It is easy to forget just how momentous an event was the launch of the Social Democratic Party in 1981. Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams, David Owen and William Rodgers, former Labour cabinet ministers who became known as 'the Gang of Four', launched the most ambitious bid to break the mould of British politics since the Labour Party was created in 1900. Despite the fanfare of the launch, success in by-elections and the favourable attention of the media, the SDP ultimately failed to achieve its potential when put to the test at the 1983 general election. **Stephen Barber** examines the strategy of the SDP, what it wanted to achieve and how. He argues that one of the reasons the SDP failed to achieve its objectives was that its strategy was fundamentally flawed.

THE FLAWED STRA

There were fundamental differences amongst the Gang of Four over strategy right from the launch of the new party. Breaking the mould of British politics was a lofty ambition but one the party felt it could achieve. Academic and founder member Stephen Haseler wrote as early as 1980 that the 'vast unanchored popular constituency that exists today not only beckons a "new" party but one that, led intelligently and sensitively, can sweep the others off the board.'[1] The SDP was not to be formed as a party of protest, but as a party of power.

To win the 1983 election outright was indeed a highly ambitious strategic objective and one which others saw as unrealistic. Shirley Williams viewed the prospects for office as longer term, believing it might take twenty years actually to break through but that the party's incredible success in by-elections suggested a possibility of pushing Labour into third place. For Williams, the strategy of beating Labour in votes if not seats would force proportional representation.[2]

The SDP was to prosecute its strategy in alliance with the Liberals. Alliance was important to Jenkins at least, since 'It was going to be difficult enough in any event to land on the enemy coast of the two-party system, heavily fortified as it was by the distortions of the British electoral system. To have engaged in a debilitating preliminary contest with the inhabitants of the offshore islands of the system, who in any event agreed with us on most policy objectives, would have been lunacy.'[3] This was in contrast to Owen, who felt that Jenkins and Williams had bounced the SDP into the Alliance.[4] However, for much of the SDP, the Liberal Party did not rank as a high consideration.[5]

This implies that the SDP may have been a threat as well as an opportunity to the Liberals. David Steel's adviser, Richard Holme, recalls that it was the Liberals' strategy to 'embrace' the Social Democrats, with the push towards Alliance coming distinctly from the Liberals.[6] David Steel's instinct to encourage the split from Labour and to form an alliance with the SDP,

also demonstrates his ambitions. Steel wanted to break the mould of British politics. Although he made his infamous 'go back to your constituencies and prepare for government' speech in 1981, it is doubtful if Steel believed the Alliance could win outright, but he may have believed that it could break the two-party dominance.

Differences in ambitions over party objectives were not the primary flaw in the SDP's strategy, however. It was the division between what was to become the Jenkinsites and Owenites that meant the party failed to resolve how it was to achieve these strategic objectives.

The SDP and Labour

Labour suffered a destabilising defeat in the 1979 general election, providing the left with the ammunition and the opportunity to threaten the moderate leadership of the party. As the dust settled, the Labour left seized upon a simple clutch of statistics. Compared with the result of the 1974 general election, the swing from Labour to the Conservatives was around 8 per cent. The middle

The division between the Jenkinsites and Owenites meant the party failed to resolve how it was to achieve its strategic objectives.

ATEGY OF THE SDP

classes had been attracted to Labour while some of the trade union vote had shifted to Thatcher's Conservatives.

For Tony Benn and the Labour left, the statistics represented more than the failure of the Callaghan administration; it was a betrayal of the working class for whom Labour had been created. This argument was used to push the Labour Party even further left. Denis Healey was critical, suggesting that the left 'never explained how this would persuade workers who had just voted Tory to vote Labour next time, or how people who had not bothered to vote at all could be inspired to man the barricades of class war.'[7]

The tensions that had existed for so many years in the Labour Party gave way to infighting. The left argued about policies it would never be in a position to enact; the right split into those fighting for the moderate soul of Labour and those who were to become the social democrats. Determined to participate in national politics, the latter simply abandoned the Labour Party. Austin Mitchell, who remained, reflected sadly that the Labour Party 'was too

busy at war within itself to wave goodbye.'[8]

Having experienced the destructive divisions within the Labour Party, and the power enjoyed by a minority of vocal activists, the Gang of Four formed a party which was in the control of its creators. The SDP was never to reflect the culture of Labour. The '1982 constitution … effectively concentrated power at the centre, specifically at Head Office and with the party leader.'[9] The only people who mattered in strategy formation were, therefore, the Gang of Four. This is evidenced by the membership of the powerful Steering Committee, which was selected personally by the Gang. 'All the major strategic decisions were made exclusively by the Steering Committee.'[10] That is everything from the creation of, and appointments to, other committees, to negotiations with the Liberals.

