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## THE ALLIANCE - PARTIES AND LEADERS<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

It is still difficult to take a sufficiently dispassionate personal view of the seven year period from the formation of the SDP to the two parties' final votes to merge. I still have very emotional feelings on how much better it could have been, on how badly the Liberal Party *qua* Party was treated, particularly in the early days, on whether or not, in retrospect, it would have been better - or even possible - to reject the Alliance root and branch, on the tactical naïvete of David Steel, on the eventual supineness of almost all the Liberal Party's negotiating team, and on whether the final settlement really did represent a compromise too far.

If one had to deal with developments since merger, I suspect that the difficulty of being less than dispassionate would be still more evident. Suffice to say that an absence of comment does not indicate a weakening of resolve!<sup>2</sup>

In exploring these questions I am conscious of the excellence of Tony Greaves' and Rachel Pitchford's account of the merger negotiations.<sup>3</sup> The very few quibbles that I have with their text will become apparent in due course. Also, I have never been able to hide from, nor disavow, current views - even if I wished to - as I have always found it difficult to resist invitations to write for any journal or publisher aware of how easy it is to flatter me.<sup>4</sup> Also I have always had a quaint belief in the need for intellectual rigour and philosophic consistency in politics, without which it is invariably difficult to accommodate the necessary tactical compromises. As a consequence there are numerous texts extant which put on the record what I felt vital at the time. To be sure, there are weasel words therein; in politics one can never wholly shrink from the necessity to avoid every possible scintilla of political and electoral damage. On occasion one relied - usually rewarded - on one's target audience reading between the lines.

The title of this essay emanates from my reading of the history of the period. The relationship between the two parties and their leaders was, to my mind, the most influential factor in the way that the key events unfolded. I focus on the political aspects of the Liberal leader, rather than his personality. I have always found David Steel personable and easy to get on with. Unusually for a politician, he does not appear to harbour grudges. He also has a good sense of humour and likes jazz - what more could one ask!<sup>5</sup> Alas, his relationship

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<sup>1</sup>To met the deadline most of this essay was written whilst on mission in Cambodia - which may explain, if not excuse, its somewhat diffuse style.

<sup>2</sup>See for instance *Focus on Freedom - The Case for the Liberal Party*, Michael Meadowcroft, 1997

<sup>3</sup>*Merger - The Inside Story*, Rachael Pitchford and Tony Greaves, 1989

<sup>4</sup>I once committed the ultimate narcissistic indulgence of looking up my own entry in the British Library catalogue, and was surprised to see a number of early pamphlets listed which I could not remember writing!

<sup>5</sup>David once agreed to play the piano on camera for a "Children in Need" television appeal and then came to me in a panic in order to get the Granny Lee Jazz Band to accompany him. We spent

with the Liberal party was always one-sided and, I believe, his political judgement was highly flawed. It is clear from his autobiography that Steel revelled in being somehow above the party debate.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Grimond Legacy**

1998 marks my fortieth year as a member of the Liberal Party and to a larger extent than is often realised, one's perception of the potential and the frustration of the Alliance years is coloured by one's experience of previous opportunities and failures. The party of the Grimond years was by no means as "Left-Libertarian" as Jo was. To a certain extent the increase in support, and the by-election victories, in the 1958-1963 period rode on a social democratic style, and an anti-Conservative appeal, in places where Labour could not hope to win. In a curious reversal of the Steel years, the then leader was, at least in terms of philosophy and policy, more liberal than the party.<sup>7</sup> Why else would the then Young Liberals have felt the need to launch its excellent *New Orbits* series of pamphlets?<sup>8</sup> The contrast with 1981-88 is salutary.

For me, at the time at party HQ as Local Government Officer, the 1963 local elections were a great shock. The party had romped home in council after council in May 1962 on the coat tails of the March Orpington by-election, winning seats in town after town, often with little or no organisation. In March 1963 the immense opportunity of a possible gain from Labour in Colne Valley presented itself and was, I believe, tactically muffed. Even without such a timely by-election boost we expected to repeat the 1962 successes. With a number of honourable exceptions we dropped back in place after place. The palpable disappointment was followed by a number of defections of sitting councillors<sup>9</sup> and it was certainly clear to me that if Liberal officers and candidates did not possess at least some understanding of liberal philosophy they were liable to be wafted about by every passing political breeze. Again, the comparison with the 1981-88 period is, I believe, significant.

Grimond was so personally attractive and charismatic<sup>10</sup> that, even though he was invariably plain speaking, few members of the public, let alone many members of the party, looked beyond the sound of what he was saying to the words themselves. In contrast, the Thorpe years were politically and organisationally

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a whole morning recording *I can't give you anything but love* which, when trailed on air, no viewer was prepared to pledge cash to hear! I have the rushes of the whole recording session - they are available in exchange for a rather large brown envelope.

<sup>6</sup>*Against Goliath*, David Steel, 1989; see for instance pages 135, 269, 270 and 288.

<sup>7</sup>Note, for instance, a typical Grimond comment "There must be a bridge between socialism and the Liberal policy of co-ownership in industry through a type of syndicalism coupled with a non-conformist outlook such as was propounded on many issues by George Orwell", *The Observer*, 11 October 1959.

<sup>8</sup>I still have a full set of the nineteen published titles, presumably because I did not allow colleagues to borrow them. Number 17, *The Left and the Liberals*, was a particularly prescient and relevant tract for the times, written by one Jim Cousins, Labour MP for Newcastle-upon-Tyne Central since 1987.

<sup>9</sup>It would be a very interesting and potentially valuable research project to follow up the subsequent careers of those elected as Liberal councillors in 1962.

<sup>10</sup>see *Jo Grimond - an appreciation*, Michael Meadowcroft, in *Liberator* 217, December 1993.

horrendous, if at times electorally successful. Labour's deep unpopularity from 1968 and Heath's stolid leadership, particularly in Opposition, provided an unrivalled opportunity<sup>11, 12</sup> which was simply dissipated and finally sunk in the politically catastrophic entrails of the Thorpe trial<sup>13</sup>. And whereas the party was mired in the struggle to present a semblance of unity between Leader and Party<sup>14</sup> the Young Liberals had continued their Liberal odyssey into their "Red Guard" period and were duly taken on publicly for their pains<sup>15</sup> with debilitating effects.

The relevance of this period to the Alliance years is threefold. First, the struggle to maintain the party's liberal identity vis à vis its leader began with Jeremy Thorpe, not with David Steel, and was a direct consequence of the lessons learned in the Grimond era. Second, the contrast between the response within the party to the Thorpe-Heath talks in 1970 and the Steel-Callaghan pact of 1977<sup>16</sup> is revealing. At the time of the 1970 General Election I was the Yorkshire Liberal Federation Secretary<sup>17</sup> and, when Jeremy Thorpe went to

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<sup>11</sup>One of the perennial "what if" discussions amongst Liberals involves pondering how different the Liberal performance in October 1974 might have been had Jo Grimond then been the party leader and at the height of his powers as he was exactly a decade earlier when the parliamentary arithmetic was not as helpful.

<sup>12</sup>The opportunity at the time to gain and to entrench victories from Labour, coupled with the excitement of debating on at least equal terms with Labour, is shown in the municipal electoral record of the period but was apparently marginal to the party leadership's national strategy.

<sup>13</sup>See the most recent, and most explicit, book on the affair: *Rinkagate - The Rise and Fall of Jeremy Thorpe*, Simon Freeman with Barrie Penrose, 1996.

<sup>14</sup>The 1976 Liberal Assembly included a private session at which a censure motion from a Dr James Walsh on the party officers re their treatment of Thorpe was defended by the Party President, Chair and Assembly Chair (Gruff Evans, Geoff Tordoff and Michael Meadowcroft respectively). The three officers agreed beforehand that there was no point in continuing to cover up the reality of the Thorpe disaster and decided to confront the Assembly with the bare facts. If the motion was carried, all three agreed to resign. Gruff Evans stunned the packed room with his frank exposition of what we had had to go through. I have no doubt that the motion would have been defeated but Tony Greaves and John Smithson decided - uniquely - to act as conciliators and got the motion withdrawn.

