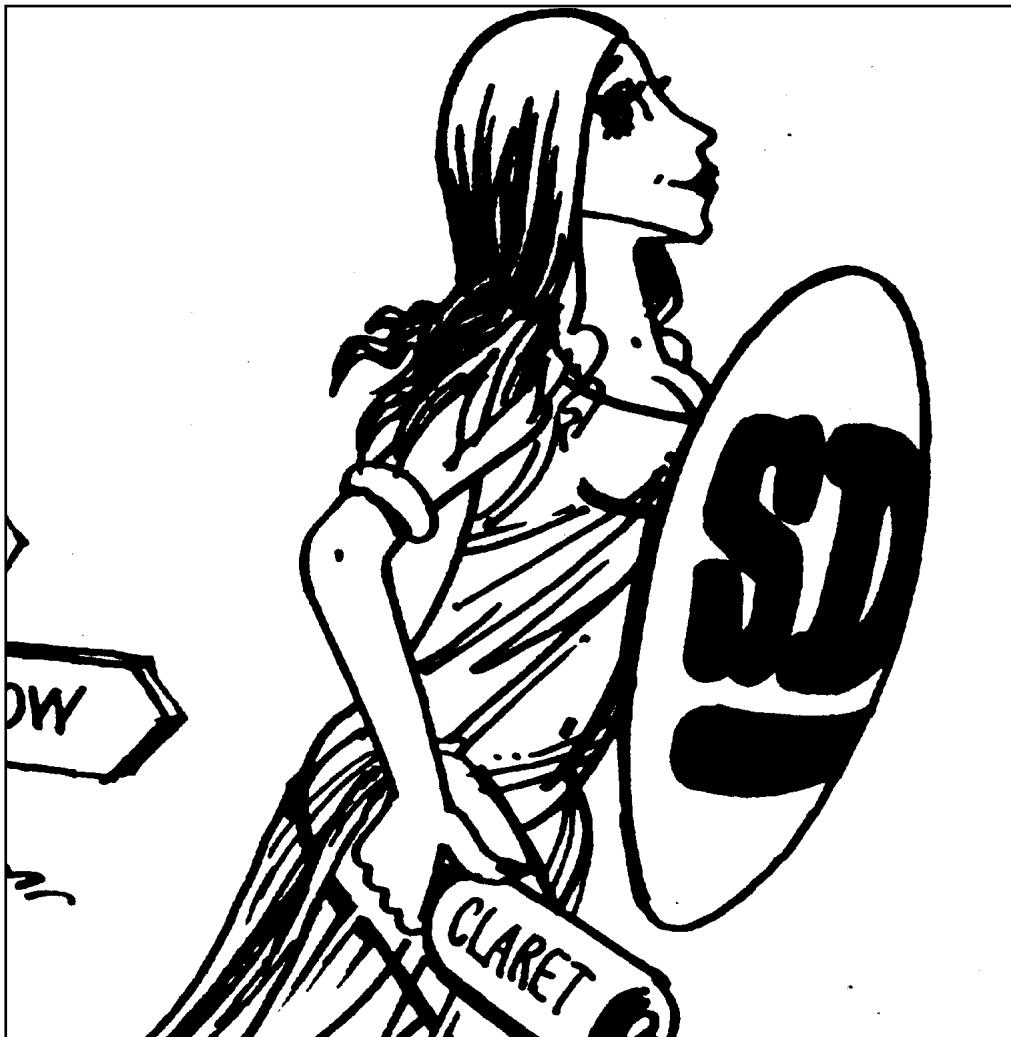


Journal of Liberal

HISTORY



A short history of political virginity

Chris Radley, with Mark Pack

The story of the SDP Original cartoons from the *Social Democrat*

Bill Rodgers

Biography: David Owen

Stefan Seelbach

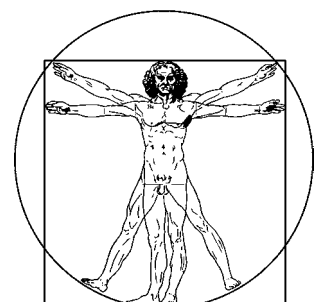
Aspects of organisational modernisation The case of the SDP

Bill Rodgers and Chris Rennard

What went wrong at Darlington? 1983 by-election analysed

Conrad Russell, Tom McNally, Tim Benson

Book reviews Roy Jenkins, Giles Radice, Alan Mumford



A SHORT HISTORY OF POLITICAL VIRGINITY

The Social Democratic Party was launched on 26 March 1981, and just under seven years later merged with the Liberals to form today's Liberal Democrats.

For most of its existence, the SDP published a regular newspaper, the *Social Democrat*. One of the paper's regular cartoonists, Chris Radley, has kindly made the originals available for reproduction in this issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*.

Accordingly, this is a special issue on the story of the SDP – the 'political virgins', as many of them were. Four selections of cartoons, together with accompanying commentary, form the core of the issue, but there is much more: a biography of David Owen, analyses of the Darlington by-election and of the organisational innovations of the SDP, an interview with

Chris Radley, book reviews, and a comprehensive bibliography and chronology for students of the SDP.

The original cartoon drawings themselves – including many not reproduced in this *Journal* – will be on display at London's Gallery 33 (near London Bridge) throughout July 2003. Bill Rodgers, one of the SDP's founding 'Gang of Four', will open the exhibition at a special showing for Liberal Democrats on Tuesday 1 July (6.00–9.00pm).

Full details of the exhibition and of how you can purchase the cartoon originals (*Journal* readers benefit from a 10% discount!) are on the separate order form included with this *Journal*. For exhibition details, you can also contact Maria Linforth-Hall, Gallery Administrator, Gallery 33, 33 Swan Street, London SE11 1DF.

New subscription rates for the Journal

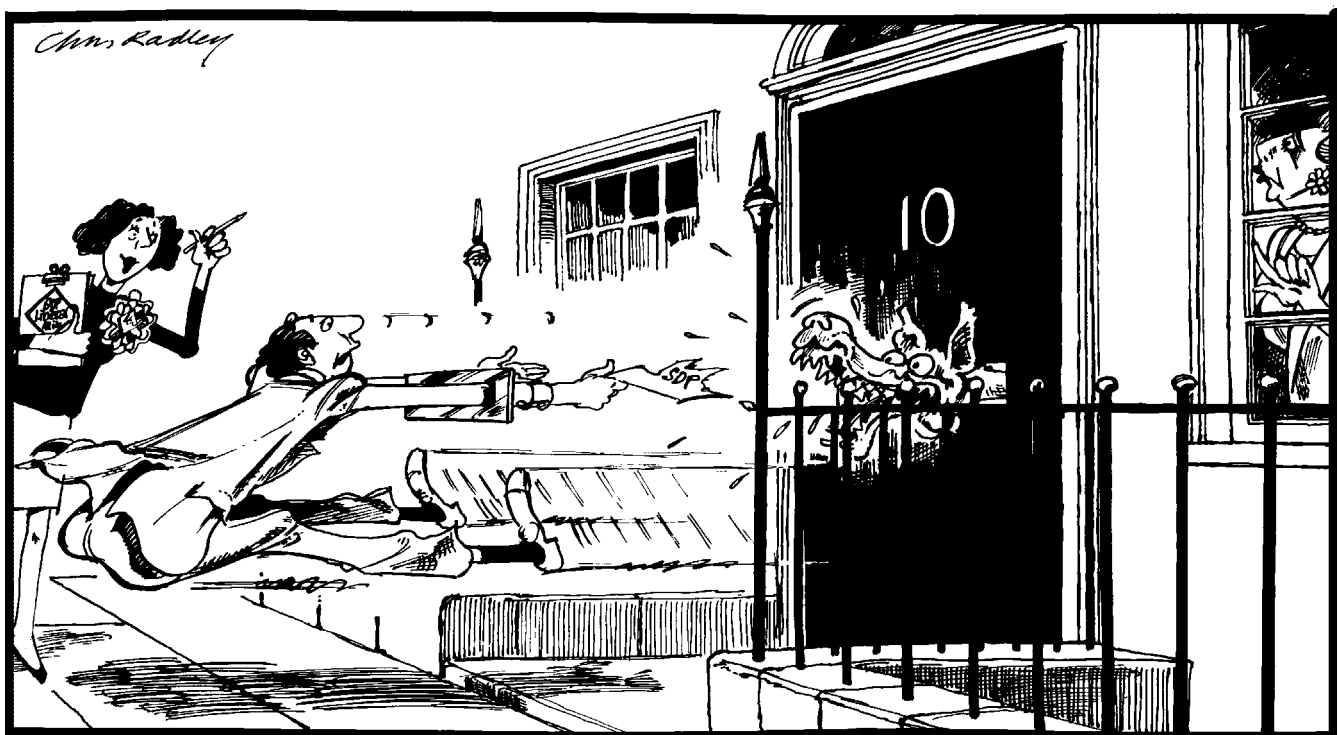
Subscription rates for the *Journal* will be increasing from the new subscription year, starting in September 2003. This is the first rise for four years; it is necessitated by the increasing costs of producing what is on average a much larger publication than hitherto.

An annual subscription to the *Journal of Liberal History* will cost £15.00 (£7.50 unwaged rate) for individuals and £25.00 for institutions. This includes membership of the History Group unless you inform us otherwise.

Rates for overseas subscribers are £20.00 for individuals and £30.00 for institutions; special three-year rates are available for £55.00 (individuals) and £85.00 (institutions) total.

Standing order forms are available on request – for contact details, see the page opposite.

The Alliance gets to grips with tactical voting ('Social Democrat', 19 June 1987)



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Liberal Democrat History Group

The Liberal Democrat History Group promotes the discussion and research of historical topics relating to the histories of the Liberal Democrats, Liberal Party, and SDP, and of Liberalism. The Group organises discussion meetings and produces the *Journal* and other occasional publications.

For more information, including details of publications, back issues of the *Journal*, tape records of meetings and archive and other research sources, see our web site at: www.liberalhistory.org.uk.

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June 2003

THE SDP: BEG

The Social Democratic Party was launched on 26 March 1981. Just under seven years later the SDP merged with the Liberals; a rump Owenite party stayed separate for another two years. For most of its existence, the SDP published a regular newspaper, the *Social Democrat*. In the first of four articles, we illustrate the history of the SDP through the drawings of one of the *Social Democrat's* regular cartoonists, **Chris Radley**. Commentary by **Mark Pack**.

The formation of the SDP (1 May 1982)

The 'Gang of Four' – Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams – were the principal founders of the SDP. They all were or had been senior figures in the Labour Party; Jenkins was a former Deputy Leader.

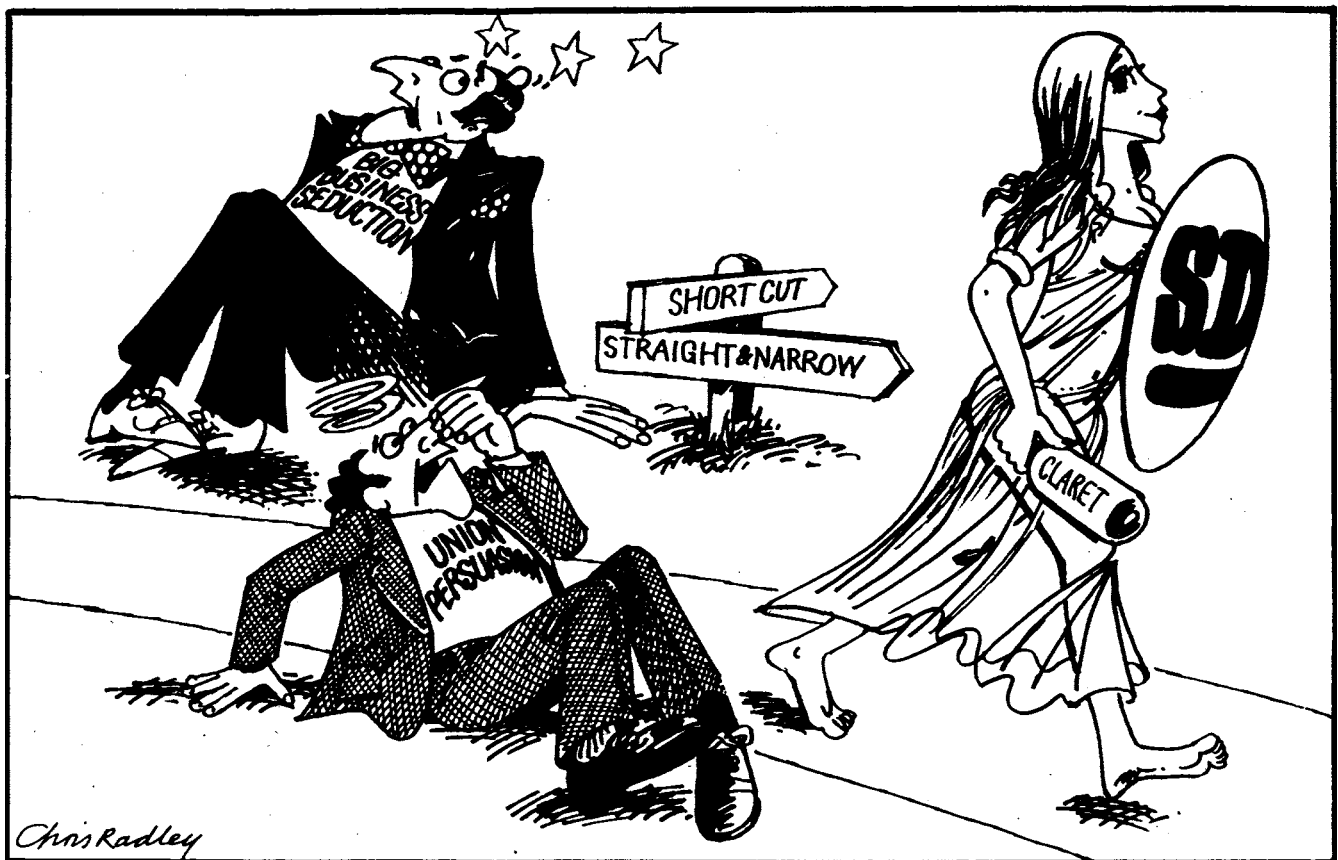
Nevertheless, the new party was notable for drawing in large numbers of supporters who had not previously been members of any political party. Dubbed the 'political virgins', they saw themselves as wanting to bring common sense to politics, unencumbered by big business or trade

union vested interests, which they held responsible for many of the shortcomings in British politics and economics.

Many were middle class, and Roy Jenkins in particular was seen as a connoisseur of upmarket alcohol – hence the bottle of claret. 'Claret and chips' became an ironic slogan of the new party.

Pendulum politics (10 September 1982)

Many saw the SDP, and then the Alliance, as a new, fresh foray into British politics, in contrast to the tired old parties, illustrated in the cartoon (right) by the slumped



INNINGS, 1981–83

figures of Labour leader Michael Foot and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Until the Conservatives' run of electoral success between 1979 and 1997, the textbook view of British politics had it operating like a pendulum: regular swings from left to right gave the Conservatives and Labour alternating turns in power. The SDP set out to break this duopoly and to try and avoid the damaging reversals of policy that followed in the wake of the electoral swing.



Glamour girl (5 November 1982)

Shirley Williams was the member of the Gang of Four with the most popular touch, bringing a degree of glamour and excitement to the SDP. To both its supporters

and its critics, the SDP was something different from the traditional mould of political parties – novel and exciting; or just a concoction of superficial showiness without

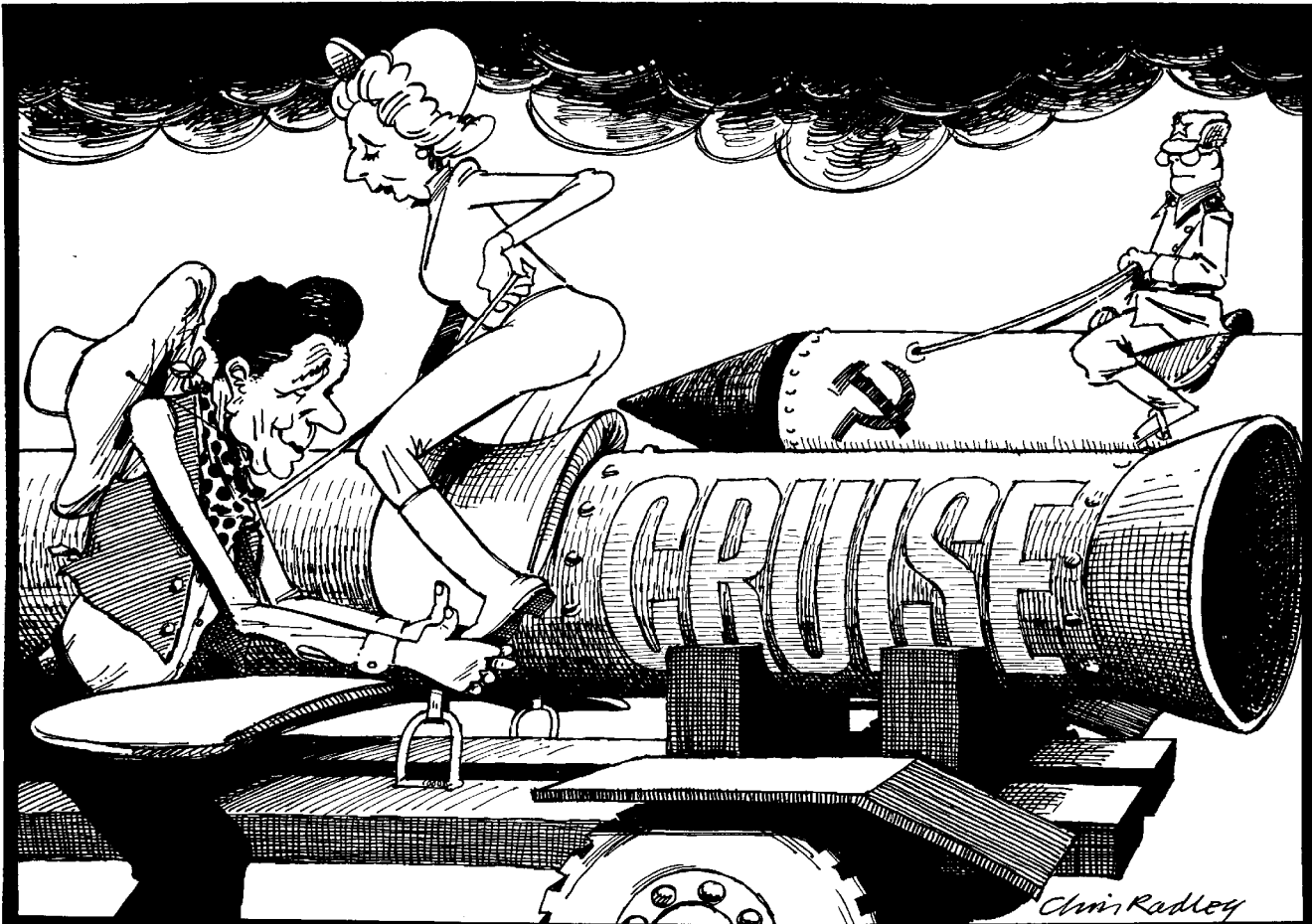
any real values, depending on taste.

The *Council for Social Democracy* was initially set up as a rallying point in the run-up to the formation of the SDP

itself. Once the party was established, the same title was used as the name of the party's governing body.

An incomes policy was the main plank of the SDP's economic policies in the early years – in quintessential SDP style, the idea was for people to behave sensibly, talk to each other and come up with reasonable agreements, in this case on wage increases across the economy. It was one of a wide range of policy issues on which there was little difference between the Liberal Party and the SDP. This similarity greatly eased the process of striking the electoral pact known as the Alliance which was agreed in principle in 1981.





**The special relationship
(19 November 1982)**

Margaret Thatcher was the

closest European ally of US President Ronald Reagan. In particular, she backed

him over the controversial policy of basing Cruise and Pershing nuclear mis-

siles in Europe, justifying it as a response to the Soviet Union's own deployment of intermediate-range nuclear weapons. The basing of cruise missiles at RAF Greenham Common in Berkshire provoked long-running protests at the site. The future of cruise missiles – and of Britain's own nuclear deterrent – was a frequent cause of tension between the Liberals and SDP, especially once David Owen (a defence hawk) became SDP leader after the 1983 general election.



**More economic gloom
(3 December 1982)**

Whilst foreign policy in the early 1980s was dominated by the Cold War, the continuing economic recession was the major domestic issue. The economy only began to turn the corner in the run-up to the 1983 gen-

eral election. The recession was largely seen as Margaret Thatcher's personal responsibility, due to her insistence on the need for radical reform to modernise the economy – almost regardless of the price to be paid.

Crossing the industrial divide (14 January 1983)

As the SDP newspaper put it in an early edition: 'As Social Democrats we are committed to a fresh approach and we are determined to grapple with intractable problems with conviction and courage.' A key part of this approach was a belief in the need to bring together the different parts of a divided society and, in particular, to overcome the divisions between bosses and unions. By contrast, Tories and Labour were seen as destructively backing their own side – and not wanting dialogue or co-operation across this divide.

For the founders of the SDP, these views were rooted in the failures of Labour's industrial policy under Wilson

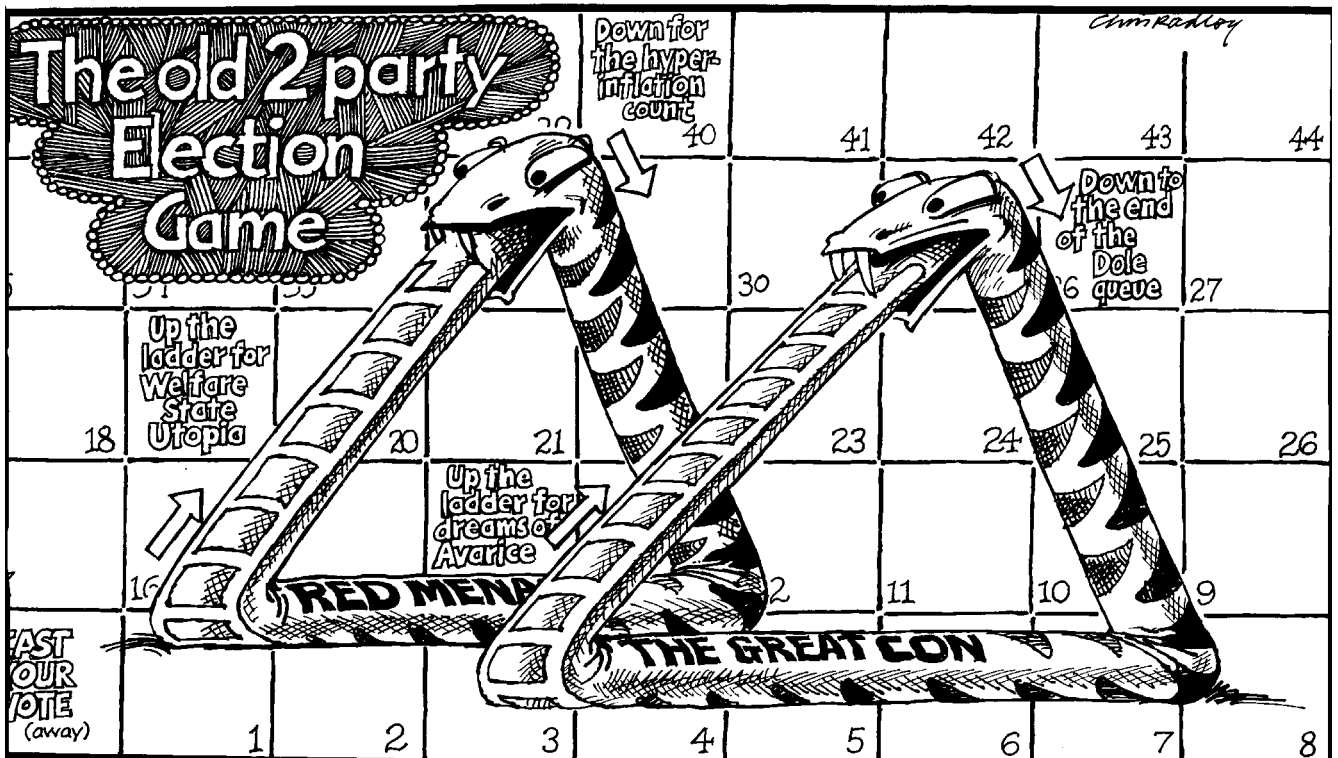


and Callaghan. They found ready agreement with the Liberal Party, which had been espousing similar policies since the inter-war years. As

a result, there was remarkably little tension between the two parties over economic policy during the lifetime of the Alliance.

Snakes and ladders (11 February 1983)

This cartoon, included in a special free issue of the *Social Democrat* marking the run-up





to the 1983 general election, epitomises the SDP’s view of Tories and Labour as failed chips off the same block. They had made many promises in the past and failed to deliver, leaving Britain stuck with an ailing economy. It was a desire to break away from this old, failed combination that attracted many of the SDP’s supporters.

The Falklands (25 March 1983)

Argentina’s invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982 transformed British politics and transmuted Mrs Thatcher’s image into that of a battling, successful war leader. The economic recovery that also took place at the time has resulted in much academic controversy and exchanges of conflicting statistical models

in an attempt to value the relative effects of the recovery and the Falklands factor in boosting the Tories’ popularity. The popular perception at the time, though, was overwhelmingly that it was the Falklands which had transformed the Conservatives from seemingly certain defeat to favourites to win the general election. The Alliance faded from its popular peak, with a poor set of

local election results in 1982 as voters backed ‘our boys’ by voting Tory. But the run-up to the general election was not without Tory jitters, particularly at the possibility of the Liberal/SDP Alliance regaining the sky-high poll ratings it had enjoyed shortly after its creation.

Who’s running Labour? (8 April 1983)

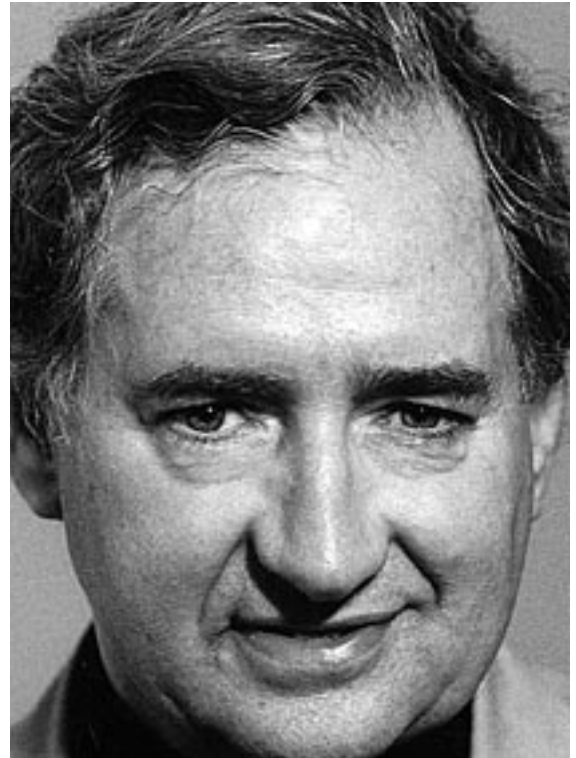
Many critics of the Labour Party saw its leader Michael Foot, shown below tethered to a tree stump, as a front for the extreme left within the party. The latter, whose central figure was Tony Benn (lurking behind the hill), were seen as using Foot for a thin veneer of public respectability whilst plotting to oust him and seize control of the party when the moment came. Restrained by the hard left, including one faction called Militant Tendency, Foot was viewed by some as a sacrificial lamb, about to go down to electoral defeat.



DRAWING FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Chris Radley, former cartoonist for the *Social Democrat*, shares his experiences of drawing cartoons throughout the lifetime of the SDP with the *Journal of Liberal History*.

Interview by **Duncan Brack, Mark Pack** and **Sarah Taft**.



How did you get involved in drawing cartoons?
As a child I always wanted to write and draw and I couldn't really see a difference between the two; both were expressing ideas. I was always consciously trying to find ways of doing both at the same time. Cartoons are one way you can achieve both, particularly if you're not simply a hack sticking drawings into someone else's text.

I started out as a trained journalist and then went to the London College of Printing to train as a graphic designer before coming back into the media world. During early jobs in the newspaper and magazine industry, I would do cartoons for pocket money. If you're working inside a publishing organisation and they've got a lot of retail magazines and things like that you can earn a fiver by contributing a cartoon here and there. I used to get things in *Melody Maker* and magazines like that, although the cartoons were fairly

poor because they were just living off the subject from an outsider's view. You learn quite quickly that if you have a heart for the subject you do better cartoons because you go beyond the superficial.

Drawing cartoons is just something that I made a conscious decision to earn my living at, but this particular job working with the Social Democrats really just rose out of living in Islington and being involved with the party.

Were you doing cartoons from the first issue of the newspaper?

A woman called Val Taylor was the main editor and a colleague of mine was working at Cowley Street producing print materials with his wife; they had a printing press in the basement. It was through that connection that I got introduced. They paid me a sum of money for the first few issues, when they had a budget, which I think was something like thirty pounds, but when money got difficult we just dropped all that.

So it was up to you which subjects you picked?

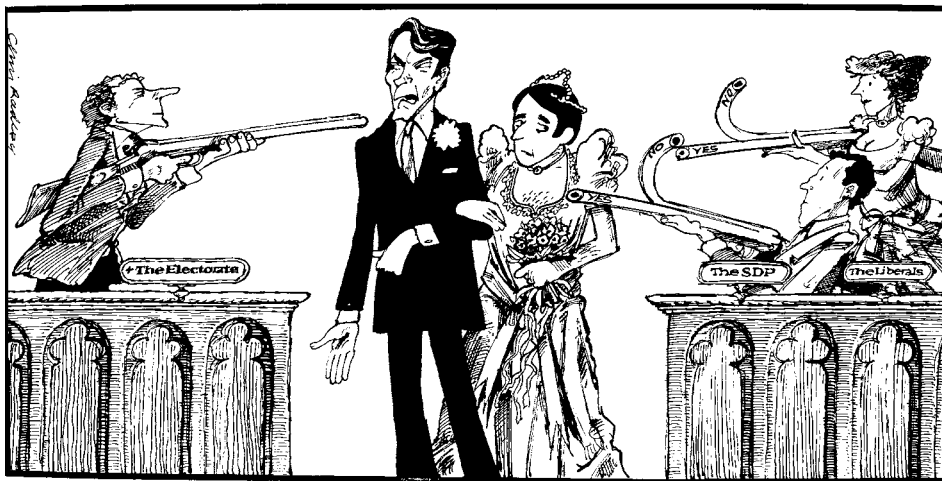
The deal I made from the beginning was that I would come up with a drawing and a line and unless there was some factual or technical error, I wouldn't accept a replacement line. It never turned out to be a problem. There were minor corrections made; there was only one occasion a cartoon wasn't used for some political reason, although I can't remember which one it was.

