Merger Hopes and Fears
Were They Realised?

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 by-election 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’.1

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-

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1. The Owenites were a group within the SDP who were opposed to the merger with the Liberals. They believed in a more radical and activist approach to politics.
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 council- lors and campaigners did not disappear. The party organisation did not prove to be an undemocratic mon-

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 negotiators 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 by-election 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-

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.