<sup>15</sup>At one Scarborough Assembly Cyril Carr attacked the Young Liberals publicly. This led to the setting up of a "Commission" under the Chairmanship of Stephen Terrell QC to look at the status of the Young Liberals within the party. So far as I know, no copy of the Terrell Report has survived - assuming that it ever existed.

<sup>16</sup>For the Pact, see *The Pact - The inside story of the Lib-Lab government, 1977-8*, Alistair Michie and Simon Hoggart, 1978.

<sup>17</sup>These were halcyon days for regional organisation. The historic, and proudly independent, Federations still existed, often with their own professional secretary. In Yorkshire in 1967 I had replaced Albert Ingham who had been Federation Secretary since 1945.

Downing Street immediately after the election, my telephone, along with other Federation officers' was permanently occupied with irate and worried Liberals appalled at what deal might be being contemplated. In 1977, when Leader of the Leeds City Council Liberal Group and a national party officer, my recollection is that I had three mildly concerned calls over the Pact. It would have been impossible to carry the party into a coalition with the Conservatives in 1970, whatever the terms, but, despite perfectly justified fears as to its possible effect on the party, the Lib-Lab Pact of 1977-78 was generally accepted as being a justified risk. Third, the failure of David Steel to extract sufficient political and electoral benefits from the Pact gave clear and adequate notice that he was not going to be the tough leader determined to protect his party in crucial negotiations.<sup>18</sup>

### **Leader versus Party**

Those Liberals who committed themselves to involvement in the party nationally - often at considerable domestic, financial and electoral cost - were not, with very few exceptions, wild revolutionaries determined to embarrass the leadership at every opportunity.<sup>19</sup> The much maligned Liberal Party Council, for instance, spent far too much of its time agonising over how to temper its policy leanings towards the "leadership's" position where the latter was known or assumed,<sup>20</sup> or how to present palpably different strategy decisions as being an example of party unity. Of course, from time to time, sometimes when goaded by the leader's - and, by and large, the whole Parliamentary Party's - neglect or criticism, the Party Council went to the barricades but, in general, conscious of the retribution that the electorate tends to wreak on party disunity, the Party was remarkably well behaved - even when provoked. I am absolutely convinced that had "the leadership" chosen to work with the Party Council (and to a less public degree, the Party Executive), as some MPs did, including John Pardoe and, from time to time, David Penhaligon, rather than treating those who were, after all, Liberal colleagues with barely concealed contempt, the gains in mutual trust and recognition would have had immense benefits during the traumatic Alliance years. As examples of what would have been possible one only has to look at the civilised debates and the acceptance of party consensus at the special Assemblies called to debate specific crucial strategic issues.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Both Christopher Mayhew and, later, David Owen told me that they were convinced that, had Steel insisted that "no PR for Europe, then no Pact" then it could have been delivered. It is interesting, also, that no Liberals secured places on important quangos during the Pact.

<sup>19</sup>We were usually, in any case, far too occupied in undertaking speaking engagements in far flung outposts. I recall one such commitment in Llanelli where, after an interminable train journey, I was given a civic welcome by the Assistant Town Clerk - there was clearly an accurate local assessment of my status! Having thus been well looked after and transported to each planned venue, I spoke at a dinner which in due well lubricated course progressed to the hymn singing stage and I had to find my own weary way back to the station for the night sleeper back to London.

<sup>20</sup>"Leadership", in this context, is not solely the Leader himself but that Parliamentary charmed circle which felt that it had to impose whatever "corporate" decision it had alighted upon. In this context "The Economist" (21 September 1985) commented that "Social Democrats have little difficulty in working with the much smaller group of smoothies that surround Mr Steel."

<sup>21</sup>12 June 1976, on Lib-Lab relationships; 21 January 1978, on the Lib-Lab pact; 22/23 January 1988, on the Liberal-Social Democrat merger.

### **By-election candidates**

To take two key examples of the frustration and, indeed, the lack of understanding of basic courtesy, one only has to examine the question of the Alliance candidatures for the Croydon North West and Crosby by-elections.<sup>22</sup> An astute Liberal party leader, faced with the Croydon opportunity, and having a perfectly reasonable desire to secure the election of an attractive SDP luminary, would have immediately consulted the obvious key people - the Croydon NW Liberal Association candidate and officers,<sup>23</sup> the party's national officers, and significant "trouble makers" - and attempted to sort out the minimum terms for a "deal": the next vacancy guaranteed for a Liberal, minor concessions on seat negotiations generally, something vague on policy etc.

Instead, faced with Steel bullying - from, as usual, a great distance - the Liberal Party Council at Abingdon (this rather curious location is etched in my memory) responded by passing enthusiastically a motion supporting William Pitt (the Defector). I recall seeing David Steel in his bijou House of Commons office early the following week and asking him what he now intended to do. He replied, extremely churlishly, "I suppose I'll have to bow to democracy"!

Not long afterwards the SDP embarked upon a pro-British Rail campaign. It wasn't intended as such - indeed, it rather backfired when BR failed to deliver the Conference delegates on time at, I think, Great Yarmouth (and why not!) - but was planned as a typical SDP mould-breaking gimmick of a "rolling" conference at three locations, as opposed to the infinitely more boring but at least achievable and even sustainable practice of assembling at one resort - usually beginning with the letter "B".<sup>24</sup> The SDP at least recognised the latter imperative by holding one-third of its Conference en route at Bradford, which I duly attended.<sup>25</sup> Whilst in the bar at the St George's Hall, ascertaining, as one does on such occasions, the real facts of the state of play of the SDP, I was astounded to hear, over the PA system, Shirley Williams unilaterally announcing her candidature for the Crosby by-election. The existing and properly selected prospective Liberal candidate for Crosby - whom I had personally recruited to the party twenty years early - was also present at Bradford. We were both outraged. Suffice to say that Anthony Hill generously accepted and supported Shirley Williams at the by-election. However, I am inclined to think that had the situation been handled differently, and given the different locations and personalities, one just might still today have Shirley Williams and Anthony Hill as MPs for Croydon NE and Crosby respectively.

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<sup>22</sup>On arrival at Westminster in 1983, I inherited Bill Pitt's splendid secretary, Mary Walker, who regaled me with stories of regularly having to do Bill's weekend surgeries in Croydon whilst he went on parliamentary delegations overseas. According to Mary, Bill would also go through the post each morning searching for envelopes which might conceivably contain cheques!

<sup>23</sup>One could add "such as they were"; I am under no illusion that there was a dynamic and well organised association in Croydon North West, but the point is still valid.

<sup>24</sup>In the 1960s the Liberal Party indulged in fantasies about moving the Assembly to exotic locations. A project to hold it in Douglas, Isle of Man, eventually foundered because the Isle of Man's then predilection for birching young offenders was thought to be potentially embarrassing politically. Another scheme to show European solidarity by holding it in Scheveningen, Holland, had to be dropped because the party was advised that it was probably illegal to hold the AGM of the party outside the UK!

<sup>25</sup>Contrary to the received truths about my antipathy to the SDP, I probably attended, and participated in, more SDP functions than any Liberal MP apart from the leader.