What made you choose the cartoons that you did?

A lot of this had to do with the timing of the cartoons and it was my background in daily newspapers that influenced me.

I knew Giles and Lowe and all the great giants among the pre- and post-war political cartoonists. They would do a drawing the day before, often the evening before, in time to catch the first edition. I watched them working and they would use the energy of the previous day's news to carry the

I felt very early on that Margaret Thatcher was mad – not, probably, sectionable, but mad.



explain to him that she wasn't a wonderful woman at all, that she was an extremely dangerous woman and that I had the democratic right to say so in any way I chose. He didn't buy a cartoon, which I rather hoped he would!

I don't know what my cartoons achieved, but I felt very early on that Margaret Thatcher was mad – not, probably, sectionable, but mad. I was very worried about a human being with those propensities getting more and more powerful. I couldn't see how she would be restrained from going to places that were really worrying and I wanted the alarm I felt to be communicated. I wanted to alarm other people or to reinforce their sense of alarm. I would like to think that to some extent that happened.

Up to a minor level I was also bothered by the Labour Party's leadership. There were one or two people like Healey who I had strong approval of in certain respects, but there were a lot of hard-left people quite cold-bloodedly using the Labour Party to achieve results. That was a whistle I wanted to blow.

What kind of reactions did your cartoons prompt?

The editor would pass to me any letters that came in. There were seldom very many, but there was one issue where I had drawn Margaret Thatcher in Number Ten sitting at a table full of Japanese businessmen. A whole lot of SDP people wrote in saying that it was ethnically branding a group of people as if they had no character. I think that was the most angry anyone ever got with me, although there were occasions when someone would write to say that I'd missed the real point, which was probably true sometimes.

You seem to concentrate on external matters rather than the internal goings-on of the SDP or the Alliance; for example, we didn't see anything of the nuclear defence debate

I can't really defend myself on that. It could only have been that

cartoon. They would know that people would remember that someone had made an embarrassing remark on the TV and that you would only have to refer to it to take the joke another stage further; it was fairly easy to get a belly-laugh.

Working on this fortnightly periodical, you couldn't rely on that overnight buzz. A fortnight is a long time in politics and a whole lot of things happen in the interval. You couldn't anticipate something that was going to be big that far ahead, so you picked a subject that you thought would still have currency a fortnight later.

Inevitably, some subjects got killed by that process. If you knew that a vote or some Bill was going to go through, or fall, in that period and you didn't have enough information about it, you didn't dare use it because you might just pitch it wrong. You tended to take stuff that had more legs than that; things with some sort of abrasion to them. Doing political cartoons that are based on caricatures, you are being personally unkind to someone most of the time, so you have to be really sure of your ground before you pitch it that far ahead.

Did you consciously model yourself on any other cartoonist?

Gillray is my man and in his day he was doing a weekly cartoon in rather the same way that I was.

In many ways he was working to the same set of pressures as I

was. There was a known cast of characters and a fairly restricted audience of the educated, important people of central London. They knew the game, they knew the inside jokes and they knew the people, so the drawings had to be identifiable in those terms. I've always liked his brilliant draughtsmanship and his courage at throwing himself at wild subjects.

Were you consciously trying to achieve anything with your drawings?

I think I was expressing things that I felt angry about. I don't think I would have counted on a tangible result otherwise and I knew that I was talking to people that mostly would have shared my feelings.

I had a very interesting experience with Jeffrey Archer. The Association of Cartoonists held a fair in the basement of a hotel somewhere in London and they'd got cartoonists to take stalls and sell their work and Archer, who is a known collector of cartoons, happened to be there. He came to my stall quite late on and went through every one of some 170 or so cartoons, at least fifty of which were Margaret Thatcher drawings. I didn't have any Jeffrey Archer ones because he was never quite important enough to draw at the time. Anyway, he gave me a real hammering and spent twenty minutes telling me that I was disgraceful to attack this wonderful woman. I did my best to

Cartoon from the 'Social Democrat', 20 July 1984. The electorate appear to want merger, but the parties are divided.

I couldn't think of anything smart enough to say about it at the time or that I didn't have a clear enough view myself. You've got to start from a point of view, otherwise you can't draw anything.

There were one or two occasions when I was ambivalent myself about where I stood on an issue, I didn't always automatically agree with what the party was saying.

There weren't very many cartoons dealing with the Liberals or David Steel?

I think I felt that I knew what the Liberal principles were, by and large. I don't think anyone had realised that the centre ground was what you had to take if you really wanted to be a new force in politics. I was concerned that a somewhat left-of-centre social view should obtain, but that it should be not a victim of these doctrinaire positions that the left- and right-wing parties were taking.

I just felt that at the time that the Liberal Party wasn't terrifically practical because it chased those ideals, whereas a bunch of escapees from the Labour Party who had been in government and knew about power were much more practically directed.

I certainly didn't have any great critical things to say about the Liberals, otherwise they probably would have featured more often. I was very pro-David Steel. I found out later from people in the SDP that there was quite a lot of friction between him and Owen, but it hadn't filtered through to my attention, so nobody was loading me with a point of view on that.

Tony Benn features in quite a lot of your cartoons as a sort of ghost of the hard left, but although the overall impression of him is fairly unflattering, his actual picture is not particularly unpleasant, whereas with Neil Kinnock and Mrs Thatcher you really accentuate the negative features of their appearance. Was there a particular reason for that?

I think probably because although I disagreed with most of

what he said, I rather respected him as a person and I wasn't in the business of just sticking knives into people.

There were one or two like that on the other side of the line. I saw Tebbit as a genuine figure of blackness and I put black crows on his shoulders. If I'd been working on a national newspaper instead of a party newspaper I would have done much more of that.

Did you ever feel like taking sides on particular issues?

I'd come to the conclusion that the merger made sense and although I would have been picking up enough of the arguments that were going on to make hay if I'd wanted to, I think that's the point when I put my independence aside and was politic.

Owen I was fairly positive about. I knew he was trouble but I also felt he was brave and energetic and capable of carrying people with him. When Maclennan took over, I didn't have much confidence in him as a forceful leader and I thought of him as a bit milk-and-water. Even with Steel, they certainly didn't look like a dynamic duo to me.

Were there any occasions you really wished you'd done a different cartoon?

There were quite a lot of times with Ken Livingstone, who was a really wonderful target, although I did do one of him where I had him dressed up as Napoleon during his GLC campaign.

The problem really was that the main targets had to be the Parliamentary Labour Party and the Parliamentary Conservative Party; those were where the big battles were happening. I felt that if the topics of local councils, even the GLC, become too dominant it would pull attention away from the stuff that seemed to need pinning down more.

What do cartoons achieve that words can't?

Just think about the power of satire such as 'Spitting Image'.

Just by showing that cartoon of John Major with Y-fronts over the front of his trousers they demolished his credibility. I don't think I've ever been quite that cruel.

I used to work for Hugh Cudliffe at the *Daily Mirror*, and he said that a good journalist has an ear to the contemporary scene; not only do they hear and sniff out matters but they articulate it first. It's that split-second of earlier articulation that the public reads and has a buzz of recognition; they already feel these things but they just haven't put them into words for themselves.

The same thing happens with advertising. They articulate what everyone feels about a general subject but accommodate it within a brand message and articulate it in half a dozen words with a bit of music. Next day half the population is singing it, saying it or using it as their opinion in a pub dialogue.

I think good cartoons can do the same.

Do you have a favourite cartoon?

There are two really. One of them has got the Conservative Party sitting around a table covered with a Union Jack tablecloth and there is an Ethiopian kneeling in front of it. I've done a lot of work for development charities and I always felt very passionately that the Tories were ignoring a lot of terrible human suffering so that one really came from the heart and I thought it was one of my better drawings too.

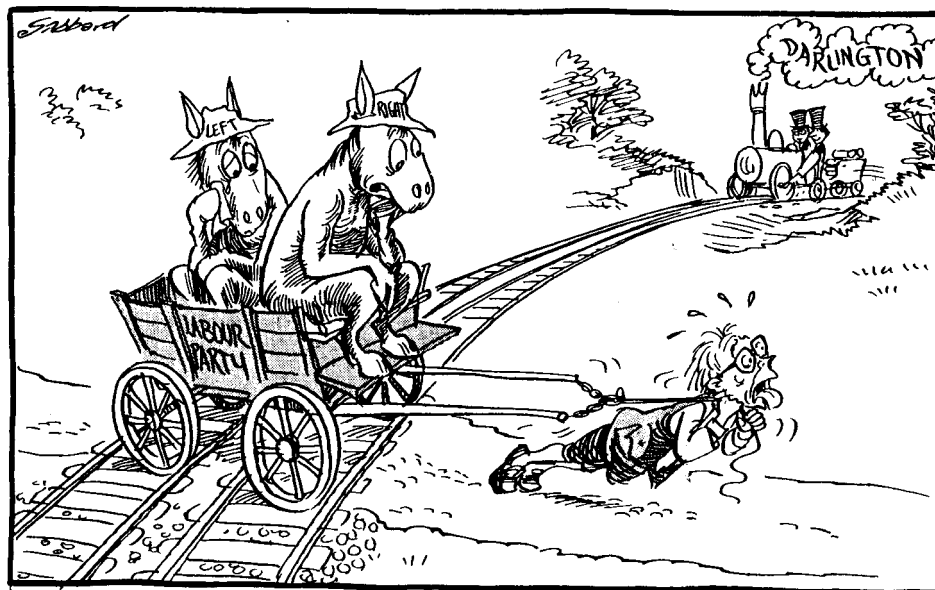
In a much earlier one that I liked, I'd drawn a single figure with Shirley Williams on the front and Cyril Smith on the back and I loved it; I just thought it was exactly what I wanted to say. It was at the time when these two parties were trying very hard to work together and here you had Shirley Williams and Cyril Smith in the same place; it was funny in every sense, physically and politically.

Unfortunately it went missing. I can't think that Cyril Smith got it, so it's just possible that it's sitting in Shirley Williams' toilet.

A good journalist has an ear to the contemporary scene; not only do they hear and sniff out matters but they articulate it first. I think good cartoons can do the same.

WHAT WENT WRONG

The Darlington by-election of 24 March 1983 was a disaster for the SDP. After a campaign which had started with an opinion poll (taken just two days after the Alliance's overwhelming victory in Bermondsey), showing the SDP in the lead, the outcome was a poor third place. The result dissipated the momentum gained at Bermondsey and left the Alliance entering the 1983 election campaign on the back foot. Here we reprint, for the time in the public domain, the internal memo **Bill Rodgers** wrote after the campaign, together with a commentary from the Liberal Democrats' current Campaigns Director **Chris Rennard**.



'Dear, oh dear, it's pitiful – I'm afraid it's time for the old nag to go to grass!' ('Guardian', 28 February 1983) – what the press expected to happen at Darlington.

We started as favourites in Darlington and finished third. We should have won. What went wrong and what are the lessons?

First, we should eliminate the irrelevant.

1. The organisation of the campaign was not at fault. The headquarters worked efficiently, canvass arrangements were first class and party workers were deployed quickly and to the right places. The great majority of voters were canvassed – many of them more than once – and a vast quantity of literature delivered.

2. Although the Press were to play a part in the undermining of our campaign, they were fair and conscientious. Correspondents as different as Peter Riddell, Peter Hetherington and Robin Oakley reported faithfully, occasionally giving us the benefit

of the doubt. Vincent Hanna was in a different category, but his aggressive style at Darlington was no different from his behaviour in by-elections elsewhere.

3. Andy Ellis made his usual constructive contribution and local Liberals played their full part in the campaign, led by their President, Ian Gale. They loyally supported the decision that the SDP should fight Darlington and their members were always in evidence. Privately, several Liberals said that their own (displaced) candidate was not strong and would have done no better. As for the voters, it was a mistake to assume that any previous Liberal vote automatically comes to the SDP (or even stays Liberal). Two-thirds is a fair proportion to expect.

Second, we should remind ourselves of the nature of the constituency. In its social composition, it was attractive to us: apparently good SDP territory

GAT DARLINGTON?

(although with a small and rather unrepresentative SDP membership which played no distinctive part in the campaign). But it was also the archetypal 'squeeze' seat, with Labour and the Conservatives dividing the vote between them in hard-fought marginal contests. In 1979, 10.2% for the Liberals in Darlington was well below the national average (14.9% in England). Our best hope was always to push one of the old parties into third place and then collapse their vote. The need to achieve tactical voting was inescapable.

The course of the campaign seems clear. Our initial canvass was optimistic with inexperienced canvassers giving us the benefit of the doubt. The assumption was too readily made that the Labour vote was crumbling when it had only become soft. But a fortnight before Polling Day we were almost certainly in the lead. Labour then began to gain ground (Shildon, Jim Callaghan's visit and a massive doorstep operation) while the Conservatives stayed in third position without showing much enthusiasm and were not helped by the Budget. They provided a substantial pool of undecided voters. About a week before polling, Labour voters began returning to their traditional loyalties. There was a short period when Conservatives might have turned to the SDP to keep Labour out, but the attraction was insufficient and the Conservative vote stiffened over the final weekend. Victory was moving away from us rapidly in the final three days.

The Labour party fought a skilful campaign with massive resources. Its canvass of the constituency was probably as thorough as ours. It equalled and overtook our display of posters which made a good initial impact but failed to grow significantly. At times, it seemed as if every full-time trade union official was in Darlington, complete with a Granada 2.3. There were more Labour people – respectable, in collar and tie – knocking-up on Polling Day than we had available.

The Labour party presented its acceptable face to the voters in the person of Jim Callaghan who made two separate visits and was well received. Healey and Hattersley were both in evidence. Silkin made a brief, early, visit but Tony Benn and the far left were absent and there was very little even of *Tribune*. An ugly incident in the town centre, on the Saturday before polling, was isolated. The fact that something could be made of one member of Militant seen in the streets of Darlington was a measure of their absence.

The Conservative campaign is less easy to measure. Activity appeared to be subdued and meetings were poorly attended. We can assume that it was steady and efficient and made great play of loyalty to the Government. At one stage, Conservative managers were resigned to third place. Conservative voters moved back as much because of our failure as of positive enthusiasm.

So, to what was our failure due?

Three factors need to be ex-

amined: our candidate; attitudes towards the Labour party; policy.

1. Tony Cook, a television presenter with Tyne-Tees, won instant recognition on the streets and doorsteps. His folksy, friendly manner was well liked. This was a positive asset. There is no doubt that he is a decent man and deserves the greatest credit for surviving the immense personal battering he received. He must not be a scapegoat. But his own fatal flaw was fatal to the campaign. He had very little knowledge of politics and showed limited aptitude for learning. His style and voice marked him as a lightweight without positive ideas or passion. He was unable to hold his own at Press Conferences or with the other candidates. For undecided voters, needing a pretext for supporting the SDP/Liberal Alliance, he provided an excuse for returning to their old loyalties. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that he was almost the worst candidate we could have chosen to fight a crucial by-election under close scrutiny and in a town which took its politics seriously.

The Press came from Bermondsey rather ashamed of their treatment of Peter Tatchell and anxious to redress the balance. Darlington provided them with the opportunity. Tony Cook's vulnerability was clear from his first Press Conference – and earlier, to those newspapermen who had interviewed him. Early in the first week of the campaign we provided him with full-time research assistance (Alex de Mont, then Wendy Buckley) and John

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WHAT WENT WRONG AT DARLINGTON?



The 'Social Democrat', 1 October 1982 – the SDP rising above sectarian politics

O'Brien emerged well from such comparisons.

Nor did the Labour Council present much of a target. Council estates were in reasonable condition and complaints were few. Several former councillors had left the Labour party (the most prominent being Ces Smith) and joined the SDP, but they tended to be in the O'Grady mould and uncertain quantities in our campaign.

The fact remains that we failed to mount an effective anti-Labour campaign either by attacking O'Brien as less moderate than he seemed or, alternatively (and with greater conviction), as a fig leaf. An early leaflet saying that Peter Tatchell and Ossie O'Brien were members of the same party – with Tatchell in the dominant position – might have made sense. There was criticism of Labour throughout our campaign but it was fierce only in the closing stages. We were too cautious in the period when we were running ahead and too inhibited by awareness of the weakness of our own candidate.

3. The weakness of our candidate was also an impediment to the positive presentation of SDP policies. Even when he could put them across, he was unable to stand up to cross-examination about them. It was easy to say that someone else had written the script. Except on defence, he was vulnerable on virtually everything, including routine issues like housing and education.

Nevertheless, the precise and thoughtful presentation of SDP policies in a leaflet – with the emphasis on national politics, national leaders and the Alliance as an alternative government – would have made sense. In addition, on each day of the campaign we could have concentrated on a single issue and given it prominence. We failed to make an impact on such major issues as the mixed economy and trade union reform. If it had proved difficult to do so in Darlington during the campaign, then it might have been possible to contrive major speeches by party leaders elsewhere. It is possible

Horam became his speechwriter. He was taken off canvassing for tutorials; given a driver so he might read the morning papers; and provided with an MP at his right hand. In particular, Jim Wellbeloved was an invaluable presence through most of the campaign. Tony Cook's performance improved but it remained unimpressive and the damage was done. In the last week of the campaign, canvassers increasingly reported that they had been told on the doorstep about the inadequacies of our candidate.

It may be that he should never have taken part in the debate at Polam Hall before an audience from private schools. There is no doubt that this televised event took the comparison between candidates right to the voters. But his weakness had been diagnosed by the Press much earlier and it is very difficult to refuse the challenge of at least one three-sided confrontation in a by-election. In fact, this is precisely the sort of occasion the SDP as a new party should welcome and expect to make a positive impression in.

2. The Labour vote did not crumble and the Labour candidate recaptured many of those who initially preferred to come to us. The acceptable face of the Labour party held its own. There are a number of reasons for this. The Labour candidate, Ossie O'Brien, was respectable, serious and a native of Darlington. He would have been a good candidate, although not an exciting one, anywhere. The left was carefully excluded from the campaign and the Co-operative Party made its own moderate and sober contribution. To be a unilateralist and anti-Common Market was not evidence of extremism, especially when Jim Callaghan was prepared to bless it.

Most Labour party supporters did not compare their candidate's position with a Golden Age of Labour, long ago: Attlee and Gaitskell were dead before some of them were born. The comparison was with Peter Tatchell and the Militants; or, at best, with Tony Benn and Arthur Scargill (Ken Livingstone was not a familiar name in Darlington). Ossie

– to put it no higher – that positive ideas might have held some wavering Conservative voters in the final stages.

Overall, it might be said that our campaign was insufficiently aggressive and concentrated on style (and razzmatazz) rather than positive presentation. It is hard to believe that the shortcomings of our candidate could have been remedied or concealed. But if we had been reconciled to this earlier, we might have been able to construct a campaign that at least in part passed him by.

Most of the lessons are obvious, but here are some:

1. We need the best possible candidate for a gruelling by-election and should be free to choose him. It is hardly likely that we would have displaced Tony Cook on this occasion (a newly-elected television presenter on the eve of a General Election with no obvious alternative in sight). But the National Committee should have the power to make the choice.

In addition, we should be more ruthless in considering the suitability of candidates for the panel; and insistent that all selected candidates attend a training school (our present one-day Conferences do not go far enough and half of our candidates have failed to attend). At by-elections, candidates should be put through a rigorous training session at the beginning of the campaign; and provided with an MP as a ‘minder’, together with proper research facilities throughout.

In the long run, our selection process itself should be reviewed. It is said that Tony Cook showed up poorly on the shortlist ‘hustings’. But voters who had not seen him in action voted for him overwhelmingly. This disparity between members who meet and hear candidates and the larger number who vote in the postal ballot has been a common feature of all selections.

2. Careful thought should be given to a concentrated campaign to discredit the Labour party and show it up for what it has be-

come. We need the best evidence of the perception of the Labour party to Labour voters and the best advice on how to undermine confidence in it. The leadership of the party, all MPs, all candidates, including candidates for Council seats, should pursue the same themes. The period up to the Council elections of 5 May should be used for such a campaign.

Meanwhile, for Cardiff, we should consider an initial leaflet which shows the candidate (who apparently lends herself well to this) amongst a circle of faces including Tony Benn, Arthur Scargill, Ken Livingstone and Peter Tatchell. The theme would be, ‘This is the real Labour party’ and would be supported by facts and figures about Militant, the Left generally, constitutional changes in the Labour party and support for Labour from outside, far left groups.

3. We should try once again to identify a limited number of policies which are peculiarly ours and keep driving them home in a simplified and repetitive fashion. At the beginning of each by-election, such national themes should be related to local circumstances and should be promoted throughout the campaign.

It would be silly to pretend that the political direction of a by-election campaign can be determined at the beginning and maintained throughout. Campaigns have their own rhythm and are volatile. But positive decisions made early could be reflected both in literature and at meetings. Each day of the campaign could be seen as presenting a new theme and visiting speakers could be asked to speak accordingly.

In every by-election prior to Darlington, we had experienced candidates well able to make their own judgements and draw on advice when they chose. There is a limit to the extent to which political direction can be imposed on a candidate whose primary responsibility it should normally be. But from Cardiff on, a more deliberate process of political decision making should be tried.

4. Optimistic canvassing at Darlington exaggerated our lead; amateur canvassing in the middle stages failed to detect the drift away. More to the point, much of the canvassing seemed to have reverted to the old pattern of asking the voter’s intention rather than positively persuading him that he should vote SDP. This may have been the result of ‘Yes’ being a frequent reply to a canvasser’s question. But the voter was not then exposed to the arguments found necessary in the past to persuade him. His well-intentioned support was not consolidated.

When canvassers arrive in large numbers, it is not easy to instruct them. We may have also assumed that between Warrington and Darlington most had become experienced. But in future there should be a form of briefing for all canvassers and instant training for some. They should be encouraged to discuss issues with supporters.

5. This means at least as many canvassers as we had at Darlington. In fact, although the initial response was very good, in the final stages the number of experienced canvassers was limited. Although virtually all MPs visited Darlington, longer stays would have been welcome. More seriously, the number of Parliamentary candidates appeared to be few, with fewer still from the panel as a whole.

The financial cost of visiting by-elections can be high. Not everyone can afford it. But steps should be taken to make all parties and all candidates aware of the importance of Cardiff and to pledge attendance.

6. In relation both to the Labour party and the SDP’s own positive policies, we should have a more sophisticated means of judging the movement of opinion during a by-election and the best positive advice on how to put our ideas over as events move on. At Darlington, there was a large output of literature and much thought was given to it. But judgments were inevitably

We should try once again to identify a limited number of policies which are peculiarly ours and keep driving them home in a simplified and repetitive fashion.

WHAT WENT WRONG AT DARLINGTON?

rough-and-ready and design and presentation were not fully considered. For example, the 'Good Morning' leaflet for Polling Day was the collective work of a few of us, guessing at the eleventh hour about what might prevent the erosion of votes. It may have been the right leaflet but we were unsure of our market and unsure of our product.

We now have advertising agents advising us on how to put our national message across and providing professional skills to do so. We have private polls and research activities to help us in our judgments. All this is absent from by-elections: we work in the dark in an amateur way. As by-elections are so vital to us and as information and experience gained at by-elections have a national significance, is it not time that we brought our advertising agents and our pollsters to them?

The outcome of the Darlington is not that the SDP and the Alliance cannot win in seats like this or that the voters have rejected us. On the contrary, our sense of disappointment is because we could have won but threw away the chance.

27 March 1983

WTR

Commentary (Chris Rennard)

Bill Rodger's memo on the failure of the SDP campaign in the Darlington by-election makes particularly frustrating reading for anyone involved in the Liberal Party or the SDP at the time. There were high hopes following the successful launch of the SDP and the formation of the Alliance. But the June 1983 general election was little short of a disaster for the SDP and a failure for the Alliance. The Darlington by-election, in my view, had much to do with that disappointment.

In February 1983, Simon Hughes had won the Bermondsey by-election with just about the biggest swing mathematically possible – 44%. The Darlington campaign began soon afterwards

In 1983, Tony Cook's third place was a crushing blow to the Alliance in the run-up to the general election and saved Michael Foot's leadership of the Labour Party.

with the SDP ahead in the early by-election polls. The background seemed promising, with a general election likely in the summer. Michael Foot's leadership of the Labour Party was in crisis, Mrs Thatcher seemed vulnerable in spite of a successful Falklands war and Bermondsey gave the Liberal-SDP Alliance the essential momentum that it needed.

As Bill's memo makes clear, the inadequacy of SDP candidate Tony Cook was generally considered to be the most significant factor in the Darlington debacle in which the SDP slid from first place in the early polls to third place on polling day. But the first big mistake of the Darlington SDP campaign was the approach (taken at a higher level than Tony Cook) of claiming to be in the lead in the beginning. It may have been difficult to appear to contradict the early polls – but it makes it hard to build momentum, or to make a tactical argument, if you appear arrogant enough to be claiming victory before the campaign begins.

My impression of the Darlington campaign was that it was extremely well organised – as SDP by-elections always were with the very able organiser Alec McGivan in charge. SDP campaigns were also much better resourced than any Liberal agent could ever dream of. The political management of some SDP by-election campaigns, however, and Darlington in particular, was poor. Liberal friends who went to Darlington sent me copies of the SDP leaflets. Apart from thinking that they were printed about five times as expensively as ever I would have been able to afford, I noted that there were no overarching themes, no overall pattern to them and no real attempt to make national messages relevant to Darlington. I also noted at the time that the most effective literature was that produced by Michael Fallon, the Tory candidate. He came second in the March by-election and went on to win it in the June general election.

Literature is crucial to by-elections and the message, mo-

mentum and relevance is vital. But each SDP leaflet in Darlington appeared to have a different author with a different idea about a good national message to put across. Previous SDP successes such as Warrington (undeniably a relative success and a campaigning triumph), Crosby and Hillhead had Roy Jenkins and Shirley Williams as the central part of the message. The crucial questions in Crosby and Hillhead were should Roy or Shirley be in Parliament? And did they want an Alliance or a Tory MP (with Labour out of the race)? These messages made it an easy choice for many voters. Tony Cook did not have the same appeal and the Darlington campaign (like those of many of the SDP MPs who lost their seats in 1983) appeared to show little understanding of tactical voting.

Some lessons were clearly learned. The SDP campaign in Portsmouth South (1984) had not only a popular and effective local councillor standing in Mike Hancock, but also had a leading Liberal agent, Peter Chegwyn, producing leaflets about local issues and tactical voting. Whilst Fulham (1986) ended up repeating some of the Darlington mistakes, Greenwich (1987) was the most closely integrated Alliance campaign ever. It had SDP organisation and money, with effective Liberal campaigning.

But in 1983, Tony Cook's third place was a crushing blow to the Alliance in the run-up to the general election and saved Michael Foot's leadership of the Labour Party. Prior to Darlington, the only thing keeping Foot in place was the fear of those plotting against him that he would be replaced by Tony Benn. In the approach to the election, Foot could have been replaced by Dennis Healey as his Deputy without a contest. This might well have happened without Darlington – so once again Dennis Healey's leadership ambitions were thwarted by the SDP – although in a less intentional manner than when defecting Labour MPs voted for Michael Foot

before joining the SDP.

As it was, Labour's success in Darlington gave at least a temporary fillip to their fortunes and the Alliance lost the benefit of the Bermondsey boost. Three months later, the Alliance recovered momentum and Labour faltered badly during the course of the general election campaign. The polls towards the end of the campaign showed the Alliance overtaking Labour. Indeed, I will never forget the *Sun* front page 'SDP/LIBS ahead of Labour'. Mrs Thatcher was so worried by the prospect of an Alliance challenge

to her position that she was effectively talking up Labour's position.

But the Alliance surge came too late. Had the Alliance been closer to Labour at the start of the 1983 campaign, then Labour would almost certainly have been pushed into third place nationally. The story of the 1980s might not have been about Kinnock slowly dragging Labour back from the brink, but of the Alliance effectively challenging the Tories ten years before Tony Blair's electoral triumph for New Labour.

One by-election can make a huge difference to history.

Chris Rennard was the Liberal agent in Liverpool Mossley Hill at the time of Darlington. In his constituency the biggest swing against any party in England in June 1983 was recorded against the Tories (14% Con-Lib) on a day when Mrs Thatcher triumphed in much of the country. He was a key member of the fully integrated Alliance by-election team that was successful in the 1987 Greenwich by-election, writing much of the literature. He has been the Liberal Democrats' Director of Campaigns and Elections since August 1989 and has overseen the party's by-election wins from Eastbourne 1990 to Romsey in 2000.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

Cornish Methodism and Cornish political identity, 1918–1960s.

Researching the relationship through oral history. *Kayleigh Mildon, Institute of Cornish Studies, Hayne Corfe Centre, Sunningdale, Truro TR1 3ND; KMSMildon@aol.com.*

History of the Liberal Party. Roy Douglas (author of *The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* and a dozen or so other historical books) is working on a new book about the Liberal Party and its history. This will trace events from the rather indeterminate 19th century date when the party came into existence to a point as close as possible to the present. He believes that the story requires attention to be given not only to the glamorous deeds of major politicians but also to such mundane matters as party organisation and finance. ideas, please! *Roy Douglas, 26 Downs Road, Coulsdon, Surrey CR5 1AA; 01737 552 888.*

Hon H. G. Beaumont (MP for Eastbourne 1906–10). Any information welcome – especially from anyone having access to material about the history of Liberalism in Eastbourne – particularly on his political views (he stood as a Radical). *Tim Beaumont, 40 Elms Road, London SW4 9EX.*

Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65). Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. *Dr A. Howe, Department of International History, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE; a.howe@lse.ac.uk.* (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, see www.lse.ac.uk/collections/cobdenLetters/).

Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s. Focussing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. *Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN; mmjkelly@msn.com.*

Liberal Party and the wartime coalition 1940–45. Sources, particularly on Sinclair as Air Minister, and on Harcourt Johnstone, Dingle Foot, Lord Sherwood and Sir Geoffrey Maunders (Sinclair's PPS) particularly welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; ian.hunter@curtishunter.co.uk.*

Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16. *Andrew Gardner, 17 Upper Ramsey Walk, Canonbury, London N1 2RP; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39. *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

Political life and times of Josiah Wedgwood MP. Study of the political life of this radical MP, hoping to shed light on the question of why the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the primary popular representatives of radicalism in the 1920s. *Paul Mulvey, 112 Richmond Avenue, London N1 0LS; paulmulvey@yahoo.com.*

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935.

Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Clr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

SDP in Central Essex. Contact with anyone who had dealings with the area, and in particular as many former SDP members of the area as possible, with a view to asking them to take part in a short questionnaire. Official documents from merger onwards regarding the demise of the local SDP branches and integration with the Liberals would also be appreciated. *Elizabeth Wood, The Seasons, Park Wood, Doddinghurst, Brentwood, Essex CM15 0SN; Lizawsea@aol.com.*

Student radicalism at Warwick University. Particularly the files affair in 1970. Interested in talking to anybody who has information about Liberal Students at Warwick in the period 1965–70 and their role in campus politics. *Ian Bradshaw, History Department, University of Warwick, CV4 7AL; I.Bradshaw@warwick.ac.uk*

Welsh Liberal Tradition – A History of the Liberal Party in Wales 1868–2003. Research spans thirteen decades of Liberal history in Wales but concentrates on the post-1966 formation of the Welsh Federal Party. Any memories and information concerning the post-1966 era or even before welcomed. The research is to be published in book form by Welsh Academic Press. *Dr Russell Deacon, Centre for Humanities, University of Wales Institute Cardiff, Cyncoed Campus, Cardiff CF23 6XD; rdeacon@uwic.ac.uk.*

RISE . . .

Nearly all the SDP's MPs were defeated in the 1983 general election, and a disappointed Roy Jenkins stood down as leader, handing over to David Owen. Nevertheless, the Alliance had made a major impact, almost winning more votes than Labour. This second instalment of cartoons from **Chris Radley**, with commentary by **Mark Pack**, illustrates what were perhaps the SDP's happiest years, between 1983 and '85.

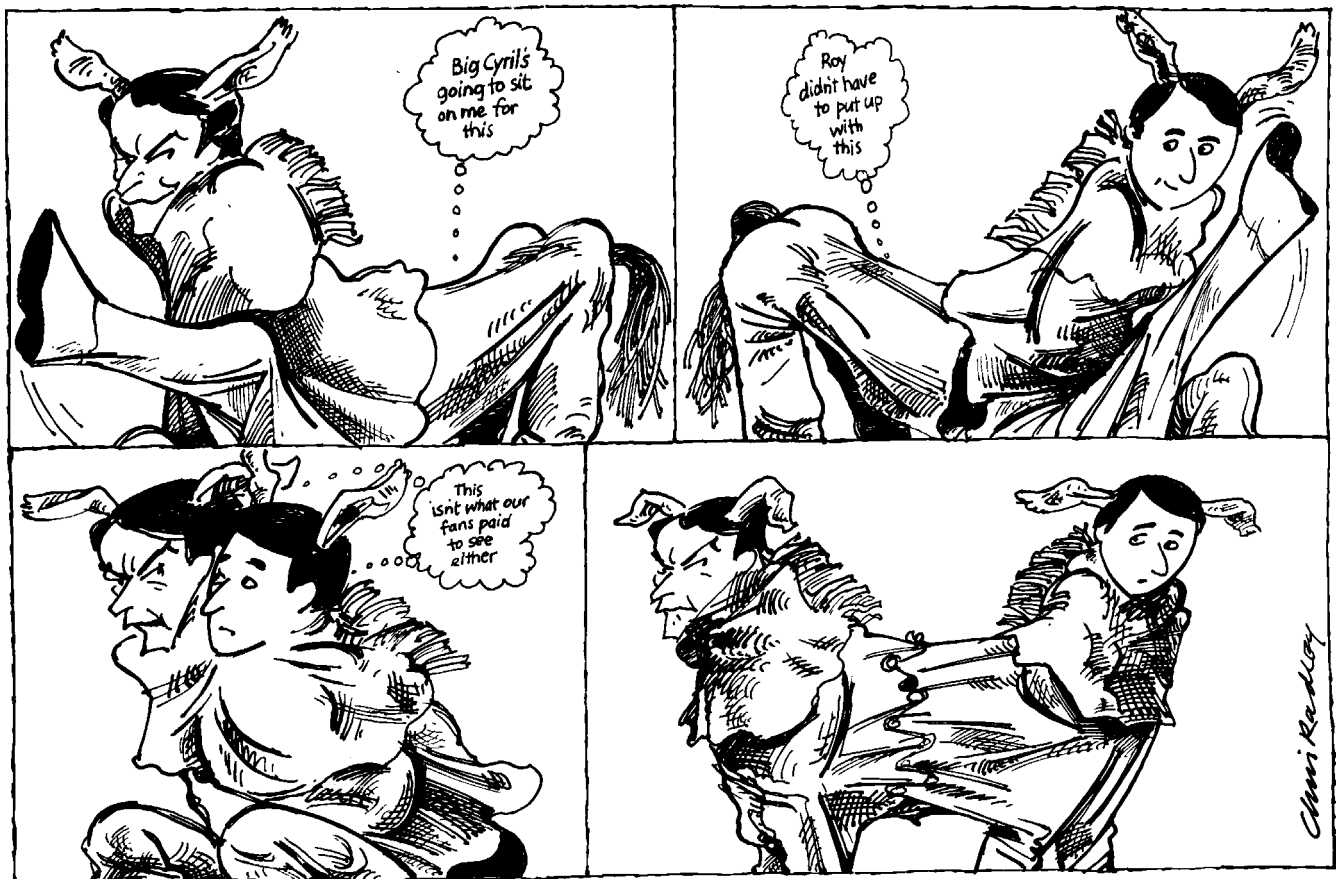
Two parties, one purpose? (24 June 1983)

David Steel and David Owen were the leaders of the Liberals and SDP respectively during the 1983–87 Parliament; Owen had succeeded Jenkins after the 1983 election.

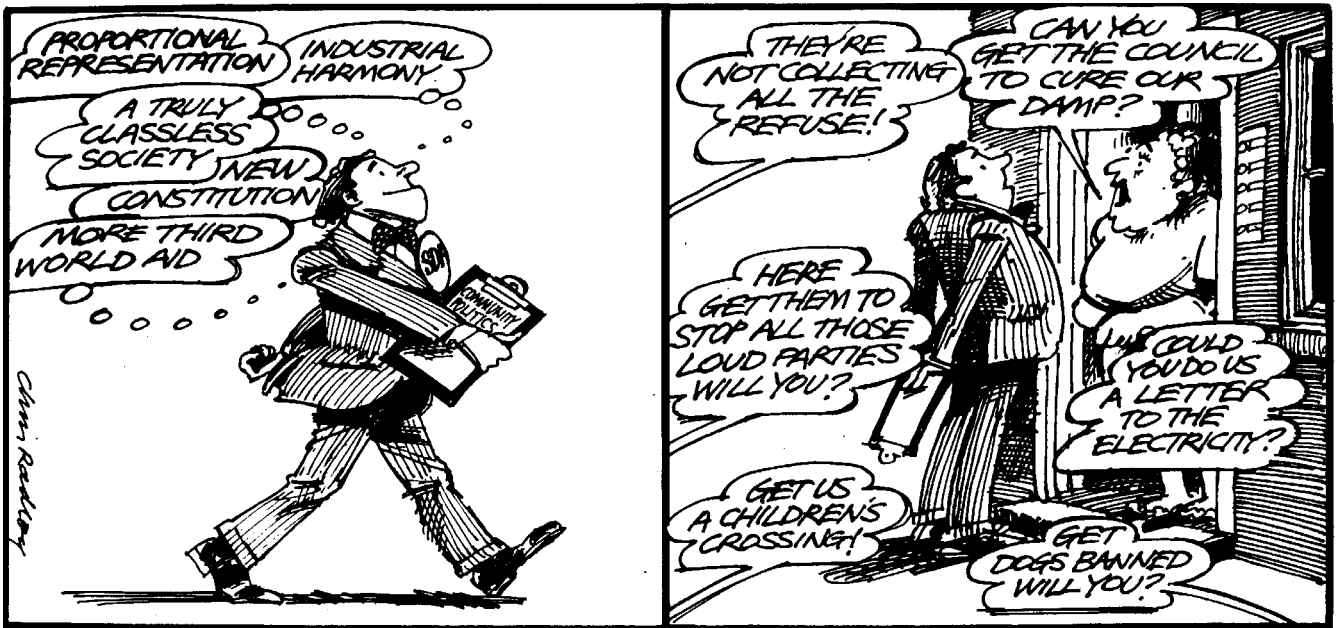
The Owen–Steel relationship was frequently less than harmonious. The joke about Steel and Jenkins had been that one was a social democrat leading a liberal party whilst the other was a liberal leading a social democratic party. But Owen was definitely not a liberal – he was an SDP

member, proud of its independence, and had firmly blocked any possible moves to merge the two parties after the 1983 election. As Jenkins put it, Owen 'essentially regarded the Liberal Party as a disorderly group of bearded vegetarian pacifists'.

Cyril Smith ('Big Cyril') was a Liberal MP and frequently very critical of the SDP. The 1980s were regularly punctuated by bursts of anger and outrage from Smith over the leadership of the Liberal Party and the Alliance.



THE SDP 1983-85



Pavement politics (5 August 1983)

Much of the initial impetus for the SDP was based on high political principles. But when it came to winning votes on the ground through

grassroots campaigning, the SDP found – as the Liberals had a decade and more previously – that more mundane issues came up on the doorstep. SDP activists slowly learned from their Liberal

colleagues the importance and techniques of ‘pavement politics’, with all-year-round community newsletters rather than wordy policy leaflets. Despite some local successes, however, the SDP never quite

managed to put down the same firm local roots which the Liberal Party had, and as a result remained far more vulnerable to national swings against the Alliance.



A new Labour leader (19 August 1983)

Neil Kinnock took over as Labour leader after the 1983 general election. He faced a formidable task in making Labour electable again, and his critics claimed that the left’s continued strength was in fact dooming it to further defeat. Kinnock saw the Alliance as splitting the natural Labour vote, and so crushing them and uniting the anti-Tory vote behind his party was one of his targets on the road to rebuilding Labour as a party of government.



More common sense, please

(18 November 1983)

David Owen (pictured right, above, with Thatcher and Kinno

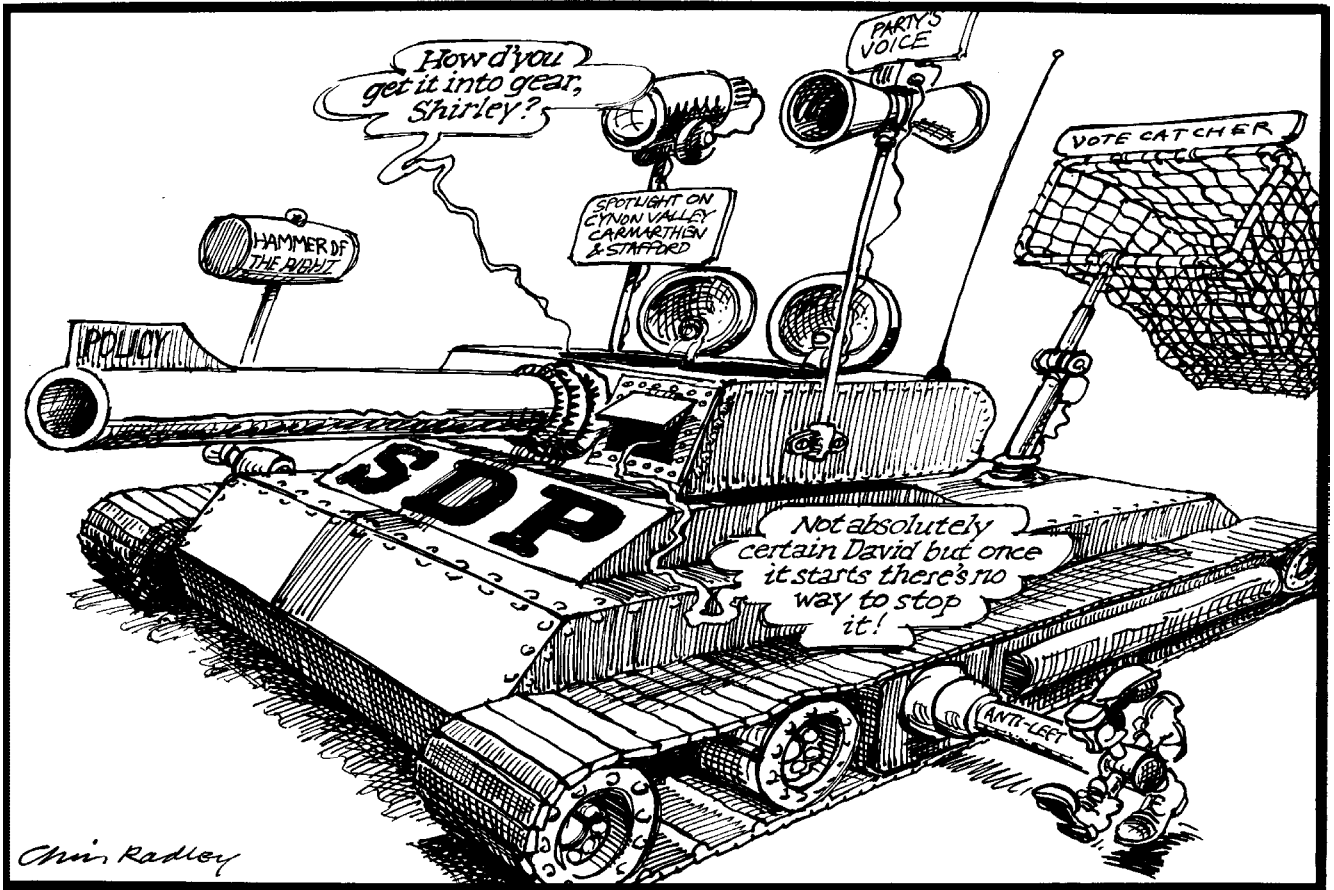
ck) provided the SDP with a harder political and ideological edge than that shown in the party's early days – encapsulated in his slogan 'tough and tender'. However, the SDP's overall

approach was still very much one of 'let's ignore outdated and divisive ideology and get on with applying some common sense'.

The two old parties

(10 February 1984)
During the mid-1980s, the Alliance continued to position itself as the newcomer, offering an alternative to the





old and failed Labour-Tory duopoly under Kinnock and Thatcher (pictured prancing around the secret garden, left). Though from different ends of the political spectrum, they both revelled in ideology and happily supported the cosiness of a

two-party, first-past-the-post political system.

By-election bandwagons (23 March 1984)

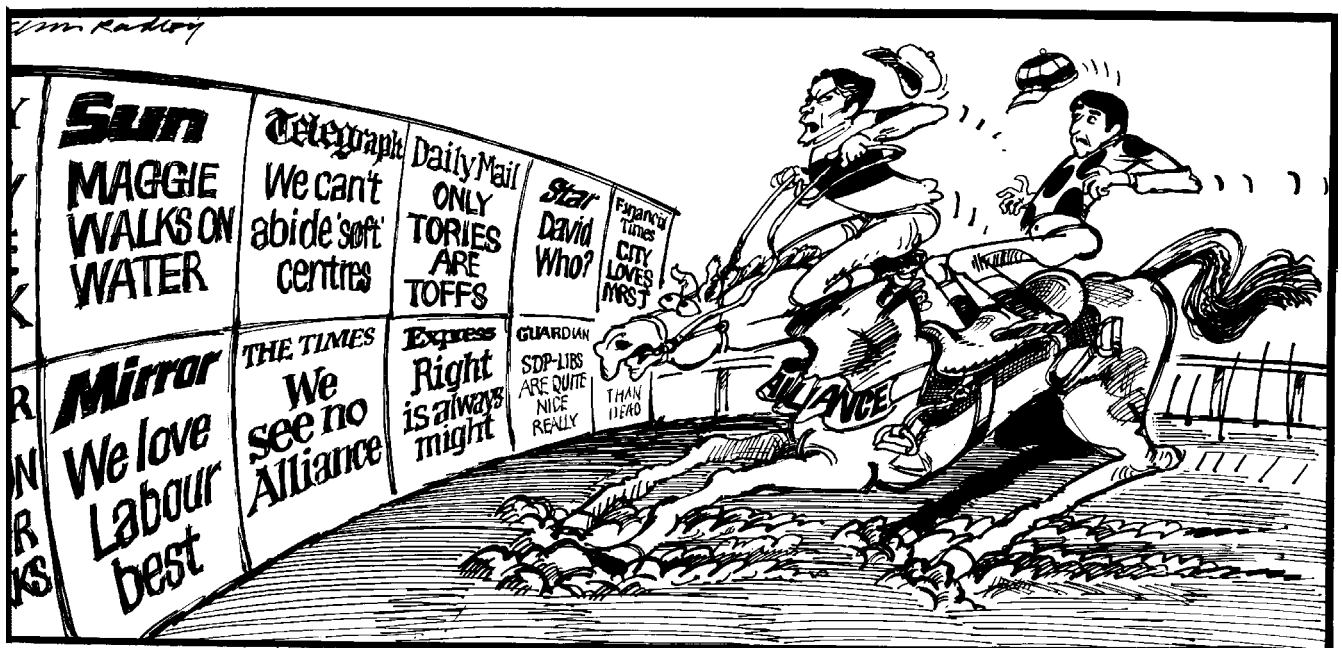
Much of the Alliance's political success relied on getting a successful bandwagon going.

A good Parliamentary by-election result could bring an upsurge in interest, media coverage and improved opinion poll ratings, all of which could feed off each other and produce a bandwagon effect. The bandwagon frequently ran out of steam, however,

and needed another by-election boost to start it rolling again (above).

Media coverage (25 May 1984)

The Alliance's relationship with the press was a strange



RISE ... THE SDP 1983–85

one. Critics dismissed the Alliance, and the SDP in particular, as a media-fuelled creation. Those within the Alliance, on the other hand, frequently complained at the lack of media coverage. Amongst newspapers, editorial lines urging people to vote for the Alliance were very rare.

Triumph in Portsmouth (22 June 1984)

Michael Hancock was the victorious SDP candidate in the Portsmouth South by-election (right). Although the European elections on the same day brought the Alliance no victories, the by-election triumph in what had been a safe Tory seat gave the Alliance an important boost. This victory highlighted an irony in the SDP's electoral appeal – although its founders had split from Labour and initially talked about replacing the Labour Party, the SDP made much greater inroads in areas of Tory support. It was Tory rather than Labour MPs who had most to fear from an insurgent SDP at the next general election and



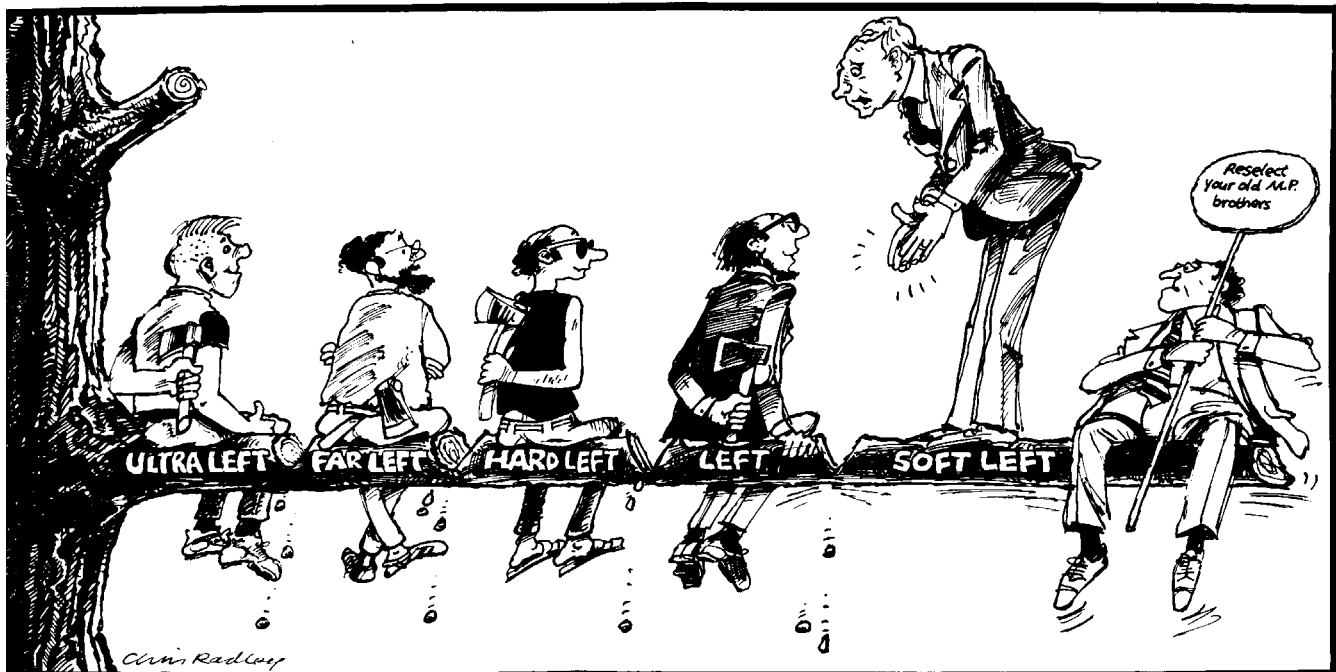
it was largely Tory rather than Labour councillors who lost their seats to the SDP.

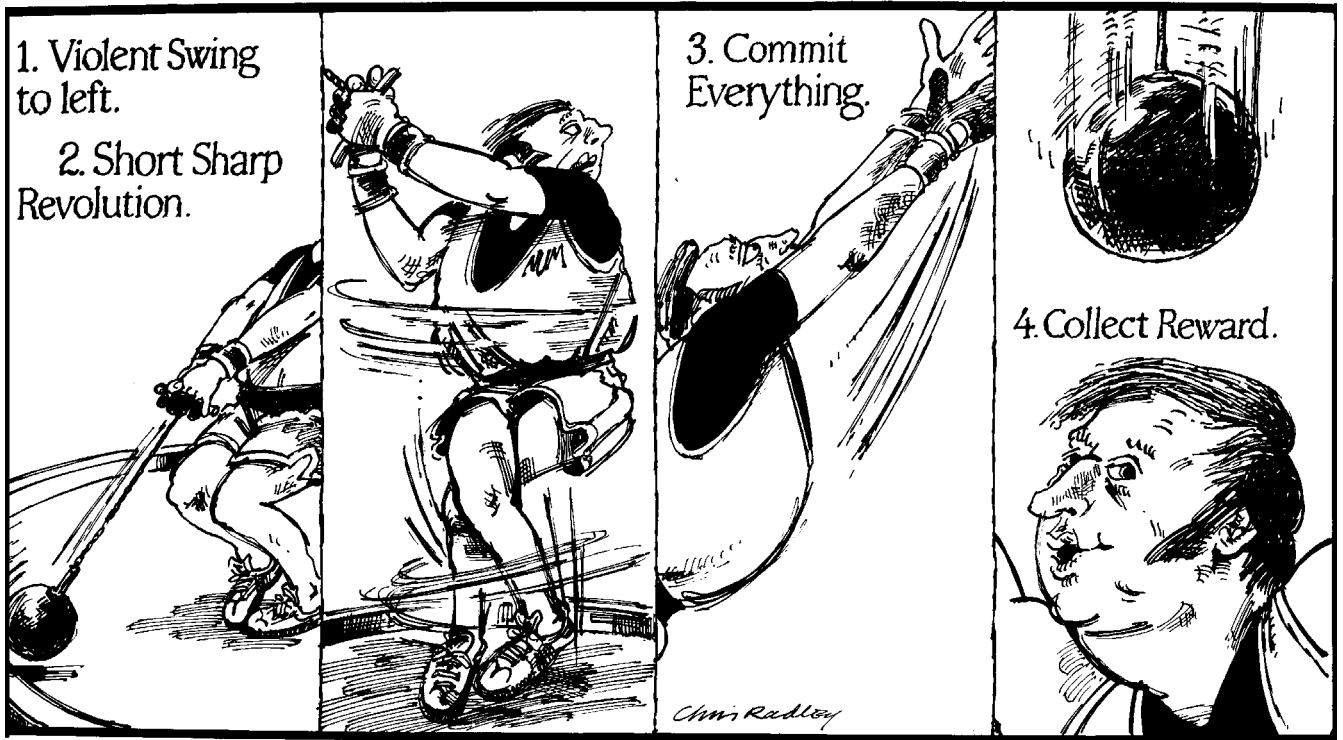
Left, more left and yet more left (3 August 1984)

The continuing power and extremism of the Labour left was a key reason why the SDP continued to attract support. The left-right

divisions within the Labour Party manifested themselves in many ways during the 1970s and 1980s. Issues about how the party should be run were as important as policy differences, and indeed both were important in triggering the original defection of the Gang of Four. The rules as to how incumbent Labour MPs could be deselected, and so not able to re-stand as Labour

Party candidates at the next general election, were a frequent source of friction. The left wanted party activists to be able to deselect MPs, believing that placing such power in the hands of committees and meetings would benefit their greater enthusiasm for the nitty-gritty of faction fighting. The soft left and right tried to outflank them by trumping their de-





mand for democracy with counter-proposals for more democracy – taking power away from activists and meetings, and giving it instead to all members with postal ballots.

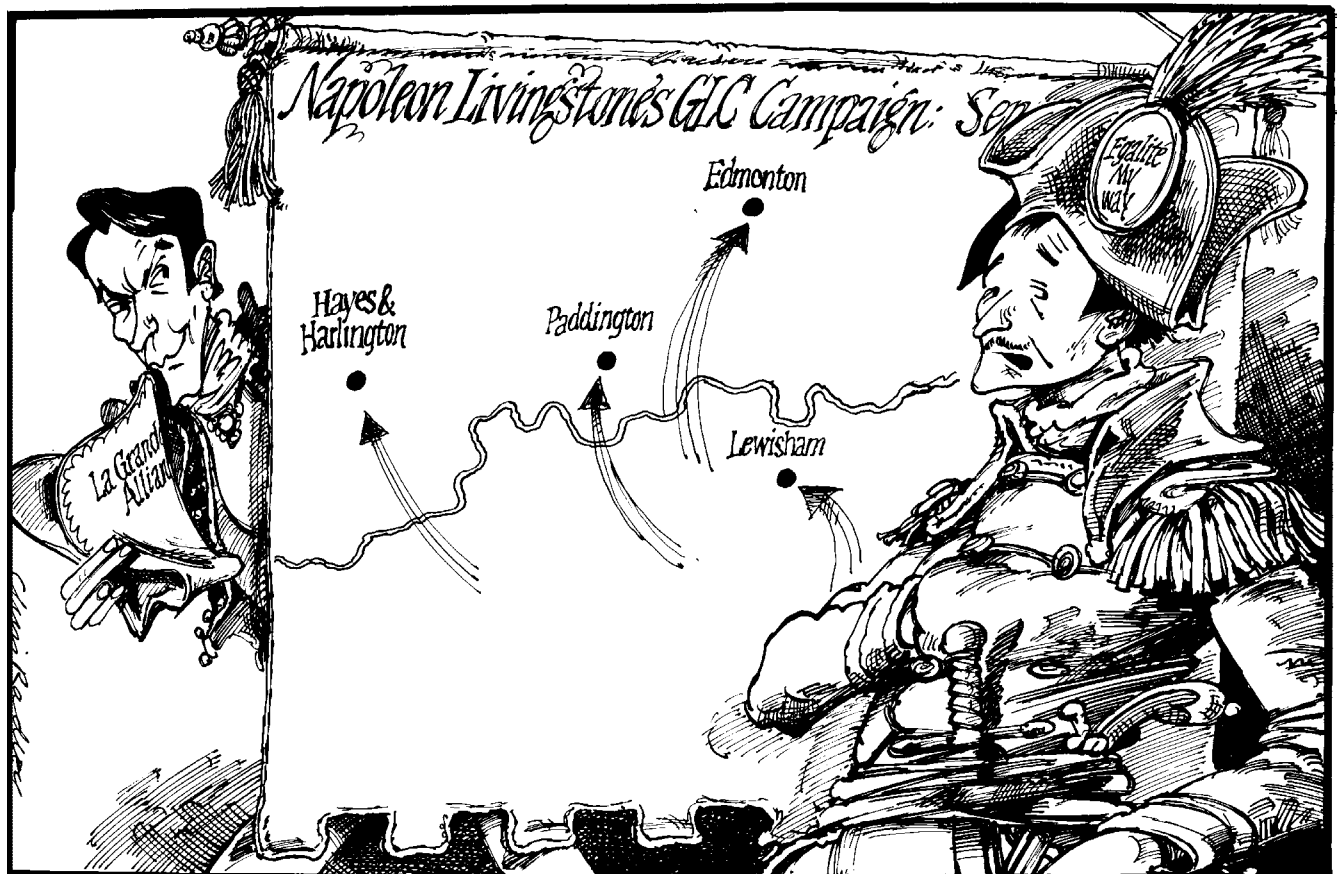
**To ballot or not to ballot?
(24 August 1984)**

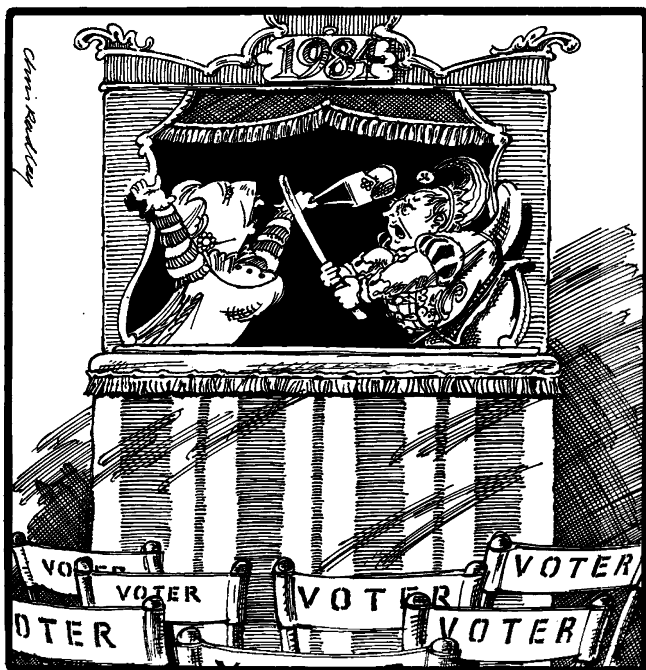
The tactics of Arthur Scargill, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) leader during the miners' strike, were often criticised as counter-

productive. Most notably, his refusal to hold a ballot of union members before calling the strike alienated many, yet he would have been almost certain to win such a ballot had he called it.

