

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.

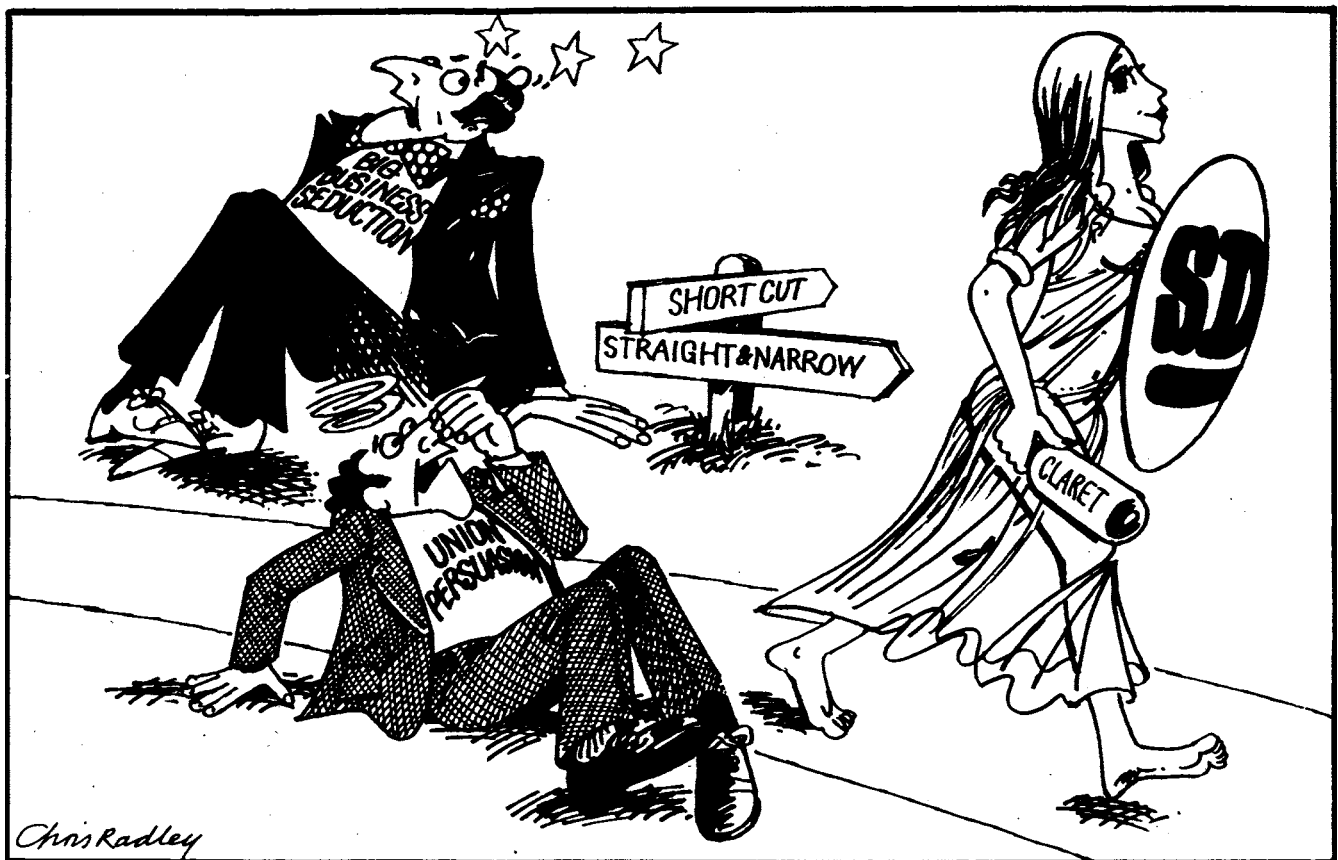
Nevertheless, the new party was notable for drawing in large numbers of supporters who had not previously been members of any political party. Dubbed the 'political virgins', they saw themselves as wanting to bring common sense to politics, unencumbered by big business or trade

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)

