Owen had abandoned the 'win-a-majority, form-a-government' message of both the SDP and the Liberals prior to the 1983 election. He now set his sights much lower, making holding-the-balance in a hung parliament the aim. This was an unsat-

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## What slowly emerged was a clearer view of David Owen's strategy. Put simply, it was to keep the Alliance together only long enough to win proportional representation for Westminster; and then for the SDP and the Liberals to go their separate ways.

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SDP, Shirley Williams and I departed for the 1981 Anglo-German Königswinter Conference on the Rhine. In the margins of it we had serious discussions with David Steel and Richard Holme, in which we were joined by David Marquand. The outcome was the so-called 'Königswinter Compact', an agreement between the two parties written out by Richard Holme on a lined sheet of greenish paper that looked as if it had been torn from an office ledger. It committed us to fighting the next general election in alliance, 'as distinct parties but offering the nation a government of partnership.'

Shirley Williams and I returned to London well pleased, believing that our agreement was totally consistent with previous understandings. But again there was trouble, principally from David Owen who said we had no mandate for our Königswinter activities. He was not alone in disliking a closer relationship with the Lib-

end we devised a system of joint closed and joint open selection. Under the first, members of both parties would vote together but only for a shortlist made up entirely of Liberals or entirely of Social Democrats; under the second, open, system members of both parties voting together would choose from a mixed list of Liberals and Social Democrats. These arrangements were monitored by the National Committee of the SDP which would approve or disapprove local proposals with David Owen taking a close interest in every seat. It was a laborious process. The objective seemed reasonable enough – to ensure a fair share of seats for both parties, especially good seats – but for David Owen it was meant to place a barrier wherever possible against members of two parties beginning to think and work as one. He only abandoned the attempt in the autumn of 1985 when I told him I would no longer oversee it

isfactory formula for campaigning and it crucially depended on a stalemate between Labour and the Conservatives which only the voters could decide. There had been three occasions since the war – 1950, 1964 and 1974 – when a strong and confident third party might have been able to negotiate a deal, but this gave no more than a one-in-four chance of a hung parliament next time. David Owen was not alone in grasping at the idea: it seemed our best hope. But to predicate the future of the SDP on such an outcome was fragile.

We are now, in 1998, also wiser about the process by which proportional representation might have been secured. An agreement with either Labour or the Conservatives would have been extracted under duress and the new government would have looked for an early opportunity to hold a further election and win a clear majority. The need to decide on the form of PR, the possibility of a referendum and the difficult progress of legislation through parliament (there would have been backbench revolts) would have provided the necessary breathing space. A hung parliament would not have delivered what David Owen wanted from it. The whole experiment would have ended in tears.

Throughout the 1983 Parliament, the two leaders, David Owen and David Steel, preferred to make decisions together rather than find themselves bound by any joint committee of the two parties. David Owen in particular feared that some Social Democrats, myself and Shirley Williams included, might make common cause with Liberals in an unacceptable majority. But from 1985 the Alliance Strategy Committee, chaired jointly by the leaders, met regularly to discuss and sometimes resolve problems between the parties. In early meetings there was a desultory attempt to raise merger until it was seen to be fruitless. And the row over the Joint Commission on Defence and Disarmament when David Owen re-

jected its unanimous report which I, together with other Social Democrats, had signed in the spring of 1986, was evidence that he preferred to keep his distance from the Liberals rather than reach any agreement that involved compromise. Defence was, he believed, one area where SDP policy should be distinct. It helped to mark an identity he hoped the SDP would retain.

The report of the Commission on Defence and Disarmament caused much bitterness in the SDP. David Owen always demanded great personal loyalty and he also equated losing with humiliation. The belief that John Roper and I had been disloyally responsible for him 'losing' in the Commission made us the object of his anger. My personal relationship with him was never to be the same again.

During 1984 and 1985 we had been quite close. I admired his dominating parliamentary performance and his relentless determination to keep the SDP in the political game. By any standards, it was an achievement of a high order. Over lunch, he would relax for a moment and confess how tired he was and how uncertain about the future. I would then try to persuade him not to rule out eventual merger and leading the merged party thereafter. He never dismissed this out of hand but a major obstacle was plainly his contemp-

tuous impatience with much of the Liberal Party which he thought of as jejune and ungovernable. There was no song in his heart about the prospects for the next parliament.

In the early hours of Friday 12 June 1987 any hope of a hung Parliament fell apart as Mrs Thatcher again headed for a three-figure majority. At 4.00am Alan Watson, a former Liberal President and one of David Steel's close advisors, and I were interviewed together on television by Robin Day. Our message was the same: merger was now a serious option that our two parties should address without delay. Six difficult months later, against David Owen's wishes and after much political blood-letting, it was achieved. Had David Owen been prepared to acknowledge that merger was the logic of two consecutive electoral defeats for the Alliance – or been willing to accept the 'Yes' verdict of the SDP's membership in a one-member, one-vote ballot – the Social and Liberal Democrats could have been launched with hope and excitement. As it was, the climb back to credibility was to be hard.

*William (Lord) Rodgers was Secretary of State for Transport 1976–79, one of the SDP's 'Gang of Four' founders in 1981, and SDP Vice President until 1987. In 1997 he was elected to succeed Lord Jenkins as leader of the Liberal Democrat peers.*

## Membership Services

*The following listings are available to History Group members:*

**Mediawatch:** a bibliography of major articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers, major magazines and academic journals from 1988; plus articles of historical interest appearing in the major Liberal Democrat journals from 1995.

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# Alliance Days

*Richard Holme* provides a few vignettes of the days of elation and experiment, frustration and failure.

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First the famous, or no doubt to David Owen infamous, Königswinter Compact. In 1981 in the margins of the annual Anglo-German Conference beside the Rhine there was a lunch at a riverside hotel followed by a walk up the Drachenfels. The participants were Bill Rodgers, Shirley Williams, John Roper, then SDP Chief Whip, David Steel and myself. The SDP was in its first flush of heady opinion poll success, the subject of enormous interest among the conference participants and understandably rather pleased with itself. At the lunch there was white wine, pale spring sunshine and a lot of mutual teasing.

Somewhat to my surprise we managed to reach agreement in principle, without too much difficulty, that the attempt to break the mould should be concerted rather than competitive. I set down, there and then, on a paper table napkin in rather blurred handwriting, the three-point understanding which we had reached: broad agreement on principles; seat sharing rather than fighting each other, the details to be negotiated; and Joint Policy Commissions on major issues. On the way through the winding alleys of the town towards the hill after lunch I vividly recall Shirley saying to me ruefully that she supposed she would now have to support PR.

This event, and its consequences, were seen subsequently as an historic sell-out of the identity and independence of the new party by David Owen. To David Steel and myself they seemed common sense. To the other SDP participants I believed they seemed inevitable for two third parties in a political system with winner-takes-all voting.

Then, as part of the follow-up to that agreement, in constructing the broad agreement on principles I recall sitting with David Marquand in the refreshment room at King's Cross, in late May, drafting and redrafting amid the puddles of cold tea, the document which was to be called, at least officially, 'A Fresh Start for Britain'.

Another vignette, and I find it difficult to remember the date, is a recollection of walking the beautiful hills around Etrick Bridge with David Steel and his labrador, talking about the name we should put on this new combination and agreeing 'Alliance' was the best option, lending itself to an alternating prefix.

And subsequently telling Roy Jenkins at a rally at Central Hall that in the Croydon byelection Bill Pitt would be fighting as Liberal-SDP Alliance, and showing him stickers and leaflets. He gulped but took the 'bounce' with his usual aplomb. Jennifer Jenkins was forthright in her support.

Then there is the painful memory of negotiating the 1987 manifesto. Negotiated manifestos are not a good idea, whether intra-party or, as this was, between parties. They tend towards the lowest common denominator rather than the highest common factor. And whereas I am proud of my part in the 1992 and 1997 Liberal Democrat manifestos, I cannot say the same of the last Alliance platform. It was bland and uninspiring.

The miracle is that we succeeded in getting agreement on anything at all. The problem was not with Ian Wrigglesworth and myself, heading our respective teams, nor with Wendy Buckley and Peter Knowlson conscientiously servicing our labours. It was rather with Michael Meadowcroft and Sue Slipman facing each other across the table – for whom most issues were issues of principle and for whom differences of emphasis were unbridgeable chasms. I was not surprised that, whereas most of us involved ended up in the same party, Michael and Sue decided to follow their respective lonely paths.

Then, who of those involved would not recall, generally with a feeling of furious sorrow, the events surrounding the Joint Defence Commission. John Edmonds, an emollient and knowledgeable chairman had laboured hard over a compromise with a certain amount of behind-the-scenes diplomacy between the

equally knowledgeable John Roper and myself, less expert but willing.

It was clear that he had succeeded when Bill Rodgers, with his own record of opposition to unilateralism in the Labour Party, gave his support to the report. We all thought we had built a bridge across which people with different perspectives in the Alliance could move freely and without embarrassment.

We had all reckoned without the Doctor. Undoubtedly provoked by David Steel, in the shape of a pre-emptive briefing on publication of the report, his fellow leader went ballistic. Every hawkish instinct came together with his barely concealed contempt for lily-livered Liberals and his deep distrust of his collaborationist fellow leaders.

Eastbourne was not happy. I remember making a very poor speech myself, in good company it must be said, and leaving there miserably aware that the best of the Alliance was behind us. 'Never again glad confident morning.' I went directly to the British-American Project conference in Philadelphia and,

when someone asked me how the Assembly had gone, said that I was thinking of applying for political asylum.

Then, as for so many other Liberals and Social Democrats, there are the memories of the byelections. Croydon, and the recollection of breakfast daily with Bill Pitt, the table a mass of newspapers and Weetabix, preparing the rigours of the morning press conference which I chaired.

Or Roy Jenkins turning a narrow defeat in Warrington into a moral victory and then converting that into the real thing at Hillhead. I remember one lady in Kelvinside, of overpowering refinement herself, telling me that although she was a lifelong Tory she would be voting for Roy because he was such a gentleman.

Then minding Shirley for a day in Crosby and realising for myself that beneath the charm and wide-ranging policy interest, there lay an incomparable election fighting machine of great stamina and toughness of mind, something

which was in my mind when we put together the team for the 1997 general election.

The final vignette is of being taken out to lunch by Mike Thomas, David Owen's most loyal henchman – older readers will remember Roy Jenkins' description of him as 'the pint-sized Pavarotti' – in early 1982.

I was slightly surprised by the invitation because we were hardly soulmates. He made me a threat I could not refuse. I should desist from the so-called convergence strategy, of letting the two parties evolve towards closer union, putting no obstacle in the way of this, or something terrible would happen.

– 'What?'

– 'Good people like David Owen and myself will simply leave politics.' We didn't – and they did.

*Lord Holme of Cheltenham CBE was President of the Liberal Party 1980–81 and candidate for Cheltenham in 1983 and '87. Made a life peer in 1990, he was election manifesto coordinator in 1992 and election campaign director in 1997.*

## Research in Progress

*This column aims to assist research projects in progress. If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other helpful information – or if you know anyone who can – please pass on details to them. If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to the Editor at the address on page 2.*

### **The party agent and English electoral culture,**

**c.1880 – c.1906.** The development of political agency as a profession, the role of the election agent in managing election campaigns during this period, and the changing nature of elections, as increased use was made of the press and the platform. *Kathryn Rix, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 2BU; awr@bcs.org.uk*

### **Liberal defections to the Conservative Party,**

**c.1906–1935.** *Nick Cott, 24, Balmoral Terrace, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1YH; N.M.Cott@newcastle.ac.uk*

**The Liberal Party 1945–56.** Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. *Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.*

### **The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88.**

Book and articles; of particular interest is the 1920s and '30s; and also the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. *Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.*

### **The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64;**

the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. *Mark Egan, First Floor Flat, 16 Oldfields Circus, Northolt, Middlesex UB5 4RR.*

### **The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79.**

Individual constituency papers from this period, and contact with individuals who were members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*

# The Alliance: Two-Party Cooperation in Practice

How did Liberals and Social Democrats cope with the mechanics of alliance? *Dick Newby* examines the record.

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The Alliance was a unique experiment. It had two distinguishing features which are rare in British politics and, in combination, unparalleled.

The first was that one of the partners, the SDP, was a new party. Born out of desperation by pro-European social democrats in the Labour Party, it tapped a vein of enthusiasm for a new style of non-confrontational politics which led tens of thousands of political neophytes – the so-called ‘political virgins’ – to join a political party and, in many cases, devote a huge amount of effort to active politics. To establish and maintain a new party in Britain is dauntingly difficult. Even if you can generate an initial surge of enthusiasm and members, to maintain momentum under the first-past-the-post electoral system is incredibly hard. As the Green Party found when it obtained 15% of the vote but no seats in the 1989 European Parliamentary elections, members and activists drain away in the absence of tangible electoral success.

In order to give itself a chance in electoral terms, the SDP, from the date of its launch, announced that it would cooperate with the Liberal Party, not least in sharing out the Parliamentary seats between the parties. As Bill Rodgers explains elsewhere in this issue, his statement at the SDP’s launch press conference that the SDP would seek to fight half the Parliamentary seats, leaving the Liberals to fight the other half, was a spur-of-the-moment decision, rather than the result of careful strategic thought. This decision, more than any other single act, however, set the framework in which the two parties would work. For, as soon as voters had been denied the opportunity to vote for the SDP in over 300 seats, SDP leaders had to be able to say that a vote for a Liberal candidate in those seats was equivalent to a vote for the SDP. This required a common manifesto, a single campaign both nationally and in

individual seats and a single leadership team.

Of all these requirements, arguably the most problematic was how to divide up the Parliamentary seats in the first place. In the spring of 1981, when the SDP was in its infancy, it did not have a national constituency organisation. The Liberal Party, by comparison, had at least some activists in the large majority of seats, and even if few in number, they understandably often had a very strong attachment to the idea that a Liberal representative should fight the seat. By the summer of 1981, they also had 230 candidates in place.

The agreement on how the seats would be allocated was reached in October 1981 after six months of sometimes fraught discussion. It stipulated that there should be rough parity in the number of seats fought by each party; that in any one region, the ratio of seats fought by the parties should not be greater than 3:2; and that seats should not be ‘clustered’. A six-strong National Negotiating Team was established from each Party, and the two teams were to meet in a Joint Negotiating Group (JNG). My role was to act as the SDP official responsible for servicing this Group and for managing the progress of the negotiating process.

The way in which the two parties tackled the negotiations reflected – to SDP eyes at least – a fundamental difference of approach on how to run a political party. We undertook an extensive amount of research, coordinated by US polling expert Sarah Horack, and with academic input from Ivor Crewe, on the winnability of each seat. Based on this work, we ranked seats in each sub-regional negotiating unit and provided our national team members with a detailed negotiating brief. Local members of the negotiating team were expected to take a lead from the national team member, who was either an MP or a member of the Steering Committee. On the Liberal side there had been considerable resistance to there

being any national input at all and their national negotiators were often little more than observers. Local whim often appeared to matter more than objective judgement.

The first negotiating meeting was held in Maidstone on 12 December 1981, two months after the negotiating framework had been agreed. The SDP negotiator was John Horam (now Conservative MP for Orpington). I accompanied him. The Liberal national negotiator was Hugh Jones, the Party's Secretary-General. The day was frosty. So was the meeting. The Liberals were extremely reluctant to cede any seat where they had any significant degree of organisation. Armed with our ranking list, we demanded what we believed to be a fair mixture of good and bad seats. The meeting broke up with little achieved. A similar pattern was followed in the handful of other meetings held before Christmas.

It took an outburst from Bill Rodgers over the New Year, suspending the talks until a more constructive attitude prevailed, to inject real momentum into the negotiating process. As the year progressed, my priority became how to ensure that rough parity of outcome was achieved. Agreement was reached in the JNG that the Liberals could retain their top 50 ('golden') seats and that the SDP would then have two-thirds of the next 150 ('silver') seats. Reaching this outcome was tricky, given the number of regional negotiations which were taking place. I regularly trudged up to Hugh Jones' dusty lair in the Liberal Party headquarters (then part of the National Liberal Club) for a glass of wine, a dry biscuit and careful consideration of the silver seat list (which he was not allowed to admit to his party ever existed). All but 50 seats were allocated by August 1982 and, as the September conferences approached, Roy Jenkins and David Steel horse-traded the rest.

The gold-and-silver approach was vindicated by the 1983 election results. They showed that if the Alliance had won 100 or more seats (our working assumption during 1981–

82), there would have been parity between the parties. As we only won 26 seats between us, it was hardly surprising that the Liberals had the majority (17 to the SDP's 6).

Despite the success of the pre-'83 seats negotiations, it was clear that such a national approach would not be acceptable again. Local Liberal associations had hated it from the start and their national leadership had found it irritating and embarrassing to have to soothe the annoyance of associations and candi-

By mid-1985, David Owen had adopted a rather more pragmatic view. After returning from Colchester where I had been to explain why they couldn't have joint selection, I explained to him in frustration that we would win the nomination in any event. 'Let them have joint selection then' was his reply.

The process still required delicate negotiations to complete and Andy Ellis (now Liberal Secretary-General) and I were sent to several places to arbitrate. One particularly diffi-

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Having seen the final edit of the broadcast, John Harris returned to Cowley Street claiming that it would be 'either a triumph or a disaster'. He was right.

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dates in seats which were to be fought by the SDP. On the SDP side there was also a recognition that a national deal was politically unachievable. Agreeing to devolve negotiations to area party level was relatively easy for the SDP. The problem which quickly arose, and bedevilled the whole of the process, was the request from many SDP constituencies to have joint selection of candidates by members of both parties living in the seat. There were two variants of this option: joint 'closed' selection where a shortlist was drawn from members of one party; and joint 'open' selection, where there was a shortlist drawn from members of both parties. David Owen, now SDP leader, saw both these devices – but particularly joint open selection – as a threat to the selection of Owenite candidates, and feared that SDP applicants would temper their views to gain Liberal support. This view was not assuaged when Parry Mitchell – a textbook Owenite – won one of the first joint open selections in Salisbury, and I was given the unenviable task of travelling the length and breadth of the country explaining to local parties which wanted joint selection that they could not have it.

cult area was Kirklees, and Andy and I spent a tedious evening hearing from representatives of the two parties why they should both fight Dewsbury. As we left the splendours of Dewsbury's Victorian town hall to return to the station, we walked across the open market. One stall caught my eye. 'Eat tripe, don't talk it!' it proclaimed. Unfortunately this principle was not enforced during the negotiations.

Following the acceptance of a package of 25 joint open selections by the National Committee in July 1985, the seats allocation was soon completed. Although some 78 seats had changed hands between the two elections, the SDP fought 306 seats in 1987, only five fewer than in 1983.

The two rounds of seat allocation were unprecedented in British politics. In one sense the process was a great success. The seats were allocated on a broadly equal basis and the deal held across the country. (The two parties only fought each other in three seats in 1983, where local Liberal associations ignored the national seats deal.) The unintended consequence of the process, and one which was anathema to the Owenites, was that, by the end, increasing numbers of activists were

questioning the need, and in some cases the viability, of the two parties maintaining their separate existence. There were a number of reasons for this, not least the experience of fighting elections jointly on the ground. But the huge amount of additional time spent in negotiating on seat allocation and, in the case of many SDP local parties, the need to have an argument with the national party about joint selection, led many activists to see merger as the logical option. From my national standpoint, the thought of having to organise a third round of seat negotiations after 1987 was deeply depressing.

Just as the experience of the seat negotiations led local activists and national figures to question the viability of a continuing two-party alliance after 1987, broadly similar considerations applied in three other areas with a large national input, namely Parliamentary byelections, general election campaigning and policy formulation.

Parliamentary byelections were the oxygen of the Alliance, breathing new vigour and support into third-party politics even in times of national doldrums. From Warrington in 1981 to Greenwich in 1987, SDP byelection organisation had benefited greatly from Liberal help. In Warrington – the first ever SDP byelection – Liverpool Liberals dra-gooned by Trevor ('the vote') Jones enthusiastically supported Roy Jenkins. By the time of Greenwich, six years later, senior Liberal campaigners such as Chris Rennard were fully integrated into SDP campaign teams. Under the leadership of Alec McGivan, the SDP had introduced innovations into byelection campaigns, not least the use of high-volume target mail shots. This had gained Liberal respect to the extent that large numbers of Liberal activists were prepared to travel and help as byelection foot soldiers. Equally, SDP politicians, staff and activists regarded it as axiomatic that they would visit Liberal byelections. Both parties fairly quickly realised that they both benefited equally from byelection success, or, as in Darlington, suffered equally

from failure.

