

SDP activist **Celia Goodhart** remembers her role, and that of SDP and Liberal women, in the merger between the two parties in 1987–88.

WOMEN IN ALLIANCE POLITICS, A PERSONAL VIEW – THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MERGER



LOOKING BACK at the time of merger, and the lengthy processes of bringing the SDP and Liberal parties together is rather painful. The two Alliance parties had their strengths as well as their weaknesses, but the latter tended to predominate in the drawing towards unity. In the summer of 1987 emotions ran high, change was challenging, decisions had to be taken and friendships severed. All this happened in the immediate aftermath of an exhausting and dispiriting general election. David Steel made a strong and immediate plea for merger. This triggered the need for many decisions to be taken before anyone had had time to recover. Exhaustion never makes the best background for momentous change – yet pressure on both sides was building up to insist on clarity about the future. David Owen drove the SDP into votes in the National Committee on whether or not to have a ballot. David Steel was smarting under the humiliations of the television parodies of his being David Owen's puppet. As summer gave way through autumn to winter David Owen marched

off with his band of followers, imagining that he could recreate an SDP. He had always been a General who failed to look behind him or take notice of the needs and wishes of his troops; he may not have noticed how few were his followers as 1988 dawned. But he did enjoy the financial patronage of another David – Sainsbury. Meanwhile David Steel struggled to lead his troops – what seemed to some in the SDP as a remarkably disparate lot with more than a fair share of stubborn and unworldly moralists unable or unwilling to face political and practical reality. Distrust seemed mutual, and was scarcely the easiest of circumstances in which to seek marriage, as opposed to divorce.

But perhaps looking back carries one important advantage – it underlines the amazing fact that the intervening twenty years have transformed the Liberal Democrats. Troubles over leadership, recently, have not been engaging, but the way the party works seems to have drawn out the strengths of each former party. Conference is amicable, well organised and used to taking decisions. Policy-making combines local and central views

remarkably well. Elections have started to be successful and representation in Parliament has increased encouragingly. Even the running of HQ and party committees has improved – perhaps the major contribution of Sir Menzies Campbell to the party. In early 1988 it would have been a brave sage who predicted all of this. The processes of merger produced a dispirited unity. The 'Dead Parrot' episode at the end of the negotiations, the row over the merged party's name and other problems took the party to its nadir in the European election of 1989 when it obtained 6 per cent of the vote and came fourth behind the Greens.

But is it possible to view the merger months with any sort of historical perspective? My tutors at Oxford in the late 1950s regarded the study of anything that had happened after 1914 as exercises in journalism; forty years was too recent for the disinterested judgements of historians to be applicable. With an interval of only 20 years, I shall not try to claim historical perspective and have not carried out proper historical research. The SDP

may well be the best-archived party ever invented, but I have not dug into the stored papers of those years. I can only aspire to a journalistic collection of memories, and confess to a sad lack of memory and even prejudice. Moreover, I played no role whatsoever in the merger itself. In convalescence from major surgery, I was isolated from the political world. When he returned home exhausted, frequently in the middle of the night, the last thing my husband, the SDP Legal Adviser, wanted to do was to talk about merger or any of its protagonists – though exasperated comments about individuals did, it has to be admitted, pour out of that normally ungossipy mouth.

Is it possible to make any judgement about the role of women in this crucial six months? It is my contention that, asked to make such an assessment about how far women influenced any period of the strategic development of either the Liberal Party or the SDP, one would conclude that the effect was not great; it was minimal. Both parties were dominated by men unused to working with women. It was an era when even having a female Prime Minister did not materially change the position of women in politics. And yet ...

There were intimations of progress. Issues could be raised that would have been unthinkable in bygone times. Women were beginning to dare to participate. After all, one of the Gang of Four who sought to break the mould of British politics in the early '80s was Shirley Williams. Margaret Thatcher had broken the sound barrier. How far were these individual exceptional women carrying ordinary women in their wake? The SDP won plaudits here; the influential *Guardian* women's page was well represented by Polly Toynbee and Mary Stott. The former encouraged us all to go into the Chamber of the

House of Commons and watch the grey-suited rows of men; she pointed out that it would be difficult to be more mediocre than many of them. The way in which the SDP constitution gave women a chance was remarkable. All parliamentary shortlists of six had to include at least two women. This was a clever enabling mechanism that fell short of the 'positive discrimination' so dreaded by many leading Liberals, as voiced at the time of merger. Often it turned out that women were chosen by constituency parties, so the party fielded far more women candidates than any other. These arrangements were not feared by the SDP, who also reserved seats on party committees for women. There were two lists for committees – one for women, one for men, so there was no 'bumping' of one candidate over another to achieve gender balance after election. And the competition for each list was very fierce. This had not proved an easy ride for a few women – women did not walk into these committees while men had to fight for places, a criticism that was later made of such lists.