### **Labour hegemony**

Like, I imagine, most Liberals during the early 1980s, I observed the suicidal tendency of the Labour Party in action with a mixture of disbelief, hilarity and sheer unadulterated joy. I vividly recall driving along the M5 - to or from what occasion I cannot now recall, but it was virtually bound to have been a Liberal meeting<sup>26</sup> - as the news came through of the special Labour Conference's totally bizarre decision on the arithmetic for its electoral college to elect its leader and deputy-leader.<sup>27</sup> Had I not been bombing along a motorway I would have done a dance of joy, as it was I confined myself to a minor whoop. Perhaps naïvely, I had at that time no premonition of the dangers lurking ahead for the Liberal Party, even though there had been a number of letters, and even introductory articles, in the serious press, and in *The Guardian*, for the eventual SDP by its soon-to-be luminaries. I saw it as an unrivalled opportunity to undermine a hegemonic, politically corrupt and illiberal Labour Party. Those who shared this view, and who succeeded against the odds to win seats in the big cities and other Labour fiefdoms, not only believed theoretically in the vital necessity to defeat Labour electorally, but actually set about doing it. It was always a strange paradox to find ourselves castigated as being political theoreticians, uninterested in power, when we were actually winning seats. Winning, moreover, without visible support from the party centrally who seemed to be curiously antipathetic to fighting Labour.<sup>28</sup>

There certainly was at the time a big difference between those Liberals - the majority of the party - who had no direct personal experience of Labour in local government control, and those, such as the party in Leeds, who suffered and struggled against sophisticated political chicanery and the calculating and cynical - and legal - abuse of public funds to maintain Labour in office.<sup>29</sup> The former saw only the pleasant, progressive but mildly erroneous Labour Party, whereas the relatively few Liberals winning seats from Labour knew a very different political animal. Inevitably this dichotomy of party priorities coloured the debates and

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<sup>26</sup>It may have been the Party Council, in Bath, I think, where Peter Freitag engaged me in interminable conversation on the pavement outside the hotel venue. There was then a bomb warning and the entire hotel disgorged on to the pavement and milled all around us. Peter continued his earnest colloquy with me, oblivious to the emergency. Eventually the "all clear" was announced and still Peter impressed his views on me. We eventually staggered inside to the Council meeting with Peter totally unaware of the Irish interlude.

<sup>27</sup>An extra source of glee was the thought of Derek Gladwin's discomfort. Derek was the long-serving Chairman of the Conference Arrangements Committee and, when from time to time we compared notes, he used to pride himself on his ruthless ability to keep the Conference under control.

<sup>28</sup>The "winnable seats" list, to which was directed central financial and other support, always included the "traditional" Liberals constituencies - for decades Merioneth was a favourite target for aid - but studiously avoided seats in industrial areas. Leeds had support from the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust but never received anything from any of the HQ slush funds.

<sup>29</sup>The evidence for this is among my political papers recently deposited with the British Library of Political and Economic Science (at LSE). I also used much of it during the committee stage of one of the local government bills in the 1983-87 parliament, and it can therefore be found in the Committee Hansard.

negotiations with the SDP in the succeeding years.<sup>30</sup>

### **The inexorable spiral**

“Our” failure - my failure - to politicise the Liberal Party, and our error of taking for granted the presumed existence of an inherent radicalism in the Party at large, were salutarily brought home to us at the Llandudno Liberal Assembly of 1981 - the Alliance Assembly. Those of us who sought to argue for a philosophical position vis à vis the SDP, and for constitutional niceties, such as the - minor? - point that the SDP was not at that time actually constituted, were comprehensively swamped by a wave of enthusiasm for some vague but attractive emotional spasm, epitomised by the pre-Assembly rally with Shirley Williams, Roy Jenkins, Jo Grimond, David Steel, Gordon Lishman and - a valiant but downbeat - Tony Greaves. Having been Assembly Chair for five years, and therefore well aware that on set piece occasions heart always wins over head, I suppose I knew that the “promote Liberalism, safeguard the Party, vigilance, watchfulness and all that” case was doomed, nevertheless, having opted for the tactical compromise of an amendment to delay assent to the Alliance (nothing more could conceivably have been salvaged from the wreckage at that point), the vote on it was at least respectable. However, one of the great myths of that Assembly is the subsequent final vote on the pro-Alliance motion itself. From the Chair, Gruff Evans simply counted the 117 delegates against the motion, subtracted that figure from the total number of registered delegates and announced that as the result. The votes for were never counted and, consequently, the substantial number of abstainers - either by conviction or, like me, out of sheer gloom, were unknown.

The problem of party “placement” in the political spectrum, and its consequential imperative in seat allocation etc, lay some way ahead and, at the time of the formation of the SDP, I felt genuinely excited by the evident potential for a cataclysmic transformation of the political - and electoral - structure. Like, I suppose, others, I smiled wryly at the launch of the new party and at its obsession with PR styles and with rejecting all received “truths”, but was prepared to give it the benefit of the doubt and to be proved wrong.

In line with the previous, and difficult to break, addiction to accepting commissions to write, I followed my *Liberalism for a New Decade*<sup>31</sup> with a booklet for *Liberator*, *Social Democracy - Barrier or Bridge*.<sup>32</sup> This delved into the background to social democracy, and analysed the state of play between the Liberal Party and the SDP. It stated that “[t]he SDP is at one and the same time the greatest opportunity and the greatest danger to Liberalism for thirty years.”<sup>33</sup> This was intended as a contribution to what one presumed would be an

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<sup>30</sup>This tendency is even more the case with the Liberal Democrats, who appear to have impaled themselves on the memorable slogan “End Equidistance” with the inevitable consequence that their vote slumped in virtually all constituencies that would otherwise be Labour.

<sup>31</sup>*Liberal Values for a New Decade*, Michael Meadowcroft, LPD, 1980. William Wallace persuaded me to write this booklet and gave valuable editing comments. In particular he encouraged me to make explicit the difference between Thatcherite “economic liberalism” and genuine “political liberalism”. Curiously, William's drafts for the recent Liberal International 50th Anniversary manifesto incorporate laudatory support for economic liberalism.

<sup>32</sup>*Social Democracy Barrier or Bridge?*, Michael Meadowcroft, *Liberator* Publications, 1981. It is interesting that David Steel began by believing that the SDP should fight one hundred seats. (*Against Goliath*, David Steel, 1989, page 224).

<sup>33</sup>To complete the “set” I also wrote two other *Liberator* Publication booklets: *Liberalism and the Left* (1982), and *Liberalism and the Right* (1983).

ongoing debate<sup>34</sup> on the fluid and evolving relationship, but its reception was altogether different. Edward Lyons QC, then Labour turned SDP MP for Bradford West - and with his wife, Barbara, extremely good company, then and now - became almost incoherent during a joint radio interview in Leeds at my suggestion in the booklet that, as things then stood organisationally with the two parties, the Liberals should fight at least 500 seats and the SDP some of the rest. Provocative this clearly was, but the rebuttal, generally, lacked confidence and content. Alas, far too many of the concerns of *Barrier or Bridge* proved to be accurate.

No “working” politician with any nous believes that leaders shouldn’t lead, or that there are never occasions when leaders cannot immediately share with their party colleagues all the delicate nuances of possible developments,<sup>35</sup> but the willing acceptance of such reality requires, first, confidence in the leader’s capability to deliver, and, second, a visible willingness to work to ensure that the led follow the leader. On both counts David Owen succeeded and David Steel failed.<sup>36</sup> An assessment of the style and achievement of the two men during the crucial period of the Alliance’s life turns on its head the received truth of the responsibility for the Alliance’s ultimate disappointment. This is not an assessment of the policies and election tactics pursued by them - for instance Owen’s error during the 1987 General Election of admitting a preference for working with the Conservatives was a significant factor in losing Leeds West - but rather a judgement on the way each handled his party. The problem of the Alliance was not, as is commonly thought, the problem of David Owen but rather the problem of David Steel. One knew where one was with Owen - for better or for worse - but one was never sure of what Steel would come out with next - whatever had been agreed in his presence at the party meeting in advance.

### **SDP triumphalism**

The SDP was an “all or nothing” break for fame and power. Inevitably it ended up as nothing. There are those who argue that it could have been all. Maybe there was an outside chance but I doubt it. There was a problem from day one with the SDP’s parliamentary recruits, and, in particular the SDP leadership - with the exception of Roy Jenkins - initially generally treating Liberals in rather the same way as Steel did: as dedicated espousers of worthy causes, but with no commitment to the required discipline for gaining power. To some extent this was a consequence of being elected as Labour MPs “on the ticket”<sup>37</sup> and being initially wholly

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<sup>34</sup>It was a time for set-piece debates and I took part in very well attended occasions with David Marquand, (which was published as *Liberalism and Social Democracy*, Arena, LPD, 1980), Tony Benn, at the Harrogate Assembly 1983, and with Ken Livingstone, at LSE, in 1984.