**Saving the GLC?
(21 September 1984)**

Faced with the Tories' desire to abolish the Greater London Council (GLC), its leader, Ken Livingstone (pictured below right) resigned,





with three other colleagues, in order to fight by-elections as a referendum on its future. The Tories responded by boycotting the elections, but the Alliance fought them, coming a rather distant second in each case. (The Alliance did, however, gain one seat in a by-election in 1985.) Once the dust had settled these by-elections did little to further the cause of the GLC – which was in due course abolished – or the Alliance.

Punch and Judy show (5 January 1985)

The Punch and Judy leitmotif (above) features regularly in third-party politics as a means of encapsulating opposition to the two main parties spending so much time criticising each other.

Disharmony in the Alliance (2 February 1985)

Frictions in the relations between the Liberals and SDP often seemed to dis-

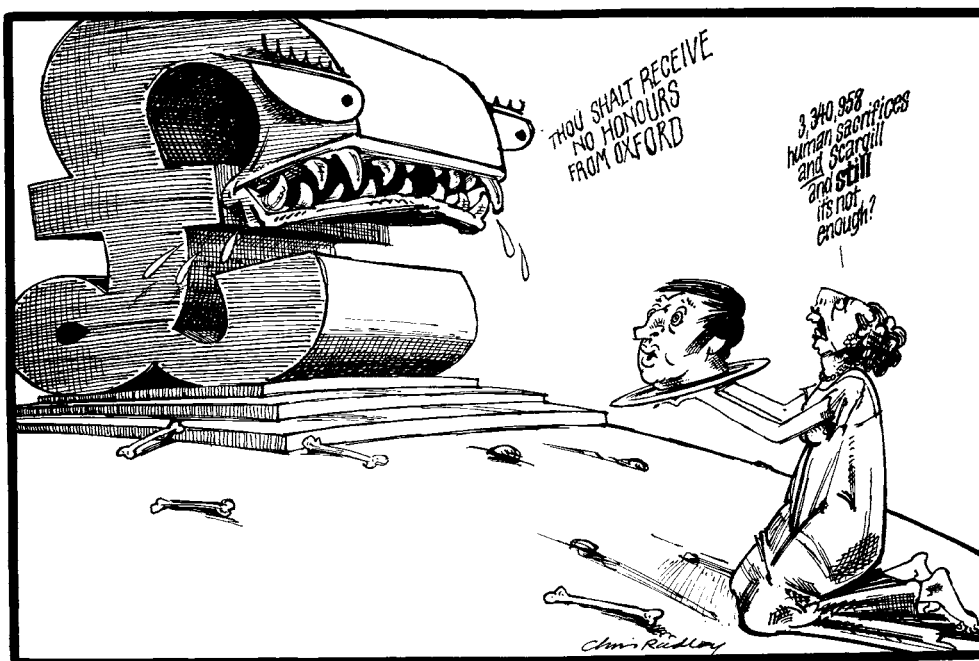


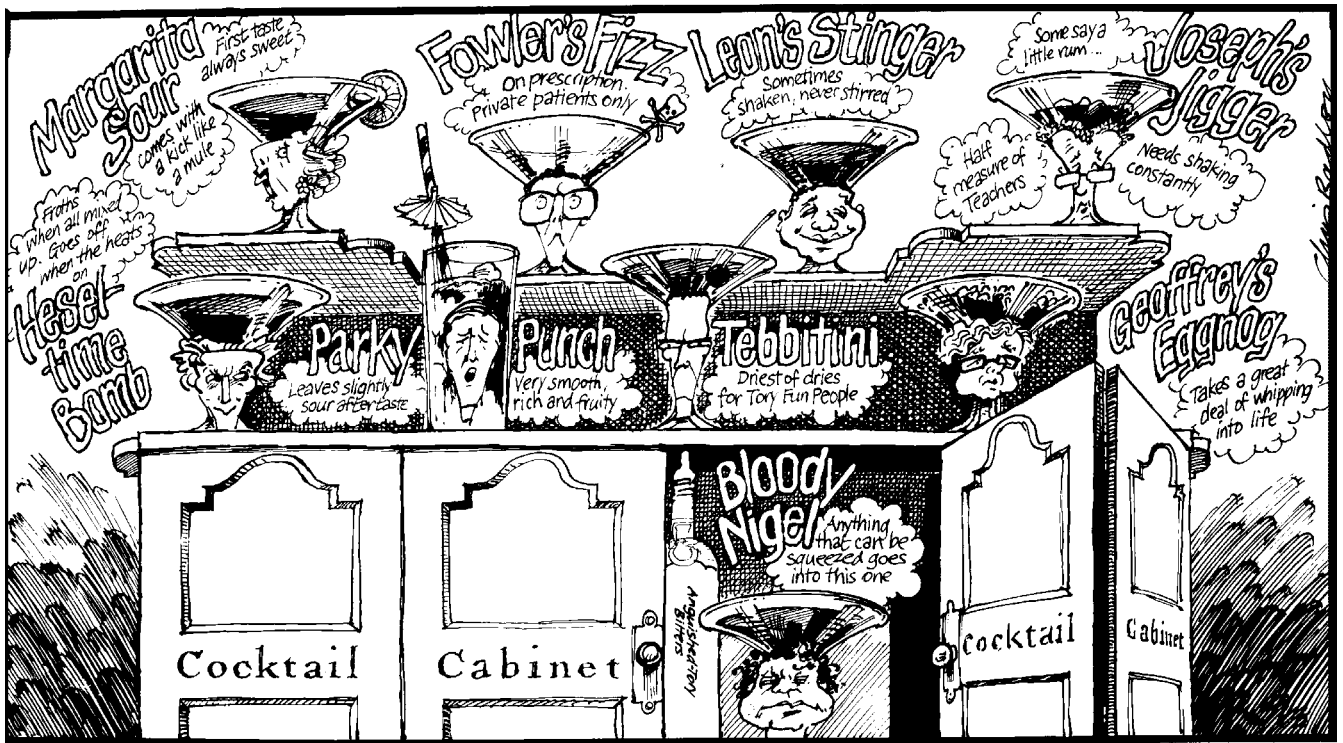
tract them from fighting the Tories and Labour (above).

The allocation of seats to Liberal or SDP candidates for the general election was a particular point of conflict. An underlying difference in approach generated much of the tension. David Owen's belief was in the Alliance as a temporary measure to secure realignment of the party system, after which the SDP could return to being a fully independent party. Many others saw the Alliance as a staging post towards merger between the two parties.

Economic reform (16 February 1985)

Margaret Thatcher's drive to reform the British economy (left) came at a high price – including unemployment





of over three million and the long-running and bitter miners' strike. The strike ended in the eventual defeat of the NUM and broke the miners as a significant political force. (The head in the cartoon is that of their leader, Arthur Scargill). Thatcher was refused an honorary degree from Oxford University

after a revolt amongst its academics, many of whom were very hostile to her political approach.

The Tory cabinet (24 May 1985)

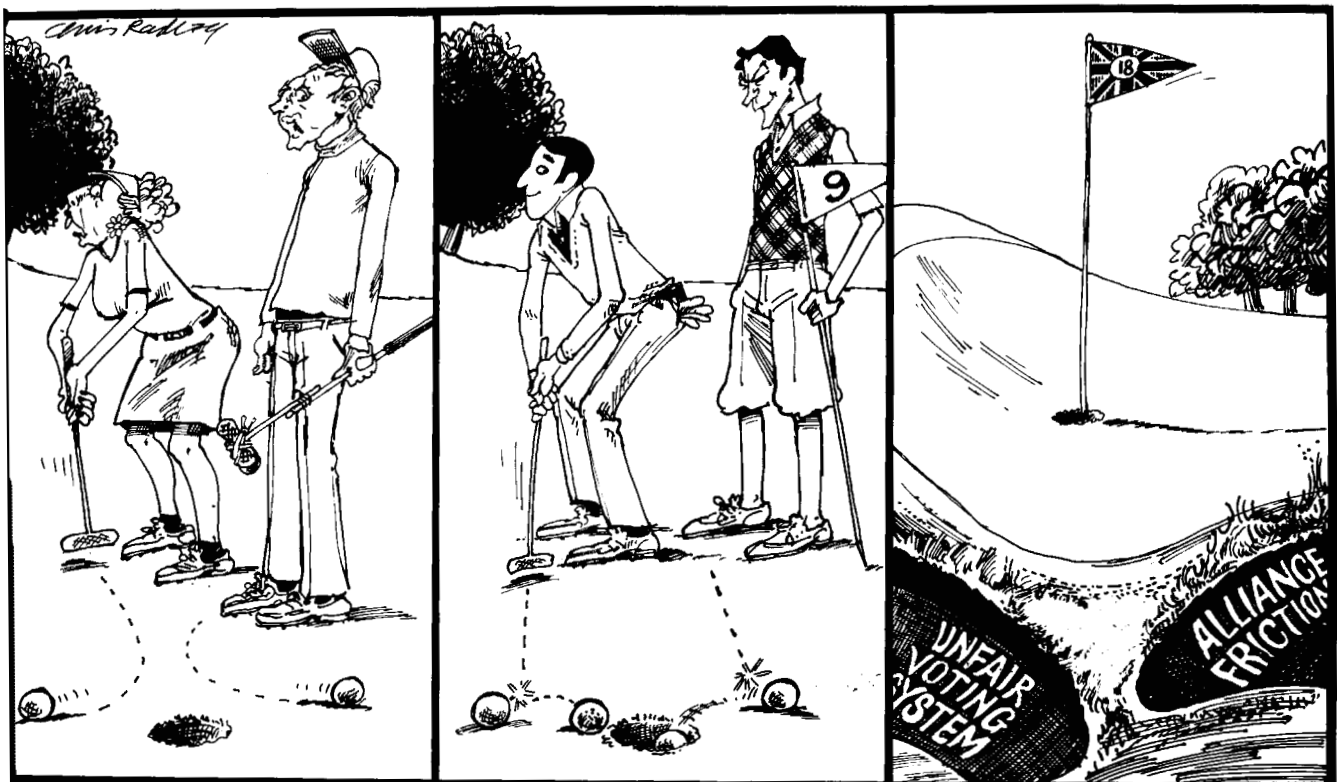
All the people caricatured in this cartoon (above) were leading Cabinet members of

the 1983-87 Thatcher administration.

The SDP's high point (4 October 1985)

The SDP's autumn 1985 conference in Torquay was probably the party's high point – riding on the back of electoral and opinion poll

success and with relations within the Alliance comparatively cordial. However, as the cartoon below presciently warns, the travails of a third party in a first-past-the-post electoral system, along with the fact that the Alliance was not even a single united third party, meant it would be easy for it all to go wrong.



ASPECTS OF ORGANISATIONAL MODERNISATION IN POLITICAL PARTIES

THE

by **Stefan
Seelbach**

The story of the SDP has been analysed in depth in articles and academic books. Most studies or articles have focused on the relationship between the party leaders – the ‘Gang of Four’ – or they have looked into the party’s contribution to policy-making or to the merger debate with the Liberals. In many ways, interest focused on the assumption that the SDP was going to represent an entirely new and fresh approach. The premise was the SDP would strive to achieve one objective in particular: to ‘break the mould’ of the existing party system and create a fairer system of party interaction.¹

In the light of this research focus, it has been argued that the SDP’s contribution towards a reformed party system had its limitations. As a political party, the SDP remained a short-lived experiment. While media interest was undoubtedly strong at and after the party’s launch in 1981, it receded as the decade progressed. There was not much the party could have done about this, because it is an intrinsic aspect of the media to move on to other events that will make the headlines. The Falklands War of 1982 and the Miners’ Strike in 1984–85 were two such events that occupied the national headlines, and by then it appeared that the SDP had become just another centre party. It might be argued in retrospect that the SDP was unable to accomplish its main task of modernising the British party system and of replacing Labour in the long run as the second party in Britain.

The true achievements of the SDP, however, can be found on a different level: the involvement of the Social Democrats in changing and modernising the concept of ‘party organisation’. The SDP quickly became a vehicle for change in this respect and began to develop and implement a number of innovative formats.

At the centre of these stood the idea of making the SDP more controllable via the instrument of ‘centralisation’. The aim of creating a centralised organisational structure was the foundation which later defined some of the key innovations the party intro-

duced. This article will look at some of these developments:

- The introduction of a computerised membership register and of subscription payment via credit card.
- The emphasis of direct member participation through one-member-one-vote or ‘OMOV’.
- The introduction of new fund-raising approaches – the SDP and direct mail.
- The policy-making organisation – Council vs. Policy Committee.

‘The party has started’ – how the SDP got off the ground

The launch of the SDP in 1981 was an impressive display of euphoria and political determination. Boosted by a wave of popular support and intense media attention, the party had been expected to do well, and a total of ten opinion polls between January and March 1981 predicted that the SDP might accumulate between 23 and 30 per cent of votes in a forthcoming election.² There was talk of an even higher share of votes for the new party, but some predictions were treated with more caution.³ The SDP nonetheless could look to the future with anticipation, and a feeling that it was at the forefront of political change in Britain.

In the light of this successful launch, the SDP had to deal with two areas that were central to the party’s future: the need to attract party members and the equally

THE CASE OF THE SDP

important requirement of securing sufficient funding to keep the new party going. Unlike Labour and the Conservative Party, the SDP could not automatically rely on a steady income flow, such as money from the trade unions or 'big business'. The logical answer appeared to be to build up a national membership network that would ensure a continual flow of funds.

Crewe and King have pointed out that the SDP was well advised to avoid the 'wholly negative point of reference' of the Liberal Party, because:

The nub of the problem was the combination of a decentralised party structure and an inadequate membership base. Too little revenue was raised from subscriptions, and too little of what was raised found its way to the centre.⁴

This observation sums up one of the most crucial but also difficult tasks the SDP faced. The party had to recruit members in adequate numbers and at the same time to make sure that the money from subscription fees was not dispersed amongst local party subdivisions, but was instead channelled directly to the centre or party headquarters.

The idea of making subscriptions the key source of money was based on the leadership's assumption that the SDP would be able to recruit 100,000 members in a relatively short time. The reality, however, was different, and even at its peak the SDP never

had more than approximately 65,000 members, a figure that was too low to generate the anticipated level of revenue.

Knowing who and where your members are

In order to be able to monitor the development of its individual members, the SDP introduced a Central Membership Register. This national register or database became a key tool as part of the strategy to create a more inclusive party. For David Owen in particular it was a vital tool in restricting the powers of activists and establishing the participatory rights of individual party members.

It mattered to the SDP to install a computerised system of membership registration with a dual function. The system was designed to enable the party leadership to ballot its members whenever necessary, and also to keep better overall control of party funds and finances. As the SDP did not have a traditional grassroots substructure in local organisations, it gave the leadership at the same time the opportunity to create its own brand of organisational system and to take charge of the control levers of such a system. The introduction of a computerised register was, at the time of its launch, a distinctive feature of SDP innovation. In 1981, none of the other British parties had a system sophisticated enough to enable them to monitor and influence the movements of individual party members.

The idea of a national membership structure was further developed by the use of credit card payments, then highly innovative. Individuals who wished to join the party could do so by simply phoning the SDP headquarters in London and by giving their credit card number. Although membership recruitment was by no means a brand-new party function, the introduction of credit card payments, together with the operational backbone of the National Membership Register, was new and as yet untested. It was further evidence that the SDP was determined to break the organisational mould of the old system.

The long-term advantages would be considerable too. By ensuring the availability of a more accurate and up-to-date register than could be compiled locally, the computerised list would ... form the basis of a sophisticated communications system within the party, enabling the leadership to ballot and to survey the membership – and to appeal for funds.⁵

The launch of the SDP in 1981 was an impressive display of euphoria and political determination.

The SDP leadership regarded the computerised membership system as much more than a simple tool for collecting subscription money. It was viewed as the centrepiece of a wider communication strategy that would provide the party with a constant link to its membership. It would enable the SDP, so the assumption went, to get in touch with its members whenever necessary and to have



a permanent two-way exchange of communication with its members. It was also the basis for a concept that was largely pioneered by the SDP in Britain – the use of direct mail as a fund-raising tool.

The SDP and the use of direct mail

Direct mail is, in its origin, an American technique. Before it made its first appearance in British politics, it was widely used in American campaigning. It had been a technique implemented in commercial marketing before it was later applied in political marketing. Richard Voguerie, a conservative political consultant, is widely regarded as the 'modern pioneer of political direct mail fundraising' in the United States.⁶

Back in Britain, the SDP quickly recognised that direct mail could be utilised as a valuable technique and marketing tool. As a means of communication it offered a two-way approach. The party could not only send messages to members or supporters, but it could also receive opinions and other feedback, as well as money, from those it had contacted via direct mail.

The SDP began to work

'The party has started' – launch at the Connaught Rooms, London, 26 March 1981

with direct mail in order to contact its party members first, rather than its voters. To do this, the SDP leadership started a marketing initiative through a think-tank which was used as a 'sounding board for advice, ideas and feedback for David Owen'.⁷ The instruments used in this campaign included a newsletter to subscribers and donors and regular lunches and meetings with leading SDP politicians, as well as a telephone 'hotline suggestion box' with the purpose of giving supporters or prospective new members the opportunity to bring in their own views and ideas.

There were even ambitious plans to extend 'membership services' to insurance and travel. Enthusiasts saw merchandising as a novel means of making money, recruiting members and publicising the party all at the same time. Sceptics feared the creation of SDP Ltd.⁸

How did direct mail work? The SDP's approach to using the new tool

One of the first steps in the process of direct mail is the selection of lists of names to be mailed. Having a list is only the begin-

ning; after that the use of direct mail involves other important tasks:

Direct mail fund-raising is both an art and a science. The art involves the selection of issues which have the fund raising potential, the preparation of copy, the design of packages, the timings of mailings ... and the creative modification of fund-raising techniques to meet the needs of the client.⁹

How did the first direct mail test work in practice for the SDP? The foundation for a first scheduled test mailing was already laid in the summer of 1982, when the party decided to contact an American agency which had organised direct mail campaigns in the United States. The test mailing was scheduled for the first three months of 1983, and the SDP had already set aside the sum of £10,000. These plans had to be postponed, though, when the government called the general election.

The SDP organised a mailing test after the election, again with the sum of £10,000 put aside. 20,000 names were bought from four different lists comprising four different target groups.¹⁰ The SDP prepared three different campaign letters (a two-page letter, a four-page letter, and a six-page letter, written by David Owen). A questionnaire was attached to the letters. According to the calculations of the American adviser firm Craver, Mathews, Smith, a 2.5 per cent response from one list and one letter would have been sufficient to make this mailing test profitable for the SDP. The longest (six-page) letter indeed produced an encouraging 2.6 per cent return on one list which was almost enough to make the programme self-financing. The average donation from this first test was £9.80.

With the first direct mail test having been a moderate success, the SDP decided to go for a follow-up test soon afterwards. In all, 29,000 people were mailed

for this second test. The appeal was eventually answered by about 1,500 people and raised a total of £14,552. Although this was not a bad result in view of the party's relative inexperience with direct mail, success was somewhat qualified by the fact that the costs were high, at about £9,000 for the entire test.

The SDP and direct mail: how successful was the tool?

The question remains: was political marketing through direct mail an overall success for the SDP? Although in Britain it probably did not attain the same status as a marketing strategy as it did in the United States, direct mail was nonetheless deemed a modest success. Crewe and King point out that:

Three direct-mail appeals to members and supporters [in the 1987 general election campaign] produced £700,000 – four times as much, in real terms, as its appeal to members had raised in 1983 and more than the Conservative Party had managed to raise by the same methods ... By the standards of a small British party largely reliant on small personal donations, the direct-mail initiative proved to be a considerable – and unexpected – success. By 1987, the SDP had, perhaps, begun to crack the problem of party finance.¹¹

The SDP became more and more familiar with the language of marketing and at times it was not entirely clear if one was listening to politicians or to marketing managers. For many in the party, however, the instruments of political marketing were a kind of guidance system which helped the SDP to locate its target voters and to match its political programme to the demands of the political consumer.

Fund-raising through direct mail was also a very welcome contribution which helped to alleviate an otherwise tight

financial situation. While a total of £760,000 came in from membership subscriptions in the SDP's first year (1981–82), this figure was almost halved by 1985–86, when total subscriptions of £469,000 amounted to 50 per cent of the party's overall income.¹² Had it not been for vigorous financial support from a few wealthy supporters, most notably David (Lord) Sainsbury, the SDP would have had many more problems in keeping the party going. It has been estimated that Sainsbury alone gave approximately £750,000 to the SDP between 1981 and 1987.¹³

The pitfalls of modernisation: good intentions and bad execution

The SDP believed strongly that it had devised a sophisticated system that was geared towards the needs of a modern mass-membership party. One of the ironies of social democratic modernisation, however, was the fact that the SDP by no means possessed such a mass membership: it never reached its envisaged target of 100,000 members. There were often fewer than 300 party members in individual area parties and there were also substantial differences between regions. The SDP was most strongly concentrated in the south and in the Greater London area but was far less so in parts of the north or in Scotland.

One other truth was even less flattering for the self-declared party of modernisation. The SDP had opted for the high-tech route of computerisation, but it had done so without having anyone in the party who was familiar with the intricacies of such a modern system. Perhaps the first and most crucial fault was to pass the entire administration of the centralised computer register to the Midland Bank. The concept that a clearing bank would be best suited to handle complex membership lists was clearly mistaken, specifically in the case of the SDP. What the Social Democrats needed was a flexible system that took into

account the diversity of its membership. What the bank could offer instead was a much more rigid system, because:

Its essential function is to maintain an up-to-date list of shareholders' names and addresses, so that the company can send out to them its annual reports, notices of annual general meetings and the like. Such a programme has no call to print out selective lists of members in one part of the country, or those with some specific interest ... The Sheffield computer programme, therefore, lacked the essential capacity, from the SDP's point of view, of selective output.¹⁴

The error of outsourcing membership lists to a clearing bank was further exacerbated by a less than professional approach on the part of the SDP itself. As Stephenson explains, many membership application forms went unprocessed from SDP headquarters to the Midland Bank, where errors regularly remained unnoticed and unchanged.¹⁵ The whole computerised system in the end turned out to be an organisational mess and was in no way the 'sophisticated' communication system the party had so proudly announced.

The SDP and OMOV – enabling the individual in the party

The launch of the SDP rekindled the discussion of the independence of MPs. Social Democrats in particular were aware how the left had gained more and more power inside the Labour Party in the early 1980s. These developments had played a key role in the decision to form a new social democratic party. It was to be a party in which the individual would be involved in decisions, thereby replacing unaccountable electoral colleges.

The introduction of One-Member-One-Vote, or 'OMOV' was a reflection of the social democratic principle of listen-

There were even ambitious plans to extend 'membership services' to insurance and travel. Enthusiasts saw merchandising as a novel means of making money, recruiting members and publicising the party all at the same time. Sceptics feared the creation of SDP Ltd.

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ing to the individual member's voice. During the lifetime of the SDP, OMOV was used on several occasions, such as National Committee elections or constitutional review ballots (in which party members had the opportunity to approve or disapprove of constitutional clauses and amendments). But perhaps the most important function of OMOV remained the election of the party leader. This had become one of the most contentious areas of dispute between social democrats and the Labour left towards the end of the 1970s. David Owen, in particular, vehemently fought against Labour's move to the left and the decision to reduce the quota of MPs in leadership elections to a mere 30 per cent.

The first opportunity for the SDP to assess OMOV came in the autumn of 1981 during the party's first leadership election. Ironically it nearly produced a rift between two of the central figures in the SDP, David Owen and Roy Jenkins. Jenkins favoured an option whereby MPs alone would choose their new leader, similar to the old, pre-1980 Labour procedure. This concept, however, infuriated David Owen who supported an alternative option, allowing all individual members of the SDP votes to elect the new leader.

In the end a compromise prevailed: the decision on which option to implement was decided via a membership ballot.¹⁶ The result of the ballot stipulated that the SDP leader was to be elected by a postal ballot of all members of the party, and that there should be a mandatory review of the election system at a later stage.

The limitations of OMOV: the role of the National Committee

It is perhaps easy to overstate the importance of OMOV as the key principle of SDP organisation. The party leadership was able to retain power within the organisational build-up of the party through a number of safeguards

'There's nothing in the phone book under Social Democrats – perhaps if you want to join them you have to be an MP first'. ('Guardian', 17 March 1981)

that limited the scope of OMOV. The SDP's National Committee, for example, reflected to a large extent the leadership's desire to have MPs elected by their fellow MPs, as had been the case in the pre-1980 Labour Party. The SDP National Committee utilised a similar principle in that up to ten places on the Committee were reserved for MPs. Furthermore, those MPs were elected to the Committee by their fellow MPs, thereby excluding an OMOV-based vote. This left only eight Committee members elected by ordinary party members, which constituted a mere third of the entire body.

Recognition of gender equality was, however, built into the system of the National Committee, because a fair balance between the genders amongst those elected by OMOV was guaranteed. The concept of gender balance also emerged during the party's process of candidate selection where the shortlists drawn up by devolved committees in the local or area parties had to contain at least two members of each sex.¹⁷ There were strong voices in the party, most notably Shirley Williams', who recognised gender balance as a very potent symbol for a new and radical party, a party that wished to signal that it was fresh and modern. And, of course, positive discrimination would also increase support amongst women voters – that was at least the theory.

'It's very convenient, you can join by credit card and at the same time write everything they stand for on the back of it.' ('Guardian', 27 March 1981)



Co-operation and participation: the mixed blessings of 'deliberative policy-making'

The SDP approached organisational reform in another field of potential impact – the cooperation of different party institutions in the field of policy-making. The key players were the Council and the influential Policy Committee.

The Council for Social Democracy ('CSD') was also called the parliament of the party. Each area party had the right to send a number of delegates to the Council (between one and four members, depending on the size of the respective area party). Members of the Council were elected by postal ballots open to all party members. With a total number of only about 400 delegates or representatives, the CSD was smaller than, for example, the annual Labour Party conference. This was intentional, as the SDP leadership wanted to avoid the problems they had encountered at Labour conferences in the past in the form of block voting and mandated delegates.

The Council was supposed to play an important part in the SDP's plan to create a deliberative policy-making process. The men behind the SDP constitution had designed the policy-making process to reflect a different style compared to that of other parties. The aim was to avoid making policy by passing short or 'composite' resolutions – the kind of decision-making that had become a serious problem in the Labour Party. The new way of SDP policy-making was to be entirely different. It was to be 'deliberative', taking place in a smaller Council, resulting in balanced statements, and giving delegates the opportunity for full reflection on issues where a difference of view would have emerged between different sections in the party.

This was the theory and it sounded very promising, not least with regard to the prospect of fruitful co-operation between the Policy Committee and the

Council as the representative body of elected party members. In practice the Policy Committee and the Council were the key players in policy-making in the SDP. It was a distinctive element of the SDP constitution that policies were only made and finalised if both the Council and the Committee had agreed on policy drafts (green papers). The constitution provided, in cases of persistent deadlock, the final possibility of 'a ballot of all members on any issue of policy of major importance'.¹⁸ Such a ballot could have been called on the initiative of either the Council or the National Committee, but that never happened.

This 'official' view of a deliberative partnership between the Policy Committee and the Council, however, concealed a crucial structural disadvantage for the latter. The Council could adopt policies, but it could not formulate, let alone initiate them. The important first stage of drafting the party's green papers remained the sole domain of the Policy Committee. The Council could either accept draft policies in the form of Policy Committee motions, in which case decisions made at the top level of the party were simply rubber-stamped by the Council, or it could amend Committee motions, thus referring them back to the Policy Committee. Yet even this meant that the Policy Committee had a second bite of the cherry, because it had the right to resubmit its original motion to the following Council meeting, perhaps with a few changes and amendments.

The picture that emerged from this system of deliberative policy-making was thus one of a party in which the true power of decision-making was weighted heavily towards the leadership, and which particularly favoured MPs over ordinary party members. Despite the retention of OMOV in the election of Council delegates, it was the Policy Committee in which the key powers of policy initiation and implementation were vested. This body's

make-up was top-heavy in favour of the party's MPs, and since 'MPs [were] not mandated nor subject to direction or control by any organ of the SDP',¹⁹ membership of the Committee represented a very strong position from which MPs could effectively influence the way decisions were being made in the party.²⁰

Summary: achievements of SDP modernisation and the impact of the Social Democrats on the centre in British politics

This article has only touched on some key features of SDP modernisation. The introduction of a computerised membership register and the approach towards direct mail as a fund-raising tool remain two of the more distinctive innovations the party had pioneered in its short lifespan.

The common denominator that linked all innovations embraced by the SDP was adaptation, the realisation that it had become necessary to adjust to a changed social environment. The Social Democrats, in other words, quickly understood the urgency of organisational change at a time when political parties in general were in danger of being sidelined as meaningless if they failed to recognise and to address social transformations amongst voters and party members or supporters.