General election campaigning activity was arguably the least successful area of Alliance cooperation. Although joint press conferences were held and joint party election broadcasts were produced, the national campaigns of 1983 and 1987, for different reasons, were unhappy affairs. In 1983, the greater popularity of David Steel compared to Roy Jenkins led to the farce of the Ettrick Bridge summit at which Jenkins was effectively replaced by Steel as leader of the campaign only days before polling day.

In 1987, Owen and Steel dis-trusted both their professional party staff, and each other, to such an extent that they excluded staff from election planning and ran virtually independent campaigns. It was a recipe for confusion and produced predictably confused results. Nowhere was this lack of a coherent structure demonstrated more clearly than in the area of party election broadcasts. Neither leader would relinquish personal control of the broadcasts to staff and so, when the campaign began, virtually no work had been done on them. John Pardoe and John Harris, joint chairs of the day-to-day campaign committee, were given responsibility at the last minute, leading to the production of the famous 'rabbit' broadcast which featured Rosie Barnes and her family's pet. Having seen the final edit of the broadcast, John Harris returned to Cowley Street claiming that it would be 'either a triumph or a disaster'. He was right. Unfortunately it was not a triumph. All the campaign professionals involved with the 1987 election were convinced that such amateurism was crazy. It helped fuel their support for merger.

Policy was an area both of great success and of the Alliance's greatest presentational disaster. The Limehouse Declaration and other early SDP policy statements caused no great Liberal alarm, and Shirley Williams and David Steel were able to launch a 'A Fresh Start for Britain' document in the spring of 1981 with the minimum of fuss. Further joint statements were produced and

joint commissions established, notably the Fisher Commission on constitutional reform, which again were able to agree on both the framework and detail of Alliance policy. No issues of unacceptable policy difference emerged and, during the 1983 election, differences within the Alliance had much more to do with personality than policy.

The disaster occurred on defence policy. A joint commission produced a report in June 1986 which said Britain should retain its independent deterrent and decide on a replacement (or not) only when Polaris was coming to the end of its natural life 10–15 years later. David Owen vehemently rejected this suggestion, saying that it was 'the sort of fudging and muddging' he had left the Labour Party to avoid. In response, and amid scenes of confusion, the Liberal Assembly at its Eastbourne in September 1986 passed an anti-Alliance, unilateralist motion. Although Steel and Owen patched up their relations, the Eastbourne vote was a godsend to the Alliance's opponents and demonstrated an inherent flaw in the Alliance. Nobody doubted that there was a large majority of members of the two parties combined who opposed unilateralism. The nature of the parties' relationship and the segregation of their decision-making meant that this majority had no outlet through which to express itself.

Six years after the Alliance was formed, the experience of negotiating the division of Parliamentary seats, fighting byelections and national elections and forming joint policy had led me to the firm conclusion that an independent SDP was neither politically necessary or organisationally viable. Nothing that has happened in the first decade of the life of the Liberal Democrats has shaken that view.

*Dick (now Lord) Newby joined the SDP as Secretary to the Parliamentary Committee in April 1981. From October 1981 until Easter 1987 when the Party merged with the Liberal Party, he was the Party's National Secretary. He now speaks in the Lords on Treasury issues.*



# The Alliance: Parties and Leaders

How successful was the Alliance? Was merger the right road to follow?  
*Michael Meadowcroft* puts the case against.

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It is still difficult to take a sufficiently dispassionate personal view of the seven-year period from the formation of the SDP to the two parties' final votes to merge. I still have very emotional feelings on how much better it could have been, on how badly the Liberal Party *qua* party was treated, particularly in the early days, on whether or not, in retrospect, it would have been better – or even possible – to reject the Alliance root and branch, on the tactical naïvete of David Steel, on the eventual supineness of almost all the Liberal Party's negotiating team, and on whether the final settlement really did represent a compromise too far.<sup>1</sup>

If one had to deal with developments since merger, I suspect that the difficulty of being less than dispassionate would be still more evident. Suffice to say that an absence of comment does not indicate a weakening of resolve!<sup>2</sup>

In exploring these questions I am conscious of the excellence of Tony Greaves' and Rachel Pitchford's account of the merger negotiations.<sup>3</sup> The very few quibbles that I have with their text will become apparent in due course. Also, I have never been able to hide from, nor disavow, current views – even if I wished to – as I have always found it difficult to resist invitations to write for any journal or publisher aware of how easy it is to flatter me.<sup>4</sup> Also I have always had a quaint belief in the need for intellectual rigour and philosophic consistency in politics, without which it is invariably difficult to accommodate the necessary tactical compromises. As a consequence there are numerous texts extant which put on the record what I felt vital *at the time*. To be sure, there are weasel words therein; in politics one can never wholly shrink from the necessity to avoid every possible scintilla of

political and electoral damage. On occasion one relied – usually rewarded – on one's target audience reading between the lines.

The title of this essay emanates from my reading of the history of the period. The relationship between the two parties and their leaders was, to my mind, the most influential factor in the way that the key events unfolded. I focus on the political aspects of the Liberal leader, rather than his personality. I have always found David Steel personable and easy to get on with. Unusually for a politician, he does not appear to harbour grudges. He also has a good sense of humour and likes jazz – what more could one ask!<sup>5</sup> Alas, his relationship with the Liberal Party was always one-sided and, I believe, his political judgement was highly flawed. It is clear from his autobiography that Steel revelled in being somehow above the party debate.<sup>6</sup>

## The Grimond legacy

1998 marks my fortieth year as a member of the Liberal Party, and to a larger extent than is often realised, one's perception of the potential and the frustration of the Alliance years is coloured by one's experience of previous opportunities and failures. The party of the Grimond years was by no means 'Left-Libertarian' as Jo was. To a certain extent the increase in support, and the byelection victories, in the 1958–63 period rode on a social democratic style, and an anti-Conservative appeal, in places where Labour could not hope to win. In a curious reversal of the Steel years, the then leader was, at least in terms of philosophy and policy, more liberal than the party.<sup>7</sup> Why else would the then Young Liberals have felt the need to launch its excellent *New Orbits* series of pamphlets?<sup>8</sup> The contrast with 1981–88 is salutary.

For me, at the time at party HQ as Local Government Officer, the 1963 local elections

were a great shock. The party had romped home in council after council in May 1962 on the coat tails of the March Orpington byelection, winning seats in town after town, often with little or no organisation. In March 1963 the immense opportunity of a possible gain from Labour in Colne Valley presented itself and was, I believe, tactically muffed. Even

tween leader and party,<sup>14</sup> the Young Liberals had continued their Liberal odyssey into their 'Red Guard' period, and were duly taken on publicly for their pains, with debilitating effects.

The relevance of this period to the Alliance years is threefold. First, the struggle to maintain the *party's* liberal identity vis-à-vis its leader began

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## The failure of David Steel to extract sufficient political and electoral benefits from the Pact gave clear and adequate notice that he was not going to be the tough leader determined to protect his party in crucial negotiations.

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without such a timely byelection boost we expected to repeat the 1962 successes. With a number of honourable exceptions we dropped back in place after place. The palpable disappointment was followed by a number of defections of sitting councillors<sup>9</sup> and it was certainly clear to me that if Liberal officers and candidates did not possess at least some understanding of liberal philosophy they were liable to be wafted about by every passing political breeze. Again, the comparison with the 1981–88 period is, I believe, significant.

Grimond was so personally attractive and charismatic<sup>10</sup> that, even though he was invariably plain speaking, few members of the public, let alone many members of the party, looked beyond the sound of what he was saying to the words themselves. In contrast, the Thorpe years were politically and organisationally horrendous, if at times electorally successful. Labour's deep unpopularity from 1968 and Heath's stolid leadership, particularly in Opposition, provided an unrivalled opportunity<sup>11,12</sup> which was simply dissipated and finally sunk in the politically catastrophic entrails of the Thorpe trial.<sup>13</sup> And whereas the party was mired in the struggle to present a semblance of unity be-

with Jeremy Thorpe, not with David Steel, and was a direct consequence of the lessons learned in the Grimond era. Second, the contrast between the response within the party to the Thorpe-Heath talks in February 1974<sup>16</sup> and the Steel-Callaghan pact of 1977<sup>17</sup> is revealing. During the '70s, I was leader of the Leeds City Council Liberal Group and a national party officer. When Jeremy Thorpe went to Downing Street immediately after the February 1974 election, my telephone, along with other regional and national colleagues', was permanently occupied with irate and worried Liberals appalled at what deal might be being contemplated. In 1977, my recollection is that I had three mildly concerned calls over the Pact. It would have been impossible to carry the party into a coalition with the Conservatives in 1974, whatever the terms, but, despite perfectly justified fears as to its possible effect on the party, the Lib-Lab Pact of 1977–78 was generally accepted as being a justified risk. Third, the failure of David Steel to extract sufficient political and electoral benefits from the Pact gave clear and adequate notice that he was not going to be the tough leader determined to protect his party in crucial negotiations.<sup>18</sup>

## Leader versus party

Those Liberals who committed themselves to involvement in the party nationally – often at considerable domestic, financial and electoral cost – were not, with very few exceptions, wild revolutionaries determined to embarrass the leadership at every opportunity.<sup>19</sup> The much-maligned Liberal Party Council, for instance, spent far too much of its time agonising over how to temper its policy leanings towards the 'leadership's' position where the latter was known or assumed,<sup>20</sup> or how to present palpably different strategy decisions as being an example of party unity. Of course, from time to time, sometimes when goaded by the leader's – and, by and large, the whole Parliamentary Party's – neglect or criticism, the Party Council went to the barricades but, in general, conscious of the retribution that the electorate tends to wreak on party disunity, the party was remarkably well behaved – even when provoked. I am absolutely convinced that had 'the leadership' chosen to work *with* the Party Council (and to a less public degree, the Party Executive), as some MPs did, including John Pardoe and, from time to time, David Penhaligon, rather than treating those who were, after all, Liberal colleagues with barely concealed contempt, the gains in mutual trust and recognition would have had immense benefits during the traumatic Alliance years. As examples of what would have been possible, one only has to look at the civilised debates and the acceptance of party consensus at the special assemblies called to debate specific crucial strategic issues.<sup>21</sup>

## Byelection candidates

To take two key examples of the frustration and, indeed, the lack of understanding of basic courtesy, one only has to examine the question of the Alliance candidatures for the Croydon North-West and Crosby byelections.<sup>22</sup> An astute Liberal Party

leader, faced with the Croydon opportunity, and having a perfectly reasonable desire to secure the election of an attractive SDP luminary, would have immediately consulted the obvious key people – the Croydon NW Liberal Association candidate and officers,<sup>23</sup> the party's national officers, and *significant* 'trouble makers' – and attempted to sort out the minimum terms for a 'deal': the next vacancy guaranteed for a Liberal, minor concessions on seat negotiations generally, something vague on policy etc.

Instead, faced with Steel bullying – from, as usual, a great distance – the Liberal Party Council at Abingdon (this rather curious location is etched in my memory) responded by passing enthusiastically a motion supporting William Pitt (the Defector). I recall seeing David Steel in his bijou House of Commons office early the following week and asking him what he now intended to do. He replied, extremely churlishly, 'I suppose I'll have to bow to democracy'!

Not long afterwards the SDP embarked upon a pro-British Rail campaign. It wasn't intended as such – indeed, it rather backfired when BR failed to deliver the conference delegates on time at, I think, Great Yarmouth (and why not!) – but was planned as a typical SDP mould-breaking gimmick of a 'rolling' conference at three locations, as opposed to the infinitely more boring but at least achievable and even sustainable practice of assembling at one resort – usually beginning with the letter 'B'.<sup>24</sup> The SDP at least recognised the latter imperative by holding one-third of its Conference en route at Bradford, which I duly attended.<sup>25</sup> Whilst in the bar at the St George's Hall, ascertaining, as one does on such occasions, the real facts of the state of play of the SDP, I was astounded to hear, over the PA system, Shirley Williams unilaterally announcing her candidature for the Crosby byelection. The existing and properly-selected prospective Liberal candidate for Crosby – whom I had personally recruited to the party 20

years early – was also present at Bradford. We were both outraged. Suffice to say that Anthony Hill generously accepted and supported Shirley Williams at the byelection. However, I am inclined to think that had the situation been handled differently, and given the different locations and personalities, one just might still today have Shirley Williams and Anthony Hill as MPs for Croydon NW and Crosby respectively.

## Labour hegemony

Like, I imagine, most Liberals during the early 1980s, I observed the suicidal tendency of the Labour Party in action with a mixture of disbelief, hilarity and sheer unadulterated joy. I vividly recall driving along the M5 – to or from what occasion I cannot now recall, but it was virtually bound to have been a Liberal meeting<sup>26</sup> – as the news came through of the special Labour Conference's totally bizarre decision on the arithmetic for its electoral college to elect its leader and deputy leader.<sup>27</sup> Had I not been bombing along a motorway I would have done a dance of joy, as it was I confined myself to a minor whoop. Perhaps naïvely, I had at that time no premonition of the dangers lurking ahead for the Liberal Party, even though there had been a number of letters, and even introductory articles, in the serious press, and in *The Guardian*, for the eventual SDP by its soon-to-be luminaries. I saw it as an unrivalled opportunity to undermine a hegemonic, politically corrupt and illiberal Labour Party. Those who shared this view, and who succeeded against the odds to win seats in the big cities and other Labour fiefdoms, not only believed theoretically in the vital necessity to defeat Labour electorally, but actually set about doing it. It was always a strange paradox to find ourselves castigated as being political theoreticians, uninterested in power, when we were actually winning seats. Winning, moreover, without visible support from the party centrally who seemed

to be curiously antipathetic to fighting Labour.<sup>28</sup>

There certainly was at the time a big difference between those Liberals – the majority of the party – who had no direct personal experience of Labour in local government control, and those, such as the party in Leeds, who suffered and struggled against sophisticated political chicanery and the calculating and cynical – and legal – abuse of public funds to maintain Labour in office.<sup>29</sup> The former saw only the pleasant, progressive but mildly erroneous Labour Party, whereas the relatively few Liberals winning seats from Labour knew a very different political animal. Inevitably this dichotomy of party priorities coloured the debates and negotiations with the SDP in the succeeding years.<sup>30</sup>

## The inexorable spiral

'Our' failure – my failure – to politicise the Liberal Party, and our error of taking for granted the presumed existence of an inherent radicalism in the party at large, were salutarily brought home to us at the Llandudno Liberal Assembly of 1981 – the Alliance Assembly. Those of us who sought to argue for a philosophical position vis-à-vis the SDP, and for constitutional niceties, such as the – minor? – point that the SDP was not at that time actually constituted, were comprehensively swamped by a wave of enthusiasm for some vague but attractive emotional spasm, epitomised by the pre-Assembly rally with Shirley Williams, Roy Jenkins, Jo Grimond, David Steel, Gordon Lishman and – a valiant but downbeat – Tony Greaves. Having been Assembly Chair for five years, and therefore well aware that on setpiece occasions heart always wins over head, I suppose I knew that the 'promote Liberalism, safeguard the party, vigilance, watchfulness and all that' case was doomed; nevertheless, having opted for the tactical compromise of an amendment to delay assent to the Alliance (nothing more could conceivably have been salvaged from the wreck-

age at that point), the vote on it was at least respectable. However, one of the great myths of that Assembly is the subsequent final vote on the pro-Alliance motion itself. From the Chair, Gruff Evans simply counted the 112 delegates against the motion, subtracted that figure from the total number of registered delegates and announced that as the result. The votes for were never counted and, consequently, the substantial number of abstainers – either by conviction or, like me, out of sheer gloom, were unknown.

The problem of party ‘placement’ in the political spectrum, and its consequential imperative in seat allocation etc., lay some way ahead and, at the time of the formation of the SDP, I felt genuinely excited by the evident potential for a cataclysmic transformation of the political – and electoral – structure. Like, I suppose, others, I smiled wryly at the launch of the new party and at its obsession with PR styles and with rejecting all received ‘truths’, but was prepared to give it the benefit of the doubt and to be proved wrong.

In line with the previous, and dif-

ficult to break, addiction to accepting commissions to write, I followed my *Liberalism for a New Decade*<sup>31</sup> with a booklet for Liberator, *Social Democracy – Barrier or Bridge*.<sup>32</sup> This delved into the background to social democracy, and analysed the state of play between the Liberal Party and the SDP. It stated that ‘[t]he SDP is at one and the same time the greatest opportunity and the greatest danger to Liberalism for thirty years.’<sup>33</sup> This was intended as a contribution to what one presumed would be an ongoing debate<sup>34</sup> on the fluid and evolving relationship, but its reception was altogether different. Edward Lyons QC, then Labour turned SDP MP for Bradford West – and with his wife, Barbara, extremely good company, then and now – became almost incoherent during a joint radio interview in Leeds at my suggestion in the booklet that, as things then stood organisationally with the two parties, the Liberals should fight at least 500 seats and the SDP some of the rest. Provocative this clearly was, but the rebuttal, generally, lacked confidence and content. Alas, far too many of the concerns of *Barrier or*

*Bridge* proved to be accurate.

No ‘working’ politician with any nous believes that leaders shouldn’t lead, or that there are never occasions when leaders cannot immediately share with their party colleagues all the delicate nuances of possible developments,<sup>35</sup> but the willing acceptance of such reality requires, first, confidence in the leader’s capability to deliver, and, second, a visible willingness to work to ensure that the led follow the leader. On both counts David Owen succeeded and David Steel failed.<sup>36</sup> An assessment of the style and achievement of the two men during the crucial period of the Alliance’s life turns on its head the received truth of the responsibility for the Alliance’s ultimate disappointment. This is not an assessment of the policies and election tactics pursued by them – for instance Owen’s error during the 1987 general election of admitting a preference for working with the Conservatives was a significant factor in losing Leeds West – but rather a judgement on the way each handled his party. The problem of the Alliance was not, as is commonly thought, the problem of David Owen but rather the problem of David Steel. One knew where one was with Owen – for better or for worse – but one was never sure of what Steel would come out with next – whatever had been agreed in his presence at the party meeting in advance.

## SDP triumphalism

The SDP was an ‘all or nothing’ break for fame and power. Inevitably it ended up as nothing. There are those who argue that it could have been all. Maybe there was an outside chance but I doubt it. There was a problem from day one with the SDP’s parliamentary recruits, and, in particular the SDP leadership – with the exception of Roy Jenkins – initially generally treating Liberals in rather the same way as Steel did: as dedicated espousers of worthy causes, but with no commitment to the required discipline for gaining

The first contest: Steel and Jenkins before the ‘83 election.



power. To some extent this was a consequence of being elected as Labour MPs 'on the ticket'<sup>37</sup> and being initially wholly unaware of the immense problem of achieving election as a third party.<sup>38</sup> SDP MPs, faced with tough Liberals, for whom political survival was a daily struggle, came to revise their opinions, but too late to revise the strategy for the

ing a new mandate. The moral authority of SDP MPs elected as such would have given them considerably greater stature in the House, rather than having permanently to counter the argument that they had been elected on a different ticket. Such judgement is, of course, subjective, but frankly, in the circumstances, it was well worth the risk. I have to

were concluded without much difficulty, but others had to be reconvened time after time, using up time which could more valuably have been spent actually winning the seats in question.

One ought not to disparage nor minimise the many cases and occasions when Liberal and SDP colleagues worked together effectively and efficiently but there was often a very different attitude to politics and political activity. Paradoxically, it was often the reverse of the general perception of which of the two parties was playing at politics and which was serious about winning. Liberals tended to despise the SDP's predilection for interminable meetings on detailed policy formation and its affection for social gatherings – preferably with big names – whilst the SDP tended to deride the Liberals' incessant community-politics activism. Such differences tended to arise from the SDP view that victory would come via the 'Grand Slam' whereas the Liberals believed in the necessity of the incremental long haul.

In the end, although the trauma of getting there left a number of scars, it was surprising in the circumstances that only three seats in the 1983 general election were contested by both SDP and Liberals.<sup>42</sup>

## Owen's dominance

I learned a lot from David Owen's chairmanship of meetings. The joint meetings he chaired did not only come to a conclusion on some policy point or on some item on the following week's parliamentary order paper; when agreement had been reached, Owen would then ask, 'OK – now what are the politics of this?' There would then ensue a short discussion on *how* one dealt with the decision made and what were the *tactical* implications of it. The need to relate policy and parliamentary decisions to the current political agenda would certainly not have been dealt with in so disciplined a way in a purely Liberal context.<sup>43</sup>

I had the adjacent office to David

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## 'The problem with the Liberal Party', said Owen, 'is that you have a leader who isn't interested in policy'.

