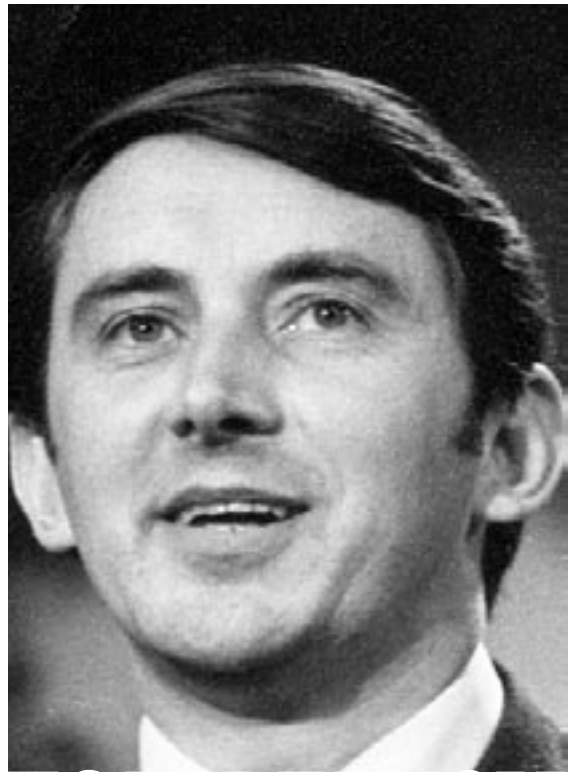


Adrian Slade talks to former Liberal leader David Steel (Lord Steel of Aikwood) about his career in politics, from his election in 1965, through his period as leader of the Liberal Party from 1976 to 1988 to his recent role as Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament.



ARCHITECT OF POLITICAL REALISM

For all the high hopes of Jo Grimond's 'Liberal Revival', only three by-elections were actually won by the Liberal Party of the 1960s. The most significant for the future was Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles, where, in 1965, 26-year-old David Steel, 'Boy David' as he quickly became known, won the seat with a 4,500 majority over the Tory. Unlike the other by-election victors, Eric Lubbock and Wallace Lawler, Steel's majority just survived the party's debacle at the 1970 election and he went on to become one of the Liberal Party's longest serving leaders.

Four years ago the creation of a Scottish Parliament drew him back from near-retirement politically. He stood for election as an MSP and then became the parliament's first speaker. Having recently stepped down, he once again feels free to talk on wider issues.

From the moment he entered politics, David Steel has never

been afraid to take risks and court controversy. His introduction of the 1967 Abortion Bill; his creation of the 1976 Lib-Lab Pact; his encouragement of the formation of the SDP; his proposed alliance with the new party; his ultimate strong advocacy of Liberal-SDP merger: all have made him enemies, even if those enemies are heavily outnumbered by his supporters. But, on each occasion, events have tended to vindicate him, and his place in history as the Liberal Party's architect of political realism and co-operation is firmly assured.

Steel's Liberalism is deeply rooted in colonial Africa, where his father was a minister of the Church of Scotland and where he was educated until coming to boarding school in Scotland in his teens. 'Right up to independence, education in colonial Africa was as segregated as it was in South Africa,' he says. 'Even at fifteen, that seemed all wrong to me. Then my time at university coincided with the Sharpeville massacre,

which had a deep effect on me, and I joined the Anti-Apartheid Movement that was formed as a result. Also, much influenced by Jo Grimond, who was rector of the university and actually introduced me to my future wife, Judy, I joined the Liberals.'

John Pardoe and Roy Jenkins had at different times suggested that David Steel was always more of Social Democrat than a Liberal. How true was that? 'Oh, Jo jokingly suggested it too, at the time of the Alliance,' he says. 'If being a bit of an interventionist Liberal also means being a Social Democrat then perhaps there is an element of truth in it. But, despite some early efforts by Labour MP John Mackintosh to persuade me, I never wanted to join the Labour Party. No doubt, if I had, I would later have helped to form the SDP! I'm a Keynesian Liberal. Was he a Social Democrat?'

In 1962, when Steel was in his last year and president of his university's Liberals, uncrowned Scottish Liberal king George

ARCHITECT OF POLITICAL REALISM

Mackie offered him his first job – Assistant Secretary of the Scottish Liberal Party. This was part of a successful Mackie plot to put him into Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles, one of Scotland's few seats in which Liberals were in second place. He went on to make huge inroads into the Tory vote in the 1964 election and to win the by-election that soon followed. 'We fought it very much on local issues,' he says. 'The local hospital, the threatened Beeching railway closure, the revitalisation of the Borders, which had been suffering badly from depopulation by the young.'