The SDP, and in particular its leadership around David Owen, stood for a disciplined and authoritative model of party organisation. This model emphasised the participatory role of the individual party member, but it left the key powers of decision-making in the hands of the leaders and, as I have outlined, in the hands of party MPs. It was also beyond doubt that the SDP organisation was not modelled along the lines of the Liberal Party, which had no comparable system of centralised cohesion.²¹

The successor of the old Liberal Party and SDP, the Liberal Democrats, has developed in a

The SDP leadership wanted to avoid the problems they had encountered at Labour conferences in the past in the form of block voting and mandated delegates.

somewhat different way. It would be wrong to say that the Liberal Democrats are simply following in the organisational footsteps of the SDP, but it can be said that in some areas the two parties show certain organisational similarities. The Liberal Democrats have a national membership system and also a delegated conference that consists of representatives of local parties and the parliamentary parties: this body is a reminder of the SDP Council. They also ensure the representation of both genders on the party's decision-making bodies.²² Overall it appears that the Liberal Democrats' constitution has acknowledged key aspects of modernisation, but perhaps with a less stringent element of 'discipline' than the SDP had displayed. In McKee's words:

Other components included ... a national committee and policy committee, plus regional organisations and multi-constituency local parties based on the SDP model. All these features replicated SDP organisation, as did the delegate conference, which was adapted from the SDP's Council for Social Democracy ... Finally, as occurred with the SDP, the Liberal Democrats' constitution also confers special recognition, with accompanying privileges, on select policy and ancillary organisations, e.g. students, trade unionists and Europeans.²³

The Liberal Democrats may well have adopted or even 'inherited' a key framework of organisational innovation from the SDP and in that sense they have modernised far beyond the limits of the old Liberal Party. But despite this the Liberal Democrats are not simply an SDP Mark II – they have kept their own identity as the main party of the political centre in Britain. They are a federal party and therefore retain a much more decentralised core structure than the SDP ever did. The principle of OMOV has also been largely

The SDP failed because it could not reconcile its autocratic style of leadership with the wider notion of popular participation.

abandoned by the Lib Dems, with the exception of elections for the Party Leader and President.

The SDP had to change and modernise, because its leaders, notably David Owen, recognised the futility of their struggle in an unreformed Labour Party. They could either have given up their ideals of a social democratic alternative to socialism, or they could have broken away from Labour. The Social Democrats were successful in the sense that they paved the way for a new outlook on the potential that a centre party in Britain would have. But the SDP failed because it could not reconcile its autocratic style of leadership with the wider notion of popular participation. The Liberal Democrats have so far avoided this dilemma by creating a modern party constitution that acknowledges the importance of a streamlined organisational structure but that, at the same time, respects the Liberal tradition of federalism and the dispersal of power on a local and regional level.

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- 1 Ian Bradley, *Breaking the Mould* (Oxford, 1981) still remains a key handbook on the formation of the SDP. A second source that analyses the background behind the birth of the new party is Hugh Stephenson, *Claret and Chips: The Rise of the SDP* (London, 1982).
- 2 Bradley, p. 91.
- 3 Bradley, p. 90, mentions an opinion poll that had been published in the *Sun* at the end of January 1981. According to this poll a combined Liberal-Social Democratic party would have been able to win the support of over 50 per cent of the electorate.
- 4 Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford, 1995), p. 245.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 241–42.
- 6 This is how he is described by

Roger Craver in his essay 'Direct Mail and Fund Raising with New Technologies' (pp. 71–72), in 'The Washington Program of the Annenberg School of Communications', *New Communication Technologies in Politics* (Washington, 1985), pp. 69–96. Roger Craver is president of Craver, Mathews, Smith & Company, a Washington DC-based direct mail and fundraising firm.

- 7 See *Marketing Week*, 12 December 1986, p. 6 ('SDP starts marketing initiative').
- 8 Crewe & King, *SDP*, p. 247.
- 9 Letter from the American Direct Mail company Craver, Mathews, Smith & Company to the SDP ('Direct Mail Fund Raising Needs and Potential'), 15 November 1982 (Source: SDP Archives, University of Essex).
- 10 Theatre-goers, wine drinkers, frequent travellers, and small investors.
- 11 Crewe & King, *SDP*, p. 250.
- 12 All income and expenditure figures are taken from the SDP Annual Reports, presented in Crewe & King, *SDP*, Appendix 5, Table 13.4, p. 492 ('Central income of SDP, 1981/2–1986/7').
- 13 Crewe & King, *SDP*, p. 251.
- 14 Stephenson, *Claret and Chips*, p. 95.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 16 A total of 78,205 members were balloted. They could choose how to elect the leader from three options. A comfortable majority of 43.5 per cent finally went for the so-called 'Option A', election of the leader by postal ballot of all members. This option received almost twice as many votes as Option B, election by a ballot of all SDP MPs.
- 17 For further details on this, see Crewe & King, *SDP*, p. 231.
- 18 See SDP Party Constitution, Chapter VI, Section A, Clause 2.
- 19 See SDP Party Constitution
- 20 See also Gerd Kräh, *Die britische SDP. Ursachen für das Scheitern der Social Democratic Party* (Baden-Baden, 1993), p. 87.
- 21 A point that is also made clear by Vincent McKee. See 'Factionalism in the Social Democratic Party, 1981–1987', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 42, Number 2, 1989, pp. 165–79.
- 22 The Constitution of the Federal Party, amended version, September 2002, 'Article 2, Provisions Relating to the Constitution'.
- 23 Vincent McKee, 'British Liberal Democrats: Structures and Groups on the Inside', in 'The Politics of the Liberal Democrats', undated discussion paper.

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concluded on page 60

... AND DECLINE:

The SDP reached its high point in 1985. From then on it was largely downhill, with Tory political recovery from their midterm nadir and rows within the Alliance.

This third selection of **Chris Radley's** cartoons from the *Social Democrat* illustrates the major political controversies of the period: unemployment, riots in the inner-cities, the Westland crisis that almost brought Mrs Thatcher down (and Neil Kinnock's speaking style which helped save her), and insider dealing and scandals in the City. The Alliance tried to make its mark in these debates, but was frequently distracted by internal rows, over policy positions and joint selection. Commentary by **Mark Pack**.

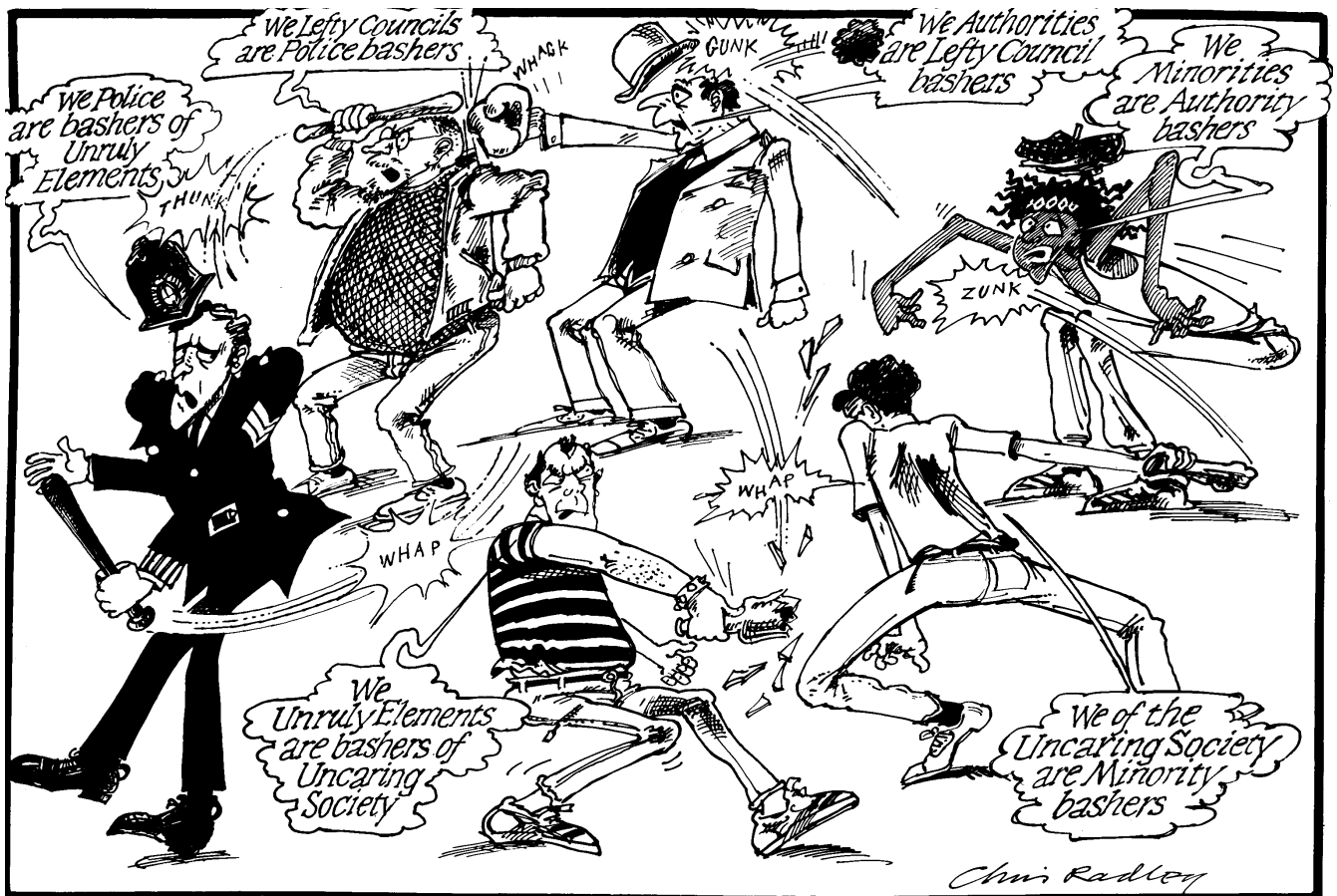


**Market forces unleashed
(18 October 1985)**

During Margaret Thatcher's second term, much of the economy recovered, and issues of inequality and the continuing high levels

of unemployment came to the fore. Inner-city riots in Toxteth, Brixton and Tottenham were seen by many as the outcome of these economic problems and the government's undue reliance on

THE SDP 1985-87



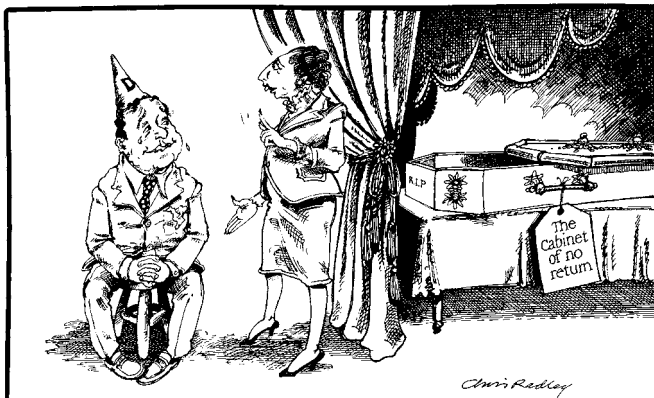
market forces. The cartoon features Nigel Lawson, Margaret Thatcher's Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time.

Short, sharp shock (29 November 1985)

The idea of giving criminals a 'short, sharp shock' by sub-

jecting them to boot-camp style physical training was briefly Mrs Thatcher's flavour of the month during one of the periodic crime panics.

Brittan, pictured, and Michael Heseltine particularly at odds. Eventually, Heseltine walked out of the Cabinet and Brittan resigned, taking responsibility for a leak of confidential documents designed to undermine Heseltine. Mrs Thatcher herself was nearly also pushed out of office, being caught up in allegations of complicity with the leaks. However, when faced with a key debate in Parliament, she survived thanks to a dreadfully inept speech by the Labour leader, Neil Kinnock (see below).



Westland (31 January 1986)

The Westland saga nearly finished Mrs Thatcher. A dispute over the future of a West Country helicopter firm (should it be rescued by a US firm or a European consortium?) produced deep divisions in the Cabinet, with Leon



**Economic boom
(14 February 1986)**

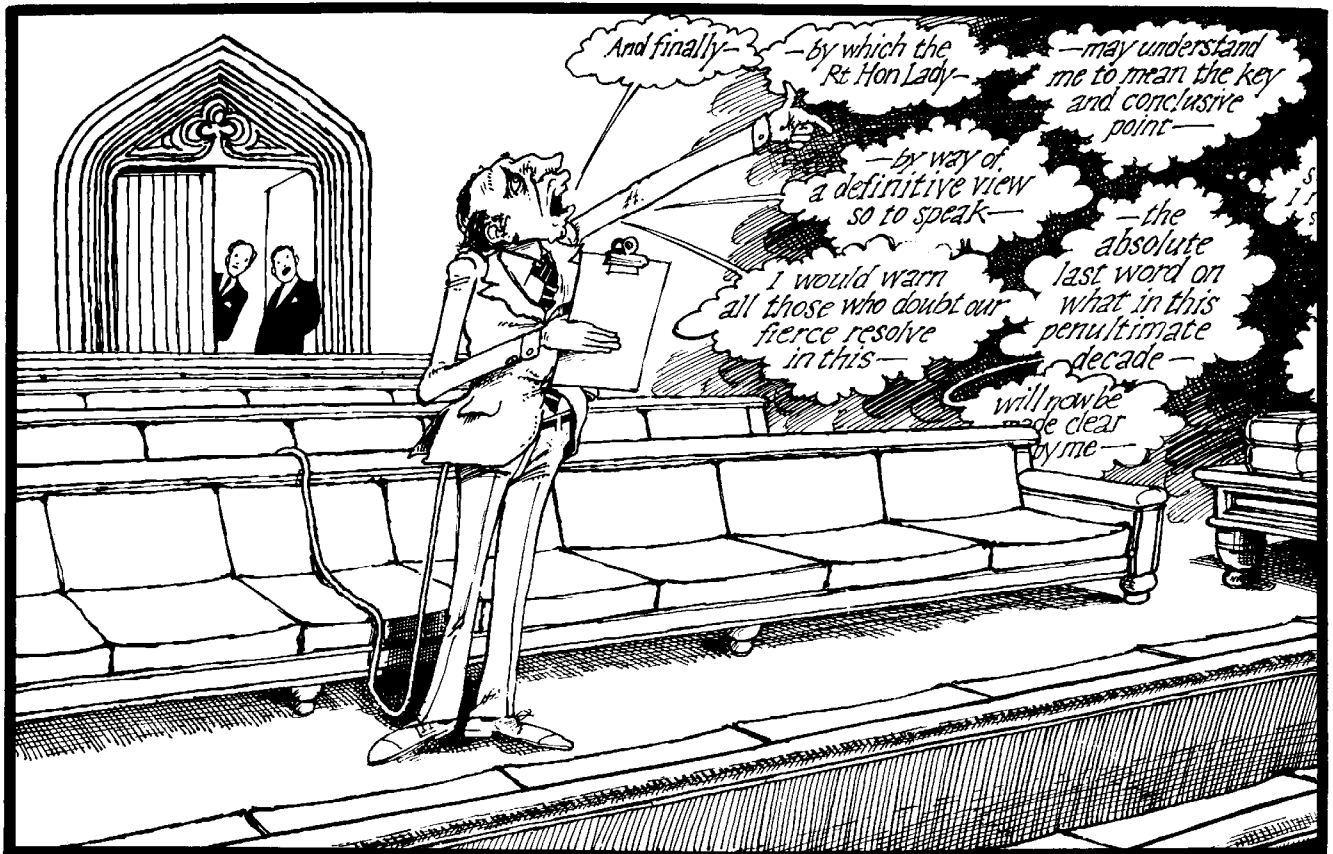
During the late 1980s, economic growth took off, with increasing concerns about the economy overheating.

Critics of the Chancellor, Nigel Lawson (pictured), argued that economic success was only due to one-off benefits of North Sea oil revenues and income from

privatisation. They argued that these were being wasted on a short-term economic boom rather than invested for the long term.

**Welsh verbosity
(28 February 1986)**

His speech in the Westland debate (see 31 January 1986) was by no means the only poor speech made by





Labour leader Neil Kinnock. Although he had originally forged a reputation as a fine left-wing orator, he had a tendency to become verbose, repetitive and ineffectual in many of his speeches as leader. The sobriquet 'Welsh windbag' was frequently applied.

Misdeeds in the City (14 March 1986)

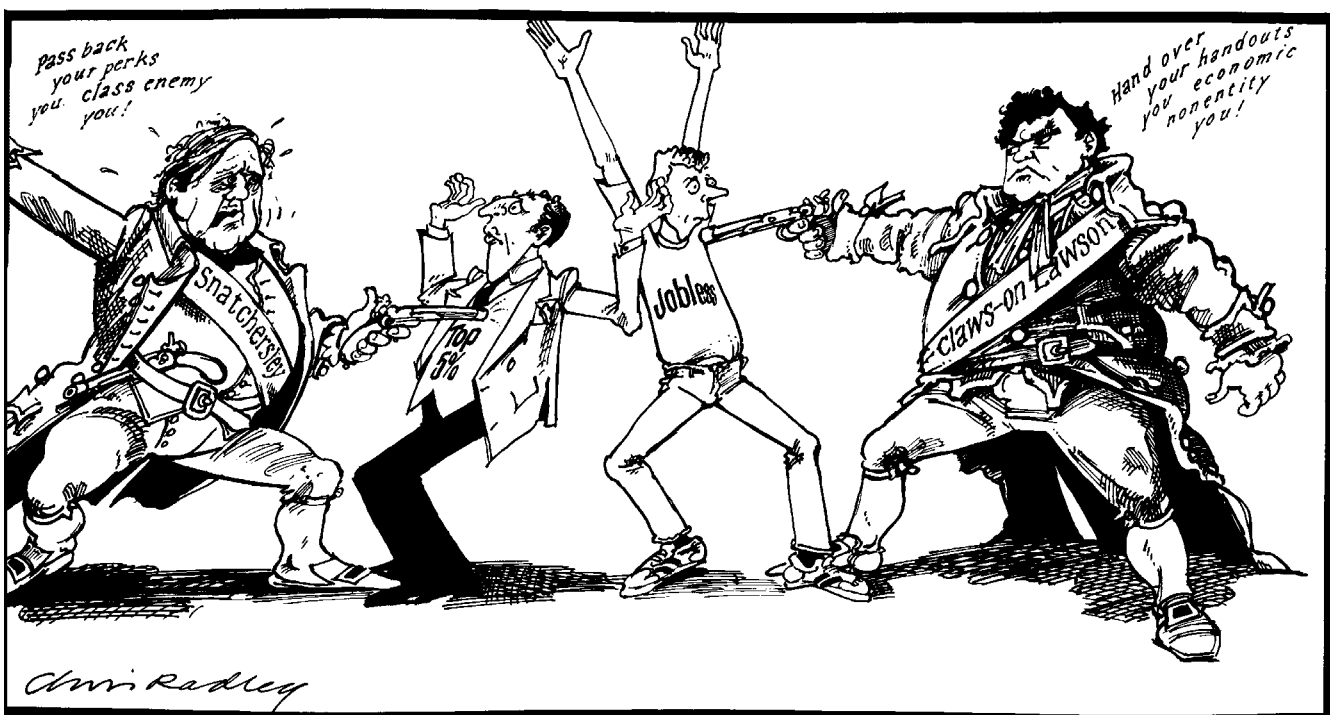
During the mid-1980s, the combination of privatisations – which greatly increased the number of shareholders in the country – and deregulation of financial institutions caused the City and its affairs to gain prominence. Its culture was of big financial deals, quick

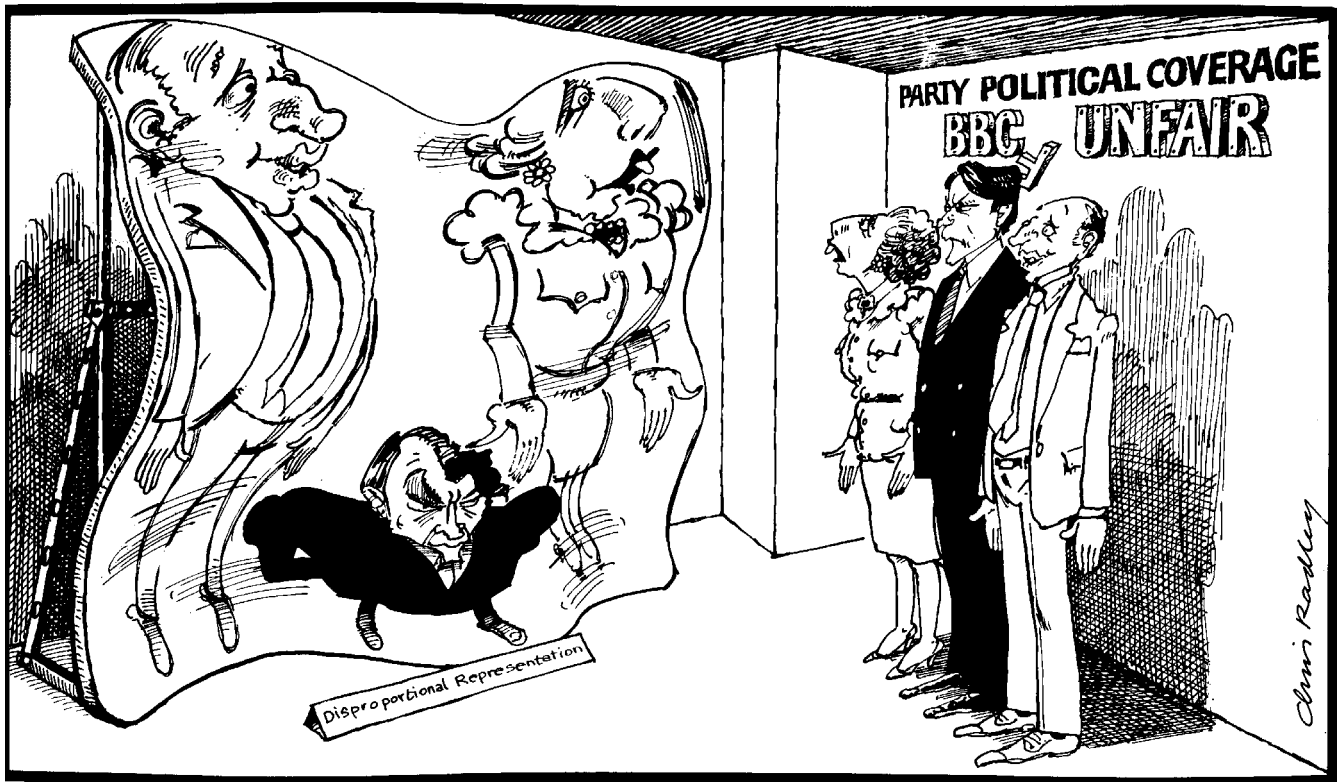
profits and large rewards for the deal-makers. With this came an increasing problem of insider dealing and debates over the extent to which the City should be allowed to regulate itself. Many critics of the government's approach drew contrasts between the relatively light sentences applied for insider dealing and

similar crimes compared with those handed out for offences such as social security fraud involving only a fraction of the sums.

Stand and deliver (28 March 1986)

During this period, the Alliance criticised the Tories





(represented by Nigel Lawson) for harsh policies towards the unemployed and those on benefits and Labour (represented by Roy Hattersley) for wanting to over-tax the rich.

**The BBC
(27 June 1986)**

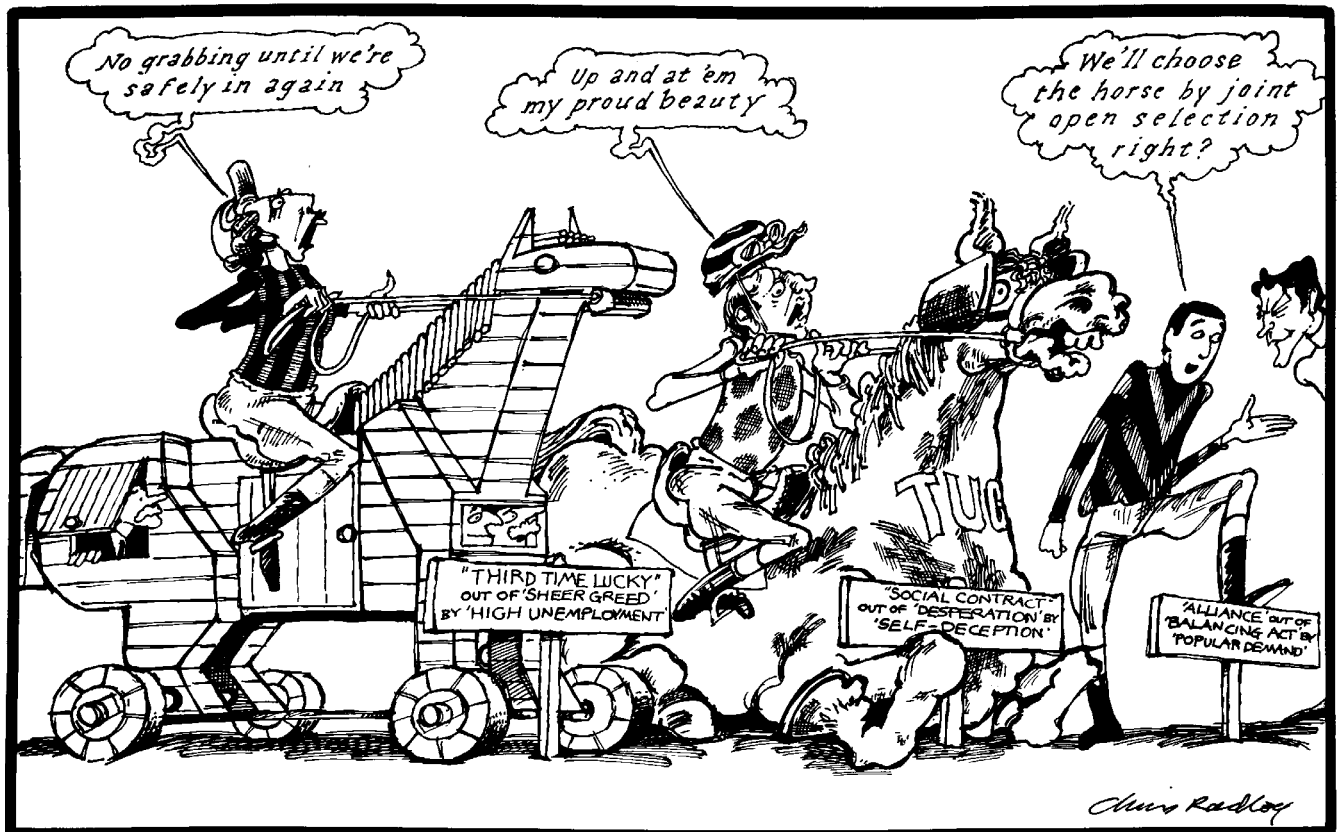
The level of Alliance press coverage was a regular source of complaint and dispute. Based on number of MPs, the Alliance was a minor party. Based on occasional periods

in the opinion polls, the Alliance was the most popular political group on offer.

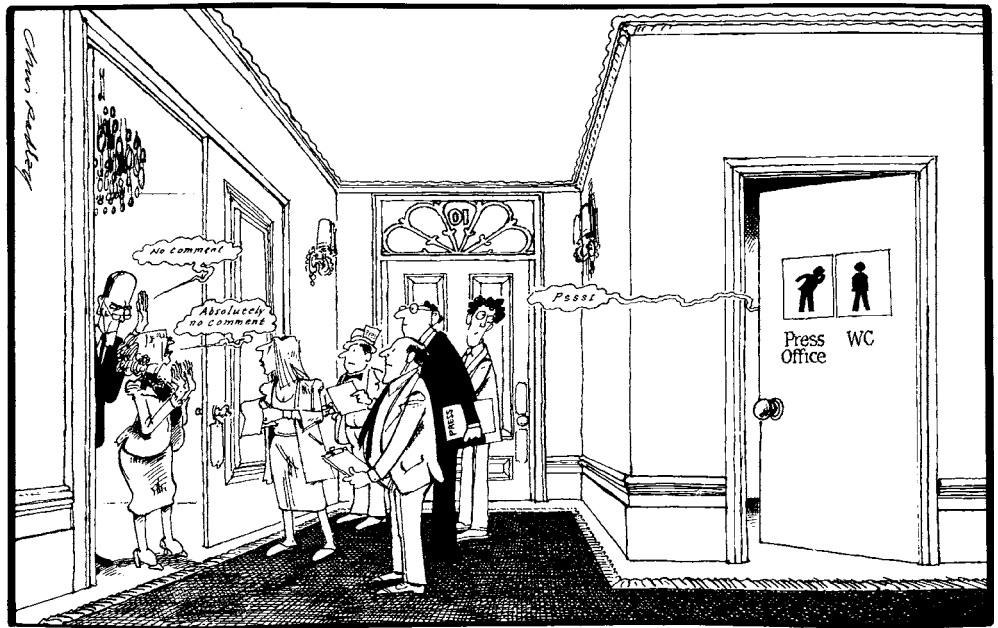
**The self-destruct button
(12 September 1986)**

The ability of the Alliance

to be its own undoing was reflected again in this cartoon produced during the final party conference season before the 1987 general election. The Conservatives set out their stall for a third election victory in a row,

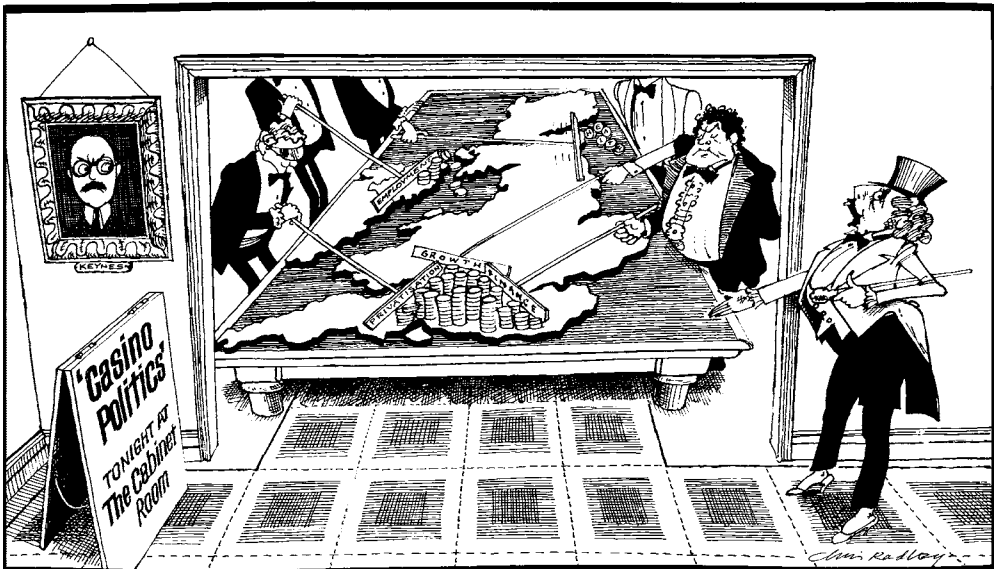


whilst the relationship between Labour and the unions continued to be a major issue for Neil Kinnock. The differences of view over the future of the Alliance (merger or separation?) were reflected in continuing disputes over the selection of candidates for the general election. 'Joint open selection' – whereby Liberal and SDP members in a constituency voted together to select a candidate, who could be either Liberal or SDP – was seen as precursor to merger and so supported or opposed by many on that basis.