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longer haul. A less arrogant and patronising attitude, and, for instance, a seat allocation strategy which concentrated less on an equality of seats fought and more on who was most likely to win each seat, might conceivably have not only produced more 'Alliance' victories but would arguably also have entrenched the SDP on the scene far better for the long haul.

Perhaps it was emotionally impossible for the then SDP to have swallowed a numerically 'junior' role but the consequences of not doing so are numerically apparent today. Paradoxically, the one tactic that could have given the SDP electoral and political dominance over the Liberals, and, indeed, could have given them phenomenal impetus, was the one they backed away from – the defectors resigning their seats and fighting byelections.<sup>39</sup> The argument was, of course, finely balanced. The parliamentary custom and practice of the party holding the seat choosing the timing of the byelection – not to mention the cost of so many campaigns – would, for instance, probably have denied the SDP a significant tactical advantage. However, in the heady electoral atmosphere of the SDP's early days, and with an extended stream of parliamentary recruits, my firm belief is that the electorate would have reacted positively to the highly principled action of each individual seek-

confess, as one who soon came to believe in the need to protect and preserve the Liberal Party's base and its position from the SDP marauders, aided and abetted by the Liberal leader, I was mightily relieved that they didn't choose the byelection route!

As it was, the Alliance soon became a bureaucratic nightmare. It was difficult enough for Liberal council groups to have to accept SDP members who were often amongst the Labour, and occasionally Conservative<sup>40</sup> members they had in the main felt least affinity with – though in the main they swallowed hard and got on with it – but we had to embark on an interminable round of joint committees, particularly to determine seat allocation. The bureaucracy involved was phenomenal! There were 'gold', 'silver' and 'bronze' seats, allocated to each category on the basis of their winnability, and each party had to have its due share of each. There was a national 'panel' of representatives who either led the team – usually on the SDP side,<sup>41</sup> the Liberals being happier to rely on leading local colleagues – or who 'observed' each negotiating meeting, and there was provision for an appeal mechanism in the event of deadlock! Some of these meetings, often where little was at stake in terms of winnable seats, or constituencies which had been nursed for many years by a Liberal,

Owen in the Norman Shaw North building on the Embankment,<sup>44</sup> and from time to time when we walked together across to the main building he would say, 'The problem with the Liberal Party is that you have a leader who isn't interested in policy'. This was palpably obvious, as the later fiasco over the infamous 'dead parrot' document demonstrated, but one could well have responded that the problem of the SDP is that it had a leader who was obsessed with the minutiae of policy. Not as desperate a fault, to be sure, but nonetheless a barrier to a healthy policy formation partnership between party and leader. One innocent analysis of SDP policy came from one of the splendid sign language interpreters who translated for both the Liberal Assembly and the SDP Conference. I went to the Salford SDP Conference and spotted one of these colleagues duly performing on the edge of the stage. When she descended I went round to greet her. 'Oh, Michael', she said spontaneously, 'I'm so glad to see you. I'm having awful trouble translating these speeches. There's no substance to them!'

As SDP leader Owen was also phenomenally alert to immediate press comment. He believed that it was essential to impress the media with his ability to know what was going on at all times and to be first with a comment. John Sargent of the BBC remarked to me once that the apogee of this came when, in April 1984, Owen 'phoned the BBC newsdesk with a comment on the shooting of WPC Fletcher in St James' Square, opposite the Libyan Embassy, *before* the newsdesk had heard of the shooting! Owen was also rather wryly proud of having spoken at one of LINK's 'Radical Conference's' at which, gauging his audience well, he gave just about his most left-wing address of the Alliance period – extracts from which were forever being quoted thereafter by Leighton Andrews.<sup>45</sup>

The Alliance nationally between 1981 to 1983 is less vivid to me than it should be, mainly because I withdrew from virtually every responsi-

bility outside the constituency in order to concentrate on winning Leeds West, though I did manage to write a fair bit to defend the Liberal Party whenever it was being maligned by its own leader, or misunderstood by the SDP – both of which occurred fairly often. Certainly in West Leeds at that time the SDP was no vote winner. General opinion, particularly in the six Liberal clubs there, was, first, that they should have stayed in the Labour Party and continued to fight their corner, and, second, that particularly as seen through Leeds' eyes, Liberals had been fighting these self-same people for years and could hardly embrace them now. The local party was virtually unanimous in deciding that tactically we should be 'Liberal' on the ballot paper 'without prefix or suffix'<sup>46</sup> and should not seek to depend on any Alliance-based assistance. We had no outside speakers and no outside money, but we *did* have the excellent Leighton Andrews and Jim Heppell (who should both have been fighting seats themselves but who weren't) who added a winning flair to all the solid fifteen-year local build-up.

## The 1983–87 Parliament

The early days of the new parliament were taken up with one of the most bizarre episodes of my time in the Liberal Party. Instead of concentrating on how we could build on the huge popular vote we had just won, the initial Parliamentary Party meetings were taken over by vitriolic attacks on Steel's leadership by Cyril Smith, supported by David Alton. Steel himself was clearly fed up with the whole business and it was left largely to David Penhaligon to try and restore calm. This led to Steel's so-called 'sabbatical', though in fact he actually resigned the leadership and had to be talked out of it over some days – often at long distance.<sup>47</sup> Astonishingly it was somehow kept out of the press.

I gathered from the response from

parliamentary colleagues when I arrived at the House that the Leeds West victory was unexpected. It has been suggested to me that it was also unwelcome to some, but I never had any sense of this from anyone. Stephen Ross – a splendid Liberal who always wore his heart on his sleeve – *did* say to me after a couple of years, 'When I heard you'd won Leeds, I thought, 'Oh, we're getting a troublemaker', but you're actually the ultimate loyalist!' The only response I could come up with was to ask how he thought it could be otherwise after my 25 years in the party.

Stephen Ross' comment came during my period as Assistant Liberal Whip. With the increase in Liberal members, and the heavy spokesperson duties each of us had to carry (apart from David Alton and Cyril Smith, who refused to take on any such responsibilities), Alan Beith felt that it would be useful to have two Assistant Whips. Archy Kirkwood and I were appointed, Archy particularly to look after Scottish interests. I was very happy to take this on. I regarded it as an opportunity to develop the vital relationship between the Parliamentary Party and the party in the country, which would be crucial to winning many more seats. I was more interested in being one of 230 than being one of 23 and the risk of spending more time at Westminster than was wise in terms of holding Leeds West seemed worth taking if, over the course of a full parliament, we could make the Liberal Party sufficiently attractive as to boost the *national* vote sufficiently. Also, and relevant to this article, I hoped to play a part in developing a healthy and mutually useful relationship between the Alliance parties, which were organised separately – and whipped separately – for most of the 1983–87 Parliament. In any case, contrary to some popular belief, I reckon that I am a 'natural' Whip! I believe that party solidarity is extremely important and that, for instance, council group discipline is also vital – and has to be worked at rather than simply imposed. Over my 13 years as council group leader

in Leeds we ran a very tight ship and it served us well in a tough political situation.

The two years as a Whip were hard going but not exceptionally difficult so far as the Alliance was concerned. There were rare occasions when the two parties agreed to promote different arguments and to vote in opposite lobbies but these were regarded as worthwhile examples of being two parties and sufficiently rare to be promoted as such without damage. John Cartwright was the remarkably well-organised SDP Chief Whip and the relationship between the two parties' Whips was as amicable and cooperative as one might expect faced with the joint pressures of maintaining a 'third party' presence in the face of a two-party system. The parliamentary parties met separately each Wednesday evening to discuss the following week's parliamentary order paper and then met jointly to compare notes, with the two leaders alternating in the chair.

The tasks of maximising the Liberal impact in the House, of writing and debating – such as with Tony Benn and with Ken Livingstone – of building the partnership with the party in the country,<sup>48</sup> and of finding the most acceptable *modus operandi* for operating the Alliance, coursed through the Whips' office for two years, and had to be carried on alongside coping with constituency casework and nursing West Leeds. Then, in July 1985, came one of David Steel's perennial obsessions with 'reshuffling' parliamentary responsibilities, mainly in order to remove Alan Beith from the Whips' Office.<sup>49</sup> I had had hardly any problems in working with Alan and would have been very happy to continue, but, if he was to be moved, then there was no secret that I would have been happy to have been promoted. There were those in the Parliamentary Party, including Paddy Ashdown and Archy Kirkwood, who pressed for it, but Steel eventually telephoned David Alton, who was at the time in the USA, to persuade him to take the job on! Alton went

from not being part of the team to being responsible for it. Clement Freud, as commendably straightforward as ever, told me that Steel had originally wanted to appoint me but 'the Welsh won't have it'!

## The 1985 reshuffle

I regard that particular Wednesday, in July 1985, as a disastrous day. The commitments to making a Liberal Party – and Alliance – impact nationally were, in theory, in parliamentary terms, less than half way through, but were being, as I saw it, seriously damaged by Steel's changes. Knowing how Steel operates – leadership by announcement – I realised that he would come to the Parliamentary Party meeting at 6pm that evening with a *fait accompli*. Early that afternoon, when Steel's changes were known, I saw Paddy Ashdown who offered to make 'representations' to Steel. I replied that this was, alas, no use. Unless he told Steel categorically that, in the circumstances, he would not take on the Trade and Industry spokespersonship – and thus putting the reshuffle back into the melting pot – it would all be done and dusted before the 6pm meeting.

– or allies.

We were clearly in for a bout of mindless activism, with overheated photocopiers, a deluge of House of Commons franked envelopes, and with whole forests being lined up for slaughter, rather than continuing to develop radical and soundly-based political and campaigning initiatives linking parliamentary and party campaigning.<sup>50</sup> Given the changes that were being made, which were bound to make it more difficult to win Leeds West, all I could do was to opt out of my then spokespersonships to try and spend enough time in Leeds to hold the seat. We had no-one full-time in Leeds. The local association slaved away devotedly, helped conscientiously and innovatively by my Parliamentary staff – from a distance – but the lack of someone able to pull the strings together day by day was a great handicap.<sup>51</sup> Eventually in 1986 the Rowntree Social Service Trust – bless 'em! – came up with enough funds to employ an agent but, alas, it was too little too late. Such detail is only worth mentioning because it illustrates the inherent lack of party and Alliance commitment to winning and holding seats which would otherwise be Labour.<sup>52</sup>

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**The Liberal Party was side-stepped by the Steel/Owen trick of appointing 'expert' commissions which were supposedly bipartisan but whose members were not even rubber-stamped by the party.**

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Paddy didn't believe me but kindly went to make his 'representations' anyway, particularly to state the obvious: that the Parliamentary Party should have the opportunity to discuss the proposals that evening. At 4.30pm the changes were announced to the press, and the meeting an hour and a half later, as ever, rather than having a public row with its leader, knuckled under. It was a well tried technique of the leader and, in a narrow sense, served him well, but it didn't make many friends

During the 1983–87 parliament we had a number of Liberal Parliamentary Party 'away days', for which I religiously prepared papers on tactics and strategy.<sup>53</sup> At this distance in time I don't recollect any of these sessions resulting in any effective collective action. The Parliamentary Party meetings became more and more Alliance-oriented – which was not necessarily a bad thing, though Owen was consistently disparaging of Ashdown, and Penhaligon regularly teased Owen. We had Alliance

spokesmanships and endeavoured to make the best of a difficult political situation. All the time, however, policy problems were simmering, without any effective party mechanisms for resolving them. The Liberal Party was side-stepped by the Steel/Owen trick of appointing 'expert' commissions which were supposedly bipartisan but whose members were not even rubber-stamped by the party. The problem with this was that there was consequently no party accountability for these 'Commissions' findings and they had to be bludgeoned through the Party Assembly. We, the Alliance – me being the Whip in charge<sup>54</sup> – nearly came unstuck over the Northern Ireland motion at the 1984 Bournemouth Assembly and the lesson simply wasn't learnt.

## Defence

Then came the biggie: defence. This one had run and run. The Alliance Defence Commission beavered away with commendable conscientiousness. Bill Rodgers was, as ever, sensible and undogmatic. Laura Grimond organised a number of valuable consultations and those of us with views on the subject were much involved. But Owen was, perfectly legitimately, a hawk on the issue and would not countenance a report which gave the impression of

weakness. Just before the report was due out, David Steel made an unfortunate lobby lunch comment which appeared to divulge the contents on the key issue of a non-nuclear Britain. Owen was furious and used his SDP conference to go over the top. The result was that the unfortunate Commission Chairman, John Edmonds, was forced to amend his report in a last-minute attempt to find a new consensus. The result was unimpressive. As a rescue attempt Steel and Owen embarked on a round of European defence consultations out of which emerged their Euro-bomb option. As a policy it was unsustainable, and even the usual refuge of calling frantically for unity and for backing the leader(s) at the subsequent Liberal assembly could not hide the threadbare case.

There is a useful analysis of the Eastbourne 1986 debate in *Radical Quarterly*<sup>55</sup> and, therefore, there are only a few extra items of importance to relate here. First, the booklet *Across the Divide*,<sup>56</sup> which was produced by a number of Liberals at the time was attacked for being deliberately intended as an 'alternative' defence commission. Why this should have been necessarily a heinous political sin is debatable, but it was certainly nothing of the kind. It gained a notoriety way beyond its then significance. Essentially it was a Young Liberal initiative. A small group of them

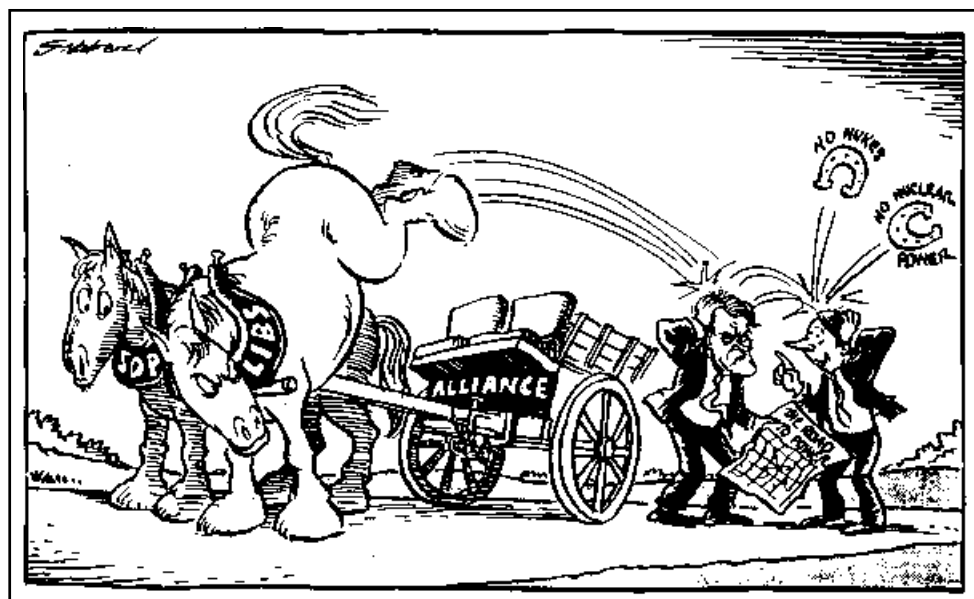
approached Simon Hughes and myself with the idea of producing a book of essays on defence which would explore the increasing sterility of the sloganising between the pro-NATO hard-liners and the emotional CNDers. Others, including Archy Kirkwood, joined in the discussions and, to our pleasant surprise, we all found the meetings exhilarating. Contrary to what Steel later alleged, the meetings were open and were usually held in a meeting room at the Norman Shaw North Building, where a number of Liberal MPs had offices. Eventually, rather than writing individual essays, there was enough common ground to produce the booklet under our joint names. It had unambiguous arguments on the intellectual unsustainability of the deterrence theory but it was far from being the unilateralist rant that it was later depicted as.

While this was going on, Clay Freud, as the Chair of the Policy Committee – a job he carried out with commendable seriousness and assiduity – was trying to get Steel to agree on a wording for an assembly defence debate which would have to deal with the commission report. I was also a member of the Policy Committee and was perfectly amenable to having a motion which would get us over a big political hurdle. I seem to recollect that William Wallace produced a wording which was adequate. Steel would have none

of it. He rejected attempts at mediation and decided to go for the high wire act. Which is how the Euro-bomb came to be on the Eastbourne agenda. It was unnecessary and, alas, all too typical. The high-wire act requires a specialist in getting to the other side. Our erstwhile leader was not such a person!

The outcome of the debate is well enough known. The appalling events of much later that evening are less well known. Inevitably, rather hyped up by the

'Aaah, isn't that nice – he's wishing us luck!' (26 September 1986)





emotion of the debate and its outcome – though not so hyper as to muff a ‘let’s put the lid on this; good debate; now let’s get on with the politics’ television interview with a highly professional Bill Rodgers – Archy Kirkwood and I were booked to play in the jazz band at that night’s *Liberator* review, which left us on even more of a high. We finished just before midnight and Archy telephoned Steel’s hotel suite, where there had been the scheduled regular Parliamentary Party meeting, just to check that it had finished. He came back from the telephone looking suddenly serious and said that he and I were urgently needed at the meeting. We went straight across and experienced just about the most appalling and unpleasant Liberal meeting I have been to in 40 years in the party. The level of anger and bitterness was beyond belief. Simon

clue as to where he was going or where he had gone.

Those who were present, or who followed the assembly on television, will doubtless remember the valiant efforts of the Chief Whip, David Alton, on breakfast television the next day, to make a disaster out of a difficulty, parading the tabloid headlines in front of the camera. Worse was to follow with the leader’s speech. Knowing Steel well, and assuming that Alton had cleared his outburst with him, I guessed that Steel would use his speech to continue the attack. For these setpiece occasions the parliamentary party had assigned seats on the platform in full view of the television cameras. I therefore sought out the party’s press officer, Jim Dumsday, and told him that I would not sit on the platform as I did not wish to be in the spotlight when Steel attacked his

nothing to deserve such disloyal treatment. In the foyer afterwards, despite such provocation, Tony Greaves and others still managed to temper their response to the interviewers.

Back eventually at the House, a more constructive atmosphere took over and an uneasy but wearable compromise Alliance defence position was hammered out which I defended, somewhat uncomfortably, in the Chamber. It was akin to the position which had been available to Steel in advance of the Liberal Assembly and which he had rejected.

## The 1987 election

Preparations for an Alliance manifesto were already underway by this time.<sup>57</sup> Sensible and practical arrangements had been made for its composition. Rightly, an original draft from a ‘single pen’ was thought important and Alan Beith duly produced a typically professional piece of work. As anyone accepting such a commission would have done – as opposed to writing a Liberal manifesto – Alan produced a draft which reflected Alliance thinking, such as it was, and wrote with an eye to what would be acceptable to a consensus of both parties. Thereafter the draft was referred to a joint committee of both parties, chaired by myself and Ian Wrigglesworth, with the help of a ‘New Ideas Group’, chaired by Des Wilson and Shirley Williams. This latter was charged with the not unknown task of ‘thinking the unthinkable’. It duly did so and some of its better ideas found their way into the manifesto, sometimes as little inset boxes within the text. Other ideas were less sound, including one to help first-time house buyers by making capital grants to them. 1987 was still a time when house prices were flying high and it was an economic fact of life that house prices reflected the amount of cash available in the market, so that any capital grants made available to prospective purchasers would put the price of houses up by approximately the same amount. This was debated on

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### Those who were present will doubtless remember the valiant efforts of the Chief Whip, David Alton, to make a disaster out of a difficulty, parading the tabloid headlines in front of the camera.