Nevertheless, it was only natural that the new party should aim to 'take 90 per cent of the Labour vote,' in the words of Bill Rodgers.[11] Roy Jenkins, however, had ambitions for a grand centre alliance with David Steel's Liberals.

'Glad confident morning' – the Gang of Four (Shirley Williams, David Owen, Roy Jenkins and Bill Rodgers) at the launch of the SDP on 26 March 1981.

This was a tension which existed from the party's conception and was never resolved. Another founder member, Matthew Oakeshott, told the Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, on the twentieth anniversary of the birth of the SDP, that, 'on the day of the Limehouse Declaration, we were not sure if Shirley [Williams] would accept the last line.'[12] This line argued for 'the need for a realignment of British politics.'[13] Jenkins was later to describe this as one of the two 'key sentences … This gave clear notice that we were moving outside a Labour Party laager. Realignment cannot be a purely internal or unilateral act. There must be somebody with whom to realign.'[14] The implication for this difference was that the SDP never decided whether it was to replace Thatcher's Tories or Foot's Labour Party. In his diary, Tony Benn reflected upon this strategic dilemma:

> Those who leave the Labour Party and go with David Steel would not expect to win a majority in an election, but they might win forty or fifty seats and they would then have a choice:

to put a Labour government in power – in which case why had they resigned simply to put Labour in power again? – or to put the Tories in power. So actually the members who leave us are on their way to becoming backbench Tory supporters, and some of them maybe to becoming Ministers in a right-wing coalition government.[15]

An important question for the SDP was which party it would support in the event of the much anticipated hung parliament. Shirley Williams claims it probably would have been, reluctantly, the Conservatives.[16] This itself has implications for the strategy. It is difficult to oppose a competing party to the extent of attempting to replace it, while simultaneously being prepared to work with it in government. The consensual approach required in a multi-party, PR, system, needs co-operative strategies. Yet the strategy for breakthrough was diametrically opposite: it was deliberately aggressive.

These strategies are not necessarily incompatible. After all, Paddy Ashdown's post-1994 strategy was unashamedly anti-Tory while simultaneously working closely with New Labour. However, to pursue such a strategy requires the centre party to decide which of its opponents it wishes to defeat and with which it is prepared to work.

One of the reasons the SDP neglected to tackle the great strategic dilemma of who it was to replace was the level of support for the SDP-Liberal Alliance, reinforced in successive by-election victories. From the Limehouse Declaration onwards, the party enjoyed significant support in the polls and new members continued to join, many of whom had never before been involved in party politics. There were advantages in this ambiguous situation, since the party was able to change its attitude depending on whether it was challenging the Tories or Labour in each by-election.[17] This may be why the SDP's policy hardly

developed from its Dimbleby Lecture roots. Insufficient attention was paid to creating policy,[18] as Williams admitted during the Crosby by-election.[19] BBC Political editor John Cole went further, suggesting that since both Thatcherism and Benn represented reaction against consensus, 'I doubted whether it was possible for the Alliance to establish a new politics on the basis of a reaction against a reaction rather than on a clear programme of its own.'[20] Yet, as each by-election illustrated, the section of the electorate most supportive of the Alliance was not Rodgers' 90 per cent of Labour voters, but moderate Conservatives disillusioned with the right-wing Thatcher government.