When he first entered Parliament, these were the sorts of constituency issues that Steel concentrated on. But he also developed his African interests. 'I remember slipping into Rhodesia with Archy Kirkwood during the Smith UDI regime,' he says. 'We were arrested on the way out.' At this point he proudly produces his 'Prohibited Immigrant' certificate, which he was forced to accept by the Rhodesian authorities. Shortly after this visit he took over from David Ennals as President of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. 'They needed someone who wasn't going to be made a minister,' he says.

But, after the 1966 election, he drew third place in the private members' bill ballot and shot immediately to the attention of the public at large when he decided to introduce a bill to legalise abortion in certain circumstances. Until then abortion had been illegal, was often self-induced, and was also the province of back-street operators and private clinics covering their work under other names.

'I had supported change openly in my by-election and here was a chance to do something about it,' says Steel. 'Six or seven previous attempts had all failed for lack of time, but the most recent, Lord Silkin's, had already gone through the Lords and I decided to pick up his draft. Silkin's son, John, was the then Labour Chief Whip and he

and Roy Jenkins, by now Home Secretary, were very keen that I should take it on. So for all these reasons I decided to try.'

It was a brave advocacy that made him very unpopular with some people. 'I still get letters to this day, calling me Hitler, baby murderer and so on,' he says. 'But there was wide cross-party support for change, particularly amongst Labour ministers. It took up many hours of consultation listening to doctors, the churches and pro and anti groups, but, crucially, Roy found us the parliamentary time to get the bill through.'

The new bill legalised abortion under certain conditions, putting the decision in the hands of any two doctors who agreed to the abortion in good faith. 'It was not a woman's right to choose, so you still get campaigning on that issue, but at the time it was a pioneering reform compared to most other countries,' he says.

His constituents were less unhappy with his Abortion Bill than his association with the anti-apartheid opposition to the 1969/70 South African rugby tour. 'Menzie Campbell and I did a meeting in my rugby-loving constituency. It was very badly attended and didn't make me popular. At the election the next year my majority went down to 500.'

He was not alone in suffering at that election. All but six of the twelve Liberal MPs lost their seats. 'And the combined majorities of Jeremy, John Pardoe and myself, half the parliamentary party, totalled just 1500,' he adds with a laugh, although he found it far from amusing at the time.

In 1968 Wallace Lawler had won a by-election seat from Labour in Birmingham Ladywood (now part of Clare Short's territory). This apart, why had the party made so little impact between 1966 and 1970? 'The Wilson government was very much in the ascendancy,' he says. 'And, unlike today, there was a strong Tory party. We were also very thin on the ground in those

days, particularly in local government. We suffered the classic squeeze. I don't think there was much we could have done.'

'The next four years were quite different because we benefited from the by-election effect. Ladywood had not been a major by-election win but Rochdale and Sutton were and they were followed by three other wins. People always tend to support winners and that was what we were. In the same way late, at a much more difficult time, we were undoubtedly helped by David Alton's win at Edge Hill a month or two before the 1979 election.'

Steel was soon to take over as party leader. In party terms what had he learned from his first ten years? 'To concentrate on our strengths, such as we had, and not to dissipate – to target seats and not spread resources too thinly. Of course we became much better at that a few years later.'

Not surprisingly he had found the period following Jeremy Thorpe's departure as leader 'very depressing and long drawn out' but he refutes any suggestion that the leadership election he fought with John Pardoe had been bad-tempered. 'John and I always got on extremely well, and I hand it to him that, within a day of my being elected, he came to my office to give me his full support. I was devastated when he lost his seat in 1979. Although he never was deputy leader, everyone thought he was and his economic expertise was of huge value, particularly to me because I had none. He was a great loss to the party.'

When Steel became leader and he used his first Assembly speech to call on his party to be prepared to share power at some stage. He sees the Lib-Lab Pact as a logical sequel to that speech. 'It had always seemed to me quite unrealistic to expect us to move straight into majority government so I was always looking for a pathway to get us back into influence and power. When Labour faced a vote of confidence in the

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House I saw this as an opportunity, not to avoid an election – we were not in particularly good shape but there was no reason to suppose that we would be any better later – but to do something positive in co-operation.

