

The Alliance and After

The Travelling of a Necessary Road

Was it all worth it? Stuart Mole looks back at the Alliance years.

There was a time, early in the life of the Liberal Democrats, when political pedigree mattered. Indeed, it revealed itself in the familiar stereotypes: sharp suits, Volvos and hands dirtied by mailshots for the SDP; corduroy and sandals, Morris Travellers, and ink-stained Focus hands for the Liberals.

History was everything: who had been at the defining battles of the early days of the Alliance – at Warrington, at Croydon, at Crosby and at Bermondsey? Who were founder members of the SDP, and what had been the sacrifices that had been necessary for those, in particular, who had taken the difficult route from the higher echelons of the Labour Party? Who had done what in the seat negotiations – and to whom? What mattered most: Westminster credibility, and connections with the great and the good, or street credibility, and years of community politics and municipal power?

Of course, it was a divide to do with substance and interest, as much as with history and style. Many had a lot to lose by gambling on political realignment. Some had put at risk their parliamentary seats and staked their reputations and careers, in the process turning their backs on erstwhile political colleagues. That was particularly true of the Gang of Four: Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers.

Many on the Liberal side had also invested much in the status quo: in assiduously cultivating otherwise barren electoral territory; in building a precious local government base; or in actually winning and holding a parliamentary seat. Nor had David Steel any desire to end his respectable career as Liberal leader as the one who had destroyed a proud and once-great party.

And then there came the moment when differences between Liberals and Social Democrats ceased to matter at all. Perhaps it was the shared disappointments of electoral hopes and hubris cruelly dashed – in 1983, in 1987 and,

most frustrating of all, in 1992. Perhaps it was the iron that entered the soul after the bloodletting and internecine struggles of the late '80s which saw some former colleagues on both wings of the old Alliance opt not for merger and reconciliation but for illusion and oblivion. Or perhaps, once merger had become a reality, it was the sheer grind of keeping a third party in British politics on the road, braving the disappointments – long on hope and short on almost everything else.

Today, I doubt if party activists give a second thought to the provenance of their colleagues. Certainly, the stereotypes can no longer be sustained. We are all – male or female – sharp-suited, mobile-phoning, Peugeot owners now.

Indeed, the Liberal Democrats, a new party no longer, are a force in the land. We control, or significantly influence, councils across much of Britain, with nearly 5,000 councillors on principal local authorities. Most remarkable of all, there is now a parliamentary party of real substance, comprising 46 MPs. This is the largest third force in parliament since the days of Lloyd George, despite a rather modest 1997 national vote of just over 17%. A new generation is beginning to emerge for whom the Alliance is no more than a distant memory.

But, in 1981, with a brave new political world waiting to be born, none of this could have been foreseen. Could it have turned out differently? After all, the events of that year promised a great deal. By the time of the special Labour conference at Wembley, in January 1981, the prospect of a substantial break-out from the Labour Party had become unstoppable and, with the birth of the SDP in March 1981, the extent of the electoral possibilities were becoming apparent. Alone, the SDP registered extraordinary levels of support. But, combined with the Liberal Party, the whole really did seem greater than the sum of its parts and, for a time, led both Conservative and Labour in the opinion polls. True, the Liberal Party, after the Orpington byelection vic-

tory of 1962, had briefly achieved something similar, but never at such consistent levels of support, not at such heights (with the Alliance actually cresting the 50% mark at one point).

What destroyed the dream? Was it the 'Falklands Factor', which turned Mrs Thatcher from being Britain's least popular national leader on record into one of its most popular ever, with the Tory Party surging to an unassailable lead of 20% in the opinion polls after the capture of Port Stanley? Or was it the descent of the Alliance from the frothy heights of ambition, idealism and hope into the murky realities of practical – and worse, coalition – politics?

down into third-party status and consigning it to be ground between the two-party millstones. But it was not to be.

