

# Alliance Days

*Richard Holme* provides a few vignettes of the days of elation and experiment, frustration and failure.

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First the famous, or no doubt to David Owen infamous, Königswinter Compact. In 1981 in the margins of the annual Anglo-German Conference beside the Rhine there was a lunch at a riverside hotel followed by a walk up the Drachenfels. The participants were Bill Rodgers, Shirley Williams, John Roper, then SDP Chief Whip, David Steel and myself. The SDP was in its first flush of heady opinion poll success, the subject of enormous interest among the conference participants and understandably rather pleased with itself. At the lunch there was white wine, pale spring sunshine and a lot of mutual teasing.

Somewhat to my surprise we managed to reach agreement in principle, without too much difficulty, that the attempt to break the mould should be concerted rather than competitive. I set down, there and then, on a paper table napkin in rather blurred handwriting, the three-point understanding which we had reached: broad agreement on principles; seat sharing rather than fighting each other, the details to be negotiated; and Joint Policy Commissions on major issues. On the way through the winding alleys of the town towards the hill after lunch I vividly recall Shirley saying to me ruefully that she supposed she would now have to support PR.

This event, and its consequences, were seen subsequently as an historic sell-out of the identity and independence of the new party by David Owen. To David Steel and myself they seemed common sense. To the other SDP participants I believed they seemed inevitable for two third parties in a political system with winner-takes-all voting.

Then, as part of the follow-up to that agreement, in constructing the broad agreement on principles I recall sitting with David Marquand in the refreshment room at King's Cross, in late May, drafting and redrafting amid the puddles of cold tea, the document which was to be called, at least officially, 'A Fresh Start for Britain'.

Another vignette, and I find it difficult to remember the date, is a recollection of walking the beautiful hills around Etrick Bridge with David Steel and his labrador, talking about the name we should put on this new combination and agreeing 'Alliance' was the best option, lending itself to an alternating prefix.

And subsequently telling Roy Jenkins at a rally at Central Hall that in the Croydon byelection Bill Pitt would be fighting as Liberal-SDP Alliance, and showing him stickers and leaflets. He gulped but took the 'bounce' with his usual aplomb. Jennifer Jenkins was forthright in her support.

Then there is the painful memory of negotiating the 1987 manifesto. Negotiated manifestos are not a good idea, whether intra-party or, as this was, between parties. They tend towards the lowest common denominator rather than the highest common factor. And whereas I am proud of my part in the 1992 and 1997 Liberal Democrat manifestos, I cannot say the same of the last Alliance platform. It was bland and uninspiring.

The miracle is that we succeeded in getting agreement on anything at all. The problem was not with Ian Wrigglesworth and myself, heading our respective teams, nor with Wendy Buckley and Peter Knowlson conscientiously servicing our labours. It was rather with Michael Meadowcroft and Sue Slipman facing each other across the table – for whom most issues were issues of principle and for whom differences of emphasis were unbridgeable chasms. I was not surprised that, whereas most of us involved ended up in the same party, Michael and Sue decided to follow their respective lonely paths.

Then, who of those involved would not recall, generally with a feeling of furious sorrow, the events surrounding the Joint Defence Commission. John Edmonds, an emollient and knowledgeable chairman had laboured hard over a compromise with a certain amount of behind-the-scenes diplomacy between the

equally knowledgeable John Roper and myself, less expert but willing.

It was clear that he had succeeded when Bill Rodgers, with his own record of opposition to unilateralism in the Labour Party, gave his support to the report. We all thought we had built a bridge across which people with different perspectives in the Alliance could move freely and without embarrassment.

We had all reckoned without the Doctor. Undoubtedly provoked by David Steel, in the shape of a pre-emptive briefing on publication of the report, his fellow leader went ballistic. Every hawkish instinct came together with his barely concealed contempt for lily-livered Liberals and his deep distrust of his collaborationist fellow leaders.

Eastbourne was not happy. I remember making a very poor speech myself, in good company it must be said, and leaving there miserably aware that the best of the Alliance was behind us. 'Never again glad confident morning.' I went directly to the British-American Project conference in Philadelphia and,

when someone asked me how the Assembly had gone, said that I was thinking of applying for political asylum.

Then, as for so many other Liberals and Social Democrats, there are the memories of the byelections. Croydon, and the recollection of breakfast daily with Bill Pitt, the table a mass of newspapers and Weetabix, preparing the rigours of the morning press conference which I chaired.

Or Roy Jenkins turning a narrow defeat in Warrington into a moral victory and then converting that into the real thing at Hillhead. I remember one lady in Kelvinside, of overpowering refinement herself, telling me that although she was a lifelong Tory she would be voting for Roy because he was such a gentleman.

Then minding Shirley for a day in Crosby and realising for myself that beneath the charm and wide-ranging policy interest, there lay an incomparable election fighting machine of great stamina and toughness of mind, something

which was in my mind when we put together the team for the 1997 general election.

The final vignette is of being taken out to lunch by Mike Thomas, David Owen's most loyal henchman – older readers will remember Roy Jenkins' description of him as 'the pint-sized Pavarotti' – in early 1982.

I was slightly surprised by the invitation because we were hardly soulmates. He made me a threat I could not refuse. I should desist from the so-called convergence strategy, of letting the two parties evolve towards closer union, putting no obstacle in the way of this, or something terrible would happen.

– 'What?'

– 'Good people like David Owen and myself will simply leave politics.' We didn't – and they did.

*Lord Holme of Cheltenham CBE was President of the Liberal Party 1980–81 and candidate for Cheltenham in 1983 and '87. Made a life peer in 1990, he was election manifesto coordinator in 1992 and election campaign director in 1997.*

## Research in Progress

*This column aims to assist research projects in progress. If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other helpful information – or if you know anyone who can – please pass on details to them. If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to the Editor at the address on page 2.*

### **The party agent and English electoral culture,**

**c.1880 – c.1906.** The development of political agency as a profession, the role of the election agent in managing election campaigns during this period, and the changing nature of elections, as increased use was made of the press and the platform. *Kathryn Rix, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 2BU; awr@bcs.org.uk*

### **Liberal defections to the Conservative Party,**

**c.1906–1935.** *Nick Cott, 24, Balmoral Terrace, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1YH; N.M.Cott@newcastle.ac.uk*

**The Liberal Party 1945–56.** Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. *Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.*

### **The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88.**

Book and articles; of particular interest is the 1920s and '30s; and also the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. *Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.*

### **The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64;**

the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. *Mark Egan, First Floor Flat, 16 Oldfields Circus, Northolt, Middlesex UB5 4RR.*

### **The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79.**

Individual constituency papers from this period, and contact with individuals who were members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*