In retrospect had the Pact achieved much? ‘Yes, I think it did – not so much in policy terms but politically, in forcing the party to think about possible coalition and relations with other parties and that was particularly important later when the SDP was formed. There were some policy gains, for example for small businesses and a free vote on Europe, but of course we lost that. In retrospect perhaps we should have stuck out for PR in the European elections but, as Jo said at the time, to bring down a government on an issue that almost nobody except Liberals cared about might not have been worth it!’

Steel had many meetings with Prime Minister Jim Callaghan during the Pact and retains a high regard for him as a patriot and manager. ‘Where he let us down was after the Pact ended. He failed to go for an election in the autumn of 1978 because he was persuaded that he would have a better chance of an overall majority later. If he had not listened to that advice, everyone might have benefited from a subsequent coalition rather than a Thatcher Government.’ Nevertheless the 1979 result was better than Steel expected at the time – ‘We came up again and we survived’.

Not many months later he was having his informal chats in Brussels with Roy Jenkins about Roy’s growing disenchantment with Labour and the fallout within the Labour Party at home. They explored ways in which they might work together. ‘Yes, later on, we did discuss whether Roy should join the Liberal Party. His view was that first he should try something new and that only if that failed should he join, and then not as a campaigner. So I encouraged him to pursue something more fundamental. It has become clear that, even at

that time, there was a difference of view between Roy and David Owen, who thought a new party should go it alone rather than work with in alliance with the Liberals.’

Was that view shared by Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams? ‘To begin with, yes it was, but Roy’s courageous decision to stand in a difficult seat like Warrington and seek the support of Liberals helped him to persuade them to change their minds and support the idea of an alliance, although David Owen was never really persuaded.’

Steel too had been courageous, some thought foolhardy, in offering up the Liberal Party to an alliance with a new party that, for a few months, looked as if it might overwhelm it electorally. ‘Yes it was a risk, but I have always taken risks and I thought all along that the two parties were complementary. They had the leadership and we had the people on the ground and in local government. It didn’t take long for Bill and Shirley, and most of the Liberal Party, to come round to that view.’

Nevertheless leadership, or rather joint leadership, was never easy and Steel had his problems with both Jenkins and Owen. He looks back with some regret at his meeting with Jenkins at Ettrick Bridge during the 1983 election that was meant to clarify leadership confusion.

‘The problem was the electorate’s perception of the two of us. Unfortunately David Marquand had invented the title for Roy of “prime-minister-designate”, which neither of us had ever used, but which was picked up by the media. It was confusing because we had agreed that I would lead the campaign and Roy would become PM if we got elected. The attempt at clarification didn’t really work and, sadly, for a short time it slightly soured my relationship with Roy. It may even have been a factor in Roy’s resignation as SDP leader after the election.’

Nevertheless, at the election the Alliance all but pushed

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Labour into third place, the Alliance continued, and David Owen took over from Roy Jenkins. ‘I actually got on well with David – those photos of us in woolly jumpers looking over farm gates were perfectly genuine,’ Steel says. ‘I didn’t have as much social contact with him as I did with Roy, but at times he was very supportive, particularly after the defence debate at Eastbourne. We had our own heated debates about policy and tactics but they were good tempered, even if he did get an obsession over defence.’

‘But, if you ask me whether joint leadership could ever have worked, the answer is no, and that is why by 1987 I strongly favoured either a split or a merger of the two parties. My one regret is that we then took so long, and it wasn’t just David Owen’s fault, as Liberals like to think. We were at fault, too, in the way we chose to structure our negotiating team.’

Steel hadn’t expected David Owen to opt out of the process and had thought he would stand for leader of the merged party. He also admits that the difficulties encountered in the protracted negotiations convinced him that, after twelve years of Liberal leadership, he did not want to stand himself. ‘It all could have been much neater and easier,’ he says. ‘But that it was done was essential, and the proof of the pudding is in the eating. We got one party with one leader and now, instead of having a handful of MPs between us, we have more than 50.’

Steel believes strongly that his legacy as leader was to get his party to face the realities of politics, and in today’s climate there is nowhere has it had to do so more than in Scotland where for the last four years devolved government has been in the hands of a Labour–Lib Dem coalition, and seems likely to remain so. Perhaps the latest proof of the Steel pudding?

A shorter version of this interview was first published in Liberal Democrat News.