

The SDP and Merger 1981–1987

Bill Rodgers traces the history of the SDP-Liberal relationship, from beginnings to alliance to merger.

In January 1980 I wrote a letter to Roy Jenkins, as much to clear my own mind as to convey a message. Hitherto I had been concerned only to find a way of saving the Labour Party from itself. Now I was hesitantly considering the possibility of helping to launch what I called ‘a fourth party.’ I was not sanguine about the prospects but reflected on the scope for an understanding with the Liberals. For the moment I favoured a cautious and discreet approach to them.

As the Labour Party continued to slide towards disaster, I had given it a year, no more, to come to its senses. Unlike Roy Jenkins, who had set out his stall very clearly in his Dimbleby lecture, I was locked into the party I had joined over 30 years earlier, and as yet had no coherent view on realignment. I was ready to concede the possibility of a new party but my energies were still devoted to the rescue of an old one.

David Steel was aware of this, but on several occasions tried to open a dialogue. We had worked together during the European referendum campaign of 1975 and I had acted as a conduit between him and the Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, in the early days of the Lib-Lab Pact. I was in no doubt that he was a man we could do business with. For the moment, however, that was a bridge too far. The position of both Shirley Williams and David Owen was similar: it was too soon to discuss what relations we would have with the Liberal Party if it came to a break.

What is strange, looking back, is that we had not discussed the matter much between ourselves even by the beginning of 1981 when the Limehouse Declaration and the formation of the Council for Social Democracy – which led two months later to the SDP – was immi-

nent. We took for granted that a partnership of a kind would be essential. There was, however, no collective view of what form it should take, not because of disagreement within the Gang of Four but because it was absent from our agenda. It follows that any idea that two parties – one not yet launched – might eventually merge was very far away. It may have crossed Roy Jenkins’ mind but it never crossed mine.

The first hint that there might be serious differences of opinion in the Gang of Four about relations with the Liberals came on the day of the launch on 26 March 1981. The four of us sat together on the platform at the Connaught Rooms, off Kingsway in central London, each to make a short statement and to answer questions on an allocation previously agreed between us. Apart from the largest con-

A new party is launched: the Connaught Rooms, 26 March 1981.



tingent of UK press, radio and television I had ever seen, there were reporters from most of western Europe, the United States, the Commonwealth and the rest of the world. One of these was Bonnie Angelo, head of *Time* magazine's London bureau and she asked how many Parliamentary seats the SDP would fight. This fell to me to answer and I said without hesitation, 'About half, at least three hundred.'

Had I been asked this question before the Limehouse Declaration, I might have suggested about 60 seats, the figure I had in mind in my letter to Roy Jenkins a year earlier. But the immense enthusiasm we had aroused and the skeleton of a nationwide organisation for which there was already a blueprint, made me confident in my announcement. David Steel might not like it, but if the Liberals and the SDP each fought half the seats it would be a measure of our equal partnership.

My answer was given on the spur of the moment, but it did not occur to me that exception would be taken to it within our own ranks. I was mistaken, and soon David Owen was arguing that I had made a serious error in 'giving away' half the seats to the Liberals. I should, I was told, have threatened to fight all seats as a measure of the dominance the SDP proposed to achieve. We might even choose to fight the elections or in saying they were perceived by the public as representing failure. Thus the lines were drawn up which were to persist to the decisive merger vote of 1987.

Relations with the Liberals remained a constant theme in the two years that led to the 1983 general election. For the most part, Roy, Shirley and I saw no point in restraining a closer partnership, but David Owen was constantly on the alert to anything that might compromise the SDP's identity either by open decision or by stealth. I remained more cautious than Roy, and occasionally found myself sharing some of David Owen's reservations. My essential theme was of 'natural convergence', a bottom-up growing



'What do you mean, can't we slow down a bit? We haven't even started the motor yet!' (2 February 1981)

together of the two parties with activists setting the pace. But merger was not then part of my vocabulary.

It was the result of the 1983 election that made it a serious subject for discussion. The Alliance won 25.4% of the vote and was within 2.2% of overtaking Labour. It was first or second in 332 seats and nearly eight million votes were divided almost equally between Liberal and Social Democrat candidates. The SDP had the highest proportion of women candidates and an effective national organisation. The result nevertheless was a great disappointment after the byelection victories of Crosby, Hillhead and Bermondsey; and after the time, in December 1981, when Gallup had recorded 51% of the electorate prepared to vote for the SDP or the Liberals and an average of all polls had given the Alliance 42.1% of the vote. Roy Jenkins' position as leader of the SDP had become untenable with David Owen making clear that he would challenge Roy if he failed to give way. Thus at the moment that merger became a credible option to discuss, the SDP's new leader ruled it out.