The 1983 results

The relative merits of alternative strategies open to the SDP can be illustrated with an analysis of the 1983 general election results. The results show the number of seats where the Alliance came second to the Conservatives and Labour respectively. It might reasonably be assumed that had it not been for the unifying factor of the Falklands conflict, the Alliance would have taken some of these seats from the Conservative Party. From a strategic analysis, however, the Falklands was not the sole reason for the SDP's failure to break the mould of British politics.[21] It was, in fact, the SDP's equivalent of Dangerfield's 'omnibus'[22] – the First World War – for the Liberals in the 1920s. The party's momentum had actually faltered before the outbreak of hostilities.[23] The Tory party had already begun to recover as the economy at last began to strengthen. Additionally, the row over seat distribution with the Liberals had taken the shine off the Alliance's reputation for unity. Nevertheless, Williams believes that had it not been for the Falklands, the Alliance would have been more electorally successful.[24] Furthermore, the then Chairman of the Conservative Party, Cecil Parkinson, still places significant emphasis on the Falklands factor

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as an influence on the 1983 result since it established Thatcher as a considerable political figure.[25]

The Falklands factor is important in explaining why the strategy of the SDP failed to break the mould, but analysis of the strategy suggests there was more to it than that. The SDP's strategy was flawed. It was insufficiently robust to handle the upset of the Falklands war because the party failed to address the fundamental strategic issue of which of its main competitors it planned substantially to replace.

Of the one hundred and ninety-one constituencies where Alliance candidates came second, one hundred and forty-seven were Conservative-held constituencies and forty-four Labour. The Alliance simply could not have broken the mould by taking only Labour seats. During the most dismal period in Labour's electoral history, the Alliance came a weak second. In twenty-two of the seats, an extra 15-per-cent-plus swing from Labour to Alliance was required. The Alliance never threatened Labour in its heartland seats, as it was not seen as the main alternative to Labour in those circumstances.

However, the Alliance was able to pose something of a threat to the Conservatives. Assuming that the seats won by the Alliance in 1983 were 'strategy-neutral' (that is they were won despite failure to resolve the strategic issue of which party it intended to replace), had the Alliance prosecuted a determined 'replace Labour' strategy, a three per cent swing from Labour to the Alliance would have gained a further two seats, a six per cent swing an extra six seats, and a ten per cent swing no more than sixteen gains. Compare this with a determined 'replace Conservatives' strategy. A further three per cent swing from Conservative to Alliance would have meant another eight seats; six per cent twenty-three seats and ten per cent fifty gains.

Furthermore, the seat distribution suggests little about the strategy of the SDP. In the twenty-five

constituencies where the Alliance came second to Labour, the Liberals were the challenger in fourteen and the SDP in eleven. In Conservative seats the Liberals were second in seventeen with the SDP trailing in eight. The distribution is relatively even when it is considered that Liberals won more seats than the SDP, that the Alliance was considerably closer in Tory-held seats and that the Liberals had a long-established reputation for grassroots campaigning in many parts of the country.

By the time of the 1983 general election the Alliance had not only failed to resolve the strategic issue which was of such crucial importance but, unlike the situation in by-elections when its stance could be altered depending on its opponent, in the national campaign the party could not benefit from ambiguity. Furthermore, by the time of Jenkins' return to the Commons at the Hillhead by-election shortly before the Falklands conflict, it was becoming clear that the party's support was beginning to wane. War made that a certainty. The Alliance was not going to win the 1983 election. Yet the strategy of the SDP specifically, and of the Alliance generally, did not adapt to reflect this more realistic situation. Jenkins' 'prime minister-designate' title illustrates that the party entered the election without a realistic strategic aim of achieving realignment. 'There must be somebody with whom to realign' – it was necessary to have a party
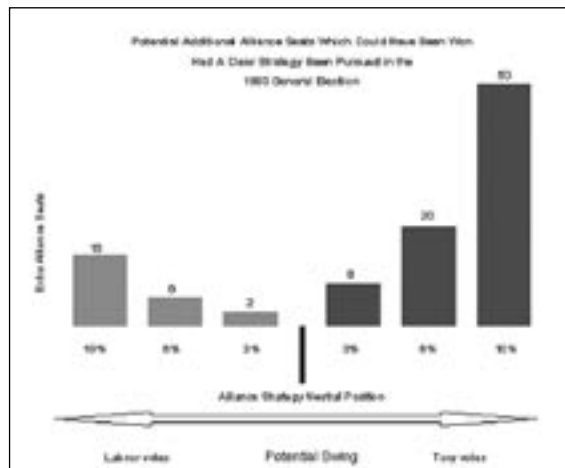
with whom the Alliance could comfortably form a government. The strategy of the SDP failed to consider this because internally the fundamental strategic issue of which of its main competitors it wanted to replace was never resolved.

