

*A Diary of Two Parliaments: 2 vols.: H W Lucy*  
How the Punch sketch writer viewed the party combat; naturally stronger on personalities than issues.

## Book Review

*The Launch of the SDP 1979-1981*  
**Report of witness seminar in *Contemporary Record*, Vol 7, autumn 1993, No. 2**

*Reviewed by Malcolm Baines*

*(A witness seminar is an exercise in oral history at which participants in events are gathered together and invited to discuss them before an audience.)*

This seminar forms part of a series of article in the same volume discussing the history of the organised Labour right from the 1960s to the present. The discussion includes individuals from both wings of the SDP, including some such as Roger Liddle, Alec McGivan and Christopher Brocklebank-Fowler who are still active in the Liberal Democrats.

The participants began by discussing the origins of the SDP and agreed that it revolved around the three key issues of Europe, unilateralism and constitutional change within the Labour Party, where later Social Democrats took a view distinct from that of the Labour mainstream. That these issues defined the views of many leading Social Democrats is itself significant in the light of later conflicts within the Alliance and the Liberal Democrats.

The seminar also raised, if it did not resolve, those questions which are likely to be addressed by future historians of the SDP. Should the SDP have competed with the Liberal Party or should it have fought them at the ballot box? Was there genuinely a 'window of opportunity' for a new third party? Was the SDP's ultimate failure due to its own mistakes or due to the strength of the UK political system?

The participants considered how far the weaknesses of the SDP contributed to its lack of success. the most interesting of those that they highlighted was that the leaders of the SDP had already been defeated in the Labour Party's internal battles, and therefore were demoralised and exhausted before the new party began. Too many of its new supporters viewed it as a charity to give passive endorsement to, and not a vehicle for active participation. The SDP's lack of innovative policy is also considered. As its leaders had spent the previous decade fighting in the Labour Party, they had not had the energy to devise new ideas. it became a negative, anti-Labour Party; while its new supporters were wedded to the idea that the UK's problems could be resolved by consensual discussion, rather than fresh and radical ideas.

Fundamental to the SDP, not least because they ultimately broke it, were its relations with the Liberals. two-thirds of the National Committee's time was occupied by this. What came across from the seminar is the depth of the contempt of most ex-Labour Social Democrats for the Liberals. A typical view was that "they were a daft party, they were badly organised, it was chaotic." Consequently, the 1983 allocation in which the Liberals fought rather more than half the seats, is seen as an unmitigated disaster, which condemned the SDP to parliamentary oblivion.

The article is therefore of great interest, especially since it places the SDP in the context of a breakaway from the Labour Party. It concludes by trying to justify the whole adventure in terms of the party's legacy within the Liberal Democrats and on the 1990s Labour Party. especially absorbing in the light of developments since 1983 is the initial disdain for alliance with the Liberals and the extent to which many ex-Labour Social Democrats felt betrayed by Roy Jenkins' sympathies for them. This seminar is one of the first perspectives on the SDP's early history; a subject hitherto only addressed by contemporary accounts such as Hugh Stephenson's *Claret and Chips*, and as such should be read by all those interested in the formation of the SDP.