From the earliest days of the SDP David Owen had seen it – at least in its central core – as divided into Jenkinsites and Owenites. This was nonsense in the case of the other two

members of the Gang of Four. Although close to Roy, my negotiations with the Liberals in 1981–83 over the allocation of Parliamentary seats – including my public row with David Steel – had won David Owen's approval whilst Roy had been unhappy. Shirley had seen David Owen to be the more acceptable image for a new party and had nominated him against Roy for the leadership. A small group of key people who had kept in touch with Roy during his Brussels years, particularly after his Dimpleby lecture – David Marquand, Clive Lindley, Matthew Oakshott, Jim Daly – were sometimes more royalist than the king. But for the most part even those most active in committees preferred to judge issues on their merits. They wanted a harmonious collective leadership.

This was not the way David Owen saw it. He preferred to label them and balance their numbers on committees and working groups. The Jenkinsites were pro-Liberal and therefore pro-merger. His own troops were anti-Liberal and not prepared to see merger discussed.

Merger by stealth was what he most feared when it came to another agreement with the Liberals about Parliamentary seats. The Liberal Party did not want the prolonged and damaging round of previous

Liberals in a byelection (and, it was implied, trounce them). But within a few days, my approach to the division of seats was agreed by the Steering Committee of the SDP, although not without some argument, and we turned to how negotiations should be conducted. I said in a paper: 'Relations with the Liberals are bound to follow an irregular pattern. In some areas, there will be hard bargaining with little genuine spirit of cooperation; in others, the Liberals and Social Democrats will get on happily together.' And so it proved.

Nine days after the launch of the

negotiations. Nor did most Social Democrats. Under pressure from David Owen, I agreed to take charge of the negotiations once again but, apart from agreed exchanges, hoped to leave the 1983 arrangements largely in place. But the question arose of who should choose the candidates, individual Liberals and individual Social Democrats (each in their own seats) or Liberals and Social Democrats voting together for whoever they thought to be the best man or woman?

Most of us would have left this to local decision with no more than guidance from the centre, but in the

and that the remaining seats should simply choose the candidate they preferred.

David Owen's attitude to merger insofar as it had previously seemed inchoate was firmly articulated in his first few months as leader. Roy Jenkins was not in favour of merger but of keeping the door open to it. I certainly rejected an instant merger but in an article for the *Political Quarterly*, said this was 'quite different from a deliberate attempt to frustrate the organic growth of the Alliance.' 'If', I continued, 'members of both parties wish to turn a loose Alliance into a close day-to-day relationship it would be foolish to resist such pressure on the grounds that premature merger might result.' But this was unacceptable to David Owen, and he contrived to ensure a motion for debate at the SDP's Salford Conference in September 1983 that effectively ruled out merger until the end of the Parliament. The Party, always deferential to its leader, agreed and this became a point of reference in the years ahead.

What slowly emerged was a clearer view of David Owen's strategy. Put simply, it was to keep the Alliance together only long enough to win proportional representation for Westminster; and then for the SDP and the Liberals to go their separate ways. This was flawed in two crucial respects. Whatever restraints he placed on coming closer together, there was very little in terms of ideas or policies that separated the two parties. The Alliance itself was a measure of this. For the SDP to turn on its previous allies at some future date and fight the Liberals was quite unrealistic. Even the Salford delegates would have found that unacceptable had it been spelt out to them.

The second objection was even more profound. David Owen had abandoned the 'win-a-majority, form-a-government' message of both the SDP and the Liberals prior to the 1983 election. He now set his sights much lower, making holding-the-balance in a hung parliament the aim. This was an unsat-

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SDP, Shirley Williams and I departed for the 1981 Anglo-German Königswinter Conference on the Rhine. In the margins of it we had serious discussions with David Steel and Richard Holme, in which we were joined by David Marquand. The outcome was the so-called 'Königswinter Compact', an agreement between the two parties written out by Richard Holme on a lined sheet of greenish paper that looked as if it had been torn from an office ledger. It committed us to fighting the next general election in alliance, 'as distinct parties but offering the nation a government of partnership.'

