

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

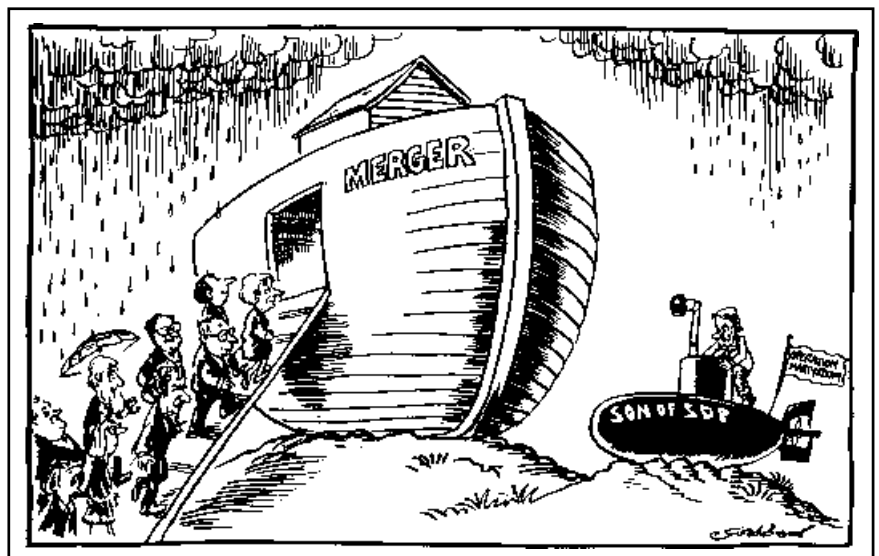
NATO in the preamble to the constitution, the creation of an English party rather than several autonomous regional units, and the accountability of party officers and the Federal Policy Committee to the conference and the membership at large.

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-

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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

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

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-