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Hughes had been under personal attack for some time before we arrived, and our colleagues then started on us. Simon was surprisingly cool – and, to his immense credit never criticised our culpable neglect of him that night – but the others seemed to have had some sort of collective aberration. Stephen Ross, of whom I was extremely fond, wagged his finger within inches of Archy’s face and shouted, ‘I can understand Michael – he’s always held these views – but you! You! Steel made you!’ It was bizarre. Eventually, after a lot more of the same, George Mackie, whose physical stature was somewhat substantial, virtually frog-marched Archy away with him, and the meeting subsided. The following morning Archy told me that, when he had finally got away, he had got into his car and driven around without any

colleagues. Jim, faced with yet another PR problem, was understandably unhappy with this information and said that he couldn’t believe that Steel would do such a thing. I said that, if he was right, it would presumably be possible for him to find a way of getting an assurance on the matter. Jim suggested that I see Steel myself and obtain a copy of the advance of his speech. I duly went across to his hotel suite and was denied access by the Special Branch officer outside. So, in due course, I watched the speech on a television monitor outside the hall, and, despite being mentally prepared for it, I was sickened to see the Liberal Party leader, without any warning to them, attack his own colleagues in public, and to watch the cameras home in on Archy, Simon and on Maggie Clay – loyal Liberals who had done



the report of the 'New Ideas Group' and duly referred to the full joint manifesto committee. As it happened it came up quite late on the latter's agenda when most of the SDP had, probably sensibly, departed. I duly explained the economics of the proposal and it was agreed to drop it. I then went to King's Cross for the train back to Leeds. I arrived at home to be met by Liz saying that I had to 'phone Owen immediately. I did so and was told that I 'had played a dirty trick tonight by waiting until the SDP members of the committee had gone and then getting this attractive idea defeated'. I went through the economic arguments yet again and was met by a brief silence, then 'OK – so what do we do for first-time buyers?' I suggested that more assistance with 'back-loading' mortgages, i.e. lower initial interest rates and higher later ones, would help first-time buyers but would not have anything like the same financial effect. Owen then said, 'Can you explain this to Alex?'<sup>58</sup> Warily, I did so and Alex conferred with Owen. Then Owen asked, 'Can you get this through your side?' and I said I

would clear it with Alan Beith, which I duly did. When I got back to the House the next day I bumped into Maggie Smart, David Owen's personal assistant. She laughed when she saw me and told me that David had been breathing fire and slaughter whilst awaiting my call and had stamped off into his private room to take it. He had eventually emerged smiling and announced, 'We've an even better policy now'.

The 1987 Alliance manifesto was, I believe, a respectable and reasonable attempt to maximise the Alliance's political attractions. It wasn't a

Liberal manifesto but it represented the best that could be produced from a partnership which had ceased to fire the imagination of the electorate. I got on fine with Ian Wrigglesworth – which might shock some colleagues – and we had no great difficulty in reconciling our different perceptions in order to produce a readable final text, so much so that, from time to time during the more traumatic moments of the merger negotiations, he would suggest that he and I should be sent of to produce an acceptable format for both groups.

This task completed, I headed back northwards to grapple with fate in West Leeds. Our local association agonised briefly over the description on the nomination paper and compromised on 'Liberal Alliance'. Adding 'SDP' stuck in the throat. I reckoned that we would need a national vote of around 27% for us to hang on and the final tally was some 4% short of this figure. There were other minuses (including horrendous libels, legal actions on which were not finally won against Maxwell and Murdoch until after the election), including the legal but immoral use

of massive city council resources against us by our city-councillor Labour opponent, and an inability to squeeze the Conservative vote. A reasonably accurate comment from one Conservative voter was that I was more dangerous than Labour! I suspect that this was a common response; after all, one cannot maintain the kind of radical position which goes with Liberalism and not expect it to be understood from time to time.

However, I recall the moment when I realised that we were not going to win. I was doing some day-time canvassing on a council estate when the news was broadcast that David Owen, when pressed at a news conference, had said that on balance he would find it easier to do a deal with Mrs Thatcher. In the industrial West Riding this was far from being a seductive appeal to prospective 'Alliance' voters who had been painstakingly weaned away from Labour over almost 20 years, and whose views on Mrs T were more sadistic than salacious. The sharp change in the response on the doorsteps was predictably sudden.

## Merger

There was little enough time to sulk after the result. Steel launched himself into the dash for merger, and yet another futile attempt to protect the cause from its leader had to be made. The Harrogate Assembly of 1987 was a very different affair from that of 1983. I ran for election as Party President, as much to tackle a worthwhile party job whilst out of Parliament as anything else, but one could not, I suppose, escape from the contest between myself and Susan Thomas tending to be depicted as representing different positions on the Alliance and, by extension, on merger. I won, and Susan went to the House of Lords. There are *some* rewards for being in the Liberal Democrats!

In retrospect, when contrasted with the special merger assembly at the Norbreck Castle – a somewhat giant Fawley Towers – in Blackpool

the following year, the delegates at the Harrogate gathering were clearly deliberately determined to get the best deal. The negotiating team elected appeared to be weighted on the side of those used to extracting the uttermost farthing in tough political circumstances. I sallied forth to London for this vital task but found that one had reckoned without the ex-officio team members, particularly those from Scotland and Wales, who were far more concerned to get a deal than to stand up for the Liberal Party. One Scot, Chris Mason, openly admitted that he was for 'merger at any price'. And, of course, we had a leader who was often absent, didn't understand what caucuses were for, and who found solidarity a difficult concept. Tony Greaves and Rachael Pitchford have done all that is necessary for an understanding of the whole disastrous negotiation.<sup>59</sup> Time after time Tony and I ended up on the 11.10pm train from King's Cross to Leeds with Tony miserably huddled in his duffel coat. I would reach home around 2am and Tony, I guess, another hour or so later in Colne.

As so often in this sorry tale, the outcome could have been much better. There was no need to form the merged party on such disadvantageous terms – which, I would still argue, were and are an intellectual and political fraud. There came a moment, late on in the negotiations when Bob Maclennan dissolved in tears as members of his team resigned, and said that he would have to withdraw to consider his situation. The Liberal team went back to the National Liberal Club absolutely clear that it was possible to achieve merger, if we so wished, on terms which would be palatable to the Liberal Party and which would entail few if any resignations. I was astonished to find that the immediate view of a majority of colleagues – the otherwise stalwart Alan Beith included – was 'what will it take to get the SDP back to the negotiating table?' That, as they say, was the defining moment. Shortly afterwards the Liberals caved in over the name of

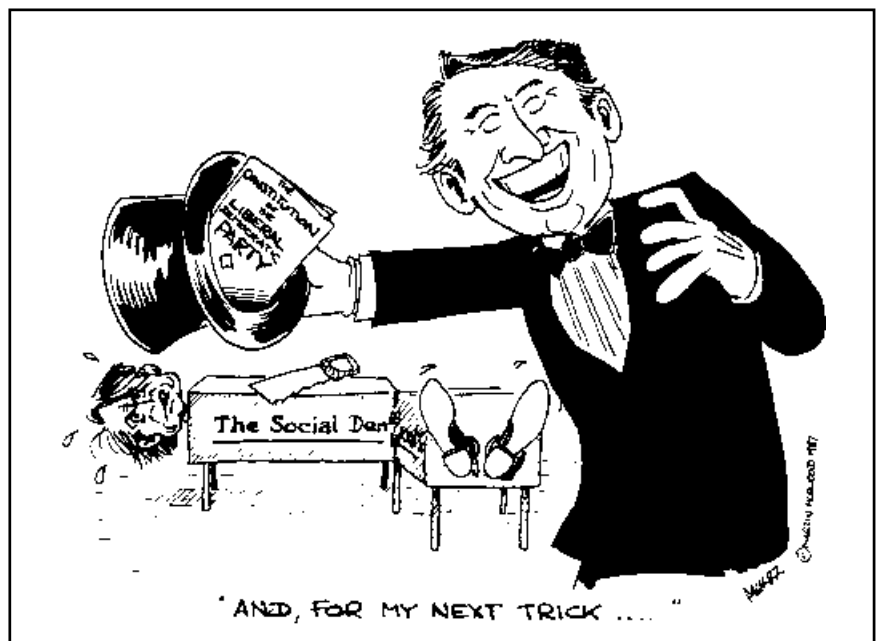
the proposed party and, having proudly fought for the Liberal Party for 30 years, this was too much to stomach and I left – to be unexpectedly door-stepped by John Sargent who was waiting in the entrance of Cowley Street on the off-chance of a news item. I resigned over the name, not over the NATO nonsense.

I was still around for the 'dead parrot' episode. Once again it provided a vivid example of the party's leadership problem. David Steel was happy to let Robert Maclennan and his aides draft the policy statement that was to accompany the completion of the merger negotiations. Steel saw the draft and pronounced himself satisfied with it. When Alan Beith and other Liberals saw the final document, at the eleventh hour, they were horrified at its reactionary contents and realised that there was no chance of it being accepted by the Liberal Parliamentary Party, let alone the party in the country. There was the bizarre press conference that wasn't, when copies of the draft had to be scooped up again from the press, and then the frantic efforts to produce an acceptable version in time to rescue the situation. Two things are significant about this episode: first, that the SDP's real views on policy became starkly apparent to Liberals, but didn't affect my colleagues' judgement re the value of merger; and, second, even when

asked much later why he ever accepted the original draft, David Steel still defended it as an acceptable statement.<sup>60</sup>

The special assembly was unpleasant. It was as well 'fixed' as I used to do as Assembly Committee Chair. Those opposed to merger had few big guns and some of those colleagues who were called to speak were not unduly helpful – some were genuinely too upset to cope with the occasion. I suspect that I made my worst assembly speech ever and the vote was in any event a foregone conclusion. I was, however, more proud of the 'manifesto' that some of us wrote, printed and distributed<sup>61</sup> which put the case rather better than the constraints on debate permitted in the hall.

Even then I couldn't bring myself finally to abandon the cause entirely. I thought that if Alan Beith became leader of the new party there was just a chance that it might become Liberal enough to encompass those who felt bereft. It was nothing personal against Paddy Ashdown, whose company I've always enjoyed, but simply a political judgement based on an assessment of their relative consistency and awareness over the preceding years. I never paid a subscription but I availed myself of the rule which let one's membership extend into the new party, so that I could campaign for Alan. Even that



glimmer of a possibility was extinguished and I headed off into limbo, until it became bit by bit apparent that there were enough people of like mind, some of whom had kept their local Liberal associations going, to relaunch the Liberal Party nationally. In its small way it remains a forthright witness to a political cause which has inspired so many individuals for so many years, and which has been treated so badly by some who should have known better.

## Conclusion

A number of questions arise out of this somewhat diffuse narrative and deserve whatever measure of objective assessment is possible. First, would the Labour Party have reinvented itself without the SDP defections? I think the answer is 'yes', but only because of the final Conservative election victory of 1992 which drove the Labour Party into its 'anything so long as its not socialist' desperation phase. I doubt whether, if the SDP MPs had remained within the Labour Party and fought on, the changes would have come any quicker and it is even arguable that Labour would not have been able so easily to jump a generation to Blair had the SDP still been around. If this analysis is right then it follows that the SDP – and by extension the Alliance – has given us the current Labour landslide. Some of them are, indeed, active within it.

Second, would the Liberal Party have achieved the 1983 level of electoral support on its own, without the Alliance? I am inclined to think that it would have reached around the same mark had the SDP never been formed and had the Liberal Party therefore carried the third-party banner alone. The protest vote indicators were all in place<sup>62</sup> and the party was in fine fettle, with good harvests of council seats in the years immediately preceding the general election. Within the Alliance vote in 1983 the Liberals polled significantly higher than the SDP. The SDP explained this as being a consequence of the Liberals getting the 'better' seats – as defined by the SDP. I am unconvinced

of this. I believe that in 1983 there was a somewhat warmer feeling towards the Liberals than towards the SDP, possibly because of the pro-underdog feeling that it was the Liberals who had 'soldiered on through the wilderness whilst the SDP had sojourned in the tents of the unrighteous'.<sup>63</sup> I don't think that this response should be oversold, but I believe that it was there.

What I am more sure about is that had the Liberals fought all the seats in which they had been building up then the tactical, and 'stature', argument for a Liberal vote would have been maximised and a significantly higher vote could have been obtained.

– of the late 1950s and the 1960s Grimond years had rooted itself in the determination to build, in Jo's words, a 'radical non-socialist progressive alternative to the Conservatives'.<sup>64</sup> This determination, as with all political strategies, had continually to re-interpret itself within the context of the immediate political agenda. Hence the struggle with the Thorpe and Steel leadership cliques; hence the delicate electoral trick of suborning the mainly right-wing protest vote whilst ploughing a distinctly radical furrow; hence the attempt to develop an intellectually coherent and distinct philosophy in the teeth of an impatient Poujadist

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## Did the arrival of the SDP and the Liberals' participation in the Alliance harm the Liberals' political project? Unequivocally, yes.

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This is, of course, speculation and, indeed, the tactical opportunity would never have been conceded by the SDP who were certainly not in business to assist the Liberal Party. Whenever the argument of Liberal build-up was advanced in seat negotiations the SDP response was 'and you've failed to win the seat – so let us show you how'.

Third, would it have been possible to ignore the SDP's formation and to have fought them electorally with any chance of success? The answer is, alas, firmly 'no'. For many years the Liberal Party had tacitly garnered the 'none of the above' vote without challenging that vote's motivation, and enough of it would have slipped to the SDP in four-cornered fights to have blighted Liberal prospects.

Fourth, did the arrival of the SDP and the Liberals' participation in the Alliance harm the Liberals' political project? Unequivocally, yes. It is this political disaster – for the country rather than the party – that is the heaviest price paid for the way the eight years from 1980 unfolded. The political inspiration – and education

element in the Liberal Party ranks; and hence, above all, the dismay at the successful hijacking of this vital and vibrant Liberal project, firstly by the Alliance and then, finally, by the merger.

It must not be thought that those of us who committed our waking hours to this project over many years had some sort of curious umbilical and myopic attachment to the Liberal Party *per se*. Far from it. Our commitment was, and is, to a coherent and highly relevant set of Liberal values which we saw, and see, as the best chance of a civilised, peaceful and convivial world. The Liberal Party was, by its constitution, its record and its promise the only vehicle for those values. Of course, like all human institutions, it was flawed. Of course, the graph of commitment and achievement was far from showing a steady upward advance. But, at its heart, the pre-Alliance party was sound and secure – not least in the sense that one could rely on its instinctive response in a political crisis.

Nor must it be thought that those

who held these views were somehow strange denizens of some isolated and obscurantist sect who went to the Liberal Party Council to hold hands to try and contact the living. These were colleagues who were passionate about the desperate conditions of their neighbours in those long neglected, quasi-Indian-reservation, urban deserts that are misnamed as 'housing' estates. These were colleagues who saw the urgent need to find some way of making the ecological imperative relevant to those who struggled to conserve anything, let alone energy. These were colleagues who took principled stands on development aid, on the folly of the nuclear deterrence theory, and on the nonsense of nation-state war-mongering. What is more, these were colleagues who did all this in the teeth of Labour's urban hegemony just as much as in the depths of Conservative complacency. It is these colleagues who survived everything that the opposition could throw at them and, for their pains, were traduced by their erstwhile colleagues who had been seduced by the superficial sloganising of the Alliance years and had then been stampeded by the simplistic attractions of the merger. The result is a merged party with a steadily declining electoral base, with virtually no presence in areas that would otherwise be Labour-held, whose commendable gains in seats are the consequence of tactical voting, and whose hybridity as a party guarantees a lack of that intellectual rigour necessary to forge a visibly distinctive image. In one way or another, those of us who couldn't reconcile ourselves with merger felt as we did because we were conscious of the callousness which – at the time, but far less evident today – epitomised the success of the quick fix over the political crusade, and which clearly neither esteemed our long struggle worthwhile nor had any regard for the party which had carried the Liberal banner with pride for so long, and which was still serviceable and very much viable.

It is, I suppose, a sign of encroaching senility or even of political atro-

phy to find oneself recalling earlier speeches. At the risk of demonstrating the truth of this, I will recall the Liberal Assembly philosophy debate of 1979. I was Assembly Committee Chair and I wanted to experiment. The Thatcher victory earlier that year provided an opportunity to do so. We set aside an entire afternoon for a debate without a motion and with only a vague structure of abstract concepts. It was an inspiring and formative session<sup>65</sup> – which I still have on cassette – and I have from time to time remembered saying that electoral success 'might fall unbidden into our grasp, but political success has to be worked for'. I dearly wish I had not been so accurate nor, indeed, so prescient!

*Michael Meadowcroft was MP for Leeds West 1983–87 and a member of the Liberal merger negotiating team. He helped found the independent Liberal Party and was subsequently its President.*

#### Notes:

- 1 To meet the deadline most of this essay was written whilst on mission in Cambodia – which may explain, if not excuse, its somewhat diffuse style.
- 2 See for instance Michael Meadowcroft, *Focus on Freedom – The Case for the Liberal Party*, (Liberal Party, 1997).
- 3 Rachael Pitchford and Tony Greaves, *Merger: The Inside Story* (Liberal Renewal, 1989) (see review elsewhere in this issue).
- 4 I once committed the ultimate narcissistic indulgence of looking up my own entry in the British Library catalogue, and was surprised to see a number of early pamphlets listed which I could not remember writing!
- 5 David once agreed to play the piano on camera for a 'Children in Need' television appeal and then came to me in a panic in order to get the Granny Lee Jazz Band to accompany him. We spent a whole morning recording *I can't give you anything but love* which, when trailed on air, no viewer was prepared to pledge cash to hear! I have the rushes of the whole recording session – they are available in exchange for a rather large brown envelope.
- 6 David Steel, *Against Goliath* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989); see for instance pages 135, 269, 270 and 288.
- 7 Note, for instance, a typical Grimond comment: 'There must be a bridge between socialism and the Liberal policy of co-ownership in industry through a type of syndicalism coupled with a non-

conformist outlook such as was propounded on many issues by George Orwell', *The Observer*, 11 October 1959.

- 8 I still have a full set of the 19 published titles, presumably because I did not allow colleagues to borrow them. Number 17, *The Left and the Liberals*, was a particularly prescient and relevant tract for the times, written by one Jim Cousins, Labour MP for Newcastle-upon-Tyne Central since 1987.
- 9 It would be a very interesting and potentially valuable research project to follow up the subsequent careers of those elected as Liberal councillors in 1962.
- 10 See Michael Meadowcroft, 'Jo Grimond – an appreciation', in *Liberator* 217, December 1993.
- 11 One of the perennial 'what if' discussions amongst Liberals involves pondering how different the Liberal performance in October 1974 might have been had Jo Grimond then been the party leader and at the height of his powers as he was exactly a decade earlier when the parliamentary arithmetic was not as helpful.
- 12 The opportunity at the time to gain and to entrench victories from Labour, coupled with the excitement of debating on at least equal terms with Labour, is shown in the municipal electoral record of the period but was apparently marginal to the party leadership's national strategy.
- 13 See the most recent, and most explicit, book on the affair: Simon Freeman with Barrie Penrose, *Rinkagate – The Rise and Fall of Jeremy Thorpe* (Bloomsbury, 1996).
- 14 The 1976 Liberal Assembly included a private session at which a censure motion from Dr James Walsh on the party officers re their treatment of Thorpe was defended by the Party President, Chair and Assembly Chair (Gruff Evans, Geoff Tordoff and Michael Meadowcroft respectively). The three officers agreed beforehand that there was no point in continuing to cover up the reality of the Thorpe disaster and decided to confront the Assembly with the bare facts. If the motion was carried, all three agreed to resign. Gruff Evans stunned the packed room with his frank exposition of what we had had to go through. I have no doubt that the motion would have been defeated but Tony Greaves and John Smithson decided – uniquely – to act as conciliators and got it withdrawn.
- 15 At one Scarborough Assembly Cyril Carr attacked the Young Liberals publicly. This led to the setting up of a 'Commission' under the Chairmanship of Stephen Terrell QC to look at the status of the Young Liberals within the party. So far as I know, no copy of the Terrell Report has survived – assuming that it ever existed.
- 16 The February '74 election left no party with an overall majority; Heath attempted to arrange a deal with the Liberals to keep him in office.

## How the Alliance worked ....

'At one session, Steel stormed out .... [When he returned,] the photographer had to stand on his head to make everyone smile. [He] kept calling them Roy Rogers, Dr Death and so on. They behaved like children, the way they fought and sulked.'

*Consultant from Gold Greenlees Trott (who handled the SDP account in the 1983 campaign)*

'From the beginning, I knew it would have been better without involving Roy, but Bill and Shirley were vacillating .... In the beginning, it was truly a Gang of Three, and we should have kept it that way.'

*David Owen, 1984*

'The others could never have done it without me .... I was the founder. I delivered the Dimbleby Lecture. I made the first radical move ....'

*Roy Jenkins, 1984*

'David Owen has no tolerance for failure. He virtually told Jenkins to leave. He said, "you're of no use to us now".'