The effect on Conservative and Labour of the first arrangements in British politics to encourage and even to ensure the participation of women (something that was already established in some continental parties) was electric – they sat up and took notice and began to change their ways, Labour far more effectively than the Conservatives. But within the Liberal Party there was suspicion about what the SDP was doing in this regard, with the majority coming down against these measures, to the chagrin of some leading women and indeed some men within the party. One leading woman who failed to prevail within her own party was Lesley Abdela, founder of the 300 Group, an all-party campaign for getting

half the MPs to be women. This organisation was very influential among a number of women from all parties who later went on to participate at the highest levels in politics, in both the Commons and the Lords, as well as elsewhere. It was well supported and gave improved credence to the Liberals and the Alliance and might indeed have helped to contribute to bring the two parties together.

Women for Social Democracy was a lively progressive outfit much influenced by its *Guardian* women mentors, to whom it owed much. It focused very much on trying to ensure that women were at the centre of the new party, at every level, and especially focused on redressing the dearth of women at the top in politics. It was very political in its aims, and given that the SDP was new, there seemed to be many opportunities to do things differently. The Women's Liberal Federation seemed to some in the SDP's women's organisation to be almost antediluvian in comparison, appearing mired in local politics, social, tea and bazaar activities. They certainly served an important social and, to some extent, political function, but their aims seemed quite different. Their membership also seemed to be older, and many of their members were not themselves seemingly concerned about seeking to represent the party at national level. WSD, by contrast, had many younger women who did have such aims.

WLF had experienced many years of being sidelined, as also were many women in the Liberal Party, up against very strong prejudices within their own party. The vitriolic reaction of some within her own party to Lesley Abdela's efforts on behalf of women would no doubt have reinforced the perception to many women in the party that this was simply not a route they wished to go down, or that there were more

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productive routes through. There can be no denying that opposition by women to what was proposed by the SDP for the new party had the effect of undermining those attempts. It was said by some men on both sides in the negotiations that special provision for women was not what women themselves wanted – they did not need it, it was patronising, innate worth would win through. They said that they themselves had achieved what they had without such mechanisms, that they realised that they might well be shunned and sidelined by some of their other colleagues if they were seen as stridently calling for such a provision – and so on.

Relations between WLF and WSD were wary, but all sorts of warmth existed too. Laura Grimond was a magnetic and charismatic force for good in bringing us together. Joint meetings were held and mutual trust and friendships were built up – even if the reverse was also true. An element of respect crept across the gaps – who could not fail to revere Nancy Seear? We admired the doughty but hopeless parliamentary candidacies of some of the Liberal women. I think a number of them supported our recognition of the need for props and stays on our political journeys. Those who emerged on both sides to favour unity were surely bolstered by the friendships and cooperation. Those who took to opposing it were equally swayed by the divergences and suspicions. All in all, the two parties' women's groups could hardly be said to have had a great role in bringing the parties together. But individuals on both sides did work together to ensure some provision for women, as I explain later.

It became abundantly clear during the 1987 election that the Alliance between the two parties did not work adequately, if only because it gave opportunity to the media to play up its weaknesses. So talk of merger

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intensified. Within days of the election we were back round the National Committee table taking votes on whether or not to hold a ballot on the issue. David Owen would not listen to protestations that we needed the summer to recover, relax, discuss together and consult. He won, and we rushed into the ballot. The women on the National Committee who supported the idea of merger were Shirley Williams, Anne Sofer, Julia Neuberger and I. There were also Polly Toynbee and Sue Slipman – always adherents to the David Owen point of view. They had quite a following amongst the women in the party.

I was excited to be told I would run the 'Yes to Unity' campaign with Roger Liddle, and offered to have the HQ in our Notting Hill house. However, without further ado I found Alec McGivan installed in our spare bedroom doing so. I was left (as so often happened to women!) doing chores, getting unearned blame and fielding hate calls in the middle of the night. Our kitchen and playroom were filled with people – mostly women – stuffing envelopes that had been addressed by further cohorts of them on our dining room table that sat sixteen. I can see Liz Lynne and Dee Doocey doing these things, along with countless Kensington and London women. It was difficult to get at the kettle to make the tea. The worst time was when my husband was due in the Court of Appeal and we couldn't get at the cupboard to extract the cornflakes because of boxes of paper.