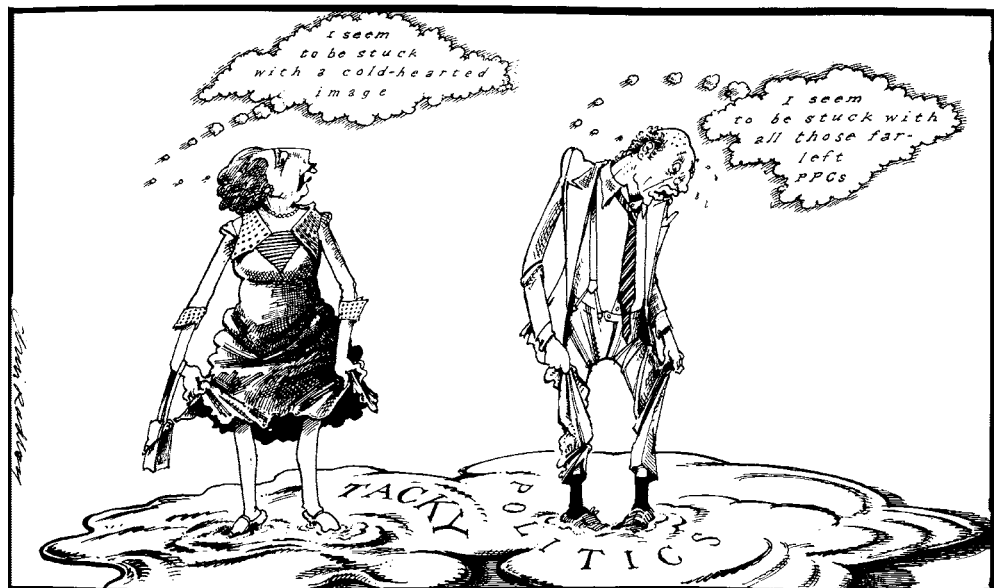
**Spinning and leaking
(21 November 1986)**

Mrs Thatcher's press secretary, Bernard Ingham, was frequently accused by critics of anonymously briefing against Cabinet members. However, as one of them pointed out, he was only 'the sewer, not the sewage'.



**Casino economics
(24 January 1987)**

The Conservatives' reliance on economic growth fuelled by the service sector, North Sea oil and privatisation proceeds made critics accuse them of only benefiting the south of the country. They saw economic growth produced in this way as inferior to – and riskier than – the more tangible outputs associated in the past with manufacturing.



**Greenwich
(6 March 1987)**

In the immediate run-up to the 1987 general election, the SDP snatched a dramatic by-election victory in Greenwich, winning a safe Labour seat after Neil Kinnock was saddled with a 'hard left' candidate.



David Owen was one of the ‘Gang of Four’ who, together with Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers, launched the Social Democratic Party in 1981. He was the Leader of the SDP between 1983–87, but when a majority of members voted for merger with the Liberal Party, he clung on to a diminishing group of supporters until he accepted a humiliating defeat. In this biography, a fellow-member of the Gang of the Four, **Bill Rodgers**, assesses David Owen’s political career and record.

BIOGRAPHY

Owen had a distinguished career behind him in the Labour Party; between 1977–79, he was Foreign Secretary in James Callaghan’s Labour government, dealing with constitutional problems over Southern Rhodesia. He supported the United Kingdom’s membership of the European Community but grew critical of further European economic and monetary integration. He left the House of Commons in 1992 and then played a significant role in peace-keeping in Yugoslavia.

With ambition, energy and ability, David Owen also had a streak of authoritarianism, suffering not only fools but men and women of comparable talents and similar values. Hoping to reshape British politics, he made a crucial error of judgement in not bringing together his social democrats and the Liberals. Owen’s was not a wasted life but his achievement fell significantly short of his potential.

Owen’s was not a wasted life but his achievement fell significantly short of his potential.

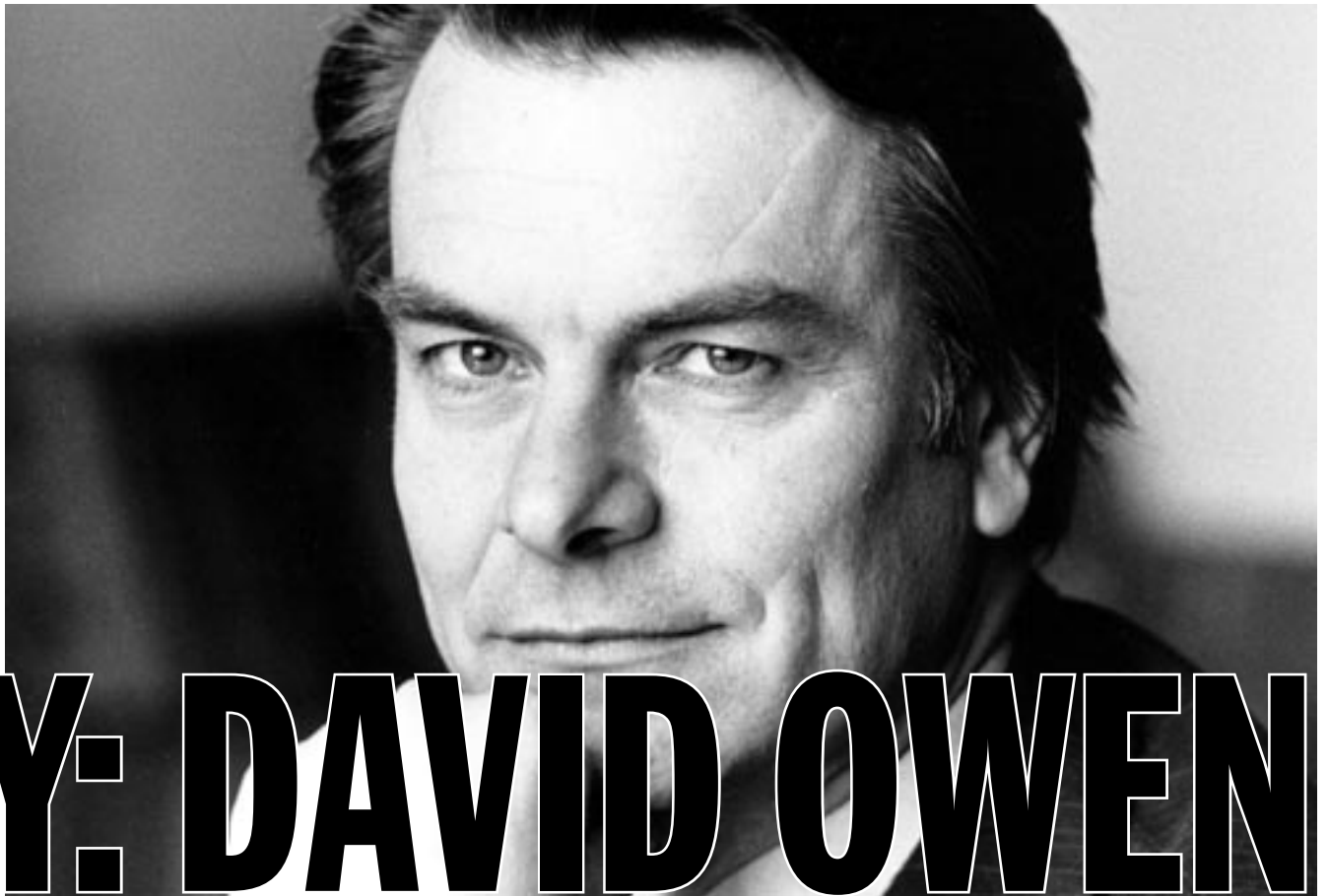
David Anthony Llewellyn Owen was born in 1938. Three-quarters Welsh, his father, Dr John Owen, was a general practitioner and his mother, Molly, a dentist. The family home was in Plympton, Devon, but during the war Owen grew up in Monmouthshire and Glamorgan, often looked after by his grandfather, to whom he became devoted. At the early age of seven he became a boarder at Mount House School near Tavistock and, later, at Bradfield College, Berkshire. From there he went to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge and, as a medical student, to St Thomas’s Hospital, London.

Although he had been taken to a meeting addressed by Aneurin Bevan during the 1950 election campaign, Owen played no part in student politics. But in his early twenties he joined the Labour Party, which was looking for good, young Parliamentary candidates in the rather bleak political territory of the south-west. Owen was invited to a selection conference at Torrington. He was

chosen to stand, and in the 1964 election he came third behind the Tory victor and Mark Bonham Carter (who had won the 1958 by-election, then lost the seat in 1959). But this experience whetted Owen’s political appetite. Within eighteen months he stood for the marginal Tory seat of Plymouth Sutton and won with a comfortable majority (there was no Liberal candidate in 1966, and previously Liberal votes were helpful to Labour).

As a new Member of Parliament, and ahead of his maiden speech, Owen was invited to become Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) to Gerry Reynolds, the Minister of State for the Army. Henceforth, defence and health were to be two of his significant themes throughout his years in the House of Commons.

Given the factions within the Parliamentary Labour Party, he was quickly drawn into the 1963 Club – held in memory of Hugh Gaitskell, the former Labour Leader. Over regular dinners, he met Tony Crosland and



WHY: DAVID OWEN

Roy Jenkins, then rising stars in the Wilson cabinet, and junior ministers like Dick Taverne and Bill Rodgers. He also became a close colleague of both David Marquand and John Mackintosh, who were among the 1966 intake of Labour MPs.

The Labour government had a secure majority of almost a hundred seats but it suffered a precipitate decline up to and beyond the devaluation of sterling in November 1967. There was a serious loss of by-elections (fifteen during the Parliament) and there was widespread discontent with the Prime Minister and his style. Owen had originally greatly admired Tony Crosland, the author of the revisionist and influential book *The Future of Socialism*, but he now saw Roy Jenkins as the strongest alternative to Harold Wilson. During the hot-house arguments and among the armchair conspirators who were calling 'Wilson must go', Owen was prominent.

But in July 1968, with the approval of Denis Healey, Harold Wilson appointed Owen as Par-

liamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence for the Royal Navy. It was a shrewd choice. The Prime Minister recognised that Owen had ability and would respond to ministerial opportunities. In addition, in his Plymouth constituency he would benefit from the historic naval vote. This turned out to be the case, and in 1970 Owen held on with a majority of nearly a thousand votes as Ted Heath replaced Wilson at Number 10.

The Labour Party was now in opposition, and with George Brown's defeat in Belper, a vacancy occurred for the Deputy Leadership. Roy Jenkins stood and won over both Michael Foot and Fred Peart, the centre-right, anti-EEC candidate. It now looked as if the old Gaitskellites – who were beginning to be called Jenkinsites – were coming back to power, with Owen amongst them. But within less than two years, this expectation fell apart. In the first place, Harold Wilson changed his mind about supporting entry to the European Community; in the

During the hot-house arguments and among the armchair conspirators who were calling 'Wilson must go', Owen was prominent.

second, and as a consequence of a referendum, Roy Jenkins resigned the Deputy Leadership.

Owen was one of the sixty-nine rebel Labour MPs who voted for entry to the EEC in defiance of a three-line whip. Unlike some other rebels, Owen was not sacked, but four months later he resigned from the Opposition Front Bench in sympathy with Roy Jenkins. Among others resigning was George Thomson, who left Parliament to become a European Commissioner when the Conservative Government had completed its European legislation, and Dick Taverne, who was to become the victim of his intolerant constituency party.

For much of the next two years the Jenkinsites were excluded from the mainstream of the Parliamentary Labour Party. They kept together, meeting at regular lunches at their homes. Among them were David Owen, David Marquand, John Roper and Robert MacLennan. As an informal team they helped to formulate Roy Jenkins' speeches,

BIOGRAPHY: DAVID OWEN

which led to *What Matters Now*, a short book setting out the broad range of his political direction. They were all anxious to show that Europe was not their only concern, and Owen brought forward his own Children's Bill on adoption. In the autumn of 1973, Roy Jenkins returned to the Labour front bench. He demolished the reputation of the Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, Anthony Barber, on the eve of the Christmas recess in an outstanding Parliamentary performance. But given the state of the Labour Party, most Jenkinsites thought that Labour was unlikely to win the general election, and some hoped they would not.

In the event, Harold Wilson did become Prime Minister for a second term. Jenkins now reluctantly found himself Home Secretary again but made it clear to Wilson that some of his close friends and colleagues, including Owen, should be included in the government. Barbara Castle, who had become Secretary of State for Social Services, also welcomed the idea of Owen joining her department as Parliamentary Secretary; and later in the year, following the second 1974 election, he moved up as Minister of State for Health, soon becoming a Privy Counsellor.

Owen got on well with Barbara Castle. He was knowledgeable and hard-working in dealing with difficult negotiations over the new consultants' contracts and pay beds. She liked his style and he, in turn, liked her, although she complained about his lack of consistency and changes of mood. But when Callaghan succeeded Wilson at Number 10 and sacked Castle, Owen stayed on at Health for several uncomfortable months. Then, in September 1976, when Roy Hattersley was promoted into the Cabinet, Callaghan put Owen into the vacancy he left as Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Tony Crosland, the Foreign Secretary, was initially less than enthusiastic about Owen, who had transferred his loyalty from

Crosland to Jenkins seven or eight years earlier. Nor was Crosland entirely happy about the sort of arrogant, good-looking, middle-class man, who seemed much like himself. But Owen made himself useful about those matters which bored Crosland, which were not a few.

Then, five months later, Crosland had a stroke and Owen was left in charge of the Foreign Office for a few days until Crosland's death. He was steady and confident in filling this gap and, to everyone's surprise, the Prime Minister appointed him Foreign Secretary at the age of 37.

Since the death of Ernest Bevin in 1950 and during the Cold War, the Prime Minister of the day had been effectively his own Foreign Secretary (there had been twelve of them in twenty-five years), dealing directly with the President of the United States and European leaders. But Owen was now fourth or fifth in the cabinet hierarchy, with frequent exposure at home and abroad. He spoke with authority, especially when trying to resolve the constitutional problems of Southern Rhodesia. Cy Vance, Jimmy Carter's Secretary of State, was much taken with Owen – a friendship that was to endure in different circumstances when they worked together in Bosnia fifteen years later.

Jim Callaghan's biographer says that David Owen 'soon showed his capacity as a strong, if sometimes domineering, minister' with an 'authoritarian temper'. He was often unpopular amongst officials, who found him impatient and irascible. It was said that he had sacked six different government drivers because he had been dissatisfied with all of them. When Ivor Richard (the British Ambassador to the United Nations, a former colleague in the Commons and a Defence Minister) attended the Tony Crosland Memorial Service at Westminster Abbey, Owen called Richard in to voice his disapproval.

His supporters said that Owen was blowing fresh air into the fusty corners of the Foreign Office and shaking up its traditional

habits and ideas. But there were times when his style – youthful, informal, iconoclastic – overran his judgment. When he recommended Peter Jay, a close personal friend and the Prime Minister's son-in-law, as ambassador to Washington, he damaged his and Callaghan's reputations.

In 1975 David Owen had not played any significant part in the European referendum. Now, as Foreign Secretary, he stayed close to the Prime Minister, expressing scepticism about monetary union. In the principal cabinet committee, of which he was chairman, he showed no preference for ministers who were either pro- or anti-Europe, and his old colleagues felt that Owen was unenthusiastic about moving the European Community forward.

In 1979 Labour lost the election with its smallest share of the vote since the 1930s, although Owen held his own seat at Plymouth (now Devonport, after boundary changes). But in the Parliamentary Committee – the Shadow Cabinet – he was elected near the bottom of the list, and Callaghan moved him to the junior role of shadow Minister for Energy. In the House of Commons it was said that Owen had been over-promoted and was a loner, lacking political roots.

When, in 1977, the Campaign for Labour Victory (CLV) – an organisation formed to defend and promote the democratic centre-right of the Labour Party – was launched, Owen supported it more in name than in practice. But after the election, he began to speak out against the Militant Tendency, although he rejected any possibility of leaving the Labour Party and committed himself to fighting inside through 'ten years of hard slog'. He was highly critical of Roy Jenkins' Dibleby Lecture, *Home Thoughts from Abroad*, in November 1979, implying that Jenkins was now on the fringe of politics and out of touch with those who would save the Labour Party.

Then suddenly, he changed gear. At a London conference in

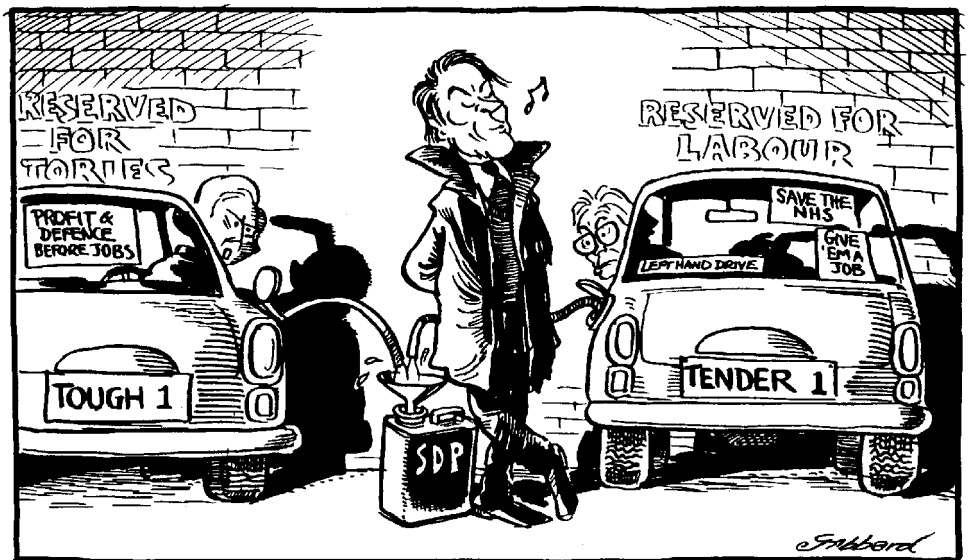
Jim Callaghan's biographer says that David Owen 'soon showed his capacity as a strong, if sometimes domineering, minister' with an 'authoritarian temper'.

May 1980, dominated by Tony Benn, he made an angry, brave impromptu speech on defence that was noisily heckled. As a result he felt personally affronted at the treatment of a recent Foreign Secretary and saw for the first time the extent to which the left had captured the Labour Party. He now began to move with increased momentum towards a break with the party.

Within days, on his initiative, he joined Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers in a public statement, rejecting any suggestion from the Labour left that Britain should withdraw from the European Community. Five weeks later Owen and Rodgers, as members of the Shadow Cabinet (Williams had been out of Parliament since 1979) challenged Callaghan to justify a series of internal policy changes that leant heavily towards the left. Then on 1 August 1980, Owen, Williams and Rodgers, the 'Gang of Three', as they became known, wrote an open letter to their fellow members of the Labour Party, saying, 'We are not prepared to abandon Britain to divisive and often cruel Tory policies because electors do not have an opportunity to vote for an acceptable social alternative'. It was now plain that the Labour Party was getting close to a split.

However, Williams and Rodgers were still reluctant to leave Labour, and Owen also recognised that there would be a further delay if Denis Healey was elected as Callaghan's successor. But when on 10 November Healey lost and Michael Foot won, Owen was off the leash. For two months he was single-minded in coaxing anxious Labour MPs closer towards a break, and hoping that the 'Gang of Three' would go together.

But he was much less enthusiastic about the prospect of the 'Gang of Three' getting together with Roy Jenkins to make the 'Gang of Four'. He saw Jenkins as 'old hat', a failure, having left the House of Commons for Brussels, being twenty years older than himself and already too close to the Liberals. He was also aware



that a group of Jenkinsites, like Dick Taverne, David Marquand and some non-Parliamentarians, were close to Jenkins and treated him as the king over the water; and he knew that the Dimpleby Lecture had made Jenkins many friends who looked to him to lead the realignment of the left. Jenkins said that he was prepared to support any one of the three – Owen, Williams or Rodgers – as leader to make the new party a success, but Owen was determined that he alone would lead. In the gap between the publication of the Limehouse Declaration in late January 1981 and the launch of the SDP in March, he proposed that he should become the Chairman of the Parliamentary Party (until a leadership ballot) and Jenkins should be relegated to fund-raising for the new party.

Owen was quick to disagree with the views of Jenkins, Williams and Rodgers about the SDP's relations with the Liberal Party. In the first place, he took exception to the proposal that the SDP and the Liberals should join together at the next general election, dividing the seats equally. Then, a few days later, he complained that Williams and Rodgers had too readily agreed with David Steel at the Anglo-German Königswinter Conference on a joint statement of principles, including the two parties agreeing to form two commissions to develop policy. Owen's constant

'Tough and tender' became Owen's slogan – combining a market economy, strong defence and compassion for the sick and unemployed. ('Guardian', 13 September 1983)

theme of opposing any coming-together between the SDP and the Liberals persisted until 1987.

When the SDP had been established, Owen began to find his feet in a difficult, hostile House of Commons. He was not a natural speaker in debate and seemed to force out his words with difficulty. But he stood his ground and his pronouncements carried weight. When the Falklands War broke out in April 1982, Owen was first inclined to oppose Margaret Thatcher's determination to repossess the islands but he was persuaded very soon to support military action. In the coming weeks, he spoke with a conviction which raised his profile both inside the Commons and outside. As a consequence, he became a strong runner to challenge Roy Jenkins as leader of the SDP in the ballot of members. He lost by 20,846 votes to 26,256 (in a turn-out of 75 per cent) but it was a much closer outcome than would have been anticipated a few weeks earlier.

Owen, however, was disappointed and he made no special effort to support Jenkins in preparing for the general election. And while Owen was sulking in his tent, Jenkins found difficulty in adjusting to a less respectful House of Commons than he had previously known. As a result, and shaken by an unsuccessful by-election at Darlington, the SDP was not fully prepared when the

BIOGRAPHY: DAVID OWEN

election was called in May 1983. Jenkins had become Prime Minister-designate in the Alliance (the partnership of the SDP and the Liberals) with David Steel as his deputy, but as the campaign failed to make progress it was proposed by the Liberals that their role should be reversed. In a tense argument at Steel's home at Ettrick Bridge, the SDP team – including Williams and Rodgers – opposed any change in the Alliance leadership. However, Owen sat on his hands, claiming that the Alliance leadership was a personal matter between Jenkins and Steel and for them alone. Later, when the arrangements were left unchanged, Owen expressed his surprise and approval that Steel had been tough enough to try to push Jenkins aside.

The 1983 election result was far from a disaster for the Alliance. Its share of the vote was 25.4 per cent, only 2.2 per cent short of Labour's vote. But with first-past-the-post, the twenty-nine SDP MPs were reduced to six and it was a major blow to morale, especially after the heady excitement of eighteen months earlier. Owen made it immediately clear that he would challenge Jenkins for the leadership and that, although he was prepared to accept a brief delay, the principle of a contest was not negotiable. By the end of the weekend the matter was settled: Jenkins resigned and, following the formalities – there was no credible alternative (Williams and Rodgers had lost their seats) – Owen became leader in time for the new Queen's Speech.

He moved quickly to establish his own authority, style, policy and personal team. This was to be his own show, erasing the relationships of the 'Gang of Four' and the spirit of the Limehouse Declaration. At the SDP Salford Conference three months later, Owen blocked any discussion of merger with the Liberals, at least during the next Parliament, and tried to stop any joint selection of Parliamentary candidates.

Owen's book *Face the Future*, published two years earlier, was

eclectic in tone. It was said that he had sent it in draft to almost a hundred individuals and amended it to take account of all their diverse ideas. Now, after Salford and in the three years ahead, he began to turn away from the social democratic, 'conscience and reform', centre-left. Owen's paradoxical 'tough and tender' slogan encapsulated his social market approach, with 'tough' being the dominant mood in keeping with his temperament. Jenkins called Owen's policies 'sub-Thatcherite' and a barely suppressed tension grew between Owen and Jenkins, Williams and Rodgers.

However, Owen was effective in the House of Commons, impressive on television and commanding in the councils of his party. This was a high-quality, sustained performance that did much to build the reputation and name of the SDP. Their members (the 'political virgins') might sometimes feel uneasy but they gave their leader the benefit of the doubt.

Between Owen and Steel, there was at first a tolerable if strained relationship. While Steel continued to push for a closer union, Owen was deeply suspicious of any further coming together between the SDP and the Liberals, hoping that proportional representation would eventually enable the two parties to go their separate ways. In asserting the SDP's identity, Owen was especially determined to preserve an independent defence policy, making no compromise with the Liberal unease about nuclear weapons.

As a result, Owen and Steel agreed to appoint a joint Alliance Commission on defence and disarmament to delay a decision on British nuclear weapons until close to the next election. After eighteen months of discussion, both sides were close to agreement when Owen suddenly rejected the draft report, declaring that Britain should remain 'a nuclear weapon state'. This caused a major breakdown of relationships not only between Owen and Steel, but between Owen and

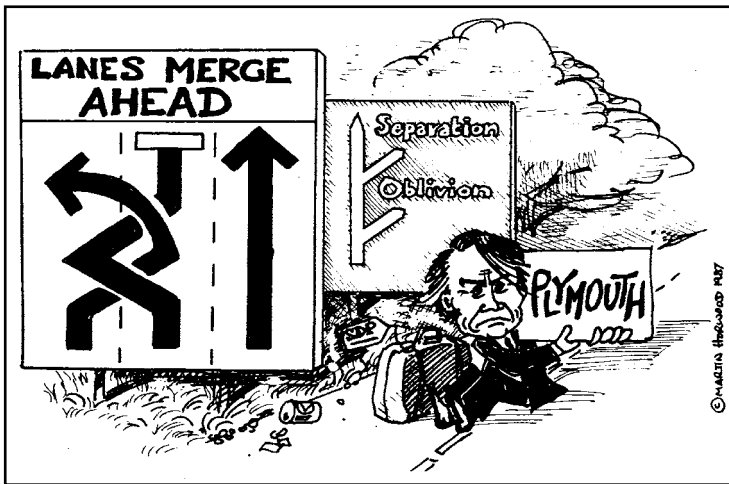
Rodgers (the leading SDP member of the Commission), Jenkins and Williams.

Owen's behaviour was in character. He was enraged about a newspaper headline, 'Owen's nuclear hopes dashed', implying that Steel had won on defence policy and Owen had been humiliated. Owen could have shrugged it off as a minor hiccup, awaited the final report and negotiated an understanding. Instead he punished his SDP colleagues for reaching an agreement with the Liberals in the Commission, and rejected the report.

Owen's outburst had arisen from an injudicious remark by Steel; and now in turn, in September 1986, the Liberals voted against the two leaders' proposal for European nuclear cooperation partly in response to Owen's rubbishing of the Commission's report. Owen and Steel tried to patch up the row in the following weeks but the Alliance was seriously damaged. Steel's morale suffered from Owen's relentless bullying; and Jenkins, Williams and Rodgers became increasingly cool towards Owen.

Early in 1987 the Alliance was successfully re-launched with a united team of spokesmen. But it should have marked the culmination of joint election planning – not, in too many respects, its beginning. Similarly, the joint policy booklet *The Time Has Come* was a natural mid-term document unsuitable for its launch close to the election. As for objectives, it would have been imaginative for Owen to promote the idea of Alliance holding the balance in a hung parliament earlier in the term, but was unsuitable when 633 candidates would soon be fighting to win, as the overwhelming majority of Social Democrats and Liberals believed that the 'hung parliament' formula ceased to have any resonance once the election approached. Owen clung to it, however, and the Alliance message was confused. Owen and Steel were obliged to restore a working relationship, but the shortcomings of dual leadership were profound.

Had Owen advocated merger, an almost unanimous vote of SDP members would have followed. It was also possible that a merged party, Social Democrats and Liberals together, would have elected Owen as leader, despite previous controversies and his authoritarian style.



The doctor's not for merging ('Radical Quarterly', 1987)

Owen and Steel had separate election teams and Owen's own circle was distinct from the formal structure of his party.

However, on the eve of the election the SDP believed that they were well-placed for the campaign. Target seats were adequately – in some cases generously – resourced, and Owen worked hard to raise money, with the help of David Sainsbury. In late February the SDP won an important by-election at Greenwich which boosted the confidence of its increasingly professional staff (holding Liberal Truro in March was more predictable). But the 1987 general election was not a success. Social Democrats and Liberals worked well together in the constituencies, but the dual leadership was unrelaxed and clumsy. The Alliance vote fell by 2.8 per cent from 1983, three SDP MPs, including Jenkins, lost their seats and the SDP Parliamentary Party was reduced to five.

Within the SDP there was now overwhelming pressure to merge with the Liberals. Owen hoped to delay a decision and to devise another, perhaps closer, partnership between the SDP and the Liberals. But the SDP's constitution, the text of which Owen had approved several years earlier, made provision for a one-member, one-vote referendum on major issues, and the party's mood was to resolve the matter. Had Owen advocated merger, an almost unanimous vote of SDP members would have followed. It was also possible that a merged party, Social Democrats

and Liberals together, would have elected Owen as leader, despite previous controversies and his authoritarian style. But with the odds against him, Owen was determined to preserve a separate party made in his own image, and face the consequences.