*Bill Rodgers, 1984*

'I was against going to bed with the Liberals from the beginning. We should have run against them in the early byelections and beat them into the ground. Then we would have had more clout in the negotiations.'

*David Owen, 1984*

'Yes. We did make one tactical error. We underestimated the capacity of the Alliance to make a mess of its own campaign'

*Norman Tebbit (Conservative press conference, 1987)*

'The press operations should have reflected the strategy more .... But of course there was no strategy really.'

*Graham Watson, on the 1987 campaign*

- 17 For the Pact, see Alistair Michie and Simon Hoggart, *The Pact – The inside story of the Lib-Lab government, 1977–78* (Quartet Books, 1978).
- 18 Both Christopher Mayhew and, later, David Owen told me that they were convinced that, had Steel insisted that 'no PR for Europe, then no Pact' then it could have been delivered. It is interesting, also, that no Liberals secured places on important quangos during the Pact.
- 19 We were usually, in any case, far too occupied in undertaking speaking engagements in far-flung outposts. I recall one such event in Llanelli where, after an interminable train journey, I was given a civic welcome by the Assistant Town Clerk – clearly an accurate local assessment of my status! Having thus been well looked after and transported to each planned venue, I spoke at a dinner which in due well-lubricated course progressed to the hymn-singing stage and I had to find my own weary way back to the station for the sleeper back to London.
- 20 'Leadership', in this context, is not solely the Leader himself but that Parliamentary charmed circle which felt that it had to impose whatever 'corporate' decision it had alighted upon. In this context *The Economist* (21 September 1985) commented that 'Social Democrats have little difficulty in working with the much smaller group of smoothies that surround Mr Steel.'
- 21 12 June 1976, on Lib-Lab relationships; 21 January 1978, on the Lib-Lab Pact; 22–23 January 1988, on the Liberal-Social Democrat merger.
- 22 On arrival at Westminster in 1983, I inherited Bill Pitt's splendid secretary, Mary Walker, who regaled me with stories of regularly having to do Bill's weekend sur-

- geries in Croydon whilst he went on parliamentary delegations overseas. According to Mary, Bill would also go through the post each morning searching for envelopes which might conceivably contain cheques from television interviews, etc.!
- 23 One could add 'such as they were'; I am under no illusion that there was a dynamic and well organised association in Croydon NW, but the point is still valid.
- 24 In the 1960s the Liberal Party indulged in fantasies about moving the Assembly to exotic locations. A project to hold it in Douglas, Isle of Man, eventually foundered because the Isle of Man's then predilection for birching young offenders was thought to be potentially embarrassing politically. Another scheme to show European solidarity by holding it in Scheveningen, Holland, had to be dropped because the party was advised that it was probably illegal to hold the AGM of the party outside the UK!
- 25 Contrary to the received truths about my antipathy to the SDP, I probably attended, and participated in, more SDP functions than any Liberal MP apart from the leader.
- 26 It may have been the Party Council, in Bath, I think, where Peter Freitag engaged me in interminable conversation on the pavement outside the hotel venue. There was then a bomb warning and the entire hotel disgorged on to the pavement and milled all around us. Peter continued his earnest colloquy with me, oblivious to the emergency. Eventually the 'all clear' was announced and still Peter impressed his views on me. We eventually staggered inside to the Council meeting with Peter totally unaware of the Irish interlude.
- 27 An extra source of glee was the thought

- of Derek Gladwin's discomfort. Derek was the long-serving Chairman of the Labour Conference Arrangements Committee and, when from time to time we compared notes, he used to pride himself on his ruthless ability to keep the Conference under control.
- 28 The 'winnable seats' list, to which was directed central financial and other support, always included the 'traditional' Liberal constituencies – for decades Merioneth was a favourite target for aid – but studiously avoided seats in industrial areas. Leeds had support from the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust but never received anything from any of the HQ slush funds.
- 29 The evidence for this is among my political papers recently deposited with the British Library of Political and Economic Science (at LSE). I also used much of it during the committee stage of one of the local government bills in the 1983–87 parliament, and it can therefore be found in the Committee Hansard.
- 30 This tendency is even more the case with the Liberal Democrats, who appear to have impaled themselves on the memorable slogan 'End Equidistance' with the inevitable consequence that their vote slumped in virtually all constituencies that would otherwise be Labour.
- 31 Michael Meadowcroft, *Liberal Values for a New Decade* (Liberal Publications Department, 1980). William Wallace persuaded me to write this booklet and gave valuable editing comments. In particular he encouraged me to make explicit the difference between Thatcherite 'economic liberalism' and genuine 'political liberalism'. Curiously, William's drafts for the recent Liberal International 50th Anniversary manifesto incorporate laudatory

- support for economic liberalism.
- 32 Michael Meadowcroft, *Social Democracy – Barrier or Bridge?* (Liberator Publications, 1981). It is interesting that David Steel began by believing that the SDP should fight one hundred seats (David Steel, *Against Goliath*, page 224).
  - 33 To complete the ‘set’ I also wrote two other Liberator Publication booklets: *Liberalism and the Left* (1982), and *Liberalism and the Right* (1983).
  - 34 It was a time for setpiece debates and I took part in very well-attended occasions with David Marquand (which was published as *Liberalism and Social Democracy* (Arena, LPD, 1980)), Tony Benn, at the Harrogate Assembly 1983, and with Ken Livingstone, at LSE, in 1984.
  - 35 Roy Jenkins was reliably reported as having attempted to join the Liberal Party on three occasions: firstly in the late 1950s, when he was allegedly dissuaded by Lady Violet Bonham Carter, then in the 1960s when the Labour Party was turning against European unity, and finally at the end of his Presidency of the European Commission and before the SDP ‘project’ was mooted, when he was urged by David Steel to launch the SDP instead. David Steel has denied that Roy Jenkins formally applied to join the Liberal Party and told me that the only Labour MP actually to ask about membership was Neville Sandelson!
  - 36 Roy Jenkins, in his short period in office as the first SDP leader, had a very different style, and did not ruffle feathers in the way David Owen managed to, hence the concentration on the Owen leadership period.
  - 37 One SDP recruit, Christopher Brocklebank-Fowler, was elected as a Conservative MP.
  - 38 When I gently warned Barbara Lyons of this new challenge she looked surprised, ‘Oh, I think we’ll be all right – they’ve always been happy to vote for Edward’.
  - 39 The only defector to resign and fight the subsequent byelection, in Mitcham and Morden, was a late recruit, Bruce Douglas-Mann. His timing was exquisite, with the byelection taking place at the height of Falklands hype. Bruce duly got clobbered.
  - 40 One such difficult councillor recruit, from the Conservatives, was in Huddersfield, where the man in question wrote long and often accusatory letters on an antique typewriter with a bi-coloured ribbon. He went to the amazing trouble of switching to the red half of the ribbon for the letter ‘D’ every time he typed ‘SDP’!
  - 41 The SDP’s national nominee in Yorkshire was John Horam, who ended up as a Conservative Minister.
  - 42 These were Liverpool Broadgreen, Hackney South and Shoreditch, and Hammersmith. Official Liberal HQ speakers spoke for the SDP candidate – and, therefore, against the official Liberal Party candidate – in Broadgreen.
  - 43 Sue Robertson, who ran the SDP Whips’ office with great efficiency, once told me that I was David Owen’s favourite Liberal MP. I implored her not to spread this information.
  - 44 I shared this office with Simon Hughes, who has been a long-time friend. This friendship was occasionally strained by Simon’s addiction to clerical colonialism, in that his papers encroached inexorably across the floor, forcing me into a smaller and smaller corner!
  - 45 The early chapters of the first edition of David Owen’s book, *Face the Future* (Jonathan Cape, 1981), contained much that strikes chords with Liberals. See, for instance, the positive references to early libertarian thought in the Fabian movement, pages 4 and 5.
  - 46 The phrase comes from H. H. Asquith, referring to himself in contrast to the Coalition Liberals, 18 November 1918.
  - 47 For once, I kept a diary of those early Parliamentary Party meetings and this is in my papers recently deposited in the British Library of Political and Economic Science, at LSE.
  - 48 It was at this time that the role of the Policy Committee was enhanced with serious attempts to make it a genuine partnership between the Parliamentary Party and the party in the country. Also LINK (Liberal Information Network) was formed, particularly with Leighton Andrews and Virginia Morck, as a vehicle for new Liberal thinking on topical issues.
  - 49 Contrary to what one what might have been assumed, the relationship between Steel and Beith was neither warm nor cooperative. Alan Beith appeared to have no great belief in Steel’s capabilities and David Steel appeared to suspect Beith of permanently angling for the leadership. See, for instance, the whispers that Beith knew in advance about the contents of the ‘Dead Parrot’ document but kept quiet, hoping that it would bring Steel down and open the way to Beith becoming leader – an allegation that I believe to be wholly wrong and mischievous (see Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP – The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (OUP, 1995), p. 427).
  - 50 One exception was the Labour Seats Committee, financed personally by Cyril Smith, but largely coordinated by me, with the late Mike Harskin as its somewhat capricious, often brilliant but occasionally wayward staff person. This initiative produced material specifically of use to those colleagues whose main opponent was Labour.
  - 51 The local situation was not helped by the embarrassing hijacking of the Liberal nomination for my vacated city council seat by a candidate who turned out to be an undischarged bankrupt as well as being unstable. Efforts to contain the problem only exacerbated it and he eventually defected.
  - 52 This was not the only reason for losing West Leeds. The pervasive and clever (though legal) use of city council funds to promote the Labour candidate certainly had an effect, as no doubt did a highly unpleasant libel action which took four years to win against the Murdoch and Maxwell empires. As stated elsewhere in this essay, Owen’s admission that, if the coalition opportunity arose, he would prefer to do a deal with Mrs Thatcher rather than with Neil Kinnock was a serious blow.
  - 53 These are in the papers recently deposited at BLPES.
  - 54 Typically it was an abrasive and tough negotiation with Owen over the wording of the motion, but, once agreed it stayed agreed.
  - 55 *Radical Quarterly* 5, Autumn 1987.
  - 56 *Across the Divide, Liberal Values for Defence and Disarmament* (LINK, September 1986).
  - 57 *Britain United – The Time has Come*, the SDP-Liberal Alliance Programme for Government, 1987. The same sweated and smiling leaders’ picture as on the manifesto was on many posters around the country, with the accompanying slogan ‘The only fresh thing on the menu’. In West Leeds some wag added ‘Sell-by date: 11th June’.
  - 58 Alex de Mont, David Owen’s economics adviser.
  - 59 Pitchford and Greaves, *Merger: The Inside Story*.
  - 60 ‘I wouldn’t say that there was much wrong with the document itself’. David Steel on the ‘Dead Parrot’ policy statement, BBC Radio 4, 15 March 1989.
  - 61 *Merger or Renewal?* A Report to the Joint Liberal Assembly, 23–24 January 1988, Michael Meadowcroft.
  - 62 Jo Grimond, when asked once in a television interview, whether the Liberal vote was to a large extent a protest vote, replied, ‘Well, there’s a great deal to protest about.’
  - 63 A typically biblical phrase used by Sir Frank Medlicott at the Liberal Assembly of 1962, following his return to the Liberal Party after spending 20 years as a ‘National Liberal and Conservative’ MP. Clement Davies, Liberal leader from 1945 to 1956, once said that the National Liberals were ‘Liberals to save their souls and National Liberals to save their seats.’
  - 64 Jo Grimond was typically contrary, in that he was opposed to the Lib-Lab Pact but, generally and far from uncritically, supported the Alliance.
  - 65 Alan Watkins told me that he anticipated it being a disastrous session but that it had turned out to be one of the most stimulating party conference debates he had experienced.

# The Merger Process

## An SDP Retrospect

*Willie Goodhart* looks back at the merger process from the perspective of the SDP negotiating team. Could it have been handled differently?

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In September 1987 representatives of the Liberal Party and the SDP sat down together to begin a courtship that ended in marriage six months later. The courtship was extremely difficult and on more than one occasion nearly ended in disaster. Yet the marriage has turned out to be remarkably happy. Like the White Nile and the Blue Nile meeting at Khartoum, the two streams retained their distinctive identity for a while but then merged into an almost indistinguishable whole.

The merger negotiations started against the depressing background of the SDP split. After the failure to achieve a breakthrough in the 1983 elections, some of us in the SDP felt that we needed to start talking with the Liberals about merger. However, a vote at the SDP autumn conference in Salford (a gloomy event in a gloomy location, cheered up only by a brilliant maiden platform speech by the party's only new MP, Charles Kennedy) made it clear that most of the party was not yet ready. Four years of tedious haggling over seat allocation (single-party selection, joint closed selection, joint open selection – remember them?) and the fiasco of the two Davids' campaign in 1987 changed people's minds and convinced many of us that merger was essential.

This view was emphatically not shared by David Owen. Over the opposition of nearly half the members of the SDP's National Committee (including my wife Celia) he forced the party into a highly divisive referendum immediately after the general election. The 'Yes to Unity' campaign (run from our house) won about 60 per cent of the vote. Owen refused to accept the result and resigned as party leader, being replaced by Robert Maclennan who had opposed merger but was willing to accept the party's decision. This was followed by the meeting of the Council for Social Democracy (the

SDP conference) in Portsmouth in late August. This was a sad and angry event – so much so that a supporter and opponent of merger came to blows one evening in a restaurant. The CSD adopted a resolution authorising negotiations for merger to proceed.

Shortly afterwards, the Liberals held their Assembly at Harrogate. This was a much more cheerful occasion, at which the principle of merger was approved by an overwhelming majority. However, a decision that was taken there – to create a negotiating team of 16 people – was responsible for much of the subsequent trouble. The Assembly decided to elect eight members of the negotiating team; by the time ex-officio members and representatives of the Scottish and Welsh Liberals had been added, the number had risen to 16. It should have been obvious that this was far too big to be a serious negotiating body. Meetings became far too long drawn out and turned into debates on party lines. Things would have gone far more smoothly if there had been no more than five or six negotiators on each side. However, once the Liberals had decided on such a large team, the SDP had no option but to follow suit.

Another decision which was arguably wrong, and for which the SDP was rather more to blame than the Liberals, was the decision to include the two party leaders as members of the negotiating teams. It was understandable that Robert Maclennan wished to be a member of the team. He was extremely interested in party constitutional issues and very skilled at them. He had been responsible for devising the SDP constitution (which I had drafted on his instructions) and was naturally keen on playing an active role in the planning of the new party's constitution. But his direct involvement had two unfortunate consequences. First, if the leaders had remained outside the day-to-day negotiations they could have acted as a kind of appellate body to which questions on



which the negotiators were deadlocked could be referred. Second, MacLennan's involvement meant that Steel necessarily became the leader of the Liberal team. It was the impression of the SDP team – and I think of the Liberal team as well – that David was as deeply bored by constitutional minutiae as Robert was fascinated by them. But these were crucial to the negotiating process, and the result was that the Liberal team had no effective leadership. On the one hand, David was unwilling or unable to browbeat the more obstreperous members of his team, with the result that the SDP was on several occasions enraged by the unpicking by the Liberals of issues which we thought had been agreed. On the other hand, David was not prepared to put up a stiff enough fight against us, with the result that on some issues we won when this was not in the long-term interest of the new party.

On policy issues the parties were not in fact very far apart. If that had not been the case, it would not have been possible to form the Alliance. Even on defence, the Liberal Party never called for unilateral nuclear disarmament or withdrawal from NATO. The difference was that the

liance Commission on defence policy. On other issues, there was little serious difference except on nuclear energy, which the SDP supported while the Liberals passionately opposed it.

The cultural differences between the parties were much deeper. Those of us from the SDP who paid fraternal visits to Liberal Assemblies found them lively, stimulating and obviously much enjoyed by the participants. We also found them anarchic and self-indulgent, with important policy decisions being taken with little or no preparation; too many points of order and other time-wasting technicalities; constitutional amendments being passed by unrepresentative groups of delegates at early-morning sessions; and annual pleas by the party headquarters for a little financial support from the constituency parties. All this contributed to the public image of the Liberals as a well-meaning but disorganised bunch, dominated by beards and sandals (and anyone who thinks that that was *not* the public image should ask themselves why our opponents continue to call us 'Liberals').

The SDP, on the other hand, was perhaps too intellectual and too

list. There was almost no regional structure, and the words 'Scotland' and 'Wales' did not appear in the party constitution. Control of the party's administration rested firmly in the hands of the National Committee. The Council for Social Democracy had limited policy-making powers but had no power to debate or decide on questions of party administration. SDP local parties were very much under the control of the party's HQ. The SDP's centralism was understandable in the context. The Gang of Four were not certain what kind of members their new party would attract; they were afraid that unless they retained tight central control it would end up as something quite different from what they wanted. As it turned out their fears were unjustified, but the centralism was hard to abandon.

The task for the negotiators was to reconcile these very different cultures. This was a long and painful process. I do not propose to go into any detail about it; the merger negotiations have been described fully by Rachael Pitchford and Tony Greaves in their book, *Merger: the Inside Story* (see review on page 45). Their book, though written from a viewpoint very different from mine, is an excellent description of the negotiations and factually reliable. They were of course not in a position to report on internal debates within the SDP negotiating team, but these were far less interesting and dramatic than the internal debates within the Liberals. With the exception of John Grant (who was basically an Owenite and disliked the whole concept of merger) and, to a lesser extent, Will Fitzgerald, the team worked on a common agenda and had no great difficulty in reaching a consensus on almost all issues.

We were also very defensive, fearing that the Liberal Party, with its much larger numbers, would dominate the new party. This was to a considerable extent a mistaken analysis. In the first place, it is by no means certain that the numbers of the Liberal Party were as large as all

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David was not prepared to put up a stiff enough fight against us, with the result that on some issues we won when this was not in the long-term interest of the new party.

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Liberals – unlike the SDP – had a large unilateralist minority, and the official position of the party was therefore less clearly multilateralist than the SDP's. The vote at the 1986 Liberal Assembly at Eastbourne which did so much harm to the Alliance was not a call for unilateralism but a rejection of the absurd proposal for an Anglo-French bomb. This had been floated by the two Davids to try to make good the damage done by Owen's rubbishing of the sensible ideas of the joint Al-

centralist. We were full of journalists, academics and lawyers. We had debates of high quality and produced well-thought-out, well-written papers on national policy, but we were basically uninterested in local politics. Few of us had much interest in Focus leaflets on the aspects of community politics which had, by 1987, enabled the Liberals to build a significant base in local government. The SDP was also a very centralist party in terms of organisation. Membership was recorded on a national

that. In the absence of a central membership register and with the practice in many constituency parties of keeping names on their lists long after they had stopped paying subscriptions, the claimed Liberal membership of 90,000 was probably a considerable exaggeration. In the second place, there were many Liberals – not just those close to the SDP, such as Richard Holme and Alan Watson – who wanted a more efficient and coherent party structure. Many of us had met such people at constituency level and had found them easy to work with. We underestimated their influence, partly because they were not adequately represented on the Liberal negotiating team.

The negotiations were helped by the fact that relationships of trust were developed at two key levels – between Andy Ellis and Dick Newby as the parties' Chief Executives (helped by the fact that Dick had made it clear that he did not wish to become the Chief Executive of the new party), and between Philip Goldenberg and myself as the constitutional draftsmen. The close working relationship between Philip and me enabled us to produce drafts with great speed, and with the confidence that neither of us was trying to steal a march on the other. The

negotiations were, however, considerably hindered by the Liberal Party Council – a body whose main function appeared to be to intervene from time to time to reject agreements reached by the negotiating teams. This strengthened the resolve of the SDP team to ensure that there was no equivalent body in the constitution of the new party.

The negotiations involved a lot of discussion about the federal structure of the party. The SDP team had little difficulty in accepting that our own constitution was too centralist (particularly for a party supporting devolution in national politics!) and that a federal structure was necessary. The Liberals equally accepted that the Scottish Liberals should be part of a federal party rather than (as they had previously been) a legally independent body. There were, however, long arguments about the nature of the federal structure – arguments which were rather more between the Scottish and English Liberals than between the Liberals and the SDP. At any rate, agreement was reached, though it had to be substantially modified by the review of the Liberal Democrat constitution in 1993.

