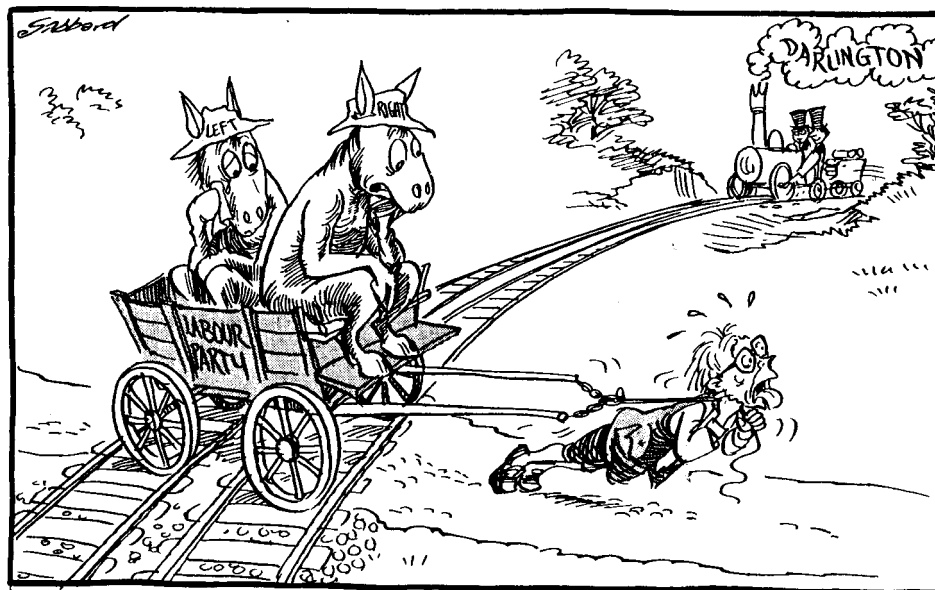


WHAT WENT WRONG

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

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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.*