Following a campaign, and with Owen strongly opposed to merger, members were divided 60:40 in a ballot for merger. Owen then immediately resigned the SDP leadership, and in a bitter and lengthy dispute, refused to accept the majority decision. Instead he chose to lead the rump membership, claiming the SDP name, despite the clear assumption that the identity of the SDP would be absorbed into a single party.

The Owenites (the 'Continuing SDP') survived for two years, carried on Owen's shoulders. His party fought eight by-elections, but when their candidate finished seventh out of eight candidates in Bootle, behind the Monster Raving Loony Party, Owen knew that his time was up. He disbanded his party and in 1991 published his autobiography, *Time to Declare*, of 800 pages. At the early age of fifty-three he decided to leave politics, knowing that he would almost certainly lose his seat at Plymouth, and with no serious prospect of a further career in the House of Commons.

It was thought that if John Major returned to Downing Street in the 1992 election, he would appoint Owen as the last Governor-General of Hong Kong. But when Chris Patten was unexpectedly de-

feated at Bath, Major offered Hong Kong to him, thus closing Owen's avenue of opportunity. Instead, on the recommendation of Douglas Hurd, he became the chief European negotiator in the Peace Conference of Yugoslavia, from 1992–95 (succeeding Lord Carrington). In this capacity he was the co-author of the abortive Vance–Owen plan to end the war by dividing Bosnia into ethnic 'cantons'. These efforts were acknowledged in his appointment as a Companion of Honour (CH); and he told the story in his book *Balkan Odyssey*. In the 1980s he was a member of the Olaf Palme Commission on Disarmament and Security, and throughout his later career he played a prominent role in top-table international institutions and conferences.

Owen became a director of Coats Viyella in 1994 and Executive Chairman of Middlesex Holdings in 1995. He has other business interests.

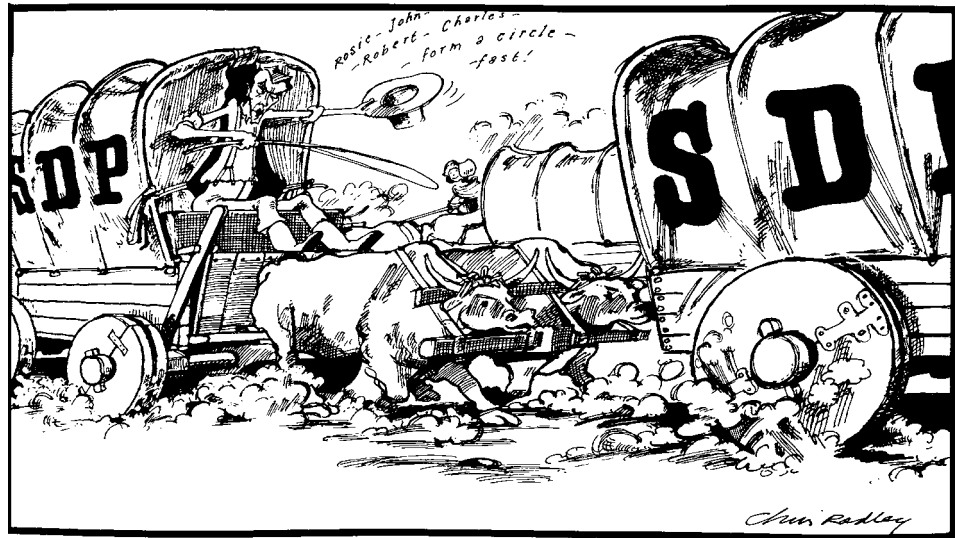
In 1992 Owen became a peer, making his maiden speech three years later and contributing occasionally to the House of Lords on international and European Union affairs. In 1999 he became Chairman of 'New Europe', committed to opposing Britain's entry to the Eurozone.

Owen married Deborah Schabert of New York in 1968 and three children followed. Debbie Owen's charm, intelligence and loyalty helped to sustain Owen through his vicissitudes; and she became a successful literary agent, with Delia Smith, Jeffrey Archer and Georgette Heyer among her star clients. The Owens created a close-knit family, as if to redress the balance of David Owen's own lonely childhood.

First elected to Parliament in 1962, Bill Rodgers served as a minister in five government departments, and in the Cabinet, as Secretary of State for Transport, between 1976–79. In 1981, along with David Owen, he was a member of the 'Gang of Four' who founded the SDP. He was given a life peerage in 1992, and from 1997–2002 was leader of the Liberal Democrat peers.

MERGER AND AFTE

The Alliance's 1987 election campaign was unimpressive and the outcome was disappointing. Pressure for merger between the SDP and Liberals began to mount almost immediately – in opposition to the wishes of David Owen. Nevertheless, Owen believed he could win the party's ballot over opening merger negotiations, and use his victory to force out his Jenkinsite critics within the SDP. It was a fatal miscalculation. This final selection of cartoons by **Chris Radley**, from the *Social Democrat*, charts the SDP's last year, and the infighting between the merged party and the Owenite rump that followed. Commentary by **Mark Pack**.

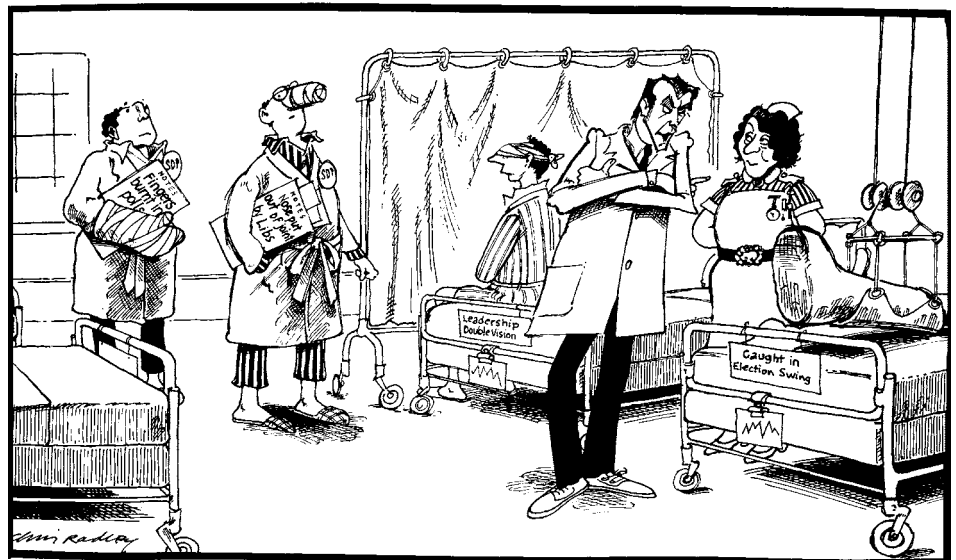


Merger? (3 July 1987)

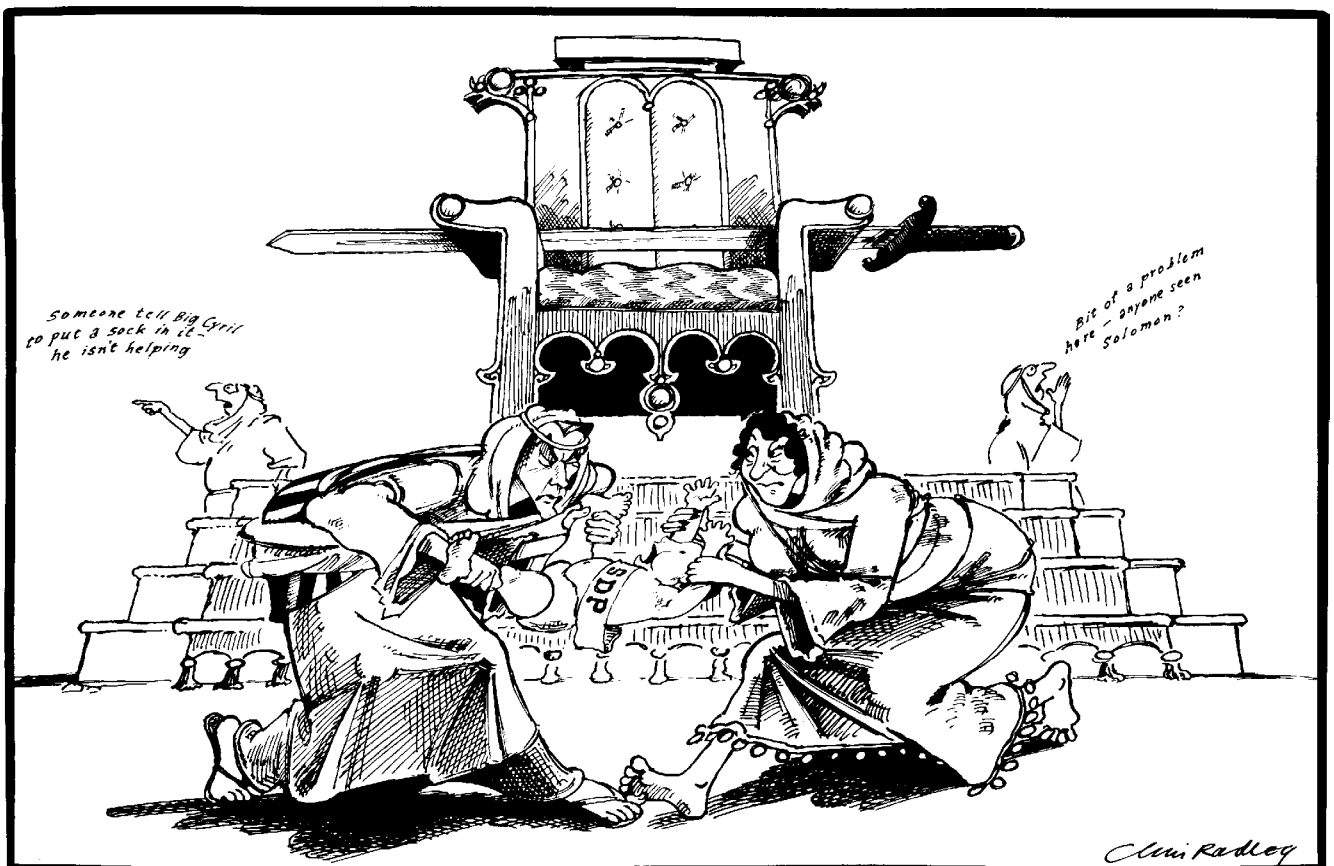
David Owen, seen here circling the SDP's wagons and calling out to the party's other MPs (above), was the main defender of the SDP's independence after the 1987 general election.

The Gang of Four splits (17 July 1987)

Arguments over merger split the old Gang of Four, with Shirley Williams – along with Bill Rodgers and Roy Jenkins – supporting the SDP merging with the Liberals to form a new party. Owen did not agree.



ERMATH: 1987–89



Squabbling to obscurity (14 August 1987)

The Bible tells a story of two women arguing over their children – whose is dead and whose is alive? – to which Solomon suggests the answer is to cut the one living child in two and to give each woman half of it. A similarly self-destructive cycle gripped the SDP at this time, with the continuing arguments for and against merger risking making the whole question irrelevant as the public turned away from the bickering, and support for both the SDP and

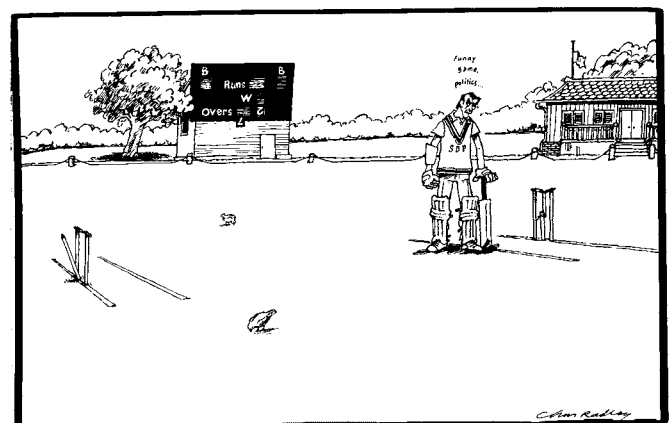
Liberals collapsed. Pictured here are Owen and Williams, leaders of the dispute within the SDP. ‘Big Cyril’ is again the Liberal MP Cyril Smith, who was still regularly indulging in outbursts of public anger (see 24 June 1983).

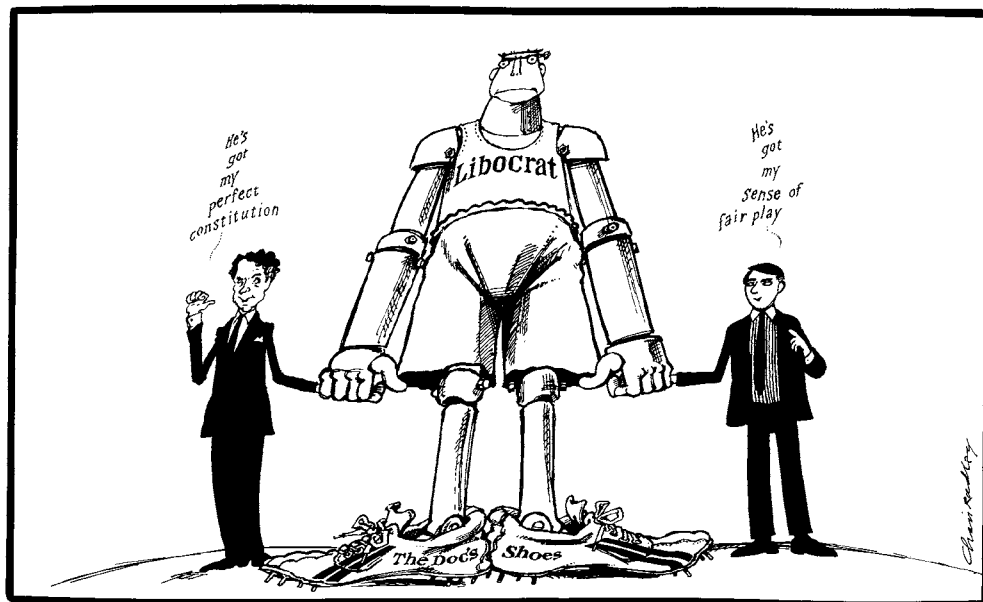
Owen on his own (18 September 1987)

The progress towards merger between the SDP and Liberals, left David Owen a forlorn-looking figure on the political scene, largely abandoned by his colleagues,

members and voters. This was exacerbated when, in the end, Charles Kennedy and Robert

Maclennan – two of the four other SDP MPs – backed merger.





messy process, with the Liberals not being able to get what they wished from the SDP, particularly on defence, whose leader in turn could not stop Owen wanting to go off and form his own splinter party.

Trying to put it all together again (11 December 1987)

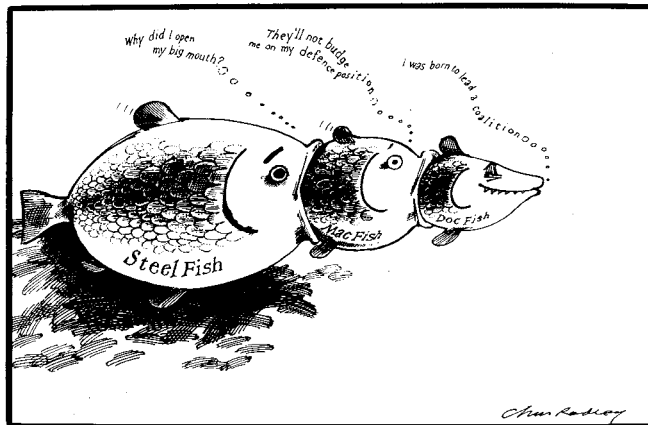
Whether or not the two parties could be merged into a cohesive and coherent new party was a matter of protracted dispute, most publicly revealed in the long discus-

A new leader (9 October 1987)

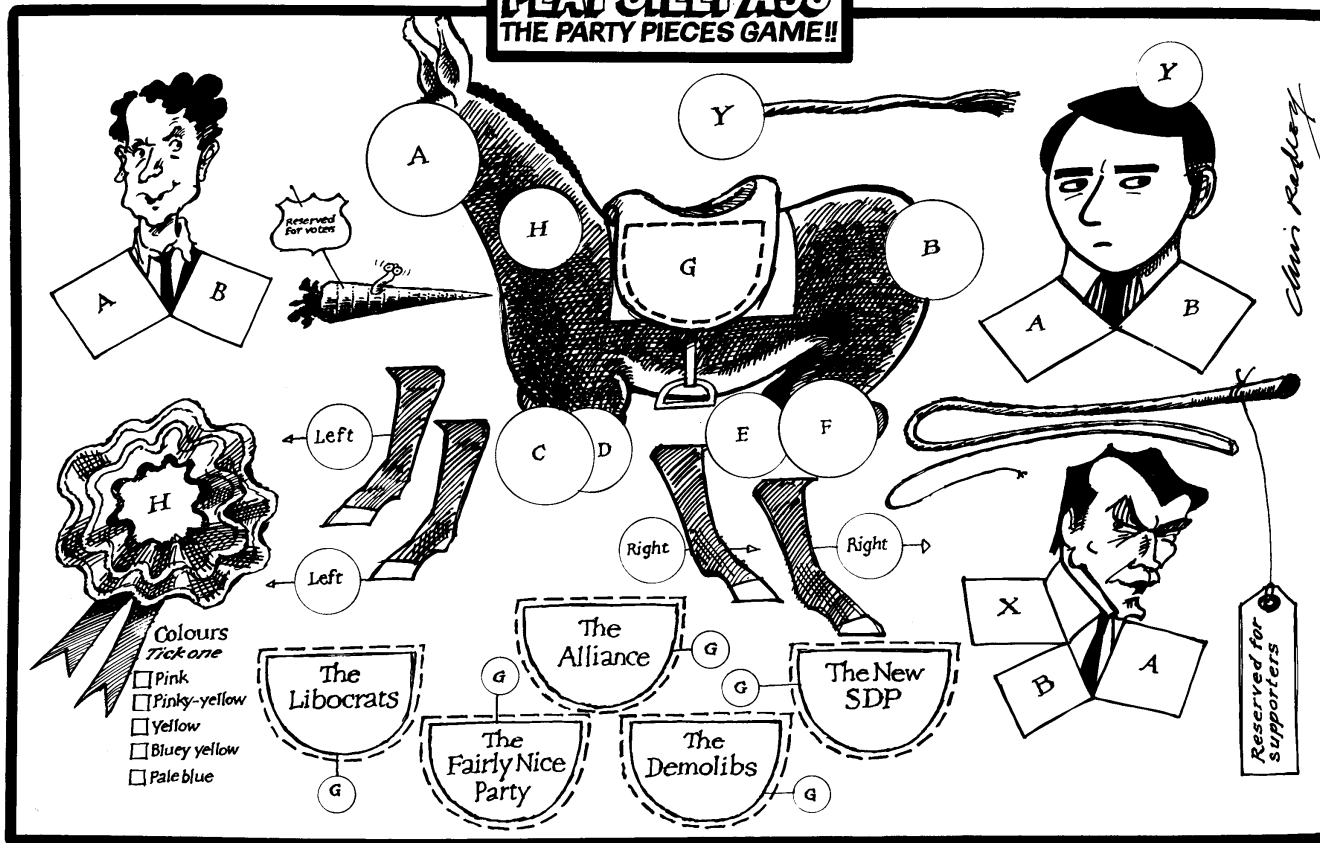
Robert Maclennan (pictured above left) took over briefly as SDP leader after Owen's resignation following his party's vote to open negotiations with the Liberal Party on merger. David Steel (pictured above right) remained the Liberal leader.

Merger, merger, merger (20 November 1987)

The merger process was a protracted one, resulting in the parties becoming largely introverted for many months, as reflected in the frequent cartoons in the SDP newspaper about the negotiations (right). It was a



PLAY SILLY ASS THE PARTY PIECES GAME!!





sions over the party's name. For those closely involved it was a crucial and emotional issue, though for many outside it all, going through several different suggested and actual names in a short period of time was more suited to comedy than to politics.

The new party nosedives (15 February 1988)

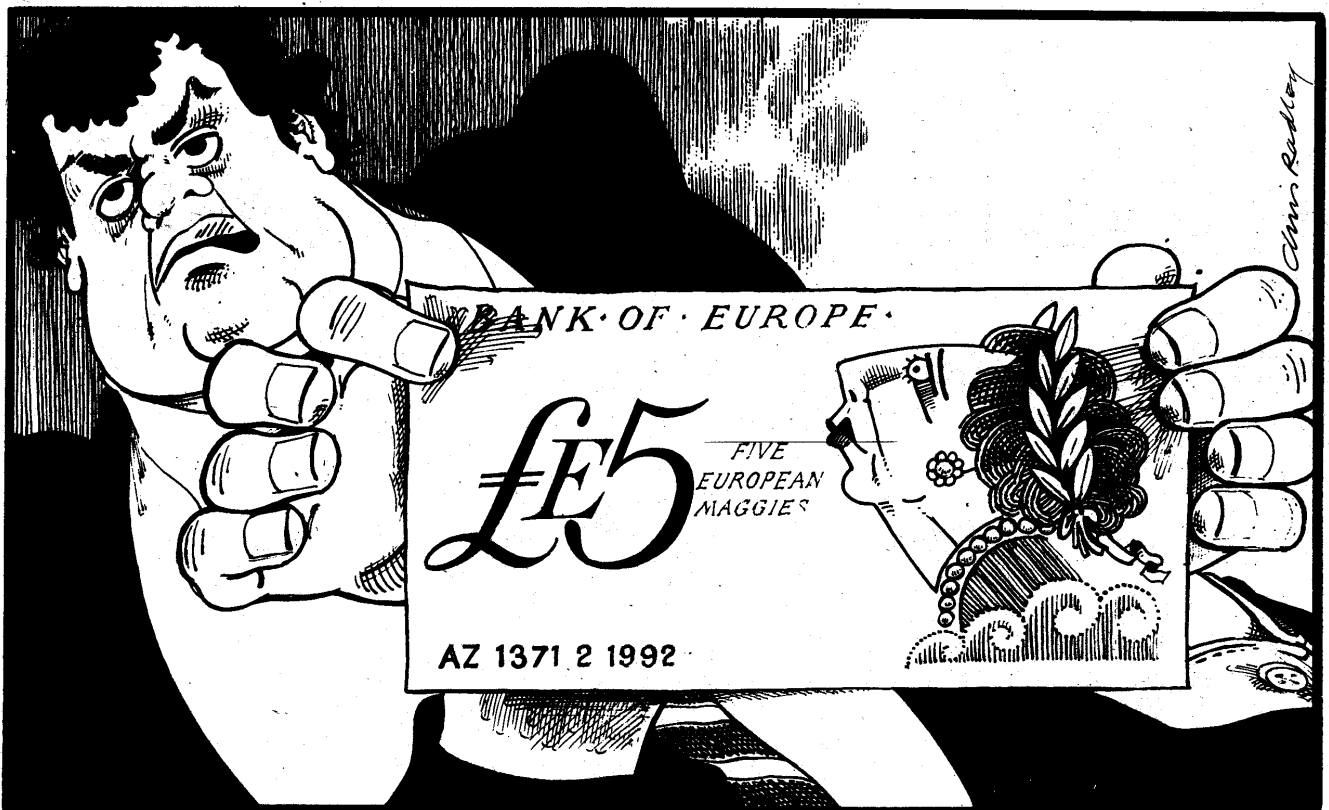
As a new party slowly and painfully emerged from the merger process, it found public support very difficult to come by: opinion poll ratings, membership and finances all collapsed. The party teetered

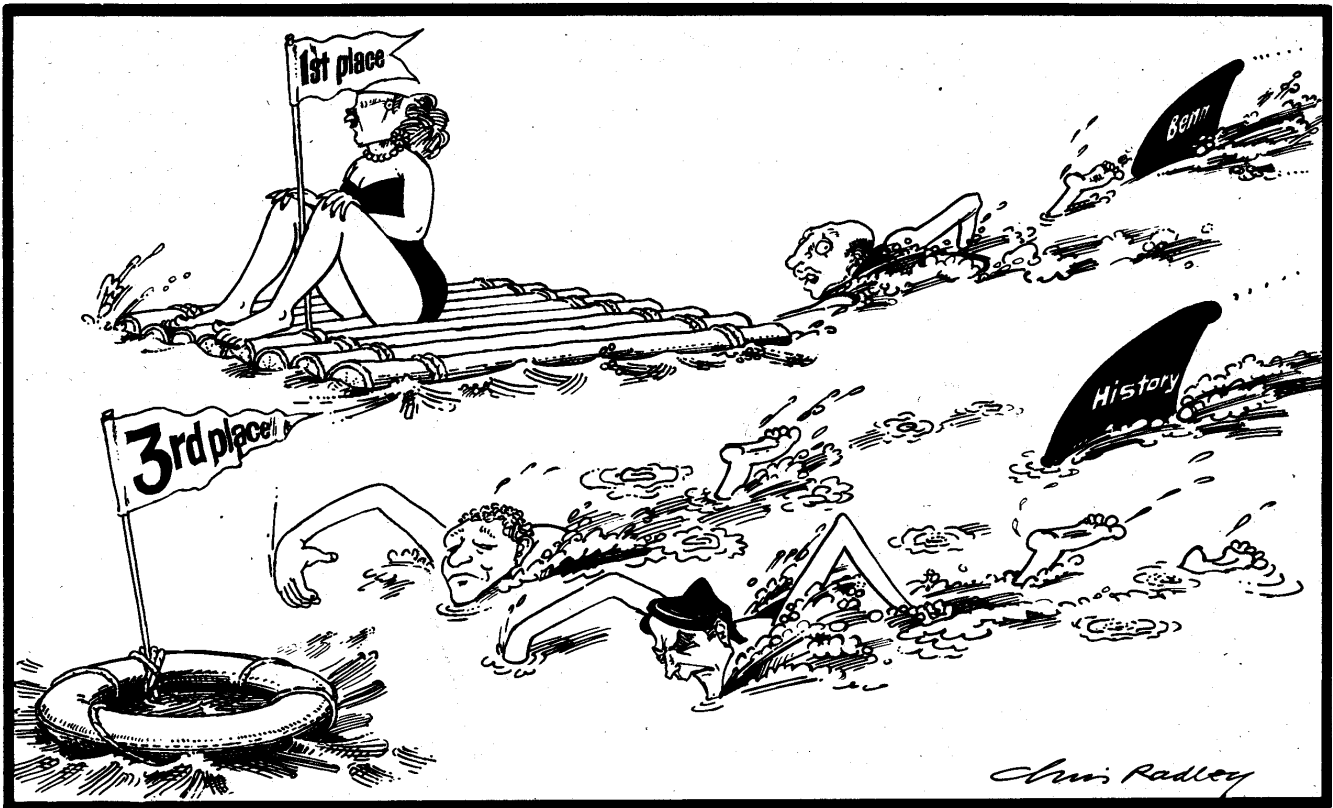
on the verge of disappearing from the political stage completely (above).

European Monetary System (July 1988)

The question of Britain's

place in Europe loomed over the latter years of Mrs Thatcher's premiership. The passage of legislation enabling the creation of a single European market in the mid-1980s passed largely without controversy, despite its importance in building





a version of the European Community which Margaret Thatcher and many in the Conservative Party came resolutely to oppose. What did attract contemporary controversy was the future of sterling. Since 1979 the Conservatives had tried various schemes of floating and managed exchange rates, although the latter depended on international cooperation. Elsewhere in the European Community momentum towards, first, fixed exchange rates, and then a single currency gathered. Some senior Tories – most notably Geoffrey Howe and Nigel Lawson (pictured, displaying some-

thing Mrs Thatcher might like about the process) – were keen supporters of sterling entering the European Monetary System of fixed exchange rates. Although Mrs Thatcher was eventually forced to agree to this, she was never a fan of the idea.

Wrong place, wrong race (August 1988)

David Owen refused to accept the verdict of the SDP's members who voted for merger. He set up a splinter party, the 'Continuing SDP'. For a brief period his party appeared to offer a serious electoral challenge to the

merged party as it struggled to recover from the debilitating merger process. With both parties frequently in single figures in the opinion polls, they seemed to many to be irrelevant to the main Tory-Labour political battle. Paddy Ashdown, the new party's leader, is here (above) pictured racing David Owen to third place in the polls.

Leading the right? (February 1989)

The Continuing SDP managed occasionally to threaten the merged party in the polls; their high point was coming second in the Richmond

(North Yorkshire) by-election in early 1989, after which Ashdown was moved to float an idea of an electoral pact. However, David Owen continued to move sharply to the right; this cartoon (below) presents him an a leadership debate with Mrs Thatcher, moderated by Robin Day.

In practice, however, Owen's party never had the membership or organisation to pose more than a sporadic threat. It continued to do badly in local elections and as Ashdown began to get a grip on his own party – which eventually settled on the name 'Liberal Democrats' – the challenge from Owen faded away.



Own your favourite cartoon
 All the cartoons reproduced in this issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* – together with many more – are available for sale. *Journal* readers benefit from a 10% reduction, and 25% of proceeds will benefit the History Group. See details on page 2 of this issue, or visit: www.liberalhistory.org.uk.

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'A sign of arrival ...'

Alan Mumford: *Stabbed in the Front: Post-War General Elections Through Political Cartoons*

(University of Kent, Canterbury, 2001, 164 pp)

Reviewed by **Tim Benson**

Politicians and political cartoonists have always had a strange symbiotic relationship. As Lord Baker says in his foreword to this book, for a rising politician to be featured in a cartoon 'is a sign he has arrived'.

Drawing cartoons of politicians during elections is a tradition that goes back a long way in Britain. One has only to think of William Dent's 'filthy prints' of the Duchess of Devonshire bestowing her favours during the famous 1784 Westminster election, or of the work of the first-ever staff political cartoonist on a daily paper, Francis Carruthers Gould (described by former Prime Minister Lord Rosebery as 'one of the most remarkable assets of the Liberal Party'), who was knighted immediately after the Liberal election victory in 1906.

