

One Man's Pride

Owen and his Impact on the Alliance

Tim Clement-Jones regrets the lost opportunities of the Alliance years.

Lib Dems, like their Liberal predecessors, are by and large forward-looking, optimistic creatures. In that respect we have been spoilt by the successes of the past 10 years. Leapfrogging the mainly positive memories of the 1990s to the Alliance era is therefore an uncomfortable process. Last September's Liberal Democrat conference at Eastbourne – the scene of the 'Euro-bomb debate' in 1986 – brought back memories of the inter-party and internal tensions of the Alliance years

David Owen and his apologists would, I am sure, like to think that this was the age of the gods and Titans when superhuman political feats appeared possible. Certainly many in the media seemed to believe that he was a colossus bestriding the Alliance. The tale, however, ended in the classical way, with human frailties causing downfall. Dr Owen's fatal arrogance led to a tragic waste of leadership, human effort and most of all political opportunity.

For many it was a disappointing time of failed ambitions which still occasionally require treatment by expert political therapists. I, for one, am still angry in retrospect about the waste of energy that went into internal wrangling, and the missed political opportunities. Having – despite hiccups over seat allocation – started to build relationships so well between the parties before the 1983 general election, it is galling to look back and think how little progress we made politically over the period from 1983 to 1987.

For the 1983 election manifesto, it is true we negotiated on policy between the parties, but it was a fairly amicable process. Joint home and legal affairs policies were thrashed out over breakfast at Eric Avebury's house in Pimlico between Simon Hughes, Ian Wrigglesworth, Eric Lyons, John Harris and myself. We did have some differences of principle, but this did not sour the

discussions. If Owen, instead of radiating distrust and paranoia in the period between the general elections, had built on the legacy of 'the partnership of principle' left him by Roy Jenkins he could have become leader of a powerful joint movement and even a joint party.

David Steel suffered from a bad virus immediately after the '83 election and took a sabbatical. Owen was widely admired by many at the time. If he had seized the initiative and built bridges between the parties instead of deliberately blowing them up, in time, with his energy and public profile, he could have become leader of a merged party. This would have been a formidable force at the '87 election rather than the quarrelsome two-headed creature it appeared to be, and, at the top, was.

Owen, however, saw the relationship as purely pragmatic. He was clearly keen to ditch the Liberals as soon as the SDP could politically do so. The Jenkinsites, like the Liberals, saw the Alliance as a meeting of policy minds. Owen and his followers clearly had a different vision, bound up with a view of him as a 'man of destiny' sure to lead the SDP to political glory provided it remained a disciplined force. This emphasis on discipline and the destiny of one man was of course anathema to Liberals. Owen's argument was that the separate party identities needed to be preserved so that each could blossom under PR when it was achieved. The irony is that without close cooperation this could not be achieved, and Owen's behaviour was not likely to encourage this.

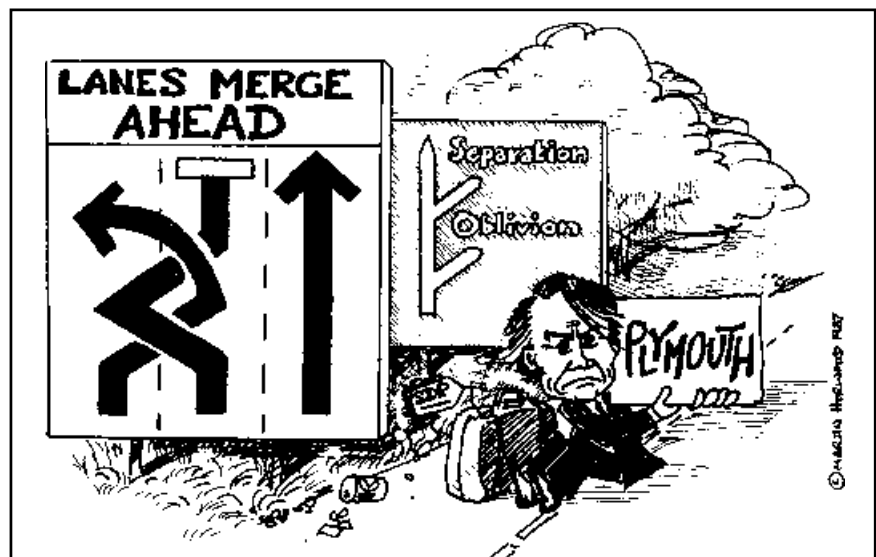
After the '83 election, as relationships between the two lawyers' organisations, the Association of Social Democratic Lawyers and the Association of Liberal Lawyers, were so friendly and constructive, Anthony Lester and I, the respective chairs, fondly imagined that the next obvious step was to make joint policy in key areas of legal affairs such as legal aid, or a proposed Ministry of Justice. We set up powerful