<sup>35</sup>Roy Jenkins was reliably reported as having attempted to join the Liberal Party on three occasions: firstly in the late 1950s, when he was allegedly dissuaded by Lady Violet Bonham Carter, then in the 1960s when the Labour Party was turning against European unity, and finally at the end of his Presidency of the European Commission and before the SDP “project” was mooted, when he was urged by David Steel to launch the SDP instead. David Steel has denied that Roy Jenkins formally applied to join the Liberal Party and told me that the only Labour MP actually to ask about membership was Neville Sandelson!

<sup>36</sup>Roy Jenkins, in his short period in office as the first SDP leader, had a very different style, and did not ruffle feathers in the way David Owen managed to, hence the concentration on the Owen leadership period.

<sup>37</sup>One SDP recruit, Christopher Brocklebank-Fowler, was elected as a Conservative MP.



unaware of the immense problem of achieving election as a third party.<sup>38</sup> SDP MPs, faced with tough Liberals, for whom political survival was a daily struggle, came to revise their opinions, but too late to revise the strategy for the longer haul. A less arrogant and patronising attitude, and, for instance, a seat allocation strategy which concentrated less on an equality of seats fought and more on who was most likely to win each seat, might conceivably have not only produced more "Alliance" victories but would arguably also have entrenched the SDP on the scene far better for the long haul.

Perhaps it was emotionally impossible for the then SDP to have swallowed a numerically "junior" rôle but the consequences of not doing so are numerically apparent today. Paradoxically, the one tactic that could have given the SDP electoral and political dominance over the Liberals, and, indeed, could have given them phenomenal impetus, was the one they backed away from - the defectors resigning their seats and fighting by-elections.<sup>39</sup> The argument was, of course, finely balanced. The parliamentary custom and practice of the party holding the seat choosing the timing of the by-election - not to mention the cost of so many campaigns - would, for instance, probably have denied the SDP a significant tactical advantage. However, in the heady electoral atmosphere of the SDP's early days, and with an extended stream of parliamentary recruits, my firm belief is that the electorate would have reacted positively to the highly principled action of each individual seeking a new mandate. The moral authority of SDP MPs elected as such would have given them considerably greater stature in the House, rather than having permanently to counter the argument that they had been elected on a different ticket. Such judgement is, of course, subjective, but frankly, in the circumstances, it was well worth the risk. I have to confess, as one who soon came to believe in the need to protect and preserve the Liberal Party's base and its position from the SDP marauders, aided and abetted by the Liberal leader, I was mightily relieved that they didn't choose the by-election route!

As it was, the Alliance soon became a bureaucratic nightmare. It was difficult enough for Liberal Council Groups to have to accept SDP members who were often amongst the Labour, and occasionally Conservative<sup>40</sup> members they had in the main felt least affinity with - though in the main they swallowed hard and got on with it - but we had to embark on an interminable round of joint committees, particularly to determine seat allocation. The bureaucracy involved was phenomenal! There were "gold", "silver" and "bronze" seats, allocated to each category on the basis of their winnability, and each party had to have its due share of each. There was a national "panel" of representatives who either led the team - usually on the SDP side,<sup>41</sup> the Liberals being happier to rely on leading local colleagues - or who "observed" each negotiating meeting, and there was provision for an appeal mechanism in the event of deadlock! Some of these meetings, often where little was at stake in terms of winnable seats, or constituencies which had been nursed for many years by a

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<sup>38</sup>When I gently warned Barbara Lyons of this new challenge she looked surprised, "Oh, I think we'll be all right - they've always been happy to vote for Edward".

<sup>39</sup>The only defector to resign and fight the subsequent by-election, in Mitcham and Morden, was a late recruit, Bruce Douglas-Mann. His timing was exquisite with the by-election taking place at the height of Falklands hype. Bruce duly got clobbered.

<sup>40</sup>One such difficult Councillor recruit, from the Conservatives, was in Huddersfield where the man in question wrote long and often accusatory letters on an antique typewriter which had a bi-coloured ribbon. He went to the amazing trouble of switching to the red half of the ribbon for the letter "D" every time he typed "SDP"!

<sup>41</sup>The SDP's national nominee in Yorkshire was John Horam, who ended up as a Conservative Minister.

Liberal, were concluded without much difficulty, but others had to be reconvened time after time, using up time which could more valuably have been spent actually winning the seats in question.

One ought not to disparage nor minimise the many cases and occasions when Liberal and SDP colleagues worked together effectively and efficiently but there was often a very different attitude to politics and political activity. Paradoxically, it was often the reverse of the general perception of which of the two parties was playing at politics and which was serious about winning. Liberals tended to despise the SDP's predilection for interminable meetings on detailed policy formation and its affection for social gatherings - preferably with big names - whilst the SDP tended to deride the Liberals incessant community politics activism. Such differences tended to arise from the SDP view that victory would come via the "Grand Slam" whereas the Liberals believed in the necessity of the incremental long haul.

In the end, although the trauma of getting there left a number of scars, it was surprising in the circumstances that only three seats in the 1983 General Election were contested by both SDP and Liberals.<sup>42</sup>

### **Owen's dominance**

I learned a lot from David Owen's chairmanship of meetings. The joint meetings he chaired did not only come to a conclusion on some policy point or on some item on the following week's Parliamentary order paper; when agreement had been reached, Owen would then ask, "OK - now what are the politics of this?" There would then ensue a short discussion on how one dealt with the decision made and what were the tactical implications of it. The need to relate policy and Parliamentary decisions to the current political agenda would certainly not have been dealt with in so disciplined a way in a purely Liberal context.<sup>43</sup>

I had the adjacent office to David Owen in the Norman Shaw North building on the Embankment,<sup>44</sup> and from time to time when we walked together across to the main building he would say, "The problem with the Liberal Party is that you have a leader who isn't interested in policy". This was palpably obvious, as the later fiasco over the infamous "dead parrot" document demonstrated, but one could well have responded that the problem of the SDP is that it had a leader who was obsessed with the minutiae of policy. Not as desperate a fault, to be sure, but nonetheless a barrier to a healthy policy formation partnership between party and leader. One innocent analysis of SDP policy came from one of the splendid sign language interpreters who translated for both the Liberal Assembly and the SDP Conference. I went to the Salford SDP Conference and spotted one of these colleagues duly performing on the edge of the stage. When she descended I went round to greet her. "Oh, Michael", she said spontaneously, "I'm so glad to see you. I'm having awful trouble translating these speeches. There's no substance to them!"

As SDP leader Owen was also phenomenally alert to immediate press comment. He believed that it was essential to impress the media with his ability to know what was going on at all times and to be first with a

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<sup>42</sup>These were Liverpool Broadgreen, Hackney South and Shoreditch, and Hammersmith. Official Liberal HQ speakers spoke for the SDP candidate - and, therefore, against the official Liberal Party candidate - in Broadgreen.

<sup>43</sup>Sue Robertson, who ran the SDP Whips' office with great efficiency, once told me that I was David Owen's favourite Liberal MP. I implored her not to spread this information.

<sup>44</sup>I shared this office with Simon Hughes who has been a longtime friend. This friendship was occasionally strained by Simon's addiction to clerical colonialism, in that his papers encroached inexorably across the floor forcing me into a smaller and smaller corner!

comment. John Sargent of the BBC remarked to me once that the apogee of this came when, in April 1984, Owen 'phoned the BBC newsdesk with a comment on the shooting of WPC Fletcher in a Belgravia square, opposite the Libyan Embassy, before the newsdesk had heard of the shooting! Owen was also rather wryly proud of having spoken at one of LINK's "Radical Conference's" at which, gauging his audience well, he gave just about his most left wing address of the Alliance period - extracts from which were forever being quoted thereafter by Leighton Andrews.<sup>45</sup>

The Alliance nationally between 1981 to 1983 is less vivid to me than it should be, mainly because I withdrew from virtually every responsibility outside the constituency in order to concentrate on winning Leeds West, though I did manage to write a fair bit to defend the Liberal Party whenever it was being maligned by its own leader, or misunderstood by the SDP - both of which occurred fairly often. Certainly in West Leeds at that time the SDP was no vote winner. General opinion, particularly in the six Liberal clubs there, was, first, that they should have stayed in the Labour party and continued to fight their corner, and, second, that particularly as seen through Leeds' eyes, Liberals had been fighting these self-same people for years and could hardly embrace them now. The local party was virtually unanimous in deciding that tactically we should be "Liberal" on the ballot paper "without prefix or suffix"<sup>46</sup> and should not seek to depend on any Alliance based assistance. We had no outside speakers and no outside money, but we did have the excellent Leighton Andrews and Jim Heppell (who should both have been fighting seats themselves but who weren't) who added a winning flair to all the solid fifteen year local build up.