Clearly all this female work contributed a bit to the coming together – but in the old-fashioned way of the women getting things done while the men talked, influenced and decided. We did the practicalities while they did the politics. However, meetings were held around the country and were addressed by

the women as well as the men involved. Shirley Williams, as so often, went all over the country, and others of us who supported merger spoke up in favour at meetings country-wide. The result of the ballot, in favour of merger, was announced while we were on holiday in Greece. Bill and Silvia Rodgers were staying with us and Bill had an awful time with the lack of telephones on our island. He and I spent many hours in queues and then dialling to no effect in the one telephone box in the locality. Since Roy Jenkins was in Tuscany, Shirley Williams in Wyoming and Bob MacLennan in Turkey, life was not easy.

When the merger talks began hopes were high, as is made plain by Tony (now Lord) Greaves in his book *Merger – The Inside Story*, written with Rachael Pitchford. If anybody tried to doubt that women were marginalised in the Liberal Party you only had to look at the team of eighteen people they fielded for the merger talks. It contained one female, a 22-year-old student, Rachael Pitchford, who was there representing students. There was not a single woman representing WLF, or Liberal women in general. The talks would have been graced by the presence of, say, Elizabeth Sidney, Susan Thomas, Liz Barker or Joyce Rose. For the SDP, Shirley participated (under the leadership of Bob MacLennan), and so too did Anne Sofer, Lindsay Granshaw, Jane Padgett and Frances David from Wales. I was originally told I would be on the team, but then Bill Rodgers said they needed my husband lawyer Willie (who drafted the SDP constitution as we had our summer holiday on Martha's Vineyard in 1982) and 'we can't have two Goodharts on the team'. Instead of fighting this, as I should have, I went off in high dudgeon to have a major operation long delayed by politics. I am delighted there is now

a married couple (albeit with different names – point worth stressing) in the Cabinet!

So information on the merger now comes largely from Tony Greaves's book which – as per C. P. Scott – is sound on the facts but prejudiced. Certainly it had its own particular viewpoint, of one side of the argument – that of dissenting voices on the Liberal side. To scrutinise that book gives one some clear impressions. Rachael Pitchford and the three men elected by the Liberal Assembly who in the end resigned (Greaves, Meadowcroft and Knowlson) were holding on to what they saw as indispensable from the Liberal tradition.

The issues that were most fought over are well covered in the book. They were

- 1 What the name should be. On this I think the SDP were, in the end, wrong. We should have been Liberal Democrats right away.
- 2 Whether or not NATO should be mentioned in the preamble to the constitution and what should be said in our accompanying policy document. There were good historical reasons for the two parties' divergent views on NATO. It was certainly questionable, as the Liberals pointed out, to have it in the preamble, so once again the SDP were wrong.
- 3 How far the new party should be Federal, with national parties (Scottish and Welsh) as well as an English one.
- 4 What the policy-making procedures should be. The SDP wanted a Policy Committee veto, which was anathema to Liberals. The compromise was surely right to require that the Policy Committee could insist on a reference back.
- 5 How the conference should be constituted. The Liberals were used to a large

Assembly, the SDP wanted a small one. There was a good compromise in establishing 'non-voting representatives' having clear rights to attend.

- 6 Whether or not to provide positive discrimination for women.

Discussion was obviously needed to sort these matters out but the debates were notably protracted and agonising. What is fascinating is how Tony Greaves sets out with clarity the way in which Liberals like Adrian Slade, Tim Clement-Jones and even David Steel himself argued vociferously against their own difficult team members. And it seems extraordinary that the opposition within the Liberal negotiating team held sway to such an extent. I mention this because this group also argued very strongly indeed against positive discrimination for women, and because they were attacking across a whole series of areas, this made the situation even more difficult. Perhaps in order to try to bring them along in other areas, this was not something for which other members of their team felt willing to die in a ditch. On the other hand, the shadow over the SDP negotiations was always the presence of David Owen, and the need to ensure that members of the SDP would feel able to join the new party, and that Owen would not be able to point to compromises which he might portray as undercutting all that the SDP had stood for.

Good will existed between the two lawyers – Philip Goldenberg for (or, in one case of the dissidents, against!) the Liberals and my SDP husband instantly formed and enjoyed then, as now, a warm and amiable relationship, and they almost always agreed with each other. I think that they played a role worth mentioning in bringing the two parties together. Joint committees of SDP and Liberal lawyers had sat in earlier years and excellent

relationships were established which have continued to this day. One such committee was chaired by Julia Neuberger. So, too, it is interesting to note that there were times when the women on the SDP obviously acted as soothers of frayed tempers. Shirley Williams' honeyed words and fabled tongue were obviously a force for good. Lindsay Granshaw and Anne Sofer were very helpful too.