Conclusion

The 1983 general election produced the best centre party vote since before the Second World War, with the Alliance coming within a whisker of Labour's vote. However, the 25.4 per cent of the vote achieved meant only twenty-three Alliance seats, just six of which went to the SDP. The electoral system effectively saved Labour, which won 209 seats on 27.6 per cent of the vote. Meanwhile, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party was returned to office with an increased majority of 144.

The Alliance's strategy failed to identify how it intended to break the mould of British politics. It was never clear if it wanted substantially to replace the Labour Party or the Tories. While the Alliance may have challenged Labour on percentage of the vote, it was incapable of challenging the party in its heartland seats. The 1983 election demonstrated that Labour was not the electoral enemy of the political centre in Britain. Subsequent history suggests that the Tories, whether in the debilitated post-1992 environment or in the post-conflict rejuvenation of 1983, were then and remain the natural electoral enemy. Roy Jenkins accepted this; later Paddy Ashdown understood it. Strategy was flawed in 1983, however, because the SDP could not resolve this fundamental issue.

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Potential Additional Alliance Seats Which Could Have Been Won Had A Clear Strategy Been Pursued in the 1983 General Election

1 Stephen Haseler, *The Tragedy of Labour* (Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 227.
2 Interview with Shirley Williams, House of Lords, 10/7/02.
3 Roy Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre* (Papermac, 1991), p. 513.
4 David Owen, *Time to Declare* (Michael Joseph, 1991), Chapter 23.
5 Ian Wrigglesworth, speaking at a Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, 29/1/01.
6 Interview with Richard Holme, St James Square, 27/11/02.
7 Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (Penguin, 1990), p. 467.
8 Austin Mitchell, *Four Years in the Death of the Labour Party* (Methuen, 1983), p. 79.
9 Vincent McKee, *Factionalism in the SDP* (unpublished PhD thesis, London Guildhall University, 1996), p. 141.
10 Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford, 1995), p. 218.
11 Ibid. p. 67.
12 Matthew Oakshott speaking at a Liberal Democrat History Group meeting, 29/1/01 .
13 Williams, Jenkins, Rodgers and Owen, *The Limehouse Declaration*, 25/1/81.
14 Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre*, pp. 534–35.
15 Tony Benn, *The End of an Era: Diaries 1980–90* (Hutchinson, 1992), p. 66.
16 Interview with Shirley Williams, House of Lords, 10/7/02.
17 Patricia Lee Sykes, *Losing From The Inside: The Cost of Conflict in the British Social Democratic Party* (New Brunswick, 1990), p. 116.
18 For an examination of SDP economic policy, see Robin Marris, 'The Politics of Rationalism: Reflections on the Economic Policy of the SDP'. For constitutional policy see Wilson Finnie 'The SDP's Plans for Britain's Constitution', in *Political Quarterly*, Vol 54 1983.
19 Lee Sykes, *Losing From The Inside*, p. 50.
20 John Cole, *As it Seemed to Me* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), p. 243.
21 This article presents a strategic analysis. There were other important factors explaining the SDP's failure to break the mould and indeed Thatcher's 1983 election victory. Crewe and King provide an historical analysis which discusses the difficulties for the new party given the first-past-the-post electoral system which afforded Labour the time it needed to recover. To a degree, this contradicts the experience of the SDP in that it took support largely from the Conservatives. See also David Butler and Denis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983* (Macmillan, 1984).
22 George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (MacGibbon & Kee, 1966).
23 Ian Gilmour, *Whatever Happened to the Tories* (4th Estate, 1998), p. 318.
24 Interview with Shirley Williams, House of Lords, 10/7/02.
25 Interview with Cecil Parkinson, House of Lords, 11/11/02.