### **The 1983-87 Parliament**

The early days of the new Parliament were taken up with one of the most bizarre episodes of my time in the Liberal Party. Instead of concentrating on how we could build on the huge popular vote we had just won, the initial Parliamentary Party meetings were taken over by vitriolic attacks on Steel's leadership by Cyril Smith, supported by David Alton. Steel himself was clearly fed up with the whole business and it was left largely to David Penhaligon to try and restore calm. This led to Steel's so-called "sabbatical", though in fact he actually resigned the Leadership and had to be talked out of it over some days - often at long distance.<sup>47</sup> Astonishingly it was somehow kept out of the Press.

I gathered from the response from parliamentary colleagues when I arrived at the House that the Leeds West victory was unexpected. It has been suggested to me that it was also unwelcome to some, but I never had any sense of this from anyone. Stephen Ross - a splendid Liberal who always wore his heart on his sleeve - did say to me after a couple of years, "When I heard you'd won Leeds, I thought, 'Oh, we're getting a troublemaker', but you're actually the ultimate loyalist!" The only response I could come up with was to ask how he thought it could be otherwise after my twenty-five years in the Party.

Stephen Ross' comment came during my period as Assistant Liberal Whip. With the increase in Liberal Members, and the heavy spokesperson duties each of us had to carry (apart from David Alton and Cyril Smith

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<sup>45</sup>The early chapters of the first edition of David Owen's book, *Face the Future*, Jonathan Cape, 1981, contained much that strikes chords with Liberals. See, for instance, the positive references to early libertarian thought in the Fabian movement, pages 4 and 5.

<sup>46</sup>The phrase comes from H H Asquith, referring to himself in contrast to the Coalition Liberals, 18 November 1918.

<sup>47</sup>For once I kept a diary of those early Parliamentary Party meetings and this is in my papers recently deposited in the British Library of Political and Economic Science, at LSE.

who refused to take on any such responsibilities), Alan Beith felt that it would be useful to have two Assistant Whips. Archy Kirkwood and I were appointed - Archy particularly to look after Scottish interests. I was very happy to take this on. I regarded it as an opportunity to develop the vital relationship between the Parliamentary Party and the Party in the country, which would be crucial to winning many more seats. I was more interested in being one of 230 than being one of 23 and the risk of spending more time at Westminster than was wise in terms of holding Leeds West seemed worth taking if, over the course of a full Parliament, we could make the Liberal Party sufficiently attractive as to boost the national vote sufficiently. Also, and relevant to this article, I hoped to play a part in developing a healthy and mutually useful relationship between the Alliance parties, which were organised separately - and whipped separately - for most of the 1983-87 Parliament. In any case, contrary to some popular belief, I reckon that I am a "natural" Whip! I believe that party solidarity is extremely important and that, for instance, Council Group discipline is also vital - and has to be worked at rather than simply imposed. Over my thirteen years as Council Group Leader in Leeds we ran a very tight ship and it served us well in a tough political situation.

The two years as a Whip were hard going but not exceptionally difficult so far as the Alliance was concerned. There were rare occasions when the two parties agreed to promote different arguments and to vote in opposite lobbies but these were regarded as worthwhile examples of being two parties and sufficiently rare to be promoted as such without damage. John Cartwright was the remarkably well organised SDP Chief Whip and the relationship between the two parties' Whips was as amicable and co-operative as one might expect faced with the joint pressures of maintaining a "third party" party presence in the face of a two party system. The parliamentary parties met separately each Wednesday evening to discuss following week's parliamentary order paper and then met jointly to compare notes, with the two leaders alternating in the chair.

The tasks of maximising the Liberal impact in the House, of writing and debating - such as with Tony Benn and with Ken Livingstone - of building the partnership with the Party in the country,<sup>48</sup> and of finding the most acceptable *modus operandi* for operating the Alliance, coursed through the Whips' office for two years, and had to be carried on alongside coping with constituency casework and nursing West Leeds. Then, in July 1985, came one of David Steel's perennial obsessions with "reshuffling" parliamentary responsibilities, mainly in order to remove Alan Beith from the Whips' Office.<sup>49</sup> I had had hardly any problems in working with Alan and would have been very happy to continue, but, if he was to be moved, then there was no secret that I would have been happy to have been promoted. There were those in the Parliamentary Party, including Paddy Ashdown and Archy Kirkwood, who pressed for it, but Steel eventually telephoned David Alton, who was at the time in the USA, to persuade him to take the job on! Alton went from not being part of the team to being responsible for it. Clement Freud, as commendably straightforward as ever, told me that Steel had

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<sup>48</sup>It was at this time that the rôle of the Policy Committee was enhanced with serious attempts to make it a genuine partnership between the Parliamentary Party and the Party in the country. Also LINK (Liberal Information Network) was formed, particularly with Leighton Andrews and Virginia Morck, as a vehicle for new Liberal thinking on topical issues.

<sup>49</sup>Contrary to what one what might have been assumed, the relationship between Steel and Beith was neither warm nor co-operative. Alan Beith appeared to have no great belief in Steel's capabilities and David Steel appeared to suspect Beith of permanently angling for the leadership. See, for instance, the whispers that Beith knew in advance about the contents of the "Dead Parrot" document but kept quiet, hoping that it would bring Steel down and open the way to Beith becoming leader - an allegation that I believe to be wholly wrong and mischievous. (see page 427, *SDP - The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party*, Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, OUP, 1995.)

originally wanted to appoint me but “the Welsh won’t have it”!

### **The 1985 Reshuffle**

I regard that particular Wednesday, in July 1985, as a disastrous day. The commitments to making a Liberal Party - and Alliance - impact nationally were, in theory, in Parliamentary terms, less than halfway through, but were being, as I saw it, seriously damaged by Steel’s changes. Knowing how Steel operates - leadership by announcement - I realised that he would come to the Parliamentary Party meeting at 6pm that evening with a *fait accompli*. Early that afternoon, when Steel’s changes were known, I saw Paddy Ashdown who offered to make “representations” to Steel. I replied that this was, alas, no use. Unless he told Steel categorically that, in the circumstances, he would not take on the Trade and Industry spokesmanship - and thus putting the reshuffle back into the melting pot - it would all be done and dusted before the 6pm meeting. Paddy didn’t believe me but kindly went to make his “representations” anyway, particularly to state the obvious: that the Parliamentary Party should have the opportunity to discuss the proposals that evening. At 4.30pm the changes were announced to the Press, and the meeting an hour and a half later, as ever, rather than having a public row with its Leader, knuckled under. It was a well tried technique of the Leader and, in a narrow sense, served him well, but it didn’t make many friends - or allies.

We were clearly in for a bout of mindless activism, with overheated photocopiers, a deluge of House of Commons franked envelopes, and with whole forests being lined up for slaughter, rather than continuing to develop radical and soundly based political and campaigning initiatives linking Parliamentary and party campaigning.<sup>50</sup> Given the changes that were being made, which were bound to make it more difficult to win Leeds West, all I could do was to opt out of my then spokesmanships to try and spend enough time in Leeds to hold the seat. We had no-one full-time in Leeds. The local association slaved away devotedly, helped conscientiously and innovatively by my Parliamentary staff - from a distance - but the lack of someone able to pull the strings together day by day was a great handicap.<sup>51</sup> Eventually in 1986 the Rowntree Social Service Trust - bless ‘em! - came up with enough funds to employ an agent but, alas, it was too little too late. Such detail is only worth mentioning because it illustrates the inherent lack of party and Alliance commitment to winning and holding seats which would otherwise be Labour.<sup>52</sup>

During the 1983-87 Parliament we had a number of Liberal Parliamentary Party “away days”, for which I

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<sup>50</sup>One exception was the Labour Seats Committee, financed personally by Cyril Smith, but largely co-ordinated by me, with the late Mike Harskin as its somewhat capricious, often brilliant but occasionally wayward staff person. This initiative produced material specifically of use to those colleagues whose main opponent was Labour.

