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 Dimbleby 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 withdrawal 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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The Two Davids

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).