

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)

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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



Monday – Friday 9.00am – 6.30pm
Saturday 10.00am – 6.00pm
Sunday 11.00am – 5.00pm

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