Could the SDP have ignored the Liberals, gone out on their own and hoped to clear their rivals from the field by putting everything into an early 'blitzkrieg'? I think not, although some might have dreamed so. But most recognised from the outset that, even if they considered the Liberals an insufficiently adequate or attractive vehicle for political realignment, competition with it would be electoral suicide. That certainly was the view of Tom Ellis, the then MP for Wrexham, who circulated to Labour defectors a secret paper demonstrating the madness of

alternative, as the most effective vehicle for radical realignment. Sir Cyril Smith, the former Chief Whip, put it more succinctly: the aim should be to strangle the new party at birth.

It is a hypothesis worthy of exploration, and one which perhaps deserves more original research and a greater historical perspective than that offered by a decade or so. But certain facts are well established. There is no denying, for example, that David Steel deliberately encouraged Labour dissidents to proceed with the new party, once he was sure that something like the SDP was possible. Indeed, he went further and discouraged at least one prominent Labour politician from joining the Liberals, judging that the welcome accretion of a handful of Labour MPs over time would have nothing like the potentially cataclysmic impact on British politics that the launch of a breakaway group would have as a fresh political force.

What if he had done the opposite? What if the Liberal leader had offered a sympathetic shoulder to potential defectors and encouraged the fracture of the Labour Party but enticed recruits into the ranks of the Liberals, rather than elsewhere, warning those tempted to think otherwise that a new party would have no future and would be rigorously opposed? Some would have joined the Liberals. Perhaps Roy Jenkins. Possibly – but not immediately – Shirley Williams. Probably not Bill Rodgers – ever. Certainly not – ever – David Owen. The new recruits would have been far fewer and the public impact correspondingly less. But Liberals would have been flattered rather than threatened by their new allies. Change would have been digestible. The trauma of seat negotiations and policy bartering, and of interminable internecine warfare in an Alliance supposedly offering the British people a new kind of politics, would have been avoided. Given the Liberal Party's six million votes in February 1974, its growing local government base and its increasingly effective campaigning style, it is not

The Alliance will be seen as important period in the creation of a new kind of multi-party and consensual politics, very different from the old adversarial two-party system.

But the general election of 1983 showed it to be a close-run thing. The Liberal-SDP Alliance polled 25.4% – well over 7.5 million votes – which was the best result since the 1923 election when the Liberals had scored 29.7% of the vote. Then, a marginally higher vote share had netted the Liberals 158 seats. But, in 1983, with its vote too evenly spread and insufficiently concentrated in more than a few areas, the tally was just 23 Members of Parliament (mostly Liberals). Of the 26 Labour MPs (and 1 Conservative) who had formed an instant SDP parliamentary party back in 1981, scarcely a handful survived.

Had the Alliance managed to edge ahead of Labour (which did disastrously, barely managing 27% of the vote), all might have been changed. In such circumstances, the remorseless dynamics of the two-party system would have worked in the Alliance's favour, pushing Labour

a third party in competition with the fourth in a two-party environment. Besides, whatever the froth of opinion poll ratings and media hype, some knew that life at the wrong end of the British political system was tough. Progress could not be made just by advertising and mailshots. It needed grassroots organisation and bodies on the ground, and the SDP just did not have the numbers where it mattered most.

If there was no realistic way forward for the SDP than an accommodation with the Liberals, that was rather less so for the Alliance partner. For the Liberal Party, there was an alternative strategy: to capitalise on the steady disillusion by voters with the two-party system (and in particular with the then Conservative Government); to encourage potential Labour defectors to join the Liberals, rather than form a separate party; and, above all, to present the Liberal Party, rather than any new

unreasonable to believe that it might have done at least as well as the Alliance electorally, if not better.

Could the Alliance itself have been better constructed? There is a great deal which, with the luxury of hindsight, many would wish undone. The public rows over seat negotiations, the disputes over policy (particularly defence), the 1983 disaster of a 'Prime Minister designate', and, in the 1987 elections, the impossibility of two parties and two leaders, ostensibly part of a single force, campaigning in different parts of the country and frequently wrong-footing each other. No doubt it could have been done better. But certain realities would not have changed. Once the decision had been taken to proceed with the creation of a new party, some period of coexistence with the Liberals became an inevitability. A new 'merged' party, constructed from the outset in part upon the existing Liberal Party, would not have been remotely possible.