The issues on which the SDP felt most strongly were a national membership register; an elected, and

therefore representative, conference; and a deliberative policy-making process. On these, we scored perhaps two and a quarter out of three. A national register was adopted (though with a separate register for Scotland). This was undoubtedly the right decision. Information technology had of course only recently made an effective national register practicable, but the register has relieved local parties of a lot of time-consuming record-keeping and subscription renewal duty. A national register has also made it possible for the national party to communicate directly with its members, to finance its own activities more effectively and to conduct party-wide elections on the basis of a proper register of members. The Labour Party has now followed us into a national register and the Conservatives will probably have to follow suit.

The negotiations on the composition of the conference ended in the Liberals' favour. Although voting membership of the Liberal Assembly was, in theory, not self-selected, the number of places allocated to constituency parties was so large and there were so many alternative routes to becoming an assembly delegate (through bodies such as the students' or women's organisations) that, in practice, any party member who wanted to attend and vote could do so. The SDP team believed that this made assemblies unrepresentative and, in particular, gave the Young Liberals disproportionate influence. We were therefore anxious to limit the number of voting conference representatives to a level which would make it likely that there would be contests in most local parties for election to the conference. We did not achieve this. Although the alternative routes to conference were eliminated (except for students, whom we acknowledged to be a special case because they would not normally be active in their local parties) the number of places allocated to local parties (which was further increased by the 1993 review) was large enough to mean

Now you see it, now you don't; Alliance leaders Steel and Maclennan explain to the media why the policy declaration is not available (13 January 1988).



that most active party members who wanted to attend conference as voting representatives were able to do so, either as elected members or substitutes.

It has to be admitted, with hindsight, that the compromise over conference membership has proved to

to NATO in the preamble to the constitution, and the name of the new party. In my view, the first of these was necessary. There was a significant degree of concern in the SDP about Liberal defence policy, particularly in view of the Eastbourne Assembly vote. While I be-

party structure, with the new party being left free to determine its initial policy position. The compromise – not in itself unreasonable – was that there should be a non-binding policy declaration, agreed between MacLennan and Steel. The negotiating teams played no part in its composition. It was presented to the SDP negotiating team the evening before its publication, after several hours of tense negotiations on the issues of NATO and the name. It has to be said, in the light of the furore which it caused the next day, that in the brief time we were given to study it none of us objected to it or saw it as likely to create problems, though it was hardly a ringing call to arms.

What is strange is that David Steel, who should have been far more closely attuned to Liberal sensitivities, so completely failed to foresee that it would be unacceptable to his colleagues. This was a self-inflicted wound, because the policy differences of the SDP and the Liberals were (as I have said above) less significant than the differences of style and organisation. It should have been relatively easy to agree an acceptable policy statement – and indeed such a statement was quickly hammered out, though too late to save us from a serious attack of psittacosis.

And yet, in the end, the merger has worked. The SDP has given our party an efficient party structure and a well-regarded policy-making process. The Liberals have given it internal democracy and a commitment to community politics which has been the foundation of its remarkable success in local government. This is not a bad record. We built better than we knew.

*Willie (Lord) Goodhart, a barrister, helped write the SDP and Liberal Democrat constitutions, and has been chair of both parties' Conference Committees. He speaks in the Lords on home affairs and social security issues.*

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**The name was another matter. This was the prime example of the SDP team's more effective negotiating skill enabling us to win battles which it would have been better for us to have lost.**

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be justified. There are advantages – both in presenting ourselves to the outside world as a substantial party, and in improving party morale by involving a large number of members in the work of the party's governing body – of having a large voting membership. The SDP's fears that a large conference, mostly elected without a contest, would behave irresponsibly have proved to be unjustified.

On the policy-making process, the balance swung back towards the SDP, with the acceptance of the principle that policy-making should be a deliberative process based on properly researched and argued policy papers commissioned by the Federal Policy Committee. The actual process adopted in the original Liberal Democrat constitution proved to be too elaborate and had to be altered by the 1993 review, but the principle remains. In practice, almost all major policy commitments follow from the approval of Policy Committee motions based on policy papers. The process has given the Liberal Democrats a broadly coherent and well-argued set of policies which could not, in my view, had been achieved by the more informal methods of policy formation in the Liberal Party.

The final battle of the negotiating process came down to two issues – the inclusion of a reference

lieve that this concern was largely unjustified, it undoubtedly existed and, in the absence of a clear commitment to NATO on behalf of the new party, there was a real likelihood that the SDP would have rejected merger. The Liberal argument that a reference to NATO was inappropriate as part of the new party's constitution may have been correct in principle but ignored the political realities. None of us could have known that within four years not only the Warsaw Pact but the Soviet Union itself would have broken up – making the removal of NATO from the preamble in 1990 entirely uncontroversial.

The name was another matter. This was the prime example of the SDP team's more effective negotiating skill enabling us to win battles which it would have been better for us to have lost. The unwieldy 'Social and Liberal Democrats' was a name which was deeply unpopular with most of the party and subjected us to ridicule by our opponents. We should have called ourselves 'Liberal Democrats' from the beginning.

There was one last sting in the tail of the negotiations – the infamous 'dead parrot' policy declaration. This represented a compromise between the SDP demand that the new party should start with established policies and the Liberal insistence that the negotiations were about

# The Two Davids

Graham Watson examines how much the failure of the Alliance was due to the failures of its leaders.

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The astonishing thing about the four years in which the Alliance was captained by Davids Steel and Owen is the amount of time spent by hundreds of idealistic people in sterile argument about the internal arrangements of the two parties' cohabitation. That their joint and several leadership failed to overcome this was without doubt its greatest failure. Steel and Owen failed to unite their followers behind a coherent vision of an alternative course to Thatcherism. Why?

Richard Holme has described the Alliance as a tragic comedy: in the first act (1977–81) the political space opens for the Liberal Party to be taken seriously and the SDP to form; in the second (1981–83) the two parties mount the strongest third-party challenge since the war to the established two-party hegemony and almost equal Labour in the polls; and in the third (the denouement, 1983–87) it all goes horribly wrong. No progress is made and the Alliance subsequently collapses in a hailstorm of recriminations. Perhaps unjustly, but inevitably, the buck stops at the top.

A major difficulty lay in the similarity of their personal appeal. Both in their mid-forties, both telegenic politicians, each ambitious and with a certain flair. They were natural rivals. But their differences posed substantial problems too. Owen represented the well-to-do, Oxbridge-educated, English upper-middle classes. He was steeped in the easy graces of money and cosmopolitan society. Steel sought refuge in a more calvinistic, self-denying, introverted Scots tradition. His was the way of the campaigner for the common man. While the differences might in other circumstances have been complementary, each man tended to deny his hinterland and approach. But these governed for each the ground rules on which their relationship had to be based. And the rules were different. For Steel, personal friendship was a prerequisite. For Owen, a business partnership would suffice.

The second determinant in the affair was the difference between the political approaches

of the two. Owen was a moving star in the firmament, exploring new galaxies, picking up cosmic dust in the post-Keynes explosion. In a new party, where many perceived the 1983 manifesto to have been proven a losing proposition, he found room to develop these ideas. Steel was firmly wedded to the John Rawls ethic of social Liberalism, as was the Liberal Party whose policy-making process he never sought to dominate.

Owen and Steel were never, in the latter's 1987 general election quip, 'Tweedledum and Tweedledee'. On the contrary, they were decidedly 'not bosom pals'.<sup>1</sup> Relations ranged from the acid spreading of stories by the Owen camp about Steel having suffered a nervous breakdown to the farcical combined family lunch at Steel's Pimlico flat where only claret or whisky were on offer, while Owen liked lager and champagne. Nor were the woolly-jumpered Judy or the debonaire Debbie well matched to smooth the course of conviviality between their respective husbands.

At work, both leaders were under attack. Owen was opposed in succession by Jenkins, Williams and Rodgers and by a growing section of the SDP, in particular by those who favoured merger with the Liberals. Steel's strategy of realignment was challenged ever more irately in a Liberal Party which, in Jo Grimond's words, tended at moments of greatest need to turn to putty in its leader's hands. The furious monotony of party controversy was a drag factor in both men's approaches to Alliance. The solidarity between them which it might have engendered showed itself only in brief flashes of uncharacteristic mutual generosity; *schadenfreude* was the more ready emotion in both camps.

Defence policy – the issue which, as Crewe and King point out, disrupted the Labour Party for much of the postwar period<sup>2</sup> – became a considerable problem for the Alliance. For David Owen, a hawkish position was a talisman. For Steel, it was a betrayal of mankind's potential. Yet major decisions, such as the siting of cruise missiles in the UK and the replacement for Polaris nuclear submarines, arose

during the parliament. Steel, with one eye on public opinion and the other on Alliance unity, attempted to move the Liberal Party away from what he regarded as a dangerous course of unilateral nuclear disarmament. Liberal opponents, some with personal ambitions to the leadership and others in opposition to merger, exploited the issue successfully to promote their case by wounding their leader (in the case of the former, only to back down from their policy position a year later). Steel then let slip some details of the contents of the report of the joint commission on defence policy and Owen hastily overreacted, thus dashing a subsequent attempt at compromise too close to a general election for recovery.

Agreement between the parties on individual policies was rendered all the more difficult by a fundamental difference of approach between their leaders. Thatcherism was the order of the decade. Owen was prepared to come to terms with it; Steel was not. Nor was public opposition to Thatcherism ever quite strong enough to catapult the Alliance forward. The runes of the opinion polls were pored over and re-read. The business community was tested. But class warfare was still a powerful determinant of the island's politics. Mrs Thatcher's troops had survived their wobbly start. She was at the centre of Thatcherism, and neither Owen's sub-Thatcherite posture nor Steel's steely opposition to its social consequences satisfied the appetite of a middle class engaged in a nihilism not seen in Britain since the 1920s.

The Tories were blessed by a divided opposition. The Alliance could make little headway against a Labour Party whose low water mark had been met under Michael Foot. Neil Kinnock, though never to enjoy the credit, had put his party back afloat on a rising tide. The Alliance's inability to appeal to Labour supporters was clear from its very lack of clarity. While Steel met the Nottinghamshire miners and the TUC during the coal dispute, Owen courted coal boss Ian McGregor, the government's hatchet man.



The end of the road: Richmond at the end of the 1987 campaign.

On issues of constitutional reform, agreement between Liberals and their SDP counterparts was never hard to find. Yet as an issue of interest to the electorate, constitutional reform never found the potency in the 1980s which it was to generate a decade later. Despite the Alliance's best efforts, it was not sufficient as a basis for a winning campaign in a general election in which the two parties still talked of the issues which interested them rather than those which interested the voters. Would a consistent message have been possible on other issues? Reform of pensions policy, attitudes to the National Health Service, approaches to crime and policing, the merits of public versus private transport; all were areas where disagreement was never more than papered over. For the 1986 local government elections, the SDP launched its manifesto without informing the Liberals of either timing or content. The parties were engaged separately in creative thinking.

It is tempting in a third party to blame the media for failing to give fair coverage to one's ideas. In the 1980s such concerns were amply justified, as a former editor of *The Times* has made clear in a seminal autobiographical work. With control of the public print and broadcasting media in fewer minds, and with the Alliance unable to open them, the

medium for communicating a distinctive message was severely limited. In defence of the media, however, there was rarely a distinctive Alliance message to communicate.

Nor were the two parties organised in any synchronous fashion to fight a common campaign. Much can be ascribed to mutual fear. If the imbalance in numbers of MPs had favoured the SDP before 1983, feeding Liberal paranoia, the converse was true from '83 to '87. An early Alliance slogan had been 'working together': yet while in some constituencies party members were being told by party headquarters to work together against their wishes, in others they were ordered not to unite behind a general election standard-bearer even where local agreement was possible.

The obvious question to any third party is: 'faced with the choice, which of the other parties would you put in to government?' This proved the rock on which the Alliance was to founder. Interviewed on *Weekend World* on 12 April 1987, before the election was announced, Owen skillfully refused to be drawn on which party he preferred, as had Steel on a number of occasions. But on 26 May, in a lengthy general election interview on *Panorama* in which the two Davids were interviewed together by

*Concluded on page 52.*

# The Alliance and After

## The Travelling of a Necessary Road

Was it all worth it? Stuart Mole looks back at the Alliance years.

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There was a time, early in the life of the Liberal Democrats, when political pedigree mattered. Indeed, it revealed itself in the familiar stereotypes: sharp suits, Volvos and hands dirtied by mailshots for the SDP; corduroy and sandals, Morris Travellers, and ink-stained Focus hands for the Liberals.

History was everything: who had been at the defining battles of the early days of the Alliance – at Warrington, at Croydon, at Crosby and at Bermondsey? Who were founder members of the SDP, and what had been the sacrifices that had been necessary for those, in particular, who had taken the difficult route from the higher echelons of the Labour Party? Who had done what in the seat negotiations – and to whom? What mattered most: Westminster credibility, and connections with the great and the good, or street credibility, and years of community politics and municipal power?

Of course, it was a divide to do with substance and interest, as much as with history and style. Many had a lot to lose by gambling on political realignment. Some had put at risk their parliamentary seats and staked their reputations and careers, in the process turning their backs on erstwhile political colleagues. That was particularly true of the Gang of Four: Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers.

Many on the Liberal side had also invested much in the status quo: in assiduously cultivating otherwise barren electoral territory; in building a precious local government base; or in actually winning and holding a parliamentary seat. Nor had David Steel any desire to end his respectable career as Liberal leader as the one who had destroyed a proud and once-great party.

And then there came the moment when differences between Liberals and Social Democrats ceased to matter at all. Perhaps it was the shared disappointments of electoral hopes and hubris cruelly dashed – in 1983, in 1987 and,

most frustrating of all, in 1992. Perhaps it was the iron that entered the soul after the bloodletting and internecine struggles of the late '80s which saw some former colleagues on both wings of the old Alliance opt not for merger and reconciliation but for illusion and oblivion. Or perhaps, once merger had become a reality, it was the sheer grind of keeping a third party in British politics on the road, braving the disappointments – long on hope and short on almost everything else.

Today, I doubt if party activists give a second thought to the provenance of their colleagues. Certainly, the stereotypes can no longer be sustained. We are all – male or female – sharp-suited, mobile-phoning, Peugeot owners now.

Indeed, the Liberal Democrats, a new party no longer, are a force in the land. We control, or significantly influence, councils across much of Britain, with nearly 5,000 councillors on principal local authorities. Most remarkable of all, there is now a parliamentary party of real substance, comprising 46 MPs. This is the largest third force in parliament since the days of Lloyd George, despite a rather modest 1997 national vote of just over 17%. A new generation is beginning to emerge for whom the Alliance is no more than a distant memory.

But, in 1981, with a brave new political world waiting to be born, none of this could have been foreseen. Could it have turned out differently? After all, the events of that year promised a great deal. By the time of the special Labour conference at Wembley, in January 1981, the prospect of a substantial break-out from the Labour Party had become unstoppable and, with the birth of the SDP in March 1981, the extent of the electoral possibilities were becoming apparent. Alone, the SDP registered extraordinary levels of support. But, combined with the Liberal Party, the whole really did seem greater than the sum of its parts and, for a time, led both Conservative and Labour in the opinion polls. True, the Liberal Party, after the Orpington byelection vic-

tory of 1962, had briefly achieved something similar, but never at such consistent levels of support, not at such heights (with the Alliance actually cresting the 50% mark at one point).

What destroyed the dream? Was it the 'Falklands Factor', which turned Mrs Thatcher from being Britain's least popular national leader on record into one of its most popular ever, with the Tory Party surging to an unassailable lead of 20% in the opinion polls after the capture of Port Stanley? Or was it the descent of the Alliance from the frothy heights of ambition, idealism and hope into the murky realities of practical – and worse, coalition – politics?

down into third-party status and consigning it to be ground between the two-party millstones. But it was not to be.

Could the SDP have ignored the Liberals, gone out on their own and hoped to clear their rivals from the field by putting everything into an early 'blitzkrieg'? I think not, although some might have dreamed so. But most recognised from the outset that, even if they considered the Liberals an insufficiently adequate or attractive vehicle for political realignment, competition with it would be electoral suicide. That certainly was the view of Tom Ellis, the then MP for Wrexham, who circulated to Labour defectors a secret paper demonstrating the madness of

alternative, as the most effective vehicle for radical realignment. Sir Cyril Smith, the former Chief Whip, put it more succinctly: the aim should be to strangle the new party at birth.

It is a hypothesis worthy of exploration, and one which perhaps deserves more original research and a greater historical perspective than that offered by a decade or so. But certain facts are well established. There is no denying, for example, that David Steel deliberately encouraged Labour dissidents to proceed with the new party, once he was sure that something like the SDP was possible. Indeed, he went further and discouraged at least one prominent Labour politician from joining the Liberals, judging that the welcome accretion of a handful of Labour MPs over time would have nothing like the potentially cataclysmic impact on British politics that the launch of a breakaway group would have as a fresh political force.

What if he had done the opposite? What if the Liberal leader had offered a sympathetic shoulder to potential defectors and encouraged the fracture of the Labour Party but enticed recruits into the ranks of the Liberals, rather than elsewhere, warning those tempted to think otherwise that a new party would have no future and would be rigorously opposed? Some would have joined the Liberals. Perhaps Roy Jenkins. Possibly – but not immediately – Shirley Williams. Probably not Bill Rodgers – ever. Certainly not – ever – David Owen. The new recruits would have been far fewer and the public impact correspondingly less. But Liberals would have been flattered rather than threatened by their new allies. Change would have been digestible. The trauma of seat negotiations and policy bartering, and of interminable internecine warfare in an Alliance supposedly offering the British people a new kind of politics, would have been avoided. Given the Liberal Party's six million votes in February 1974, its growing local government base and its increasingly effective campaigning style, it is not

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## The Alliance will be seen as important period in the creation of a new kind of multi-party and consensual politics, very different from the old adversarial two-party system.

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But the general election of 1983 showed it to be a close-run thing. The Liberal-SDP Alliance polled 25.4% – well over 7.5 million votes – which was the best result since the 1923 election when the Liberals had scored 29.7% of the vote. Then, a marginally higher vote share had netted the Liberals 158 seats. But, in 1983, with its vote too evenly spread and insufficiently concentrated in more than a few areas, the tally was just 23 Members of Parliament (mostly Liberals). Of the 26 Labour MPs (and 1 Conservative) who had formed an instant SDP parliamentary party back in 1981, scarcely a handful survived.

Had the Alliance managed to edge ahead of Labour (which did disastrously, barely managing 27% of the vote), all might have been changed. In such circumstances, the remorseless dynamics of the two-party system would have worked in the Alliance's favour, pushing Labour

a third party in competition with the fourth in a two-party environment. Besides, whatever the froth of opinion poll ratings and media hype, some knew that life at the wrong end of the British political system was tough. Progress could not be made just by advertising and mailshots. It needed grassroots organisation and bodies on the ground, and the SDP just did not have the numbers where it mattered most.

If there was no realistic way forward for the SDP than an accommodation with the Liberals, that was rather less so for the Alliance partner. For the Liberal Party, there was an alternative strategy: to capitalise on the steady disillusion by voters with the two-party system (and in particular with the then Conservative Government); to encourage potential Labour defectors to join the Liberals, rather than form a separate party; and, above all, to present the Liberal Party, rather than any new

unreasonable to believe that it might have done at least as well as the Alliance electorally, if not better.

Could the Alliance itself have been better constructed? There is a great deal which, with the luxury of hindsight, many would wish undone. The public rows over seat negotiations, the disputes over policy (particularly defence), the 1983 disaster of a 'Prime Minister designate', and, in the 1987 elections, the impossibility of two parties and two leaders, ostensibly part of a single force, campaigning in different parts of the country and frequently wrong-footing each other. No doubt it could have been done better. But certain realities would not have changed. Once the decision had been taken to proceed with the creation of a new party, some period of coexistence with the Liberals became an inevitability. A new 'merged' party, constructed from the outset in part upon the existing Liberal Party, would not have been remotely possible.

Once the Alliance was formed, the most destructive strategy, in my opinion, was to hold to the view that political allies might in time become party competitors. Such an approach would in any case have been disastrous for both the SDP and the Liberals had it become reality. As it was, the existence of such a notion fed suspicions and distrust and inhibited moves towards 'organic' merger.

The only realistic approach – and one which most embraced, with varying degrees of enthusiasm – was to work for an 'ever-closer union', an Alliance which was a meeting of minds and hearts rather than the result of mere political expediency. Even so, it was a process that took the best part of decade and was deeply enervating and traumatic for many of those involved. It might have been done sooner and possibly with less pain; but, in some shape or form, it was always the price which the Alliance – by its very nature – was bound to pay.