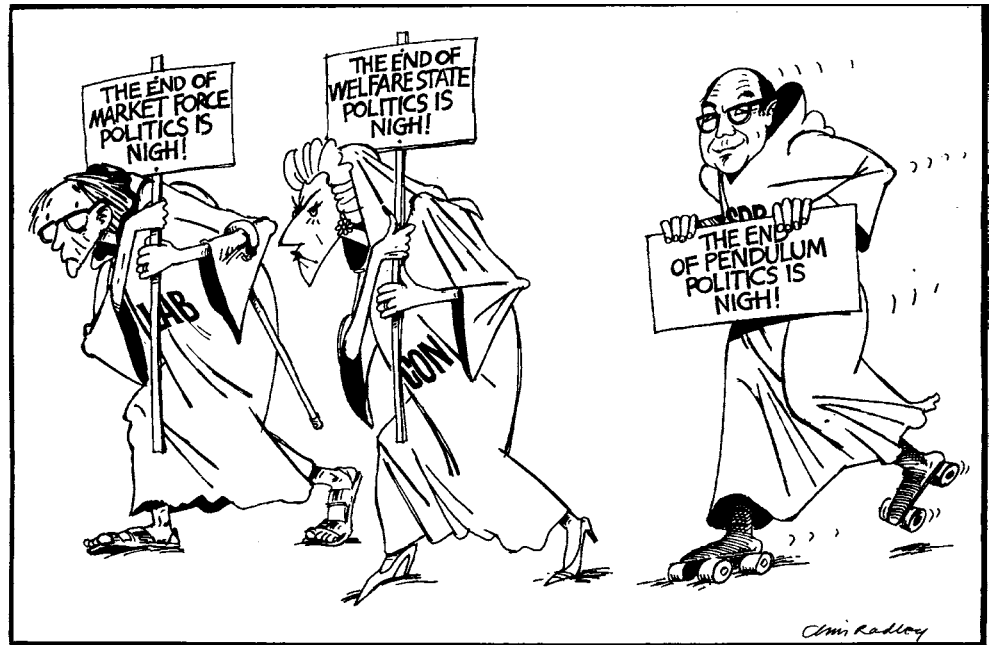
Many saw the SDP, and then the Alliance, as a new, fresh foray into British politics, in contrast to the tired old parties, illustrated in the cartoon (right) by the slumped



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

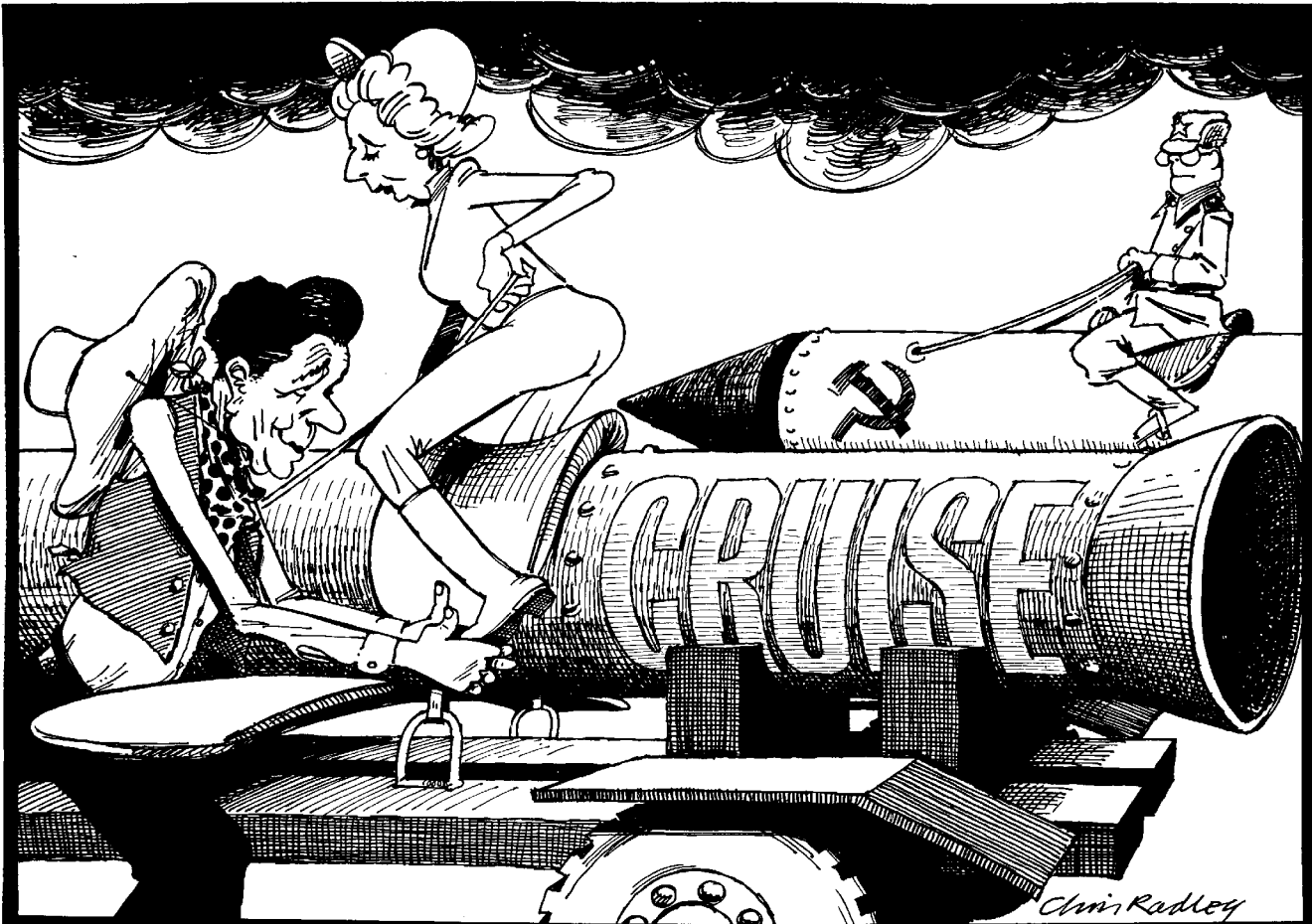
any real values, depending on taste.