<sup>51</sup>The local situation was not helped by the embarrassing hi-jacking of the Liberal nomination for my vacated City Council seat by a candidate who turned out to be an undischarged bankrupt as well as being unstable. Efforts to contain the problem only exacerbated it and he eventually defected.

<sup>52</sup>This was not the only reason for losing West Leeds. The pervasive and clever use of City Council funds to promote the Labour candidate certainly had an effect, as no doubt did a highly unpleasant libel, action on which took four years to win against the Murdoch and Maxwell empires. As stated elsewhere in this essay, Owen’s admission that, if the coalition opportunity arose, he would prefer to do a deal with Mrs Thatcher rather than with Neil Kinnock was a serious blow.

religiously prepared papers on tactics and strategy.<sup>53</sup> At this distance in time I don't recollect any of these sessions resulting in any effective collective action. The Parliamentary Party meetings became more and more Alliance oriented - which was not necessarily a bad thing, though Owen was consistently disparaging of Ashdown, and Penhaligon regularly teased Owen. We had Alliance spokesmanships and endeavoured to make the best of a difficult political situation. All the time, however, policy problems were simmering, without any effective party mechanisms for resolving them. The Liberal Party was sidestepped by the Steel/Owen trick of appointing "expert" commissions which were supposedly bipartisan but whose members were not even rubber stamped by the Party. The problem with this was that there was consequently no Party accountability for these "Commissions'" findings and they had to be bludgeoned through the Party Assembly. We, the Alliance - me being the Whip in charge<sup>54</sup> - nearly came unstuck over the Northern Ireland motion at the 1984 Bournemouth Assembly and the lesson simply wasn't learnt.

### **Defence**

Then came the biggie - defence. This one had run and run. The Alliance Defence Commission beavered away with commendable conscientiousness. Bill Rodgers was, as ever, sensible and undogmatic. Laura Grimond organised a number of valuable consultations and those of us with views on the subject were much involved. But Owen was, perfectly legitimately, a hawk on the issue and would not countenance a report which gave the impression of weakness. Just before the report was due out, David Steel made an unfortunate lobby lunch comment which appeared to divulge the contents on the key issue of a non-nuclear Britain. Owen was furious and used his SDP Conference to go over the top. The result was that the unfortunate Commission Chairman, John Edmonds, was forced to amend his report in a last minute attempt to find a new consensus. The result was unimpressive. As a rescue attempt Steel and Owen embarked on a round of European defence consultations out of which emerged their Euro bomb option. As a policy it was unsustainable, and even the usual refuge of calling frantically for unity and for backing the leader(s) at the subsequent Liberal Assembly could not hide the threadbare case.

There is a useful analysis of the Eastbourne 1986 debate in *Radical Quarterly*<sup>55</sup> and, therefore, there are only a few extra items of importance to relate here. First, the booklet *Across the Divide*<sup>56</sup> which was produced by a number of Liberals at the time was attacked for being deliberately intended as an "alternative" defence commission. Why this should have been necessarily a heinous political sin is debatable, but it was certainly nothing of the kind. It gained a notoriety way beyond its then significance. Essentially it was a young Liberal initiative. A small group of them approached Simon Hughes and myself with the idea of producing a book of essays on defence which would explore the increasing sterility of the sloganising between the pro-NATO hard liners and the emotional CNDers. Others, including Archy Kirkwood, joined in the discussions and, to our pleasant surprise, we all found the meetings exhilarating. Contrary to what Steel later alleged, the meetings were open and were usually held in a meeting room at the Norman Shaw North Building, where a number of Liberal MPs had offices. Eventually, rather than writing individual essays, there was enough common ground to produce the booklet under our joint names. It had unambiguous arguments on the intellectual unsustainability of the deterrence theory but it was far from being the unilateralist rant that it was later depicted as.

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<sup>53</sup>These are in the papers recently deposited at BLPES.

<sup>54</sup>Typically it was an abrasive and tough negotiation with Owen over the wording of the motion, but, once agreed it stayed agreed.

<sup>55</sup>*The Radical Quarterly*, Number 5, Autumn 1987.

<sup>56</sup>*Across the Divide, Liberal Values for Defence and Disarmament*, LINK, September 1986.

While this was going on, Clay Freud, as the Chair of the Policy Committee - a job he carried out with commendable seriousness and assiduity - was trying to get Steel to agree on a wording for an Assembly defence debate which would have to deal with the Commission report. I was also a member of the Policy Committee and was perfectly amenable to having a motion which would get us over a big political hurdle. I seem to recollect that William Wallace produced a wording which was adequate. Steel would have none of it. He rejected attempts at mediation and decided to go for the high wire act. Which is how the euro-bomb came to be on the Eastbourne agenda. It was unnecessary and, alas, all too typical. The high wire act requires a specialist in getting to the other side. Our erstwhile leader was not such a person!

The outcome of the debate is well enough known. The appalling events of much later that evening are less well known. Inevitably, rather hyped up by the emotion of the debate and its outcome - though not so hypo as to muff a "let's put the lid on this; good debate; now let's get on with the politics" television interview with a highly professional Bill Rodgers - Archy Kirkwood and I were booked to play in the jazz band at that night's *Liberator* review, which left us on even more of a high. We finished just before midnight and Archy telephoned Steel's hotel suite, where there had been the scheduled regular Parliamentary Party meeting, just to check that it had finished. He came back from the telephone looking suddenly serious and said that he and I were urgently needed at the meeting. We went straight across and experienced just about the most appalling and unpleasant Liberal meeting I have been to in forty years in the party. The level of anger and bitterness was beyond belief. Simon Hughes had been under personal attack for some time before we arrived, and our colleagues then started on us. Simon was surprisingly cool - and, to his immense credit never criticised our culpable neglect of him that night - but the others seemed to have had some sort of collective aberration. Stephen Ross, of whom I was extremely fond, wagged his finger within inches of Archy's face and shouted, "I can understand Michael - he's always held these views - but you! You! Steel made you!" It was bizarre. Eventually, after a lot more of the same, George Mackie, whose physical stature was somewhat substantial, virtually frogmarched Archy away with him, and the meeting subsided. The following morning Archy told me that, when he had finally got away, he had got into his car and driven around without any clue as to where he was going or where he had gone.

Those who were present, or who followed the Assembly on television, will doubtless remember the valiant efforts of the Chief Whip, David Alton, on breakfast television the next day, to make a disaster out of a difficulty, parading the tabloid headlines in front of the camera. Worse was to follow with the leader's speech. Knowing Steel well, and assuming that Alton had cleared his outburst with him, I guessed that Steel would use his speech to continue the attack. For these set piece occasions the parliamentary party had assigned seats on the platform in full view of the television cameras. I therefore sought out the party's press officer, Jim Dumsday, and told him that I would not sit on the platform as I did not wish to be in the spotlight when Steel attacked his colleagues. Jim, faced with yet another PR problem, was understandably unhappy with this information and said that he couldn't believe that Steel would do such a thing. I said that, if he was right, it would presumably be possible for him to find a way of getting an assurance on the matter. Jim suggested that I see Steel myself and obtain a copy of the advance of his speech. I duly went across to his hotel suite and was denied access by the Special Branch officer outside. So, in due course, I watched the speech on a television monitor outside the hall, and, despite being mentally prepared for it, I was sickened to see the Liberal Party leader, without any warning to them, attack his own colleagues in public, and to watch the cameras home in on Archy, Simon and on Maggie Clay - loyal Liberals who had done nothing to deserve such disloyal treatment. In the foyer afterwards, despite such provocation, Tony Greaves and others still managed to temper their response to the interviewers.

Back eventually at the House, a more constructive atmosphere took over and an uneasy but wearable compromise Alliance defence position was hammered out which I defended, somewhat uncomfortably, in the Chamber. It was akin to the position which had been available to Steel in advance of the Liberal Assembly and which he had rejected.