A sub-committee was set up to deal with the deeply contentious issues surrounding whether or not to have any elements of positive discrimination included in the agreements. The Liberal team was very keen to argue that places should be reserved on committees for councillors and for the young – but they did not see that this in any way logically might also be extended to women. Rachael Pitchford was particularly adamant on this point. The arguments about women centred round the Liberal concern that help mechanisms could be interpreted as demeaning women by putting them into reserved places. This issue was pretty crucial in the whole negotiation. Shirley Williams said early on that it was important to the SDP. The sub-committee's work was arduous and bitter. However, although the official Liberal team on this group, and the Liberal negotiators as a whole, were opposed to any special provision for women, there were a number of Liberal women who approached the SDP side to offer support and to emphasise that not all Liberal members shared their negotiators' point of view. They saw it as a very important opportunity to try to achieve what they had failed to secure in their party over the years. They pointed out that there was only one woman on the Liberal team and they did not feel her position represented the future of the party. For Lindsay Granshaw, who was on the SDP

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sub-committee on this, it was immensely encouraging to have this support from Liberal members. She herself brought from her time at university in the US strong support for the concept of affirmative action. She used the phrase 'positive action', as opposed to 'positive discrimination'. This had the effect, as she puts it, of:

... allowing the flattening of the playing field rather than promoting unfair advantage, as opponents portrayed it. I drew the parallel with blacks in the US where affirmative action was used for them in universities and you could see the growing black middle class as kids were given opportunities. I remember being asked to put on paper all these terms.

It is also riveting to learn that Lindsay had quite a lot of difficulty with the SDP; some of the women had to be carefully wooed and a number of the men were keeping an all-too-obvious eye on the main chance and didn't want a single opportunity closed to them.

I was shocked to learn what a struggle Lindsay had – well supported throughout by Shirley Williams – in ensuring that what the SDP had won for women in the eighties could go forward into the new party. Some men on the committee had during the SDP's history fought vigorously to prevent the one-third rule applying to conference reps. For them this issue was not as central as others, although they did recognise that key elements must be delivered, not least because not to do so would be seen as going backwards, and would be seized upon by those prominent women who had followed David Owen. Lindsay Granshaw says,

On Parliamentary shortlists we had one-third as the quota to be women. On party committees it had been 50/50. The latter did not survive and in the end it

was agreed that there would be the one-third rule throughout. But I did know that there were a significant number of Liberal women and some men trying their best to neutralise things on their side if only we could bring from the sub-committee recommendations to the main committee and try to get it through that way. And there were women on the SDP side saying this too.

One strong supporter on the Liberal side was John McDonald, who was held in great respect by both teams. And outside the negotiating team the support of men like Chris Walmsley was very important. Their help was especially appreciated because in no way could that be seen as something that was simply about self-interest.

The issues of establishing greater equality for women continued to dog the party however, well into its united era under Paddy Ashdown and later. The Labour Party leapfrogged the new party, and reached 100 women elected to parliament in 1997, while the Liberal Democrats continued to dispute how best to do things, although seizing the moment of the list system and no incumbents for the European elections to ensure that in 1999 equal numbers of women and men went to the European Parliament. The topic formed a difficult part of the negotiations and will continue as a battleground long into the future.

On the other main contentious points I cannot discern a particular female point of view, though once again there were moments when women's voices from the SDP sought to ameliorate. Right at the end Anne Sofer was tempted to argue for moving towards the Liberals about the name, which resulted in Bob MacLennan banging the table and insisting on the agreed party line. Thus it seems to me that there was no discernible

women's role that can really be identified as being a force in bringing the parties together. And yet ... who knows?

It has always seemed to me that even if one probes further into women's roles in influencing their men it would rarely be true to find women altering things. If one knew more about the pillow talk and domestic discussions of twentieth-century couples, would it be possible to attribute (male) politicians' attitudes and decisions to their wives' influence? Clemmie fought Winston, but more about people than policies. Violet was an essentially Conservative wife to Attlee (which may say a lot). Surely neither Margaret nor even Frances held sway over Lloyd George's political views? One can speculate intriguingly.

A notable feature of the Gang of Four was not only that one of them was a woman (who went for merger in the end) but all three men were married to women of very considerable stature in their own rights. All three could argue brilliantly and held strong views. How far did Debbie influence David Owen? His presidential aspirations or style, perhaps, may well have had their origins in Debbie's American-type view of politics. Was her opposition to Liberals visceral or seminal? Did it influence him? Few could be wiser than Jennifer Jenkins, and much of Roy's wisdom could be attributed to her. How many other wives were edging their husbands in this direction or that? I shall refer discussion on this to our children.

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