Once the Alliance was formed, the most destructive strategy, in my opinion, was to hold to the view that political allies might in time become party competitors. Such an approach would in any case have been disastrous for both the SDP and the Liberals had it become reality. As it was, the existence of such a notion fed suspicions and distrust and inhibited moves towards 'organic' merger.

The only realistic approach – and one which most embraced, with varying degrees of enthusiasm – was to work for an 'ever-closer union', an Alliance which was a meeting of minds and hearts rather than the result of mere political expediency. Even so, it was a process that took the best part of decade and was deeply enervating and traumatic for many of those involved. It might have been done sooner and possibly with less pain; but, in some shape or form, it was always the price which the Alliance – by its very nature – was bound to pay.

There is no denying that there was much about this time which was

also beneficial, with each partner in their own way bringing strengths to the Alliance – and later, the merged party – which the other had been unable to supply. Undoubtedly, the SDP helped in the development of a greater professionalism – in party structures, in internal decision-making and membership, in public relations and fund-raising. It also encouraged a greater rigour in national policy creation and in the development of new ideas (not least through opening up new and fertile sources of thought in academia and elsewhere). It brought in recruits who were substantial and respected figures, but it also attracted many more, some of whom had never before been involved in politics.

For their part, the Liberals had a ready-made organisation at constituency level, attuned to the realities of third party politics and honed by disappointment and adversity into a force of considerable tenacity and commitment. These were the 'political missionaries' of which Dick Taverne had spoken, who had developed formidable campaigning skills and an ability to win and use power at the local government level. Liberalism itself – in policy terms or in the approach of individual activists – also proved to be a useful antidote to tendencies which sometimes erred towards an over-rigid, centralised and authoritarian view of politics.

Above all, I believe that the Alliance will be seen as important period in the creation of a new kind of multi-party and consensual politics, very different from the old adversarial two-party system. Back in November 1979, in his Dimpleby lecture, Roy Jenkins had seen the two-party system as a citadel, from which it was necessary to break out, if political realignment, the free flow of ideas and fundamental change were ever to be possible. David Steel's leadership of the Liberals involved an odyssey – stretching over the course of a decade and more – building upon the ideas of cross-party cooperation developed at the

time of the European referendum of 1975, the experiment of the Lib-Lab Pact of 1977–78 and, in particular, the creation of an Alliance which, for a moment, promised everything but which, in time, may have been shown to deliver far more than we realise.

Over more than 20 years, Liberal Democrats (in whatever their previous manifestation) have learned through these experiences – and through the realities of using and sharing power in local government – that 'coalition' politics is a necessary component of the new politics; and that the third force needs to be strong and mature enough to cope with the contradictions and pressures which such a system entails.

That is surely the reality of the present, and Paddy Ashdown's strategy of 'constructive opposition'. He must now lead his 45 parliamentary colleagues along a difficult path which involves both working with the Labour Government, on a Joint Cabinet Committee, to help deliver constitutional reform, and maintaining the Liberal Democrats' separate identity and electoral credibility by providing vigorous opposition where the issues demand. It is a perilous task, requiring courage and determination. But it is the surest way of delivering the greatest prize of all – proportional representation. And it has come a step closer with the setting up of an independent commission on electoral reform – chaired by that great architect of political realignment, Lord Jenkins – to recommend a broadly proportional alternative to Britain's present first-past-the-post electoral system.

If proportional representation can be achieved, the dream of the Alliance – the shattering of the old two-party mould – will have been finally attained and its purpose surely fully justified.

Stuart Mole was head of David Steel's office, and now works for the Commonwealth Secretariat. He fought Chelmsford for the Alliance in 1983 and 1987.