### **The 1987 Election**

Preparations for an Alliance manifesto were already underway by this time.<sup>57</sup> Sensible and practical arrangements had been made for its composition. Rightly, an original draft from a “single pen” was thought important and Alan Beith duly produced a typically professional piece of work. As anyone accepting such a commission would have done - as opposed to writing a Liberal manifesto - Alan produced a draft which reflected Alliance thinking, such as it was, and wrote with an eye to what would be acceptable to a consensus of both parties. Thereafter the draft was referred to a joint committee of both parties, chaired by myself and Ian Wrigglesworth, with the help of a “New Ideas Group”, chaired by Des Wilson and Shirley Williams. This latter was charged with the not unknown task of “thinking the unthinkable”. It duly did so and some of its better ideas found their way into the manifesto, sometimes as little inset boxes within the text. Other ideas were less sound, including one to help first time house buyers by making capital grants to them. 1987 was still a time when house prices were flying high and it was an economic fact of life that house prices reflected the amount of cash available in the market, so that any capital grants made available to prospective purchasers would put the price of houses up by approximately the same amount. This was debated on the report of the “New Ideas Group” and duly referred to the full joint manifesto committee. As it happened it came up quite late on the latter’s agenda when most of the SDP had, probably sensibly, departed. I duly explained the economics of the proposal and it was agreed to drop it. I then went to King’s Cross for the train back to Leeds. I arrived at home to be met by Liz saying that I had to ‘phone Owen immediately. I did so and was told that I “had played a dirty trick tonight by waiting until the SDP members of the committee had gone and then getting this attractive idea defeated”. I went through the economic arguments yet again and was met by a brief silence, then “OK - so what do we do for first time buyers?” I suggested that more assistance with “back loading” mortgages, ie lower initial interest rates and higher later ones, would help first time buyers but would not have anything like the same financial effect. Owen then said, “Can you explain this to Alex?”<sup>58</sup> Wearily, I did so and Alex conferred with Owen. Then Owen asked, “Can you get this through your side?” and I said I would clear it with Alan Beith, which I duly did. When I got back to the House the next day I bumped into Maggie Smart, David Owen’s Personal Assistant. She laughed when she saw me and told me that David had been breathing fire and slaughter whilst awaiting my call and had stamped off into his private room to take it. He had eventually emerged smiling and announced, “We’ve an even better policy now”.

The 1987 Alliance manifesto was, I believe, a respectable and reasonable attempt to maximise the Alliance’s political attractions. It wasn’t a Liberal manifesto but it represented the best that could be produced from a partnership which had ceased to fire the imagination of the electorate. I got on fine with Ian Wrigglesworth - which might shock some colleagues - and we had no great difficulty in reconciling our different perceptions in order to produce a readable final text, so much so that, from time to time during the more traumatic moments of the merger negotiations, he would suggest that he and I should be sent of to produce an acceptable format for both groups.

This task completed I headed back northwards to grapple with fate in West Leeds. Our local association agonised briefly over the description on the nomination paper and compromised on “Liberal Alliance”. Adding “SDP” stuck in the throat. I reckoned that we would need a national vote of around 27% for us to hang on and the final tally was some 4% short of this figure. There were other minuses, (including horrendous libels, legal actions on which were not finally won against Maxwell and Murdoch until after the election), including the legal but immoral use of massive City Council resources against us by our City Councillor

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<sup>57</sup>*Britain United - The time has come*, the SDP/Liberal Alliance Programme for Government, 1987. The same sweated and smiling leaders’ picture as on the manifesto was on many posters around the country, with the accompanying slogan “The only fresh thing on the menu”. In West Leeds some wag added “Sell by date: 11th June”.

<sup>58</sup>Alex de Mont, David Owen’s economics adviser.



Labour opponent, and an inability to squeeze the Conservative vote. A reasonably accurate comment from one Conservative voter was that I was more dangerous than Labour! I suspect that this was a common response, after all one cannot maintain the kind of radical position which goes with Liberalism and not expect it to be understood from time to time.

However, I recall the moment when I realised that we were not going to win. I was doing some daytime canvassing on a council estate when the news was broadcast that David Owen, when pressed at a news conference, had said that on balance he would find it easier to do a deal with Mrs Thatcher. In the industrial West Riding this was far from being a seductive appeal to prospective "Alliance" voters who had been painstakingly weaned away from Labour over almost twenty years, and whose views on Mrs T were more sadistic than salacious. The sharp change in the response on the doorsteps was predictably sudden.

### **Merger**

There was little enough time to sulk after the result. Steel launched himself into the dash for merger and yet another futile attempt to protect the cause from its leader had to be made. The Harrogate Assembly of 1987 was a very different affair from that of 1983. I ran for election as Party President, as much to tackle a worthwhile party job whilst out of Parliament as anything else, but one could not, I suppose, escape from the contest between myself and Susan Thomas tending to be depicted as representing different positions on the Alliance and, by extension, on merger. I won, and Susan went to the House of Lords. There are some rewards for being in the Liberal Democrats!

In retrospect, when contrasted with the special merger Assembly at the Norbreck Castle - a somewhat giant Fawley Towers - in Blackpool the following year, the delegates at the Harrogate gathering were clearly deliberately determined to get the best deal. The negotiating team elected appeared to be weighted on the side of those used to extracting the uttermost farthing in tough political circumstances. I sallied forth to London for this vital task but found that one had reckoned without the ex-officio team members, particularly those from Scotland and Wales, who were far more concerned to get a deal than to stand up for the Liberal Party. One Scot, Chris Mason, openly admitted that he was for "Merger at any price". And, of course, we had a leader who was often absent, didn't understand what caucuses were for, and who found solidarity a difficult concept. Tony Greaves and Rachael Pitchford have done all that is necessary for an understanding of the whole disastrous negotiation.<sup>59</sup> Time after time Tony and I ended up on the 11.10pm train from King's Cross to Leeds with Tony miserably huddled in his duffle coat. I would reach home around 2am and Tony, I guess, another hour or so later in Colne.

As so often in this sorry tale, the outcome could have been much better. There was no need to form the merged party on such disadvantageous terms - which, I would still argue, were and are an intellectual and political fraud. There came a moment, late on in the negotiations when Bob MacLennan, dissolved in tears as members of his team resigned, and said that he would have to withdraw to consider his situation. The Liberal team went back to the National Liberal Club absolutely clear that it was possible to achieve merger, if we so wished, on terms which would be palatable to the Liberal Party and which would entail few if any resignations. I was astonished to find that the immediate view of a majority of colleagues was - the otherwise stalwart Alan Beith included - "What will it take to get the SDP back to the negotiating table?" That, as they say, was the defining moment. Shortly afterwards the Liberals caved in over the name of the proposed party and, having proudly fought for the Liberal Party for thirty years, this was too much to stomach and I left - to be unexpectedly doorstepped by John Sargent who was waiting in the entrance of Cowley Street on the offchance of a news item. I resigned over the name, not over the NATO nonsense.

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<sup>59</sup>*Merger - The Inside Story*, Rachael Pitchford and Tony Greaves, Liberal Renewal, 1989.

I was still around for the “dead parrot” episode. Once again it provided a vivid example of the party’s Leadership problem. David Steel was happy to let Robert Maclennan and his aides draft the policy statement that was to accompany the completion of the merger negotiations. Steel saw the draft and pronounced himself satisfied with it. When Alan Beith and other Liberals saw the final document, at the eleventh hour, they were horrified at its reactionary contents and realised that there was no chance of it being accepted by the Liberal Parliamentary Party, let alone the Party in the country. There was the bizarre press conference that wasn’t, when copies of the draft had to be scooped up again from the Press, and then the frantic efforts to produce an acceptable version in time to rescue the situation. Two things are significant about this episode: first, that the SDP’s real views on policy became starkly apparent to Liberals, but didn’t affect my colleagues’ judgement re the value of merger; and, second, even when asked much later why he ever accepted the original draft, David Steel still defended it as an acceptable statement.<sup>60</sup>

The special Assembly was unpleasant. It was as well “fixed” as I used to do as Assembly Committee Chair. Those opposed to merger had few big guns and some of those colleagues who were called to speak were not unduly helpful - some were genuinely too upset to cope with the occasion. I suspect that I made my worst Assembly speech ever and the vote was in any event a foregone conclusion. I was however more proud of the “manifesto” that some of us wrote, printed and distributed<sup>61</sup> which put the case rather better than the constraints on debate permitted in the hall.