joint groups to reach joint conclusions. This was instantly frowned on by the Doctor. Under Owen's leadership this way of working was heresy in the SDP. Joint working parties and official joint policy papers were initially forbidden (until it was utterly clear that a commission had to be set up for defence policy in 1985). In the end, despite strenuous representations our papers could not be made official joint publications and the lawyers' associations published them themselves as joint papers.

I remember sitting in a Commons committee room shortly before the 1987 election at a joint meeting of the two parties' policy committees, arguing over the position of commas in the joint statement of defence policy – with Nancy Seear threatening to walk out – reflecting that things could have been very different. Instead of every item in the manifesto being negotiated between the parties, often on a line-by-line basis, policies could, as with our Ministry of Justice proposal, have been thrashed out in joint working groups over a period of years. The joint manifesto could have been the distillation of already-agreed policy positions.

Even worse than the manifesto deliberations, the structure for agreeing strategy and organisation for the 1987 general election was byzantine in the extreme. There were two tiers of committees: the 'Leaders' Advisory Committee', which became the joint Alliance Strategy Committee; and the Joint Planning Committee. In addition there were separate election committees for each party, each with their own budget. All this has been documented in all its ineffectiveness by Des Wilson in *Battle for Power*.

The '87 general election itself featured not only twin campaign managers (John Pardoe and John Harris), but twin heads for every function. However well we got on with our opposite number – and in the candidate briefing area I was fortunate in John Roper – most of us who had any depth of involvement said 'never again'. The poster slogan, 'The Only Fresh Thing on the



Menu', seemed laughable. We all seemed stale by then.

Many of the problems of the merger negotiations and the reaction to merger proposals were in themselves the result of scar tissue, such as this, formed during the Alliance years, when closer relationships and fraternisation were not encouraged. This was discouraging enough for Liberals but little did many of us know at the time how difficult life was for those in the SDP who disagreed with Owen's line. I can only admire their tenacity over those years in staying with the SDP and arguing for merger when the time came.

I was reminded of my own position on merger before the election when I recently came across a September 1986 edition of *Limehouse Grit* (a publication produced by the left of the SDP), on the front page of which is an article by me headed 'Stuff Merger!' arguing that the two parties' cultures were very different and merger was not desirable. If we had been able to work out a more positive and cooperative way of working between the two parties, without suspicion and paranoia, then the post-election pressure for merger would not have been nearly so great.

It was hardly surprising, in the light of the frustration and wasted opportunities of those years, that David Steel raised the banner of merger immediately after the election, especially when Owen had tried to rule it out so completely. All credit to him. It had

to be done then if it was to be done at all. He may not have always been fully in touch – or wanted to be – with the Liberal Party during his period as leader, but on that occasion he certainly reflected its mood.

The SDP stance on the negotiations was reached in the shadow of Owen, with the hope that if the SDP terms were tough enough, he would be reconciled to merger. Some of the aspects of merger which caused such difficulty and were only finally resolved later, such as the name of the party and some aspects of the preamble, could have been resolved earlier, I believe, if it had not been for this doomed belief. As a result it has taken us 10 years longer than it should have done, under Paddy Ashdown's generalship, to make the major parliamentary breakthrough many of us have worked for and dreamed of since we joined the party or its predecessors.

The contrast between the two men's contribution could not be greater. Don't tell me that one person can't have a major impact on politics. It's just sad that Owen's should have been so irredeemably negative.

Tim Clement-Jones was Chair of the Liberal Party 1986–88, during the merger negotiations. He has chaired the Liberal Democrats' Federal Finance and Administration Committee since 1991 and was deputy chair of the 1997 election campaign.