

Robert Maclennan was one of the original MPs who left the Labour Party to found the SDP, eventually becoming its third, and last, leader. **Tony Little** interviewed him during this year's Liberal Democrat conference at Harrogate.

Breaking the mould?

In 1981, twenty-nine Labour MPs and one Conservative, backed by some senior political figures who were not in Parliament, defected to the newly formed Social Democratic Party. Their bold plan was to break the mould of British two-party politics and this led first to the Alliance with the Liberal Party and eventually to merger and the formation of the Liberal Democrats.

Robert Maclennan was a leading figure in this process. He first entered Parliament as Labour MP for Caithness & Sutherland at the general election of 1966, defeating the Liberal incumbent George Mackie. He was one of the few MPs who defected to the SDP to hold onto his seat at the 1983 general election. When the SDP membership voted for merger with the Liberals, David Owen resigned as party leader, later opting to keep a 'continuing SDP' in being. Robert Maclennan was elected unopposed as leader of the SDP for the period of the merger negotiations, and was joint leader of the new merged party with David Steel until the election of Paddy Ashdown in July 1988.

This background has given Robert Maclennan a unique perspective from which to comment on the triumphs and disappointments of political defection and to talk about the personal pain of leaving behind friends and achievements in one party to embark into an uncertain future in another.

TL: *What brought you into politics in the first place?*

RM: A desire to improve the condition of our fellow human beings; a sense of anger at the low aspirations of politicians in government. I really became active in the thirteen years of Conservative government after 1951.

TL: *Your choice of party, was it inevitably Labour?*

RM: Not absolutely inevitably. But it seemed to be the party of the progressives in British politics at the time and the only vehicle through which one might hope to achieve one's political goals. The Liberal party, which I did consider, seemed to be so reduced and with so few prospects of being even in a position of influence that it seemed to me quite impossible to join it at that time.

TL: *The seat you fought (Caithness and Sutherland) was held by a Liberal.*

RM: It was. In 1966 I defeated a Liberal by a mere sixty-four votes. The choice of Caithness & Sutherland had been mine. I had expressed an interest to the Labour Party in fighting that particular seat. It was in a part of the country I knew and cared for and had known for a very long time.

TL: *You seemed to have quite a fast rise in the Labour Party. In your first Parliament you became a PPS and then a junior minister. Were you ambitious?*

RM: I was ambitious to hold the seat at first because I had a very small majority. The first job was to get myself re-elected. After that, I had hoped that eventually I would get involved in foreign affairs and become a spokesman and eventually a minister. I had no doubt about that being an appropriate goal. But in the period following the 1970 general election, at which I did hold my seat, the issue of the European Community (as it then was) rose up to the surface. I felt very angered about the direction the Labour Party took. I really was putting my position as a rising young politician at risk, because I resigned from an Opposition Front Bench spokespersonship in 1972, quite early on. I had only been there for a couple of years and the whole period had been plagued by what I saw as an unfortunate and indeed an unacceptable U-turn on European union.

TL: *You presumably participated in the referendum campaign?*

RM: I did, and I was one of the sixty-nine MPs who voted against the party three-line whip on the issue of Europe along with Roy Jenkins and Shirley Williams and others and that really was the beginning of my disaffection. So it started quite early in my Parliamentary life.

TL: *In terms of defecting from Labour, was Roy Jenkins' Dimpleby Lecture (delivered on 22 November 1979) the crystallising factor for you?*

RM: No, not altogether. In a sense to me, my conversion had occurred earlier. I was a junior minister in the government of 1974–79. During that time I was con-



Robert Maclennan MP

cerned about the role of the trades union movement, particularly in relation to the conduct of economic policy at the Treasury under Denis Healy. I thought their bullying tactics were unacceptable and I became more and more disenchanted with the class politics of the Labour Party. I was doing a job which I thought was important within the government and I thought it was right to get on with the job, but at the same I was very disturbed about the corporatism, if you like, of the Labour Party and the fact that all the time the trades unions were trying to call the shots and dictate where the public interest lay. I did not really believe that was appropriate. Even before the Dimpleby Lecture, I had really decided before that if a new party was formed, I would join it. I had talked to Roy Jenkins in the period between 1976 and the general election of May 1979. I used to go to Brussels quite a lot as a junior minister dealing with issues of agricultural prices because I was consumer minister and I attended Council of Ministers' meetings. I often saw Roy and exchanged views with him about the state of play and the state of mind of many members of the Parliamentary Labour Party. So my mind had moved to the possibility of a break.