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

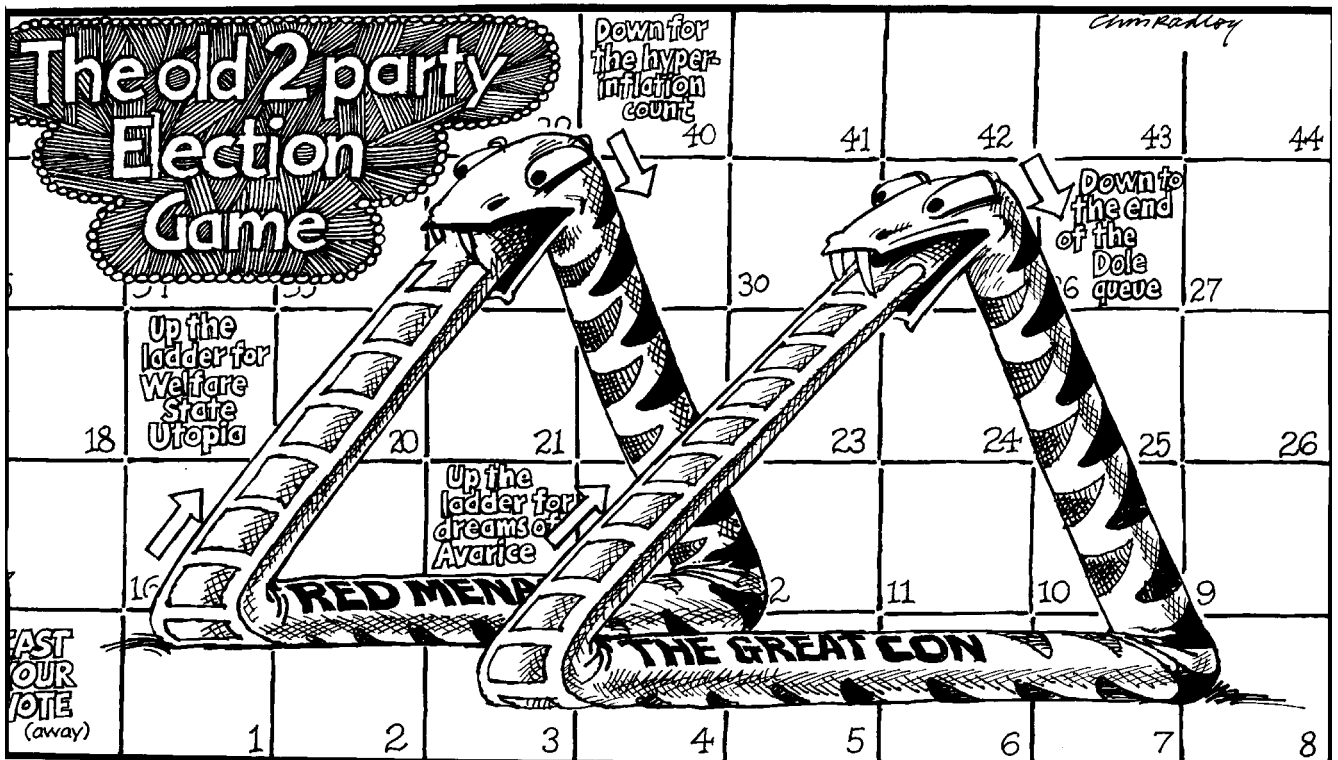


and Callaghan. They found ready agreement with the Liberal Party, which had been espousing similar policies since the inter-war years. As

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.

