

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it contains – who said what and when, how negotiating positions were decided and abandoned, concessions granted and withdrawn on each side – tends to obscure the reader's understanding of whether or not the talks succeeded in their aim of creating a new party which amalgamated the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.

trol 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*