TL: *To what extent was there coordination among the disaffected Labour MPs at that time?*

RM: There was no coordination. There was an exchange of views with people continuously. There were all kinds of little factions and organisations within the Labour Party and I was seriously concerned about the way the party was going. Of course it all accelerated and be-

came very acrimonious after the general election had been lost by the Labour government. It became increasingly a break between friends, many of whom shared the same objections to the tendency of the party. In addition there were the moves towards de-selection against individual MPs in their constituencies and then there was an appalling conference in Blackpool in the autumn of 1980. And that actually was for me the break point. I told my constituency party that I would not stand again as a Labour candidate if the policies which had been adopted at that autumn conference were to become the policies on which the Labour Party fought the next election.

TL: *How did they react?*

RM: Most of them were rather supportive and agreed with my general view about the monstrosity of what had been done.

TL: *Was this backing at constituency level unusual amongst those who defected?*

RM: I was unusual in several respects. First of all, I had made my declaration long before anyone else had. It was unusual in that there was a very considerable degree of understanding and agreement and support for my position and afterwards when I did leave the Labour Party many of the people in the management committee of the Labour Party in the constituency went with me. A third went immediately and another third followed shortly thereafter. I had talked very openly with my agent about the situation. And I kept the public informed.

TL: *Did you find it a very painful experience, given that you had been in the Labour Party so long?*

RM: In one sense, obviously, it was painful to break with people, many of whom I liked personally, many of whom shared my views about policies but were not able for one reason or another to make the break but I never had any pain however in leaving the institution of the Labour Party. I do not think I have ever regarded a political party as an institution to which personal attachment should be given, as if it were some form of religious creed. A party is only valid as a means to obtain political ends and once it ceases to enable you to do so, it is only rational to withdraw

support. When I decided to make the break and told the constituency, the SDP was not yet formally in being. The Council for Social Democracy (CSD) had been formed, and indeed the Limehouse Declaration had been made, but it was only a signal that we were likely to break. The response to the formation of the CSD was so immense and positive that the bringing into being of the SDP had to be advanced.

TL: *But that suggests there was always a plan to have a separate party.*

RM: There was a contingency plan to do so. If we had not evoked such sympathy and support we might have remained as a separate faction within Labour.

TL: *A relatively small number of Labour MPs compared to the total size of the party joined at the beginning. Was that a disappointment?*

RM: No, not at all. I think we were actually pleased that we got so many on the very first day, I think twelve if I remember rightly. By the end it was twenty-nine. That was a pretty good tally. The pressures against leaving a party are very strong. The uncertainty about whether one survives as a politician are immense. And you have to be prepared to accept the probability that you will not survive.

TL: *There was a lot of criticism by the Labour Party then that those who did defect were not prepared immediately to offer themselves for re-election.*

RM: We did discuss that and I would have been willing to stand again but I thought the consensus was that it would have been quite selfish so to do, because I was in a position where I felt in my bones that the public was with me and would probably have re-elected me. But I recognised that there were other constituencies where support for the Labour Party was instinctual and almost hereditary, where it would not have been so and I thought we should all behave in the same way. So far as the constitutional position was concerned, I had been elected as a Labour MP, it is true, but I had also made plain my views on issues of policy and they were very far removed from those which the Labour Party spent a lot of time making great play. And indeed very far from the manifesto on which we had fought the 1979 election.

TL: *There was a considerable amount of sympathy from the public to the formation of the SDP. Was that a surprise to the people involved?*

RM: I think it was a surprise. We were very pleased and recognised that what we had been saying about the readiness of the country to break away from the old two-party politics was not just an expression of hope; it was a diagnosis of a condition.