There is no denying that there was much about this time which was

also beneficial, with each partner in their own way bringing strengths to the Alliance – and later, the merged party – which the other had been unable to supply. Undoubtedly, the SDP helped in the development of a greater professionalism – in party structures, in internal decision-making and membership, in public relations and fund-raising. It also encouraged a greater rigour in national policy creation and in the development of new ideas (not least through opening up new and fertile sources of thought in academia and elsewhere). It brought in recruits who were substantial and respected figures, but it also attracted many more, some of whom had never before been involved in politics.

For their part, the Liberals had a ready-made organisation at constituency level, attuned to the realities of third party politics and honed by disappointment and adversity into a force of considerable tenacity and commitment. These were the 'political missionaries' of which Dick Taverne had spoken, who had developed formidable campaigning skills and an ability to win and use power at the local government level. Liberalism itself – in policy terms or in the approach of individual activists – also proved to be a useful antidote to tendencies which sometimes erred towards an over-rigid, centralised and authoritarian view of politics.

Above all, I believe that the Alliance will be seen as important period in the creation of a new kind of multi-party and consensual politics, very different from the old adversarial two-party system. Back in November 1979, in his Dimpleby lecture, Roy Jenkins had seen the two-party system as a citadel, from which it was necessary to break out, if political realignment, the free flow of ideas and fundamental change were ever to be possible. David Steel's leadership of the Liberals involved an odyssey – stretching over the course of a decade and more – building upon the ideas of cross-party cooperation developed at the

time of the European referendum of 1975, the experiment of the Lib-Lab Pact of 1977–78 and, in particular, the creation of an Alliance which, for a moment, promised everything but which, in time, may have been shown to deliver far more than we realise.

Over more than 20 years, Liberal Democrats (in whatever their previous manifestation) have learned through these experiences – and through the realities of using and sharing power in local government – that 'coalition' politics is a necessary component of the new politics; and that the third force needs to be strong and mature enough to cope with the contradictions and pressures which such a system entails.

That is surely the reality of the present, and Paddy Ashdown's strategy of 'constructive opposition'. He must now lead his 45 parliamentary colleagues along a difficult path which involves both working with the Labour Government, on a Joint Cabinet Committee, to help deliver constitutional reform, and maintaining the Liberal Democrats' separate identity and electoral credibility by providing vigorous opposition where the issues demand. It is a perilous task, requiring courage and determination. But it is the surest way of delivering the greatest prize of all – proportional representation. And it has come a step closer with the setting up of an independent commission on electoral reform – chaired by that great architect of political realignment, Lord Jenkins – to recommend a broadly proportional alternative to Britain's present first-past-the-post electoral system.

If proportional representation can be achieved, the dream of the Alliance – the shattering of the old two-party mould – will have been finally attained and its purpose surely fully justified.

*Stuart Mole was head of David Steel's office, and now works for the Commonwealth Secretariat. He fought Chelmsford for the Alliance in 1983 and 1987.*



# One Man's Pride

## Owen and his Impact on the Alliance

*Tim Clement-Jones regrets the lost opportunities of the Alliance years.*

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Lib Dems, like their Liberal predecessors, are by and large forward-looking, optimistic creatures. In that respect we have been spoilt by the successes of the past 10 years. Leapfrogging the mainly positive memories of the 1990s to the Alliance era is therefore an uncomfortable process. Last September's Liberal Democrat conference at Eastbourne – the scene of the 'Euro-bomb debate' in 1986 – brought back memories of the inter-party and internal tensions of the Alliance years

David Owen and his apologists would, I am sure, like to think that this was the age of the gods and Titans when superhuman political feats appeared possible. Certainly many in the media seemed to believe that he was a colossus bestriding the Alliance. The tale, however, ended in the classical way, with human frailties causing downfall. Dr Owen's fatal arrogance led to a tragic waste of leadership, human effort and most of all political opportunity.

For many it was a disappointing time of failed ambitions which still occasionally require treatment by expert political therapists. I, for one, am still angry in retrospect about the waste of energy that went into internal wrangling, and the missed political opportunities. Having – despite hiccups over seat allocation – started to build relationships so well between the parties before the 1983 general election, it is galling to look back and think how little progress we made politically over the period from 1983 to 1987.

For the 1983 election manifesto, it is true we negotiated on policy between the parties, but it was a fairly amicable process. Joint home and legal affairs policies were thrashed out over breakfast at Eric Avebury's house in Pimlico between Simon Hughes, Ian Wrigglesworth, Eric Lyons, John Harris and myself. We did have some differences of principle, but this did not sour the

discussions. If Owen, instead of radiating distrust and paranoia in the period between the general elections, had built on the legacy of 'the partnership of principle' left him by Roy Jenkins he could have become leader of a powerful joint movement and even a joint party.

David Steel suffered from a bad virus immediately after the '83 election and took a sabbatical. Owen was widely admired by many at the time. If he had seized the initiative and built bridges between the parties instead of deliberately blowing them up, in time, with his energy and public profile, he could have become leader of a merged party. This would have been a formidable force at the '87 election rather than the quarrelsome two-headed creature it appeared to be, and, at the top, was.

Owen, however, saw the relationship as purely pragmatic. He was clearly keen to ditch the Liberals as soon as the SDP could politically do so. The Jenkinsites, like the Liberals, saw the Alliance as a meeting of policy minds. Owen and his followers clearly had a different vision, bound up with a view of him as a 'man of destiny' sure to lead the SDP to political glory provided it remained a disciplined force. This emphasis on discipline and the destiny of one man was of course anathema to Liberals. Owen's argument was that the separate party identities needed to be preserved so that each could blossom under PR when it was achieved. The irony is that without close cooperation this could not be achieved, and Owen's behaviour was not likely to encourage this.

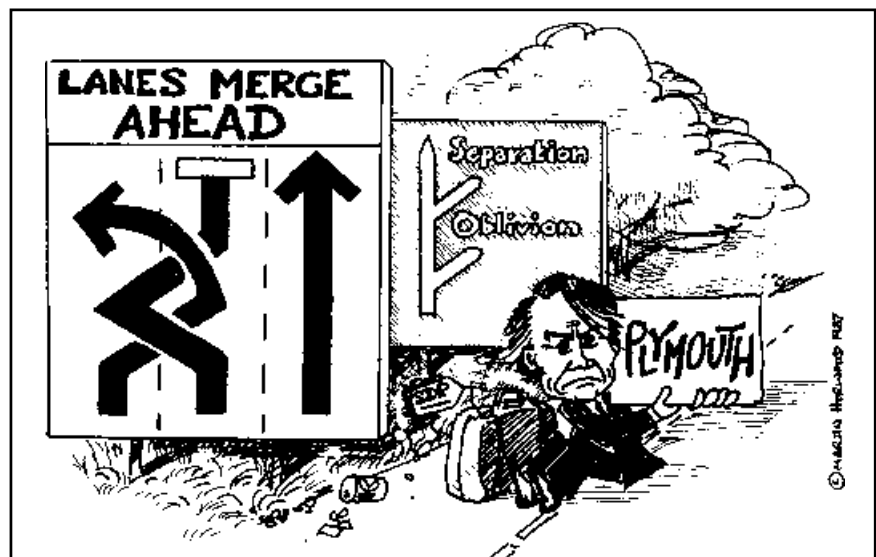
After the '83 election, as relationships between the two lawyers' organisations, the Association of Social Democratic Lawyers and the Association of Liberal Lawyers, were so friendly and constructive, Anthony Lester and I, the respective chairs, fondly imagined that the next obvious step was to make joint policy in key areas of legal affairs such as legal aid, or a proposed Ministry of Justice. We set up powerful

joint groups to reach joint conclusions. This was instantly frowned on by the Doctor. Under Owen's leadership this way of working was heresy in the SDP. Joint working parties and official joint policy papers were initially forbidden (until it was utterly clear that a commission had to be set up for defence policy in 1985). In the end, despite strenuous representations our papers could not be made official joint publications and the lawyers' associations published them themselves as joint papers.

I remember sitting in a Commons committee room shortly before the 1987 election at a joint meeting of the two parties' policy committees, arguing over the position of commas in the joint statement of defence policy – with Nancy Seear threatening to walk out – reflecting that things could have been very different. Instead of every item in the manifesto being negotiated between the parties, often on a line-by-line basis, policies could, as with our Ministry of Justice proposal, have been thrashed out in joint working groups over a period of years. The joint manifesto could have been the distillation of already-agreed policy positions.

Even worse than the manifesto deliberations, the structure for agreeing strategy and organisation for the 1987 general election was byzantine in the extreme. There were two tiers of committees: the 'Leaders' Advisory Committee', which became the joint Alliance Strategy Committee; and the Joint Planning Committee. In addition there were separate election committees for each party, each with their own budget. All this has been documented in all its ineffectiveness by Des Wilson in *Battle for Power*.

The '87 general election itself featured not only twin campaign managers (John Pardoe and John Harris), but twin heads for every function. However well we got on with our opposite number – and in the candidate briefing area I was fortunate in John Roper – most of us who had any depth of involvement said 'never again'. The poster slogan, 'The Only Fresh Thing on the



Menu', seemed laughable. We all seemed stale by then.

Many of the problems of the merger negotiations and the reaction to merger proposals were in themselves the result of scar tissue, such as this, formed during the Alliance years, when closer relationships and fraternisation were not encouraged. This was discouraging enough for Liberals but little did many of us know at the time how difficult life was for those in the SDP who disagreed with Owen's line. I can only admire their tenacity over those years in staying with the SDP and arguing for merger when the time came.

I was reminded of my own position on merger before the election when I recently came across a September 1986 edition of *Limehouse Grit* (a publication produced by the left of the SDP), on the front page of which is an article by me headed 'Stuff Merger!' arguing that the two parties' cultures were very different and merger was not desirable. If we had been able to work out a more positive and cooperative way of working between the two parties, without suspicion and paranoia, then the post-election pressure for merger would not have been nearly so great.

It was hardly surprising, in the light of the frustration and wasted opportunities of those years, that David Steel raised the banner of merger immediately after the election, especially when Owen had tried to rule it out so completely. All credit to him. It had

to be done then if it was to be done at all. He may not have always been fully in touch – or wanted to be – with the Liberal Party during his period as leader, but on that occasion he certainly reflected its mood.

The SDP stance on the negotiations was reached in the shadow of Owen, with the hope that if the SDP terms were tough enough, he would be reconciled to merger. Some of the aspects of merger which caused such difficulty and were only finally resolved later, such as the name of the party and some aspects of the preamble, could have been resolved earlier, I believe, if it had not been for this doomed belief. As a result it has taken us 10 years longer than it should have done, under Paddy Ashdown's generalship, to make the major parliamentary breakthrough many of us have worked for and dreamed of since we joined the party or its predecessors.

The contrast between the two men's contribution could not be greater. Don't tell me that one person can't have a major impact on politics. It's just sad that Owen's should have been so irredeemably negative.

*Tim Clement-Jones was Chair of the Liberal Party 1986–88, during the merger negotiations. He has chaired the Liberal Democrats' Federal Finance and Administration Committee since 1991 and was deputy chair of the 1997 election campaign.*

# Merger Hopes and Fears

## Were They Realised?

Alliance into merger: how has it worked? *Rt. Hon. Alan Beith, MP* examines the myths and the realities.

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It seems an age since a number of us were condemned to endless meetings in often miserable – but never smoke-filled – rooms for the merger negotiations between the Liberals and the SDP. Was it really only ten years ago? Were we once in separate parties? Did the process of merger really have to be so painful and damaging, given that the party which emerged became, after the first couple of years, a very congenial party to be in and one which is now enjoying well-deserved success?

It is instructive to look back to the hopes and fears which surrounded the Alliance and the merger. Liberals hoped to prevent the dissipation and division of their potential support which resulted from competition between the two parties. (The effect of such division was vividly displayed in the later election of William Hague to the House of Commons. Either the SDP or the Liberals could have won that byelection if both had not been standing.) Most Liberals shared the SDP mission to ‘break the mould’ and draw new support from alienated voters, although they believed that many in the SDP underestimated the campaigning task and romanticised the prospects of early success. Some Liberals hoped that the central organisational skills and presentational flair shown in the SDP launch could be productively married with Liberal experience in grass-roots campaigning. They hoped to release energies wasted in the duplicated processes of the Alliance. Some Liberals – although I was not one of them – believed that the merged party would replace the Labour Party, by pursuing a strategy which would fatally wound Labour at the next election and move into position to tackle

the Tories at the one after.

The Social Democrats who backed merger, and had to put up with undisguised bitterness and calumny from others in their party as a result, saw merger as essential to the continuance of their mission to provide an electable and responsible alternative to the Tories. They realised that what they had achieved in detaching so many from the Labour Party and attracting significant new support would not last if they remained in competition with the Liberals. They hoped to advance many policies which they found they shared with Liberals.

Then there were the fears which made the negotiations so difficult. Liberals feared that Liberal identity in the minds of voters would be lost, and that Liberalism itself could be dangerously diluted in the philosophy and policies of the new party. They feared that the SDP was not committed to grassroots campaigning. They feared that the new party would be centralised and undemocratic in its internal structures. Liberal critics of the merger package feared that ‘the real Liberal legacy of over 3,000 councillors and a local campaigning force’ might ‘just melt away’.<sup>1</sup>

Social Democrats feared that the new party might retain what they saw as an amateur approach, a disorderly method of policy-making and a tendency for a limited number of activists to have disproportionate influence. And even if they did not themselves have these fears, they knew that others did and were anxious not to lose too many people to the Owenite camp. At times they feared that the vote for merger at the SDP conference could be lost, although in reality the Owenites had accepted that merger was going to happen and seemed to be looking forward to being left on their own. Key battles in the negotiations, such as the ill-fated deci-

sion on the party name, were haunted for some Social Democrats by the ghostly apparition of the dreaded Doctor holding a sign pointing his way for 'Social' Democrats and the other way for 'Liberal' Democrats. It was that perception rather than mere stubbornness which led SDP negotiators to insist on the inclusion of a reference to NATO in the party's

positioning Labour.

Success for the Liberal Democrats was slow to come, but it was painstakingly built at grassroots level, while a more professional approach to national organisation was developed simultaneously. 3,000 councillors and campaigners did not disappear. The party organisation did not prove to be an undemocratic mon-

Liberal identity not shone through, confounding the fears of many Liberals at the time of merger.

Those key SDP members who have contributed most to the Liberal Democrats are the ones who seemed most at home in it. Their instincts were Liberal and they had confidence that the new party they had helped to design was serious about winning power and modernising its methods. Bob MacLennan is an example: at times he was a mind-numbingly intransigent negotiator in the merger process, but in the new party he has been largely responsible for ensuring that we are close to the achievement of a series of key Liberal policies on constitutional issues. As Party Presidents, both he and Charles Kennedy have understood and fostered the internal democracy of the party which is now unique among the three main parties. A few careerists in the SDP ranks who did not feel at home in the Liberal Democrats are now Blairites, but the others have maintained and in many cases helped to shape a genuinely Liberal identity for the new party.

*Alan Beith has been MP for Berwick-on-Tweed since 1973. Liberal Chief Whip 1976–85, he is currently Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats and spokesman on Home Affairs.*

Notes:

- 1 Rachael Pitchford and Tony Greaves, *Merger: The Inside Story* (Colne: Liberal Renewal, 1989), p.147.

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## Success would not have been possible, however, had the party's Liberal identity not shone through, confounding the fears of many Liberals at the time of merger.

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original constitution and on a name for the party so unmemorable that most people have now forgotten what it was. It probably contributed to the near-fatal decision of the leaders of the two parties to promote the 'dead parrot' policy document. Even David Owen found it rather too right-wing, at least at the time.

So, were these hopes and fears realised? The main political hope was certainly not realised at the beginning. A combination of the disunited picture presented by the merger negotiations and public confusion over the party's name and identity meant that it was in no position to withstand what turned out to be very unfavourable political circumstances. The new party had disastrous European election results and hit 6% in the opinion polls. Liberal fears of a loss of identity were briefly realised when the new party, in defiance of the cumbersome negotiated settlement on the name, resolved to call itself the Democrats. It took a reversal of that decision in October 1989 to restore damaged morale, and the climb back to viability began with successful local elections in May 1990, followed by the Eastbourne byelection success.

The idea that the new party would replace the Labour Party became clearly unsustainable even during John Smith's leadership, and was buried when Tony Blair set about re-

ster – a more orderly conference and policy-making structure has largely proved its value. It was particularly necessary in setting out a full range of policies in the party's early years, although the policy-making machinery now appears to have been rather too cumbersome and not sufficiently geared to campaigning.

Now at last, however, the new party's hopes are being realised. It has a record number of MPs and is overshadowing the official opposition in effectiveness in the House. The Liberal Democrats are the second party in local government. The party has set much of the policy agenda for the new parliament, particularly but not exclusively on constitutional issues. Success would not have been possible, however, had the party's

## Gladstone Lecture

by **Roy Jenkins**

6.30pm, Thursday 14 May

Strathclyde University, Richmond Street, Glasgow

Followed by dinner at Ingram Hotel

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Organised by Greater Glasgow Liberal Democrats

# Reviews

## Merger Most Foul

Rachael Pitchford and Tony Greaves:

*Merger: The Inside Story*  
(Liberal Renewal, 1989)

Reviewed by Mark Egan

Reading *Merger: The Inside Story*, it is difficult to imagine how Pitchford and Greaves had any time to contribute to the negotiations which led to the merger of the Liberal Party and the SDP, so painstaking must their note-taking have been at meetings.

This short volume lays bare the detailed discussions at every meeting of the two parties' negotiation teams, as well as the Liberal team's own meetings, and various Liberal Party Council meetings and Assemblies along the way. Both writers have a 'committed standpoint – Liberal, radical and activist' and they make no apologies for it. Regardless of their own position in the negotiations, their's is the only contemporary record of the merger talks, beginning in September 1987 and concluding the following January.

The authors indicate throughout that the outcome of the talks – both in terms of the new party's constitution and the policy document which accompanied it – was unsatisfactory. In their view, while the SDP team remained united behind their leader, Robert Maclennan, in defence of the policy and constitutional issues which had initiated the Gang of Four's break from the Labour Party, David Steel repeatedly undermined the Liberal position, selling the party out to the SDP. Maclennan and his team took the talks to the brink on numerous occasions, each time forcing a Liberal climb-down on issues including the party's name, the reference to

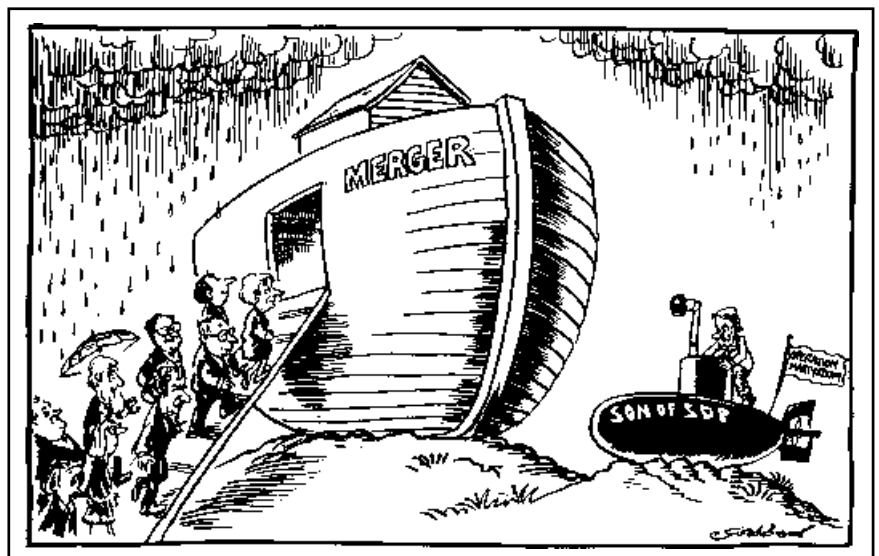
NATO in the preamble to the constitution, the creation of an English party rather than several autonomous regional units, and the accountability of party officers and the Federal Policy Committee to the conference and the membership at large.

In the words of Michael Meadowcroft, another member of the Liberal team, 'David Steel puts far less premium on trying to keep the Liberal Party united' than did Maclennan. Maclennan's brief was to strike a deal which would keep the

SDP intact and, at the conclusion of the talks, he even embarked on a late mission to convert David Owen to the merits of merger. The spectre of a strong Owenite party competing with the merged party, or even blocking merger altogether, was frequently used by both Maclennan and Steel to force the Liberals to compromise. Steel seemed convinced that the Liberal Party would unite behind the necessity of anaesthetising Owen's political appeal. Ultimately, he was wrong and Meadowcroft spurned merger to keep the independent Liberal flag flying, although Steel probably regarded that as a price worth paying for the success of the merger.