Even then I couldn’t bring myself finally to abandon the cause entirely. I thought that if Alan Beith became leader of the new party there was just a chance that it might become Liberal enough to encompass those who felt bereft. It was nothing personal against Paddy Ashdown, whose company I’ve always enjoyed, but simply a political judgement based on an assessment of their relative consistency and awareness over the preceding years. I never paid a subscription but I availed myself of the rule which let one’s membership extend into the new party, so that I could campaign for Alan. Even that glimmer of a possibility was extinguished and I headed off into limbo, until it became bit by bit apparent that there were enough people of like mind, some of whom had kept their local Liberal associations going, to re-launch the Liberal Party nationally. In its small way it remains a forthright witness to a political cause which has inspired so many individuals for so many years, and which has been treated so badly by some who should have known better.

### **Conclusion**

A number of questions arise out of this somewhat diffuse narrative and deserve whatever measure of objective assessment is possible. First, would the Labour party have reinvented itself without the SDP defections? I think the answer is “yes”, but only because of the final Conservative election victory of 1992 which drove the Labour party into its “anything so long as its not socialist” desperation phase. I doubt whether, if the SDP MPs had remained within the Labour party and fought on, the changes would have come any quicker and it is even arguable that Labour would not have been able so easily to jump a generation to Blair had the SDP still been around. If this analysis is right then it follows that the SDP - and by extension the Alliance - has given us the current Labour landslide. Some of them are, indeed, active within it.

Second, would the Liberal Party have achieved the 1983 level of electoral support on its own, without the Alliance? I am inclined to think that it would have reached around the same mark had the SDP never been formed and had the Liberal Party therefore carried the third party banner alone. The protest vote indicators

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<sup>60</sup>“I wouldn't say that there was much wrong with the document itself". David Steel on the 'Dead Parrot' policy statement, BBC Radio 4, 15 March 1989.

<sup>61</sup>*Merger or Renewal? A Report to the Joint Liberal Assembly, 23/24 January 1988, Michael Meadowcroft.*

were all in place<sup>62</sup> and the Party was in fine fettle, with good harvests of council seats in the years immediately preceding the general election. Within the Alliance vote in 1983 the Liberals polled significantly higher than the SDP. The SDP explained this as being a consequence of the Liberals getting the “better” seats - as defined by the SDP. I am unconvinced of this. I believe that in 1983 there was a somewhat warmer feeling towards the Liberals than towards the SDP, possibly because of the pro underdog feeling that it was the Liberals who had “soldiered on through the wilderness whilst the SDP had sojourned in the tents of the unrighteous”.<sup>63</sup> I don’t think that this response should be oversold but I believe that it was there.

What I am more sure about is that had the Liberals fought all the seats that they had been building up in then the tactical, and “stature”, argument for a Liberal vote would have been maximised and a significantly higher vote could have been obtained. This is, of course, speculation and, indeed, the tactical opportunity would never have been conceded by the SDP who were certainly not in business to assist the Liberal Party. Whenever the argument of Liberal build up was advanced in seat negotiations the SDP response was “and you’ve failed to win the seat - so let us show you how”.

Third, would it have been possible to ignore the SDP’s formation and to have fought them electorally with any chance of success? The answer is, alas, firmly “no”. For many years the Liberal Party had tacitly garnered the “none of the above” vote without challenging that vote’s motivation, and enough of it would have slipped to the SDP in four-cornered fights to have blighted Liberal prospects.

Fourth, did the arrival of the SDP and the Liberals’ participation in the Alliance harm the Liberals’ political project? Unequivocally, yes. It is this political disaster - for the country rather than the Party - that is the heaviest price paid for the way the eight years from 1980 unfolded. The political inspiration - and education - of the late 1950s and the 1960s Grimond years had rooted itself in the determination to build - in Jo’s words - a “radical non-socialist progressive alternative to the Conservatives”.<sup>64</sup> This determination, as with all political strategies, had continually to re-interpret itself within the context of the immediate political agenda. Hence the struggle with the Thorpe and Steel leadership cliques; hence the delicate electoral trick of suborning the mainly right wing protest vote whilst ploughing a distinctly radical furrow; hence the attempt to develop an intellectually coherent and distinct philosophy in the teeth of an impatient Poujadist element in the Liberal Party ranks; and hence, above all, the dismay at the successful hi-jacking of this vital and vibrant Liberal project firstly by the Alliance and then, finally, by the merger.

It must not be thought that those of us who committed our waking hours to this project over many years had some sort of curious umbilical and myopic attachment to the Liberal Party per se. Far from it. Our commitment was, and is, to a coherent and highly relevant set of Liberal values which we saw, and see, as the best chance of a civilised, peaceful and convivial world. The Liberal Party was, by its constitution, its record and its promise the only vehicle for those values. Of course, like all human institutions, it was flawed.

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<sup>62</sup>Jo Grimond, when asked once in a television interview, whether the Liberal vote was to a large extent a protest vote, replied, "Well, there's a great deal to protest about."

<sup>63</sup>A typically biblical phrase used by Sir Frank Medlicott at the Liberal Assembly of 1962, following his return to the Liberal Party after spending twenty years as a "National Liberal and Conservative" MP. Clement Davies, Liberal Leader from 1945 to 1956, once said that the National Liberals were "Liberals to save their souls and National Liberals to save their seats."

<sup>64</sup>Jo Grimond was typically contrary, in that he was opposed to the Lib-Lab Pact but, generally and far from uncritically, supported the Alliance.

Of course, the graph of commitment and achievement was far from showing a steady upward advance. But, at its heart, the pre-Alliance party was sound and secure - not least in the sense that one could rely on its instinctive response in a political crisis.

Nor must it be thought that those who held these views were somehow strange denizens of some isolated and obscurantist sect who went to the Liberal Party Council to hold hands to try and contact the living. These were colleagues who were passionate about the desperate conditions of their neighbours in those long neglected, quasi-Indian-reservation, urban deserts that are misnamed as "housing" estates. These were colleagues who saw the urgent need to find some way of making the ecological imperative relevant to those who struggled to conserve anything, let alone energy. These were colleagues who took principled stands on development aid, on the folly of the nuclear deterrence theory, and on the nonsense of nation state war mongering. What is more, these were colleagues who did all this in the teeth of Labour's urban hegemony just as much as in the depths of Conservative compacency. It is these colleagues who survived everything that the opposition could throw at them and, for their pains, were traduced by their erstwhile colleagues who had been seduced by the superficial sloganising of the Alliance years and had then been stampeded by the simplistic attractions of the merger. The result is a merged party with a steadily declining electoral base, with virtually no presence in areas that would otherwise be Labour held, whose commendable gains in seats are the consequence of tactical voting, and whose hybridity as a party guarantees a lack of that intellectual rigour necessary to forge a visibly distinctive image. In one way or another, those of us who couldn't reconcile ourselves with merger felt as we did because we were conscious of the callousness which - at the time, but far less evident today - epitomised the success of the quick fix over the political crusade, and which clearly neither esteemed our long struggle worthwhile nor had any regard for the party which had carried the Liberal banner with pride for so long, and which was still serviceable and very much viable.

It is, I suppose, a sign of encroaching senility or even of political atrophy to find oneself recalling earlier speeches. At the risk of demonstrating the truth of this, I well recall the Liberal Assembly philosophy debate of 1979. I was Assembly Committee Chair and I wanted to experiment. The Thatcher victory earlier that year provided an opportunity to do so. We set aside an entire afternoon for a debate without a motion and with only a vague structure of abstract concepts. It was an inspiring and formative session<sup>65</sup> - which I still have on cassette - and I have from time to time remembered saying that electoral success "might fall unbidden into our grasp, but political success has to be worked for". I dearly wish I had not been so accurate nor, indeed, so prescient!

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<sup>65</sup>Alan Watkins told me that he anticipated it being a disastrous session but that it had turned out to be one of the most stimulating party conference debates he had experienced.