

# Merger Hopes and Fears

## Were They Realised?

Alliance into merger: how has it worked? *Rt. Hon. Alan Beith, MP* examines the myths and the realities.

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It seems an age since a number of us were condemned to endless meetings in often miserable – but never smoke-filled – rooms for the merger negotiations between the Liberals and the SDP. Was it really only ten years ago? Were we once in separate parties? Did the process of merger really have to be so painful and damaging, given that the party which emerged became, after the first couple of years, a very congenial party to be in and one which is now enjoying well-deserved success?

It is instructive to look back to the hopes and fears which surrounded the Alliance and the merger. Liberals hoped to prevent the dissipation and division of their potential support which resulted from competition between the two parties. (The effect of such division was vividly displayed in the later election of William Hague to the House of Commons. Either the SDP or the Liberals could have won that byelection if both had not been standing.) Most Liberals shared the SDP mission to ‘break the mould’ and draw new support from alienated voters, although they believed that many in the SDP underestimated the campaigning task and romanticised the prospects of early success. Some Liberals hoped that the central organisational skills and presentational flair shown in the SDP launch could be productively married with Liberal experience in grass-roots campaigning. They hoped to release energies wasted in the duplicated processes of the Alliance. Some Liberals – although I was not one of them – believed that the merged party would replace the Labour Party, by pursuing a strategy which would fatally wound Labour at the next election and move into position to tackle

the Tories at the one after.

The Social Democrats who backed merger, and had to put up with undisguised bitterness and calumny from others in their party as a result, saw merger as essential to the continuance of their mission to provide an electable and responsible alternative to the Tories. They realised that what they had achieved in detaching so many from the Labour Party and attracting significant new support would not last if they remained in competition with the Liberals. They hoped to advance many policies which they found they shared with Liberals.

Then there were the fears which made the negotiations so difficult. Liberals feared that Liberal identity in the minds of voters would be lost, and that Liberalism itself could be dangerously diluted in the philosophy and policies of the new party. They feared that the SDP was not committed to grassroots campaigning. They feared that the new party would be centralised and undemocratic in its internal structures. Liberal critics of the merger package feared that ‘the real Liberal legacy of over 3,000 councillors and a local campaigning force’ might ‘just melt away’.<sup>1</sup>

Social Democrats feared that the new party might retain what they saw as an amateur approach, a disorderly method of policy-making and a tendency for a limited number of activists to have disproportionate influence. And even if they did not themselves have these fears, they knew that others did and were anxious not to lose too many people to the Owenite camp. At times they feared that the vote for merger at the SDP conference could be lost, although in reality the Owenites had accepted that merger was going to happen and seemed to be looking forward to being left on their own. Key battles in the negotiations, such as the ill-fated deci-

sion on the party name, were haunted for some Social Democrats by the ghostly apparition of the dreaded Doctor holding a sign pointing his way for 'Social' Democrats and the other way for 'Liberal' Democrats. It was that perception rather than mere stubbornness which led SDP negotiators to insist on the inclusion of a reference to NATO in the party's

positioning Labour.

Success for the Liberal Democrats was slow to come, but it was painstakingly built at grassroots level, while a more professional approach to national organisation was developed simultaneously. 3,000 councillors and campaigners did not disappear. The party organisation did not prove to be an undemocratic mon-

Liberal identity not shone through, confounding the fears of many Liberals at the time of merger.

Those key SDP members who have contributed most to the Liberal Democrats are the ones who seemed most at home in it. Their instincts were Liberal and they had confidence that the new party they had helped to design was serious about winning power and modernising its methods. Bob MacLennan is an example: at times he was a mind-numbingly intransigent negotiator in the merger process, but in the new party he has been largely responsible for ensuring that we are close to the achievement of a series of key Liberal policies on constitutional issues. As Party Presidents, both he and Charles Kennedy have understood and fostered the internal democracy of the party which is now unique among the three main parties. A few careerists in the SDP ranks who did not feel at home in the Liberal Democrats are now Blairites, but the others have maintained and in many cases helped to shape a genuinely Liberal identity for the new party.

*Alan Beith has been MP for Berwick-on-Tweed since 1973. Liberal Chief Whip 1976–85, he is currently Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats and spokesman on Home Affairs.*

Notes:

- 1 Rachael Pitchford and Tony Greaves, *Merger: The Inside Story* (Colne: Liberal Renewal, 1989), p.147.

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## Success would not have been possible, however, had the party's Liberal identity not shone through, confounding the fears of many Liberals at the time of merger.

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original constitution and on a name for the party so unmemorable that most people have now forgotten what it was. It probably contributed to the near-fatal decision of the leaders of the two parties to promote the 'dead parrot' policy document. Even David Owen found it rather too right-wing, at least at the time.

So, were these hopes and fears realised? The main political hope was certainly not realised at the beginning. A combination of the disunited picture presented by the merger negotiations and public confusion over the party's name and identity meant that it was in no position to withstand what turned out to be very unfavourable political circumstances. The new party had disastrous European election results and hit 6% in the opinion polls. Liberal fears of a loss of identity were briefly realised when the new party, in defiance of the cumbersome negotiated settlement on the name, resolved to call itself the Democrats. It took a reversal of that decision in October 1989 to restore damaged morale, and the climb back to viability began with successful local elections in May 1990, followed by the Eastbourne byelection success.

The idea that the new party would replace the Labour Party became clearly unsustainable even during John Smith's leadership, and was buried when Tony Blair set about re-

ster – a more orderly conference and policy-making structure has largely proved its value. It was particularly necessary in setting out a full range of policies in the party's early years, although the policy-making machinery now appears to have been rather too cumbersome and not sufficiently geared to campaigning.

Now at last, however, the new party's hopes are being realised. It has a record number of MPs and is overshadowing the official opposition in effectiveness in the House. The Liberal Democrats are the second party in local government. The party has set much of the policy agenda for the new parliament, particularly but not exclusively on constitutional issues. Success would not have been possible, however, had the party's

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