TL: *Did the enthusiasm mean that the contingency plans really were not adequate, that the thing took off faster than you could cope with?*

RM: No, not at all. The initial enthusiasm and the huge response from the public which flooded in gave us all wings. We really did set up the organisational structure very quickly, engaging people to work with us. We drafted an initial constitution and we had great success in the arrangements for the early conferences for which we travelled the length and breadth of the country. The whole development was almost spontaneously enthusiastic and people gave enormous amounts of time and money to make it work.

TL: *What part did you play yourself in the setting up of the organisation?*

RM: I played quite a big part in it. I was present at the launch of the CSD. I went to Scotland as the only Scottish Member of Parliament associated with this move to carry the flag there. I drafted the initial document which really was the constitution of the CSD, and then took particular responsibility for the constitution of the SDP which set up the structures, the policy committee, the national ex-

ecutive committee, the arrangements for assemblies and so forth.

TL: *When you were doing that, you were obviously setting out to do something that was very different from the Labour Party's constitution, but how much was that your own work and how much the ideas of a group of like-minded people?*

RM: It was pretty much my own work. I did have the assistance of Will Goodhart, who actually was the lawyer who drafted the document, but I prepared the brief and took it through the decision-making steering committee of the party.

TL: *You were involved in drafting the constitution of the Liberal Democrats as well. Did you find there were lessons from the drafting of the SDP constitution of things to avoid or things to bring in?*

RM: Not altogether. The situation was a little different. Some of the best features of the SDP constitution we retained. But some of them had been necessities for the moment when we were a growing party and were not necessary when we united with the Liberals. For example, we had had as a basic unit of organisation in the SDP the area party, which straddled constituencies. This was in order to enable the membership which was active on the ground in one constituency to help the formation of parties in other constituencies, or at least to attract members and ensure there was activity. It also helped to have this structure when it came to negotiating seats during the Alliance with the Liberals, deciding which party would stand in which seat. But that was no longer required when we merged and we

went down to the unit of the constituency. But the Federal constitution which was developed for the Liberal Democrats was really building on the thinking of the SDP. We had a number of things which carried on, for example the appeals process to avoid disputes having to be decided by committees when they really were essentially quasi-judicial matters.

TL: *When the SDP was formed, was there a common decision of the group of MPs that they would approach local Liberals and seek an Alliance?*

RM: I think that varied from individual to individual. In some parts of the country the Liberals were not very strong and that was part of the reason why the SDP was a separate party. In some areas they were rather stronger and we naturally gravitated into talks with each other. But it was the situation on the ground really that determined what was the sensible thing to do.

TL: *So in your own case, presumably there was a reasonably strong Liberal Party in Caithness and Sutherland?*

RM: It was more of a strong Liberal tradition than a strong Liberal Party. Actually they had not fielded a candidate against me at the previous general election. So they were not all that strong organisationally and there was never any question of putting a Liberal candidate up against me as I understand. The general picture in the country was of the SDP being stronger in areas where the Liberals had not been strong. It was a complementary relationship in many parts. There were areas where there were difficulties, obviously, but I participated in the discussions with the Liberals on the sharing of seats for the Parliamentary elections in Scotland and we really managed it without serious ructions. And I think at the end of the day, most people were satisfied. Some people had to make sacrifices but they did so with a rather good will. For some it paid off. Jim Wallace, for example, had been selected or was expected to be selected as the Liberal candidate for Dumfries but he made way for the SDP. He was shortly thereafter selected to stand for Orkney and Shetland.

TL: *There were those who came with you from the Parliamentary Labour Party and*

Founding the new party: David Steel and Robert Maclennan.



those who had sympathy but who did not defect. Was there work put in to try and convert more people?

RM: Members of the new party were very sensitive to people who might share their ideas but were in different situations on the ground in their own constituencies and we really did not proselytise amongst our friends. We continued to be friendly and if they wanted to talk to us, of course we talked. And that did lead to a gradual increase in the ranks of the SDP in Parliament between 1981 and 1983 which was very heartening. But there were some people who took it very badly. Some who were genuinely outraged by what we had done. There were some who were less outraged but regarded us as something of a threat and as casting a reflection on their unwillingness to make the same move. So there was a range of different responses.