While Liberals voted on 23 January 23 1988 by 2099 votes to 385 to back merger, the policy declaration which accompanied the new party's constitution was quickly abandoned. Pitchford and Greaves reveal little about the writing of the 'dead parrot' largely because it was left almost entirely to the two parties' leaders. Alan Beith's recollections of this incident would be much appreciated, especially because he saw the document in advance of its publication but failed to convince Steel that it would prove wholly unacceptable to his party. The 'dead parrot', redolent of the 'stench of Thatcherism' according to Greaves and Pitchford, shredded the credibility of the SLD and

Owen resigns as leader after SDP vote for merger negotiations (7 August 1987)



its leaders at the moment of its birth. Revealingly, Paddy Ashdown, the MP least involved with the merger negotiations and therefore least tainted with the embarrassment they caused to ordinary party members, was swiftly elected leader of the new party.

The book's main drawback is that the mass of detail it contains – who said what and when, how negotiating positions were decided and abandoned, concessions granted and withdrawn on each side – tends to obscure the reader's understanding of whether or not the talks succeeded in their aim of creating a new party which amalgamated the best elements of its two antecedents and, if not, who was responsible for the fail-

ure. Pitchford and Greaves often become engrossed in their own participation in the talks, littering the text with unnecessary references to long-forgotten policy papers, wisecracks by the negotiating teams and references to the food and drink ordered during nocturnal sessions, without clarifying exactly what was at issue. This is a shame because the negotiations were historic, the only instance in this country of two independent political parties jointly deciding to pool their resources to form one new entity. A broader, more objective academic study of the talks is still required. In the meantime, this book is an indispensable guide to the merger process.

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control of the party machine; internal disagreement then ceases as soon as an election is called. Sykes examines the experience of the 1983 and '87 election campaigns, and, more broadly, the history of the SDP and the Alliance, in order to discredit the Downsian economic theory of elections (which would, of course, have predicted Conservatives and Labour converging on the Alliance position, instead of maintaining quite distinct programmes) and, in particular, the 'myth of unified parties'. In the former, she is not wholly convincing, especially when viewed from the perspective of May 1997, but in the latter, which is the main theme of the book, she is entirely successful. In particular, she shows how intraparty competition and conflict can drive leaders and activists to make decisions which may be entirely rational in terms of their own perspectives and strategies, while being utterly disastrous when seen from the outside. Hence the book's title.

The SDP is of course a perfect case study for this approach. Born out of conflict within one party, and dedicated to ending the strife-ridden mould of British politics, within a tragically short period it found itself descending into a new set of antagonisms: with the Liberals, over the seats share-out and major policy disagreements; between Jenkinsites and Owenites; to merge or not to merge. Sykes painstakingly traces the history of these internal struggles, from the foundation of the SDP through to merger.

Despite its thorough treatment of the basic hypothesis, the book could be a good deal better written; perhaps Transaction Books competes with the bigger publishers by not employing editors. The two chapters setting out the background of Labour and SDP history are annoyingly superficial and simplistic; the chapter on the different roles played by journalists ('representative', 'sceptic', 'prophet') is interesting but tangential; arguments are laboured; and irritating clichés are liberally deployed (seats are never 'won' or

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## Falling Apart

Patricia Lee Sykes:

*Losing from the Inside: The Cost of Conflict in the British Social Democratic Party*

(Transaction Publishers, second edition, 1990)

*Reviewed by Duncan Brack*

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Patricia Lee Sykes' book makes an interesting addition to the sparse collection of studies on the SDP and the Alliance, and is about the only one to be rooted in political theory. First published in 1988, and in this edition revised to take account of merger and the first 18 months of the Liberal Democrats, the book sets out to nail Anthony Downs' 'economic' theory of party competition in a democracy.

Writing in 1957, the American sociologist Downs formulated a model in which voters try to gain maximum utility from the outcome of elections, and parties attempt to maximise their chances of winning. Parties' political ideologies will develop to maximise their electoral appeal, and will therefore converge towards the centre from both left and right. Downs presupposed that parties were single units or cohesive teams, following rational calculations

in order to win power.

This simple model was later refined by other theorists; intuitively there is obviously something to be said for it. But, as Sykes observes, relatively few academics have ever examined closely the internal structures of parties and how this may affect their electoral behaviour and success. Even those who have done so tend to view internal faction-fighting as being essentially about which leader or group can seize con-

‘gained’ but always ‘stolen’). The epilogue, added after merger, might have been better omitted, since it was written at the lowest possible point in the new party’s existence, and much space is taken up with pointless speculation over the future of the Owenite SDP and the Greens – but read it and remember how bad things were in 1989.

The introduction and conclusion, which explore the Downsian theory and its faults, are much better. So too is the chapter tracing the opinion polls’ reflections of Alliance disagreements, and Alliance leaders’ views of the polls and public opinion, which help to explain their own personal strategies and differences. Steel’s ‘challenge’ to Jenkins at Ettrick Bridge in the midst of the ’83 campaign, for example, followed polls consistently showing Steel to be twice as popular as the SDP leader. Bill Rodgers’ throwing down of the gauntlet to Steel over the seats negotiations in December 1981 is traced to his own self-image as the guardian of SDP party interests (and, in this narrow context, his action was a success – though the Alliance immediately fell seven points in the polls). Jenkins was a consensus politician, Owen a conviction one; perhaps that was the basic tension that tore the SDP apart. And so on.

The best chapters deal with the two election campaigns and their run-ups and aftermaths, spotlighting the internal rivalries within the Gang of Four, and the growing animosity between Steel and Owen. The shambles of the campaigns – ‘joint’ media operations that couldn’t coordinate with each other, a basic failure to agree on any coherent strategy, leadership manoeuvring with an eye to internal struggles after the elections – are examined in painful detail. The 1984–86 defence commission and debates are described thoroughly and accurately. And the Downsian assumption of unified parties fighting rational and focused election campaigns is left in shreds.

Where the book is most interesting and enjoyable is in its use of interviews as source material. Sykes approached her topic systematically and thoroughly, interviewing at length most of the key players, many of whom are quoted throughout *Losing from the Inside*. A few examples will suffice, and more are reproduced elsewhere in the *Journal*. Read ‘em and weep.

‘David Owen, an ambitious, talented young man, found himself without a party, and so he decided to form a new one .... [At the same time] Roy

Jenkins believed that he was forming a new party. Actually, there were two formations of the SDP but, as we know, only one SDP ....’

*SDP supporter and journalist, 1982*

‘I do not believe the Dimpleby lecture has any major significance in the creation of the SDP .... I found the Dimpleby lecture an impediment for concentrating people’s minds on the need to try and fight genuinely from within.’

*David Owen, 1984*

‘I suppose we’ve always had different approaches to the party. Owen disapproved of my Dimpleby lecture. He was not ready for it. He is not as radical as I am .... I made the first radical move. It’s a paradox, isn’t it? – that people should consider Owen the radical. Well, there are a great many paradoxes in politics.’

*Roy Jenkins, 1984*

‘In 1983 the two-leader thing was a problem .... So, you see, we had to have the Ettrick Bridge meeting .... At the same time, we thought the problem was simply Jenkins .... We thought we dealt with the central problem when we got rid of Roy. Didn’t work. The problem was not Roy. It was dual leadership itself.’

*John Pardoe, 1987*

## To merge or not to merge ....

‘Ill-feeling between the pro-mergers and anti-mergers has grown into bitterness, and there has been angry talk on both sides of fighting each other in the next general election. If that really happens, the future of the third force can be defined shortly: none.’

*Economist 5 September 1987*

‘The Liberal Parliamentary Party was lined up behind the two leaders like warders surrounding a pair of newly-recaptured prisoners. Bob Maclennan was asked whether any of them would comment on the foundering policy document. ‘They will not be allowed to open their mouths’, he replied.’

*Bruce Anderson, The Times, January 1988*

*From the Liberal merger debate, 23 January 1988:*

‘We will create a Frankenstein party with ready-made divisions. From the word go we will be divided more

thoroughly and obviously than the Liberal Party has ever been.’

*Martin Horwood*

‘We have not gone through all of this just to add to Dr. David Owen’s credibility.’

*Tim Clement-Jones*

‘The country is not demanding that we merge. The country could not care less whether we merge or not.’

*Claire Brooks*

‘If that is what you want, all I can say is goodbye. Goodbye to every one of you.’

*Michael Meadowcroft*

Opponents of merger sometimes talk as if the Liberal Party is going to be abolished, that the new party will not be Liberal. If that were so, I should be voting against merger.’

*David Steel*

# Research Notes

## Chronology

Key Alliance dates 1979–88

Compiled by Mark Pack

### 1979

3 May

General election won by Tories. Defeated Labour MPs include Shirley Williams.

June

Social Democrat Alliance (SDA) reorganises itself into a network of local groups, not all of whose members need be in the Labour Party.

22 November

Roy Jenkins delivers the Dimpleby lecture, 'Home thoughts from abroad'.

30 November

Bill Rodgers gives speech at Abertillery: 'Our party has a year, not much longer, in which to save itself.'

20 December

Meeting of Jenkinsites and others considering forming a new party organised by Colin Phipps (Robert MacLennan declined invitation).

### 1980

1 May

Local elections. Liberal vote changes little, though seats gained with large advances in Liverpool and control of Adur and Hereford.

31 May

Labour Special Conference at Wembley. Policy statement *Peace, Jobs, Freedom*, including pro-unilateralism and anti-EEC policies, supported. Owen deeply angered by vitriolic heckling during his speech.

7 June

Owen, Rodgers and Williams warn

they will leave Labour if it supports withdrawal from the EEC: 'There are some of us who will not accept a choice between socialism and Europe. We will choose them both.'

8 June

Williams warns that a centre party would have 'no roots, no principles, no philosophy and no values.'

9 June

Roy Jenkins delivers lecture to House of Commons Press Gallery, calling for a realignment of the 'radical centre.'

15 June

Labour's Commission of Inquiry backs use of an electoral college for electing the leader and mandatory reselection of MPs.

24 July

SDA announces plans to run up to 200 candidates against Labour left-wingers.

1 August

Open letter to members of Labour from Owen, Rodgers and Williams published in *Guardian*.

9 September

David Marquand speaks at Liberal Assembly. David Steel says Labour rebels have six months to leave the party.

22 September

Group of 12 MPs, led by Michael Thomas, publish statement in *The Times*, calling for major reforms in Labour's structure.

29 September – 3 October Labour conference at Blackpool votes to change method for electing leader. Unilateral disarmament and with-

drawal from the EEC passed as policy. Shirley Williams and Tom Bradley refuse to speak from the platform on behalf of the NEC.

15 October

James Callaghan resigns as Labour leader.

4 November

First round of Labour's leadership election (Healey 112, Foot 83, Silkin 38, Shore 32).

10 November

Michael Foot elected leader of Labour (defeating Healey 139–129).

21 November

Owen announces he will not be restanding for Shadow Cabinet.

28 November

Williams announces she cannot be a Labour candidate again with its current policies

1 December

Labour proscribes SDA.

10 December

Meeting in Williams' flat, including Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, who outline considerable possible support for a new party.

### 1981

6 January

Jenkins returns from Brussels.

12 January

Liberals publish ten-point plan for economic recovery. Several Labour MPs publicly welcome it.

18 January

Gang of Four (Jenkins, Owen, Rodgers and Williams) agrees to issue a joint statement following Wembley Conference.

24 January

Labour Special Conference at Wembley. New electoral college for electing the leader gives trade unions the largest share of the vote (40%, with 30% for MPs and 30% for constituency parties).

25 January

Limehouse Declaration issued by Gang of Four.



26 January

Nine Labour MPs join Council for Social Democracy

30 January

Owen tells his local party he will not be standing for Labour in the next election.

5 February

Advert published in *Guardian* sees 100 people declare their support for the Council for Social Democracy, and elicits 25,000 letters of support. Alec McGivan appointed organiser.

9 February

Council moves into offices in Queen Anne's Gate. Williams resigns from NEC.

20 February

Two Labour MPs resign whip to sit as social democrats.

2 March

Ten Labour MPs and nine peers resign whip so sit as social democrats.

17 March

Christopher Brocklebank-Fowler becomes only Conservative MP to join Council.

26 March

Official launch of SDP in Connaught Rooms, Covent Garden attracts more than 500 press.

April

Anglo-German Königswinter conference: Rodgers, Williams and Steel meet and agree on the outlines of an alliance between their parties.

7 May

Local elections: Liberal vote rises thanks to increase in number of candidates; take control of Isle of Wight and hold balance on eight county councils. Small number of independent social democrat candidates make little impression.

16 June

Publication of *A Fresh Start for Britain*, a joint Liberal-SDP policy statement, along with photo-opportunity of Steel and Williams sitting on the lawn of Dean's Yard, Westminster.

16 July

Warrington byelection: Labour's

majority cut from 10,274 to 1,759. Jenkins stands for Alliance: 'This is my first defeat in 30 years of politics and it is by far the greatest victory in which I have participated.'

September

Liberal Assembly at Llandudno. Jenkins and Williams address fringe meeting. Motion calling for an electoral pact overwhelmingly carried. Steel calls for delegates to 'Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government.'

SDP rolling conference travels by train between London, Perth and Bradford.

22 October

Croydon North-West byelection won by Liberal Bill Pitt.

October

Healey just defeats Benn's challenge for the Labour deputy leadership.

26 November

Crosby byelection won by Shirley Williams.

December

Gallup poll shows 51% would vote Liberal/SDP.

## 1982

3 January

Rodgers breaks off negotiations with Liberals over seat allocation for forthcoming general election.

25 March

Jenkins wins Glasgow Hillhead byelection.

1 April

Liberal-SDP negotiations over division for seats for general election concluded.

2 April

Argentina invades Falkland Islands.

6 May

Local elections. Liberals win five times as many seats as the SDP, which makes a net loss.

3 June

Tories gain Mitcham & Morden (byelection caused by Bruce Douglas-Mann resigning his seat on de-

fecting to the SDP in order to stand again under his new party's colours).

14 June

End of Falklands war.

2 July

Jenkins defeats Owen to become SDP leader.

September

Williams elected SDP President.

## 1983

24 February

Simon Hughes wins Bermondsey byelection.

24 March

Darlington byelection: SDP candidate slumps to a poor third; Labour's victory saves Michael Foot's leadership.

5 May

Local elections. Alliance's national vote slips, though number of seats increases. Thatcher calls general election for 9 June.

29 May

Ettrick Bridge meeting: Steel attempts to remove 'Prime Minister-designate' title from Jenkins.

9 June

Mrs Thatcher wins general election; Alliance (25.4%) almost catches Labour (27.6%). Liberals win 17 MPs (from 13), SDP 6 (from 29); Rodgers and Williams defeated.

12 June

Foot announces he will not restand as Labour leader.

13 June

Jenkins resigns as SDP leader.

22 June

Owen becomes SDP leader unopposed.

July

Liberals fail to win Penrith & Border byelection by 553 votes.

7 July

David Steel starts three months' sabbatical.

September

SDP conference at Salford rejects proposals for joint selection of Euro

and Westminster candidates and any chance of merger before election.

## 1984

*3 May*

Local elections. Alliance makes net gains of 160 seats.

*14 June*

European elections. Alliance wins 19.1% and no seats but SDP wins Portsmouth South byelection.

*20 September*

Steel defeated at Liberal Assembly over calls to withdraw cruise missiles from Britain.

## 1985

*2 May*

Local elections. Alliance gains over 200 seats and 24 out of 39 English county councils end up under no overall control.

*4 July*

Liberals win Brecon & Radnor byelection. During July (and again in September), Alliance briefly tops opinion polls.

*September*

Successful SDP conference at Torquay represents high point of SDP strength and self-confidence.

*3 December*

Audience of over 15 million watches John Cleese present party political broadcast on PR for SDP – possibly the most-watched PPB ever.

## 1986

*8 May*

Liberals win Ryedale byelection and just miss West Derbyshire. Local elections: Alliance gain control of Adur and Tower Hamlets and make a net gain of around 380 seats.

*May*

Owen reacts furiously to Steel's hints to press that Alliance Defence Commission report will recommend no replacement for Polaris nuclear submarine fleet.

*11 June*

Alliance Defence Commission reports, avoiding decision on Polaris replacement. Owen and Steel subsequently explore options for Anglo-French cooperation over nuclear deterrent (the 'Euro-bomb').

*18 July*

Liberals narrowly fail to win Newcastle-under-Lyme after hard-hitting campaign which draws criticism from David Steel.

*23 September*

Liberal Assembly in Eastbourne defeats leadership over European cooperation on nuclear weapons.

## 1987

*26 January*

'Relaunch' of Alliance at Barbican rally. Joint Alliance parliamentary spokesmanships announced.

*26 February*

SDP wins Greenwich byelection.

*12 March*

Liberals hold Truro in byelection caused by David Penhaligon's death in a car accident in December 1986.

*7 May*

Local elections: Alliance gains over 450 seats. Labour losses and Conservative gains lead Thatcher to call general election.

*11 June*

Mrs Thatcher wins general election. Alliance's vote drops by 2.9%. SDP falls from 8 to 5 seats (Jenkins loses Hillhead) and Liberals from 19 to 17.

*13 June*

Owen gives press conference where he appears to reject any attempts at merger.

*14 June*

Steel announces to media support for merger. Owen fails to receive his message before being contacted by the press and accuses Steel of trying to bounce him.

*June*

SDP National Committee decides to hold a ballot on whether to negotiate over merger with Liberals.

*2 July*

'Yes to Unity' campaign launched by SDP pro-merger members.

*5 August*

SDP votes 57%–43% in favour of merger negotiations.

*6 August*

Owen resigns as SDP leader.

*29 August*

MacLennan becomes SDP leader.

*17 September*

Liberal Assembly votes to open negotiations on merger.

*10 December*

Merger negotiators agree on 'New Liberal Social Democratic Party' (or 'Alliance' for short) as the new party's name, but forced to rethink after Liberal Party Council protests.

## 1988

*13 January*

'Dead parrot' policy document (*Voices and Choices for All*) issued and then withdrawn.

*23 January*

Special Liberal Assembly in Blackpool approves merger by 2099 to 385, subject to a ballot of members.

*31 January*

SDP conference in Sheffield approves merger by 273 to 28 (Owenites largely abstain or are absent), subject to a ballot of members.

*2 March*

Liberal and SDP members' ballots give majorities for merger (Liberals 46,376 – 6,365; SDP 18,872 – 9,929).

*3 March*

Press launch of Social and Liberal Democrats.

*7 March*

Constitution of new party comes into force at midnight.

*8 March*

Owenite 'Continuing SDP' launched.

*10 March*

Public meeting to launch Social and Liberal Democrats.

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Compiled by Mark Pack

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## The Two Davids

*continued from page 37*

Sir Robin Day, Owen said he would regard the Conservatives as 'the lesser evil' and that Labour's position (on Britain's security) was 'unacceptable'. The pass was sold.

The Liberal-SDP Alliance never quite made the grade. While the Liberals' strength was growing, particularly in local government, the party had not been able to consolidate its new support. Nor had the SDP caused sufficient defections from Labour to sustain a long-haul campaign; and it had failed almost entirely to attract prominent Conservatives.

The two Alliance leaders found themselves locked in a pantomime horse, each pulling in different directions, with large sections of both parties cheering the resulting confusion. Just entering middle age, neither had the experience to analyse his situation and plan a way out. Though Owen had served briefly as Foreign Secretary after one or two junior ministerial positions, and Steel had completed eighteen years in Parliament and seven as party leader, neither had substantial experience of life outside politics. Nor was either entirely convinced that the game was worth the candle. In a cruel symbiotic twist to their relationship, however, each was determined to prevent the other from scooping the prize. If there was ever a prize to scoop, they succeeded. In any event, the third force had to wait a decade before beginning to realise again the potential it had shown in the 1977 Lib-Lab agreement.

*Graham Watson was head of the Liberal leader's private office in the House of Commons 1983-87. In 1994 he became the first Liberal Democrat to be elected to the European Parliament. He is currently seeking a publisher for his book on the Alliance in the 1983-87 Parliament.*

### Notes:

- 1 The quote is David Steel's, in a television interview.
- 2 Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (OUP, 1995).

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