In *Stabbed in the Front*, Alan Mumford has made a good start on a potentially vast subject by looking at British general elections following the Second World War. Produced as a large-format (A4) paperback, it contains nearly 200 black-and-white cartoons from the pens of more than forty artists working for the best-known national newspapers over the last half-century. Dr Mumford, who is also a collector of political cartoons, admits to a special liking for Vicky, who was the first cartoonist really to attract his attention when he began to get interested in politics.

Indeed, the title of the book is partly a homage to Vicky, who published a post-war anthology entitled *Stabs in the Back*. But in Mumford's view 'although they may seem to be unfair, political cartoons are an obvious assault from the front, not a covert attack from the rear', and hence the change.

The book is divided into fifteen chapters, one for each of the general elections since the war, and each chapter has separate sections on the background to the election in question, election issues, personalities, results and the cartoonist of the election. The latter section is a curiosity. Though it is, of course, interesting and important to know who the cartoonists were, it is difficult to assess who was the most prominent in any particular election, and two odd choices feature amongst the usual suspects of Vicky, Cummings, Low, Illingworth, Bell, Gibbard, and Garland. These are Norman Mansbridge (1966 election) and Willie Rushton (1992 election), neither of whom are particularly renowned for their political work.

The introduction examines the content of cartoons, looking especially at the element of savagery and the use of symbols, metaphors and references, and, following on from Lord Baker's comments, discusses their impact. In this regard, Mumford quotes Ralph Steadman (whose grotesque *New Statesman* cartoon from the 1997 election

forms the cover illustration to the book). Acutely aware of the relationship between politicians and cartoonists, Steadman deliberately stopped drawing cartoons altogether in 1988 and urged others to follow his lead, claiming that if all the world's cartoonists shunned them for a year politicians 'would suffer withdrawal symptoms of such withering magnitude that the effect on their egos could only be guessed at. Not even a tyrant can survive the whiplash of indifference.'

Many of the cartoons in this well-researched and well-produced book come from the Cartoon Study Centre at the University of Kent, one of Britain's hidden treasures and a true Aladdin's Cave of visual satire. Now more than two decades old, it is effectively the national archive of twentieth-century British political cartoons, with more than 80,000 original drawings, 70,000 cuttings, 60,000 photographic images and an award-winning computer database. Others have been gathered from a variety of sources and, together with Dr Mumford's informative text,



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the result is a refreshing mix that makes fascinating reading for anyone interested in current affairs, one which will also be appreciated by students of politics, history, journalism and cartoon art.

Dr Tim Benson is Director of the Political Cartoon Society, an organisation for those interested in history and politics through the medium of cartoons.

Visit www.politicalcartoon.co.uk

When personal ambitions collide, mutual co-operation is precluded

Giles Radice: *Friends and Rivals: Crosland, Jenkins and Healey*

(Little, Brown & Co., 2002), 382 pp.

Reviewed by **Tom McNally**

Let us start with the conclusion. Giles Radice has written an important book, a very readable book and one that entirely justifies the many favourable reviews it has received since its publication in September 2002. By the device of interweaving the careers and ambitions of Anthony Crosland, Roy Jenkins and Denis Healey, Radice is able to tell the tale of the rise and fall of social democracy within the Labour Party in a way that is both readable and understandable to those coming fresh to this period of recent contemporary history, while being positively unputdownable for those of us who lived through it as active participants.

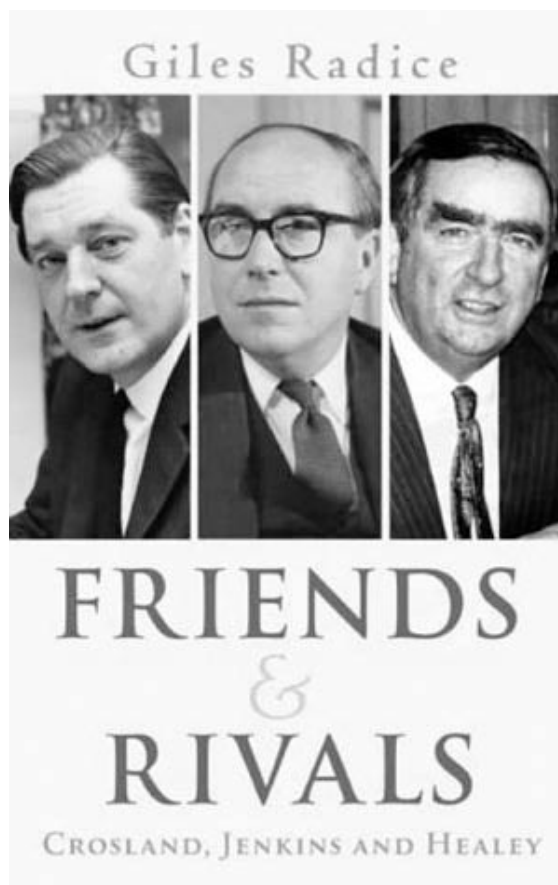
The Wilson Government of the 1960s had probably the cleverest cabinet of the twentieth century. Radice's three heroes were among the cleverest of the clever. I disagree with Giles Radice that they were the Blairites of the 1960s. Both singly and collectively they had an intellectual depth to their politics and their convictions, the absence of which is the most disturbing aspect of the post-1997 New Labour government. Yet this trio of heavyweights, whose basic political philosophies were remarkably close, lost the battle for the soul of Old Labour. In a way, Radice's

narrative parallels Dangerfield's *The Strange Death of Liberal England* in seeking to explain how both a political establishment and a political philosophy lost its way.

I watched this story unfold first of all as a Labour Party researcher in the mid- and late sixties, then as International Secretary of the Labour Party from 1969–74 (the youngest since Denis Healey, who served in the post from 1945–52), followed by the position of Political Secretary to Jim Callaghan from 1974–79, and finally as a Member of Parliament from 1979–83. As Denis Healey once memorably told me, it was a vantage point from which you could peep under the table and see the true colour of the political knickers people were wearing.

Although the book is the story of the rivalry of a triumvirate, my old boss, Jim Callaghan, is a kind of Iago figure, a brooding presence in the narrative whose influence on the unfolding tragedy is a malign one for our three noble failures.

Radice's central thesis is probably true: if mutual jealousies and ambitions had not prevented it, an alliance between Crosland, Jenkins and Healey at almost any time between the late sixties and the mid-seventies could have delivered the premiership to one of



them. In that respect Tony Blair and Gordon Brown did learn the lessons of history by cementing their own non-aggression pact, and reaped their full reward for so doing.

We will never know whether the battles which Neil Kinnock began in the mid-eighties and Tony Blair completed in the nineties could have been achieved a decade earlier by a more resolute and united centre-right. I have my doubts. Those who remained deny it, but the analysis presented to me by Bill Rodgers, when in 1981 I left the Labour Party to join the newly formed SDP, is, I believe, valid: 'Tom, what we are doing will force the Labour Party to either reform or die. If it refuses to reform then the SDP will replace it.' Faced with that stark choice, Labour chose to reform, but there was not much stomach for it before the arrival of the SDP, as a close examination of the careers of some Cabinet members would testify. Although the key reforms lay a decade ahead, the defining moment came, as

Radice records, at the 1981 Labour conference when Denis Healey defeated Tony Benn for the Deputy Leadership by four-fifths of one percent. In his diary, Giles Radice wrote on the evening of the Healey victory: 'By beating Benn, however narrowly, Denis Healey has saved the Labour Party.' If that is so, then I played a part in that rescue. My final vote as a Labour Member of Parliament was to vote for Denis Healey at that conference. It was my parting gift to a Labour Party to which, as Roy Hattersley told me at the time, I owed everything.

But I have my doubts whether any of our three heroes could have led the Labour Party better or more effectively in the 1960s and 1970s than the 'consensus' leaders, Wilson and Callaghan. The structure of the party gave too much power to the trade unions (fine when the unions are in the control of the right, poison when controlled by the left – as Tony Blair may shortly find out). In addition, the Benn reforms on reselection emasculated the Parliamentary Party so that most of them opted for the 'quiet life' option of Michael Foot when Jim Callaghan belatedly stood down.

Politics is about great issues. But it is also about personalities and how their weaknesses and strengths play on the great issues. Radice does not allow his admiration for his subjects to blind him to their flaws. Tony Crosland could be cavalier and peevish, Roy Jenkins pompous, and Denis Healey, in Roy Jenkins' memorable phrase, carried light ideological baggage on a heavy gun carriage. In the end all that this tells us is that politicians, like the rest of humanity, have human failings and weaknesses. Whether a politician gets to the top or not depends as much on time and chance as on personal qualities. Yet what led to Crosland, Jenkins and Healey all failing to reach Number 10 – although at various times all three had both their time and the chance – was Radi-

ce's third element in their interaction, which makes the exercise of a triple biography worth telling in this form: 'When personal ambitions collided, mutual co-operation was precluded.'

So it was that time and chance delivered No. 10 to Jim Callaghan. When Jim was elected leader of the Labour Party and appointed Prime Minister in March 1976, it was to me (not, as stated in the book, to Peter

Hennessy) that he said: 'There were a lot of them who are cleverer than me; but I am here and they are not.' There was no doubt which trio of old rivals he had particularly in mind.

Giles Radice's book goes a long way to explaining how he outsmarted them all.

Lord (Tom) McNally is Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords.

His books were read

Roy Jenkins: *A Life at the Centre*
(Macmillan, 1991; 658pp)

Reviewed by **Conrad Russell**

Tell me. Where is fancy bred?
Or in the heart. Or in
the head?

Shakespeare's question has curiously been answered by modern science and the answer is in the head. One may ask the same question about political power. Is it bred in the heart of government, in 10 Downing Street – and perhaps in No. 11 – or is it bred in the ideas that are the petrol such people take from the pumps to put in their engines?

Roy Jenkins was perhaps the first major politician since Gladstone to pursue both sorts of political power at once. That is why, though great it is, the sequence of Home Secretary – Chancellor of the Exchequer – President of the European Commission grossly underestimates his importance. Plenty of twentieth century prime ministers – Home, Major, Callaghan even Wilson – did less to shape twentieth century politics than he did. If one calls a man a Callaghanite it has no meaning. If one calls him Jenkinsite this instantly tells us what we can say to him and what we cannot. Those who prepare the language politicians feed into their brains have more

power in the end than any office-holder, and Roy was one of these. Though he may have been the most successful post-war Chancellor of the Exchequer, that, by comparison, was a minor achievement.

It underestimates Roy Jenkins even to describe him as a great political thinker. When candidates are nominated for election to the British Academy they may be proposed on honorary grounds for their service to scholarship through public life. Roy, defender of literary merit, Chancellor of Oxford University, drafter of the academic freedom amendment of 1988, deserved such a nomination. Yet the biographer of Gladstone, Dilke and Asquith as a historian of standing in his own right also deserved a nomination. I know of no-one since John Morley who deserved consideration on both grounds at once.

What has not been remarked upon is the extent to which his academic and his political work concentrated on the same issue. The link is perhaps made most clear in the Dimpleby Lecture. He said that the British political system had not changed much

Politics is about great issues. But it is also about personalities and how their weaknesses and strengths play on the great issues.

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since 1868, but Britain had changed very much in those years, so that stability risked turning into 'stultifying political rigidity'. He was interested in two moments when such pressure for change ran into conflict with the political system. One was the rise of the Labour Party and the other its fall. The big question of twentieth-century politics that Roy did not become conscious of until around 1975, but which may have haunted him since 1959, was whether the rise of the Labour Party was a blind alley and a wrong turning. Did it have any continuing use or should it be marked 'Return to Sender'?

Both the rise and the decline of the Labour Party force us to consider the electoral system. It is not clear whether Roy noticed the relevance of the electoral system to Labour's rise. The key evidence is printed only by Colin Matthew in his *Gladstone Diaries*. The Liberal Party of the 1890s needed to attract the growing group of working-class politicians. It was doing well enough for a while, but the near abolition of the two-member constituency in 1885, struck it a near-fatal blow. In 1891 Stuart Rendel of that ilk submitted a memo to Gladstone in which he pointed out that Liberals in a two-member constituency were prepared to choose a working-class candidate for the second seat, just as they are often prepared now to choose a woman for the second place on a list. Given single-member constituencies they ceased to choose the working-class candidates. The result was that Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and Arthur Henderson all applied for nominations to safe Liberal seats and were turned down. With those three on board the Liberals would surely have been in a far stronger position to repel Labour boarders. Roy's work, and particularly his *Asquith*, demonstrate a Liberal Party that in 1914 was very far from ready for eclipse and yet, thanks to a quirk of the electoral system as well as its own internal

death wish, it was indeed eclipsed four years later.

Once it had collapsed it stayed collapsed. It is characteristic of 'first past the post' that once a party becomes a clearly established second it is very hard to dislodge. As Machiavelli said: 'there is great difficulty in seizing the estate of the Turk but once it is taken, great ease in holding it'.

It is that great ease which has kept a Labour Party recognised as obsolescent by 1959 firmly in its place in spite of all inward decay. It is almost impossible now for people who learnt their politics after the beginning of the Cold War to understand the extent to which the Labour Party of those whose beliefs were formed before 1939 was in hock both to Moscow and to Marx. Roy Jenkins in *A Life at the Centre* complains that he and Tony Crosland were two of only three members of the Labour Club committee at Oxford who were not on the Moscow line on questions such as the Russian invasion of Finland. The result was that they decided to split the Club and won a comfortable victory among the membership. Roy was Treasurer of the democratic socialists and Iris Murdoch of the Moscow traditionalists. The resulting correspondence between 'Dear Miss Murdoch' and 'Dear Comrade Jenkins' is the beatification of incongruity.

Perhaps the importance of this Marxist presence is the extent to which it created a confusion of identity on the Labour right. The persistent awareness of the *ennemi à gauche* enabled them to hold together an unnatural unity against Marxist or Communist infiltration and, more seriously, inhibited many of them from developing genuine ideals that they actually held but which they made known to very few at the time. I never knew at the time of Roy's proposed programmes for Labour of 1959 (*A Life at the Centre* p. 130) but I would have been delighted to have done so.

The liberal right to which Roy belonged and that he made

his own was small and noteworthy. Among my contemporaries, Bob Maclennan was one of its recognisably distinguished figures from the early sixties onwards. On the other hand the frequent pairing together during the seventies of Shirley Williams and Reg Prentice – of which there is a good deal in *A Life at the Centre* – is sheer illusion. They were united in certain negative propositions aimed at Tony Benn and Michael Foot but we can see now that they were united in very little else. Reg Prentice in his final Conservative years in the House of Lords showed himself an unadulterated right-winger of a sort who sometimes made me prefer Enoch Powell. He reminded me of Donne's line 'busy old fool, unruly sun, go choose sour prentices'. Not even her worst enemy in the grip of a nightmare could have said any of this of Shirley Williams.

With these came a tradition that I identified under the name of Comrade Blimp, which was Labour only because it was working class, while being thoroughly reactionary on everything else. Bob Mellish was a prime example of this tradition.



He once tried in the late 1980s to divide the House of Lords in favour of the closed shop and failed because he could not find a fellow teller. The issues of the sixties – race and social liberalism as well as Europe – split this group apart and exposed what had always been an artificial unity. There is very little sign in *A Life at the Centre* that Roy Jenkins perceived the artificiality of these alliances on which he perforce depended. The shock of his split with Gaitskell over Europe equally illustrates this lack of eye for the crevasses under the snow of their glacier. Bill Rodgers remaining seated with his arms folded and Dora Gaitskell lamenting that ‘the wrong people are cheering’ illustrate this to perfection.

Only some of the Labour right were ever democratic socialists. They were a miscellaneous crew of party bosses, ambitious parliamentarians, working-class chip wearers (of whom David Blunkett is a survivor), isolationists, and people like Woodrow Wyatt who are best classified as mercurial. They were not a stable base for any movement. Some of the worst sufferers were people like Bill Rodgers who were genuine idealists but spent so long policing the left touchline that their idealism was not made visible even to those who would happily have admired it if it had been. Bill Rodgers on criminal justice is a Liberal through and through, but there is nothing in *A Life at the Centre* and very little in Labour politics which might have led anyone to realise it.

Roy was beginning the search for a new creed as early as his *New Fabian Essays* of 1952 in which he said that Marxist-Leninism was ‘more interested in capital maldistribution as a flaw to be used for the overthrow of the system than in an evil to be rectified for its own sake’. His seven great issues of today and tomorrow set out in a *Spectator* article of 1959 indicate a programme in which all of the issues

The twenty-three months of Roy Jenkins’ tenure at the Home Office remain for me one of the highest points of British politics since the war. He was the greatest Home Secretary since Sir Robert Peel.

save that of colonial freedom are as much keys to the future as the past. Some, such as ‘whether we can expose and destroy the abuses and inefficiencies of contemporary private industry without only offering the sterile alternative of an indefinite extension of public monopoly’, are at the very cutting edge of the current debate within the Liberal Democrats. That members of the Labour Party had got there forty-four years ago and were unable to move on is surely a terrible indictment of their party. It seems that such ideas, by inserting something positive in the face of the negatives that had held the Labour right together, simply exposed a depth of difference that had long been latent.

It was not just Roy’s Europeanism that raised this spectre. His liberalism at the Home Office did so just as much and still does on some parts of the Labour benches today. It was this that led Ernst Armstrong to tell Roy, when he contemplated him as a successor to Wilson, that he had long expected to support him ‘but the party was now so fragile that it needed Callaghan’s bedside manner’. Maybe it did but there were people who would have gone to the stake for Roy’s measures at the Home Office, including his incipient policies on gender and race. Who would have gone to the stake for Jim Callaghan? The twenty-three months of Roy Jenkins’ tenure at the Home Office remain for me one of the highest points of British politics since the war. He was the greatest Home Secretary since Sir Robert Peel.

In 1974 Roy submitted a memo in favour of PR to the Labour cabinet. It was shot down in flames by Barbara Castle – his causes were not hers. As Roy always said, Labour was a coalition and that coalition was falling apart. Thus the rivalry over Europe that has riven all political parties except the always internationalist Liberals was a consequence as well as a cause of instability in the Labour Party.

The question that needs explaining over Europe is why there has been so little meaningful dialogue about it. More than anywhere else the two sides in Britain have talked past each other like ships in the night, generating more heat than light. When Jim Callaghan spoke of the need to preserve ‘the language of Chaucer’, what would he have done if he had known that Chaucer wrote equally well in English, French and Latin, because he did not know which of them would survive? The more that Enoch Powell and Peter Shore ranted about sovereignty the better a European they made me. No wonder Roy Jenkins could not prevail by reason. He was unable to address the issues that concerned his opponents because as soon as he conceded they had any importance he would have been forced to abandon his own beliefs.

Against this background Roy was forced for lack of any other political outlet to set out on the course that led to the Alliance. The clash with David Owen once again encapsulated the incoherence of the Labour right. The path has been slow because neither Labour nor Conservative were as efficient or as single-minded in their attempts to commit suicide as Asquith and Lloyd George. Give them time – they are certain to get there in the end. In reading *A Life at the Centre* and then today’s paper on Europe (22 May) I read of a story that is still going on. Europe, like Mount Everest, is there and while it is, so will we be, for we are the only party that is capable of running a government that has to deal with it. Roy will be able to enjoy Hilaire Belloc’s epitaph:

When I am dead, I hope it may be said,

His sins were scarlet but his books were read.

Conrad (Earl) Russell is a Liberal Democrat spokesman in the House of Lords.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE SDP

Compiled by Mark Pack

1979	3 May	General election won by the 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.
	July	'Inquest on a movement' by David Marquand appears in <i>Encounter</i> .
	22 November	Roy Jenkins delivers the Dimpleby Lecture, 'Home thoughts from abroad'.
	30 November	Bill Rodgers gives a 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 declines invitation.
1980	January	NEC refuses to publish report from Reg Underhill detailing Trotskyite infiltration of Labour.
	1 May	Local elections. Liberal vote changes little, though seats are gained with large advances in Liverpool and control of Adur and Hereford.
	31 May	Labour Special Conference at Wembley. Policy statement <i>Peace, Jobs, Freedom</i> , including pro-unilateralism and anti-EEC policies, supported. Owen is 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 the <i>Guardian</i> .
	9 September	David Marquand speaks at Liberal Assembly. David Steel says Labour rebels have six months to leave the party.
	22 September	Group of twelve MPs, led by Michael Thomas, publish statement in <i>The Times</i> , calling for major reforms in Labour's structure.
	29 September – 3 October	Labour conference at Blackpool votes to change method for electing its leader. Unilateral disarmament and withdrawal from the EEC are passed as policy. Shirley Williams and Tom Bradley refuse to speak from the platform on behalf of the National Executive Committee (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 stand again for the Shadow Cabinet.
	28 November	Williams announces she cannot be a Labour candidate again given Labour's 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 to Britain from Brussels.
	12 January	Liberals publish ten-point plan for economic recovery. Several Labour MPs publicly welcome it.
	14 January	Meeting of the 'Gang of Four' (Jenkins, Owen, Rodgers and Williams) at Williams' flat.
	18 January	Gang of Four meets at Rodgers' house, and agree to issue a joint statement following the 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). Owen fails to get 'one member, one vote' adopted. Opponents include Neil Kinnock.
	25 January	Limehouse Declaration issued by the Gang of Four.
	26 January	Nine Labour MPs join the Council for Social Democracy.
	30 January	Owen tells his local party he will not be standing for Labour at the next election.
	31 January	Joint rally by SDA and Association of Democratic Groups, chaired by ex-Labour foreign secretary Lord George-Brown.
	5 February	Advert published in the <i>Guardian</i> sees 100 people declare their support for the Council for Social Democracy and elicits 25,000 letters of support. Alec McGivan is appointed organiser of the Council.
	9 February	Council moves into offices in Queen Anne's Gate. Williams resigns from NEC.
	20 February	Two Labour MPs resign whip and sit as social democrats.
	2 March	Ten Labour MPs and nine peers resign whip and sit as social democrats.
	17 March	Christopher Brocklebank-Fowler becomes the only Conservative MP to join the Council.
	26 March	Official launch of SDP in Connaught Rooms, Covent Garden, complete with high-tech directional microphones. More than 500 press attend.
	April	Anglo-German Königswinter conference, where 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 of power on eight county councils. The few independent social democrat candidates make little impression.
	16 June	Publication of <i>A Fresh Start for Britain</i> , 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 by-election. Labour's majority cut from 10,274 to 1,759. Jenkins (Alliance candidate) comments, 'This is my first defeat in thirty years of politics and it is by far the greatest victory that I have ever participated in.'
	September	Liberal Assembly at Llandudno. Jenkins and Williams address fringe meeting. Motion calling for 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 Perth, Bradford and London.
		Alliance launched.
	22 October	Croydon Northwest by election won by the Liberal Bill Pitt.
	October	Healey defeats Benn's challenge for the Labour deputy leadership by just 0.426%.
	26 November	Crosby by-election 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 by-election.
	1 April	Liberal/SDP negotiations over division for seats for general election are concluded.
	2 April	Argentina invades the Falklands.
	23 April	Ballot of all SDP members backs 'one member, one vote' for electing party leader.

CHRONOLOGY

	6 May	Local elections. Liberals win five times as many seats as SDP, which makes a net loss.
	3 June	Tories gain Mitcham & Morden in by-election caused by Bruce Douglas-Martin resigning his seat on defecting to the SDP in order to stand again under his new party's colours.
	14 June	End of the Falklands war.
	2 July	Jenkins defeats Owen to be SDP leader.
	September	Williams elected SDP President.
1983	24 February	Simon Hughes wins Bermondsey by-election.
	24 March	Darlington by-election: SDP candidate slumps to a poor third. Labour's victory saves Michael Foot's leadership.
	5 May	Local elections. Labour wins control of Liverpool (from a minority Liberal administration) as Alliance's national vote slips, though number of seats increases.
	29 May	Ettrick Bridge meeting, where Steel attempts to remove 'Prime Minister designate' title from Jenkins.
	9 June	Mrs Thatcher wins general election, and Alliance (25.4%) just fails to win more votes than Labour (27.6%). Liberals move from 13 to 17 MPs, SDP slump from 29 to 6 MPs. Rodgers and Williams defeated.
	12 June	Foot announces he will not stand again as Labour leader.
	13 June	Jenkins resigns as SDP leader.
	22 June	Owen becomes SDP leader unopposed.
	7 July	David Steel starts three months' sabbatical.
	28 July	Liberals fail to win Penrith & Borders by-election by just 553 votes.
	September	SDP conference at Salford rejects proposals for joint selections (with Liberals) of Euro and Westminster candidates and any chance of merger before the next election. After Harrogate Liberal Assembly Cyril Smith announces his departure into self-imposed exile.
1984	3 May	Local elections. Alliance makes net gains of 160 seats, but SDP vote continues to slip.
	14 June	European elections. Alliance wins 19.1% and no seats but SDP wins Portsmouth South by-election.
	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 twenty-four out of thirty-nine English county councils end up under no overall control. SDP wins a larger increase in its vote than the Liberals.
	4 July	Liberals win Brecon & Radnor by-election. During July (and again in September), Alliance briefly tops opinion polls.
	September	Successful SDP conference in Torquay marks high point of party's strength and self-confidence.
	3 December	Over 15 million watch John Cleese present a party political broadcast on PR for the SDP. Probably the largest ever audience for a PPB.
1986	8 May	Liberals win Ryedale by-election and just fail to gain West Derbyshire. In the local elections, Alliance gains control of Adur and Tower Hamlets and makes a net gain of around 380 seats.
	5 June	Alliance Defence Commission reports, avoiding decision on Polaris. It is criticised by Owen. Owen and Steel subsequently explore options for Anglo-French co-operation over nuclear deterrence (the 'Euro-bomb').
	18 July	Liberals narrowly fail to win Newcastle-under-Lyme by-election after a hard-hitting campaign which draws criticism from David Steel.
	23 September	Liberal Assembly defeats leadership over Alliance's defence policy. Cyril Smith publicly makes his peace with Steel at the Assembly.
1987	26 January	Re-launch of Alliance at Barbican rally. Joint Alliance Parliamentary spokespeople announced.
	26 February	SDP wins Greenwich by-election.
	12 March	Liberals hold Truro in by-election caused by David Penhaligon's death in December 1986.
	7 May	Local elections. Alliance gains over 450 seats. Labour again regains control of Liverpool, but overall Labour loses and Conservative gains lead to Mrs Thatcher calling a general election.

11 June	Mrs. Thatcher wins the general election. Alliance's vote drops by 2.9%. SDP falls from 8 to 5 seats, Jenkins defeated at Hillhead. Liberals win 17.
13 June	Owen gives press conference where he appears to reject any attempts at merger.
14 June	Steel announces to the media his support for merger. Owen fails to receive his message before being contacted by the press and accuses Steel of trying to bounce a merger on 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 members to support merger negotiations in the ballot.
5 August	Result of SDP ballot: 57% – 43% (25,897 – 19,228) in favour of merger negotiations.
6 August	Owen resigns as SDP leader.
29 August	Maclennan becomes SDP leader.
17 September	Liberal Assembly votes for negotiations over merger with SDP (998 – 21).
September	Merger negotiations begin.
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 the Liberal Party Council protests.
1988 13 January	In the early hours of the morning, merger negotiators agree on 'Social & Liberal Democrats' as the name, with no official short name. 'Dead parrot' policy document (<i>Voices and Choices for All</i>) issued and then withdrawn.
23 January	Special Liberal Assembly in Blackpool approves merger (2,099 – 385), subject to a ballot of members.
31 January	SDP conference in Sheffield approves merger (273 – 28), subject to a ballot of members. Owenites largely abstain or are absent.
2 March	Results of ballots of Liberal and SDP members on merger announced (Liberals vote for merger by 46,376 – 6,365 and SDP by 18,872 – 9,929).
3 March	Press launch of Social & Liberal Democrats.
7 March	Constitution of new party comes into force at midnight.
8 March	Continuing SDP launched with backing of three MPs (Owen, Barnes and Cartwright)
10 March	Public launch of Social & Liberal Democrats.
5 May	Local elections. Despite significant seat losses, the Social & Liberal Democrats still win 385 seats compared to the SDP's six.
28 July	Paddy Ashdown elected leader of Social & Liberal Democrats, beating Alan Beith by 41,401 to 16,202.
26 September	Social & Liberal Democrats agree to use 'Democrats' as party's official short name.
15 December	Epping Forrest by-election. Split of votes between Democrats and Continuing SDP gives Tories easy victory.
1989 23 February	Richmond (Yorkshire) by-election. Continuing SDP just fall short of victory as split of centre party votes hands victory to William Hague, the future Conservative leader.
March	Continuing Liberal Party launched, headed by Michael Meadowcroft.
4 May	Local elections. Continuing SDP loses twenty-two of the thirty-four seats it was defending.
13 May	David Owen admits publicly that Continuing SDP can no longer function as a national party.
June	Euro elections: Democrats win only 6%, being beaten easily by the Greens into fourth place. Continuing SDP candidates score even worse.
September	Last SDP conference held in Scarborough.
16 October	Social & Liberal Democrats change name to Liberal Democrats following ballot of party members.
1990 24 May	Bootle by-election: Monster Raving Loony Party candidate, Lord Sutch, secures his most notable election result, out-polling the Continuing SDP candidate.
3 June	Continuing SDP's National Executive votes to suspend its constitution, close its HQ and place its remaining affairs in the hands of its trustees.

THE FALL OF THE LLOYD GEORGE COALITION

The summer 2003 History Group meeting will examine the events which brought an end to the last peacetime participation by the Liberal Party in UK government – when Lloyd George’s coalition was overthrown by a revolt of backbench Conservatives in 1922. The meeting will be held jointly with the Conservative History Group.

Speakers: **Margaret Macmillan** (author, *The Peacemakers*), **Andrew Thorpe** (Exeter University), **Stuart Ball** (Leicester University), **John Barnes** (LSE).

6.00 p.m., Monday 14 July (note earlier start time than normal)

National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1

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Corrections

We regret that two errors crept into the last issue of the *Journal* (issue 38, spring 2003).

On page 24 (middle column), Thomas Shaw did not in fact become a viscount until the death of his father (as correctly stated in the last column).

On page 29, the standfirst text refers to Sir John Harris as MP for North West Hackney; in fact, as the main text correctly indicates, he was MP for North Hackney.

Our apologies to all concerned.