TL: *Was this an ideological split, with hostility from left-wingers?*

RM: No, the left-wingers in most cases wrote us off. Some of them even went so far as to say we had done the honest thing; that we should never have been in the Labour Party anyway. The real problem was with the centre and the centre-right, people like Roy Hattersley, who despite his evident disagreement with the direction of the Labour Party, felt that it was treacherous to leave it; that it was an institution that should command our loyalty even when it erred.

TL: *How did that hostility reflect itself?*

RM: To some extent in the barracking one faced in the House of Commons, in the general hostility of manner and in public denunciations. I suppose it eased off gradually but it took an awfully long while to disappear. Perhaps it never totally disappeared but as the Labour Party reformed itself there was a slight tendency on the part of some of those people not to understand why we all did not throw our hands in the air and say 'Wonderful; time to go home'. They did not seem to appreciate how events had moved on. Some of them, like Roy Hattersley, were even left behind inside the new Labour Party. It is rather curious how that group neither fitted into the post-1979 party nor into the post-1992 party.

TL: *Do you see it as a great achievement that the founding of the SDP eventually forced the Labour Party to reform?*

RM: I certainly think that it had a beneficial impact upon politics as a whole and that it did have an impact primarily on the Labour Party in moving them away from the appalling class-based politics which had scarified the scene in this country for too long. But the Labour Party was not totally converted by our activities and the basic Liberalism of the Liberal Democrats is something which they are incapable of feeling any affinity to. They are collectivist. They are centralist. They are basically bossy. They think they know what is best for everyone. They are not drawn to libertarian positions. They do not see the individual as the person whom we politicians are in business to protect. They are too ready to subscribe to the tyranny of the majority.

TL: *Whilst it would not be fair to characterise his views in that way, one gets the impression that David Owen was never drawn to Liberalism in the way you have just described it.*

RM: No, I think that is probably true with the benefit of hindsight. He was not at heart a liberal with a small 'l'. He certainly was not a Liberal with a capital 'L'.

TL: *Did that create problems for you as an SDP group?*

RM: It created immense problems after the 1987 election. Even before that election, there were tensions which stemmed from his very strong personality and his unwillingness, in truth, to work with people when they disagreed with him at all, Liberals and Social Democrats. A lot of people admired him hugely for his energy, his commitment, his readiness for change and he was a man of great charismatic personal qualities but the political philosophy which informed his stances was always a little hard to detect.

TL: *There must have been huge disappointment at the result of the 1983 general election within the SDP?*

RM: It was an amazing achievement to have more than a quarter of the popular

vote. It was also a tragedy that so many good people were not elected. We had not learned about targeting seats. Perhaps we did not have the resources to do even that. We certainly did not make the breakthrough we had hoped for but we did establish a bridgehead from which it was possible to go on and build, and it was a seminal point in the history of the Liberal Democrats. We were not wiped out. We were able to build on the narrow base and carry forward the process which in many ways was perhaps stronger for having gone through a period of adversity.

TL: *At what point did it dawn that it was necessary to have the merger?*

RM: I think there were some people who thought quite early on that it would make sense. There were others who felt that it might happen and perhaps that it should happen but that it should not be rushed. I was certainly in that camp myself. Others were

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totally opposed to it and that response led to the split within the SDP after the 1987 election. I thought it would be better if it was not a shotgun wedding, and that the hearts and minds of the SDP and Liberals should be seen to be well and truly committed to it. So I favoured a more gradualist approach than that which was adopted by the two parties in the referendum. But once the members had expressed their view, it was quite clear it was a democratic decision fairly and properly arrived at, and the important thing was to make it work and work well. It was also very important to establish as a basis for the new party understandings and agreements about how that new party would operate. That was why there were such tough discussions prior to the formal agreement following the referendum. We had a long and rather arduous process of beating our heads together to reach agreement on the constitution of the new party. This was a matter of real significance and it did ultimately lay the foundations for the organisation we have today. Ours is a very strong and very democratic party with decentralisation in a federal sense

which honours and values the individual membership as sovereign. It is both efficient and deliberative in its approach to policy-making. These were issues which were very important in my mind because I had felt there had been some weaknesses in the old Liberal Party which had led to policy lurches which had damaged the public perception of the Liberal Party as a consistent party. I felt you had to give the members of the party a real opportunity to participate and that those who did should be properly prepared for the conferences and properly representative of their constituencies; that decisions should not be just taken as a result of the happenstance if you just turned up at a conference.

