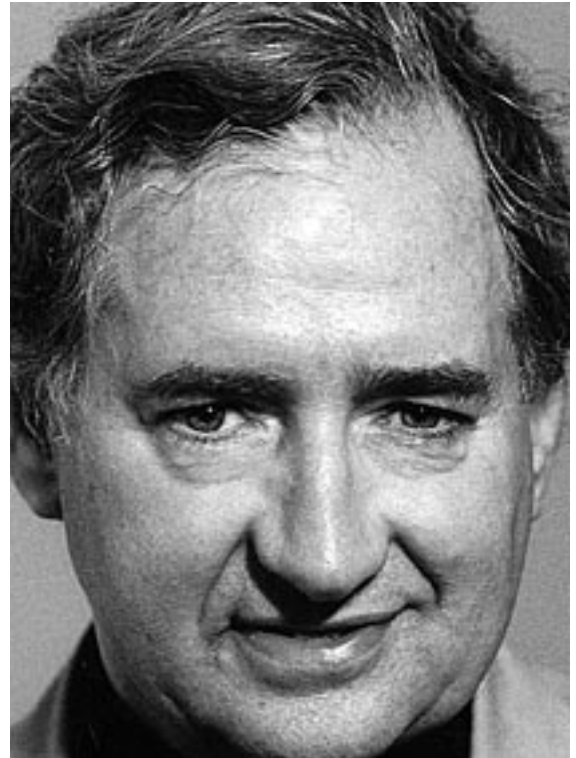


# DRAWING FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

**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**.



**H**ow 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?*

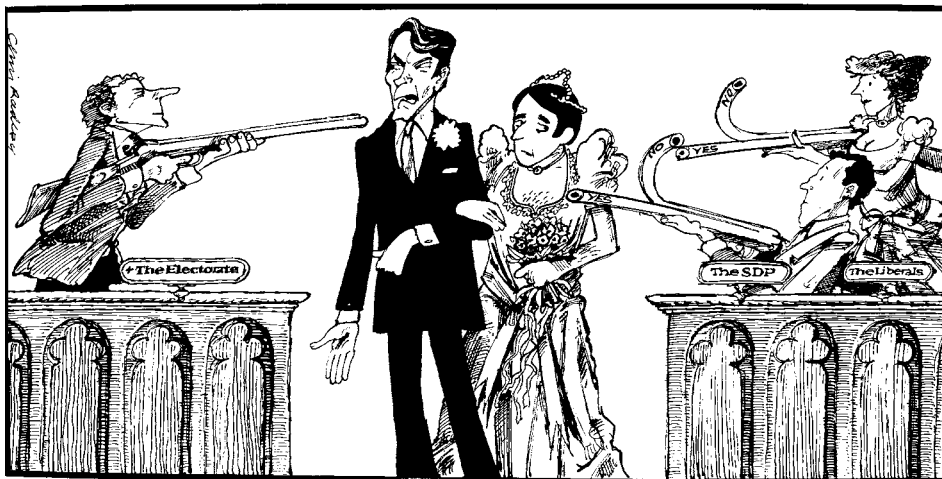
The deal I made from the beginning was that I would come up with a drawing and a line and unless there was some factual or technical error, I wouldn't accept a replacement line. It never turned out to be a problem. There were minor corrections made; there was only one occasion a cartoon wasn't used for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

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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.

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