Shirley Williams and I returned to London well pleased, believing that our agreement was totally consistent with previous understandings. But again there was trouble, principally from David Owen who said we had no mandate for our Königswinter activities. He was not alone in disliking a closer relationship with the Lib-

end we devised a system of joint closed and joint open selection. Under the first, members of both parties would vote together but only for a shortlist made up entirely of Liberals or entirely of Social Democrats; under the second, open, system members of both parties voting together would choose from a mixed list of Liberals and Social Democrats. These arrangements were monitored by the National Committee of the SDP which would approve or disapprove local proposals with David Owen taking a close interest in every seat. It was a laborious process. The objective seemed reasonable enough – to ensure a fair share of seats for both parties, especially good seats – but for David Owen it was meant to place a barrier wherever possible against members of two parties beginning to think and work as one. He only abandoned the attempt in the autumn of 1985 when I told him I would no longer oversee it

isfactory formula for campaigning and it crucially depended on a stalemate between Labour and the Conservatives which only the voters could decide. There had been three occasions since the war – 1950, 1964 and 1974 – when a strong and confident third party might have been able to negotiate a deal, but this gave no more than a one-in-four chance of a hung parliament next time. David Owen was not alone in grasping at the idea: it seemed our best hope. But to predicate the future of the SDP on such an outcome was fragile.

We are now, in 1998, also wiser about the process by which proportional representation might have been secured. An agreement with either Labour or the Conservatives would have been extracted under duress and the new government would have looked for an early opportunity to hold a further election and win a clear majority. The need to decide on the form of PR, the possibility of a referendum and the difficult progress of legislation through parliament (there would have been backbench revolts) would have provided the necessary breathing space. A hung parliament would not have delivered what David Owen wanted from it. The whole experiment would have ended in tears.

Throughout the 1983 Parliament, the two leaders, David Owen and David Steel, preferred to make decisions together rather than find themselves bound by any joint committee of the two parties. David Owen in particular feared that some Social Democrats, myself and Shirley Williams included, might make common cause with Liberals in an unacceptable majority. But from 1985 the Alliance Strategy Committee, chaired jointly by the leaders, met regularly to discuss and sometimes resolve problems between the parties. In early meetings there was a desultory attempt to raise merger until it was seen to be fruitless. And the row over the Joint Commission on Defence and Disarmament when David Owen re-

jected its unanimous report which I, together with other Social Democrats, had signed in the spring of 1986, was evidence that he preferred to keep his distance from the Liberals rather than reach any agreement that involved compromise. Defence was, he believed, one area where SDP policy should be distinct. It helped to mark an identity he hoped the SDP would retain.

The report of the Commission on Defence and Disarmament caused much bitterness in the SDP. David Owen always demanded great personal loyalty and he also equated losing with humiliation. The belief that John Roper and I had been disloyally responsible for him 'losing' in the Commission made us the object of his anger. My personal relationship with him was never to be the same again.

During 1984 and 1985 we had been quite close. I admired his dominating parliamentary performance and his relentless determination to keep the SDP in the political game. By any standards, it was an achievement of a high order. Over lunch, he would relax for a moment and confess how tired he was and how uncertain about the future. I would then try to persuade him not to rule out eventual merger and leading the merged party thereafter. He never dismissed this out of hand but a major obstacle was plainly his contemp-

tuous impatience with much of the Liberal Party which he thought of as jejune and ungovernable. There was no song in his heart about the prospects for the next parliament.

In the early hours of Friday 12 June 1987 any hope of a hung Parliament fell apart as Mrs Thatcher again headed for a three-figure majority. At 4.00am Alan Watson, a former Liberal President and one of David Steel's close advisors, and I were interviewed together on television by Robin Day. Our message was the same: merger was now a serious option that our two parties should address without delay. Six difficult months later, against David Owen's wishes and after much political blood-letting, it was achieved. Had David Owen been prepared to acknowledge that merger was the logic of two consecutive electoral defeats for the Alliance – or been willing to accept the 'Yes' verdict of the SDP's membership in a one-member, one-vote ballot – the Social and Liberal Democrats could have been launched with hope and excitement. As it was, the climb back to credibility was to be hard.

William (Lord) Rodgers was Secretary of State for Transport 1976–79, one of the SDP's 'Gang of Four' founders in 1981, and SDP Vice President until 1987. In 1997 he was elected to succeed Lord Jenkins as leader of the Liberal Democrat peers.

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