TL: *The overwhelming majority in the Liberal Party voted for the merger and very few, whatever their misgivings, decided to drop out. Why was not that the case with the SDP?*

RM: There was a significant loss of membership to David Owen's 'continuing SDP'; probably as much as a third of the total membership did not join the new party. And it was very much with that third in mind that I had been advocating taking the hurdles slowly, but I lost that debate and I then had to recognise that there was a new situation. I regretted that loss of membership and David Owen was very largely responsible for that. He personified the SDP and I think he demonised the Liberals. He did not recognise how much there was a genuine coming together on new ground between the two parties.

TL: *What was the cause of this split within the relatively newly formed SDP? Was it ideological as with the fights that had caused people to leave Labour?*

RM: It was very much more personalised. There was a small element of ideology in it. At that time David Owen was more of a central European social democrat, perhaps, and less of a liberal democrat, with concerns about individual freedom. But I really think it was very largely a personal pull he exerted on the members. There were some members who were, frankly, attracted to David

Owen and who had the belief that British politics could be changed by an individual. For them, he was that man. That was never a view to which I subscribed.

TL: *Was the break-up of the SDP actually a more painful experience than your defection from Labour?*

RM: Certainly for some people it was. I was very unhappy about it indeed, because I had put a lot of creative energy into the SDP. I was both angry with David Owen and somewhat despairing of the folly of my fellows who had shown so little regard for the democratic processes of our party. They had

New Labour is not an SDP Mark II. The SDP cared about social justice.

campaigned on the slogan of 'one member one vote' but when the result went against them, they felt they were entitled to try and smash the whole process. So, yes, there was a good deal of bitterness and that took quite a time to eradicate. But the new party, despite the appalling difficulties of the year 1987–88, during which I was joint leader with David Steel, actually did establish important foundations and in the local elections in the spring we did not do as badly as people feared we might. In fact we did remarkably well, considering.

TL: *Do you agree that one of David Owen's ideas was that of the 'virtual' political party which could exist as a central entity, propagandised by television but which did not need people working on the streets and in the constituencies; contrasting with Liberal thinking?*

RM: When he separated himself from the SDP and went off on his own, pretending to be the surviving SDP, he tried his theories out on the electorate and he did spectacularly badly. I don't believe there was any merit in what he was saying.

TL: *Looking back from today, do you think the breakaway of the SDP influenced the reform of Labour or do you think Labour would have come to its senses and transformed in the way it did anyway?*

RM: I think it is very hard to say. I have seen it argued by Anthony King and Ivor Crewe in their book on the life and death of the SDP * that it made no difference. I think they are profoundly wrong and I have told them so. I do not believe that political parties are like hu-

man beings that have a birth, a life and a death. That whole concept is a nonsense; although it may have been helpful in shaping the book. Beginnings and ends in history are often difficult to point to. There is a continuity, a flow, of which the SDP was a part. Many people in the Labour Party – and I suspect, not least, Tony Blair – were influenced by the thinking of the SDP. They had also noticed the spectacular public support for it when it was launched. They no doubt wanted to replicate that effect. I think it gave some the idea that you really could draw a line under the past and re-present yourself, which is what Blair and New Labour have done. There have certainly been innovations which the SDP brought into politics which have been copied by Labour. For instance, the SDP was the first party to put its membership onto a computer database and we used public relations advisers much more than any party had done before. We did go in for some sample polling. We did things which are now taken completely for granted. In organisational terms the SDP was a modern party. In ideological terms we did contribute to the smashing of the class base of British politics, which had dominated it. Notwithstanding the existence of the Liberal Party, British politics was still a class-based war which was being fought between two principal players. That is no longer true today.

TL: *So is New Labour an SDP Mark II, or are there still fundamental differences?*

RM: It is not an SDP Mark II. The SDP had a touch of the old Labour Party about it. It cared about social justice. It did not have Thatcherite beliefs, although David Owen sometimes used Thatcherite rhetoric. The membership of the SDP was genuinely more pluralist than is New Labour. The SDP from the very beginning took a strong line on constitutional reform. This brought it on to the agenda. Although the Liberals had been in favour of many of these reforms, the support of the SDP for them gave a cutting edge to the debate and gave a new impetus to the issue. While it has been a Labour government which has delivered on some of these issues, one has felt a certain lack of

concluded on page 50



issues and policies that Emma Nicholson has campaigned for. These include the fight to end all forms of unfair discrimination. Emma Nicholson herself was born with a hearing deficiency which was not identified until she was seventeen years old. Other causes Emma Nicholson has espoused are the campaign to combat adult illiteracy, the need to persuade and encourage more women (particularly members of the ethnic minorities) to enter public and political life, closer co-operation with our European partners, penal reform,

opposing the introduction of identity cards, protecting the privacy of patients' medical records and supporting moves to impose proper standards on those in public life — all classic liberal themes.

More importantly in personal terms, the story is told of Emma Nicholson's work with children's charities. In 1973, she joined the Save the Children Fund because of her background working in IT, eventually rising to become Director. As an MP in 1990 she visited Romania and later founded an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Romanian Children and launched a financial appeal. Against this background and together with an interest in fair treatment for international refugees and the legacy of the Iran–Iraq and Gulf Wars, Emma Nicholson set up the AMAR appeal in 1991 to assist the Marsh Arabs of Iraq. That appeal raised £4 million over the next five years. A year later she arranged to bring Amar himself to Guy's Hospital for treatment to his 45% third degree burns and then took him into her own family. This in turn led to greater awareness of the effects of government policies on those in the community and a growing realisation that the Conservative Party was an integral part of the problem, not a means to its solution.

A criticism of the book is that while

its structure is essentially chronological, the subject matter seems at times to jump around and the story of a particular campaign or political episode is sometimes difficult to follow through. But in a sense this is a reflection of real life. Busy politicians do not campaign neatly on one issue at a time. Crusades overlap and political themes interact. The organisation of the book brings home the hectic nature of current political life for an active and campaigning MP.

There is an epilogue to the book which consists of quotations from well-wishers, mostly traditional Conservative supporters who, like Emma Nicholson, and for their own reasons, could stand no more of the last government and had decided to change electoral allegiance. It would be instructive to know if any of those quoted have reverted to the Conservative fold or whether the deep disillusion expressed in their words has remained as strong as time passes and the memory of Conservative government fades. Emma Nicholson's political future is, however, firmly entrenched in the Liberal Democrats, as a peer and a Member of the European Parliament. Reading this book, her whole political life seems to have revolved around liberal causes and the only wonder is — what took her so long?

Graham Lippiatt



Breaking the mould?

continued from page 44

enthusiasm for these policies as if they are concessions given by a Labour Party anxious to win the golden opinions of 'bien-pensant' society. But I do not have a sense of their innate enthusiasm for the sort of principles which underlie the constitutional programme. That aspect of SDP thinking has not actually been absorbed by the Labour Party.

TL: How much do you think the SDP has been the dominant influence on the Liberal Democrats?

RM: I do not think it is possible to say. One of the most interesting and in a way unpredicted developments was the speed with which it was impossible to tell from which party the members of

the new Liberal Democrats had originated. The differences now are almost impossible to detect. This happened very quickly. Liberals and Social Democrats found they had so little dividing them that it was artificial to talk about it. This was probably because the members of the SDP who joined the merged party were the people who were most moved by liberal democratic philosophy.

TL: *Reviewing politics from 1979 onwards, what would you identify as the greatest achievement you participated in?*

RM: Helping to promote into the centre of political debate in Britain, liberal, democratic ideas — to end class as the test of British politics, to end the dominance of class in political debate. And to foster pluralism in the political arena. That is what has led to the greater ac-

ceptance of the role of our party in local government, at Westminster and in the European Parliament. These [electoral successes] are the easy measures of our advance but the real change is in the nature of the debate and that, I think, has been our achievement.

TL: *And what has been your greatest regret?*

RM: My greatest regret is that it took so long. We are a conservative people. The aspirations of people in politics has not matched the needs of the country. We should have been more radical in challenging the nostrums of the other parties.

Tony Little is the Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

★ *SDP – The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* by Ivor Crewe and Anthony King (Oxford, 1995)