

The Alliance: Two-Party Cooperation in Practice

How did Liberals and Social Democrats cope with the mechanics of alliance? *Dick Newby* examines the record.

The Alliance was a unique experiment. It had two distinguishing features which are rare in British politics and, in combination, unparalleled.

The first was that one of the partners, the SDP, was a new party. Born out of desperation by pro-European social democrats in the Labour Party, it tapped a vein of enthusiasm for a new style of non-confrontational politics which led tens of thousands of political neophytes – the so-called ‘political virgins’ – to join a political party and, in many cases, devote a huge amount of effort to active politics. To establish and maintain a new party in Britain is dauntingly difficult. Even if you can generate an initial surge of enthusiasm and members, to maintain momentum under the first-past-the-post electoral system is incredibly hard. As the Green Party found when it obtained 15% of the vote but no seats in the 1989 European Parliamentary elections, members and activists drain away in the absence of tangible electoral success.

In order to give itself a chance in electoral terms, the SDP, from the date of its launch, announced that it would cooperate with the Liberal Party, not least in sharing out the Parliamentary seats between the parties. As Bill Rodgers explains elsewhere in this issue, his statement at the SDP’s launch press conference that the SDP would seek to fight half the Parliamentary seats, leaving the Liberals to fight the other half, was a spur-of-the-moment decision, rather than the result of careful strategic thought. This decision, more than any other single act, however, set the framework in which the two parties would work. For, as soon as voters had been denied the opportunity to vote for the SDP in over 300 seats, SDP leaders had to be able to say that a vote for a Liberal candidate in those seats was equivalent to a vote for the SDP. This required a common manifesto, a single campaign both nationally and in

individual seats and a single leadership team.

Of all these requirements, arguably the most problematic was how to divide up the Parliamentary seats in the first place. In the spring of 1981, when the SDP was in its infancy, it did not have a national constituency organisation. The Liberal Party, by comparison, had at least some activists in the large majority of seats, and even if few in number, they understandably often had a very strong attachment to the idea that a Liberal representative should fight the seat. By the summer of 1981, they also had 230 candidates in place.

The agreement on how the seats would be allocated was reached in October 1981 after six months of sometimes fraught discussion. It stipulated that there should be rough parity in the number of seats fought by each party; that in any one region, the ratio of seats fought by the parties should not be greater than 3:2; and that seats should not be ‘clustered’. A six-strong National Negotiating Team was established from each Party, and the two teams were to meet in a Joint Negotiating Group (JNG). My role was to act as the SDP official responsible for servicing this Group and for managing the progress of the negotiating process.

The way in which the two parties tackled the negotiations reflected – to SDP eyes at least – a fundamental difference of approach on how to run a political party. We undertook an extensive amount of research, coordinated by US polling expert Sarah Horack, and with academic input from Ivor Crewe, on the winnability of each seat. Based on this work, we ranked seats in each sub-regional negotiating unit and provided our national team members with a detailed negotiating brief. Local members of the negotiating team were expected to take a lead from the national team member, who was either an MP or a member of the Steering Committee. On the Liberal side there had been considerable resistance to there

being any national input at all and their national negotiators were often little more than observers. Local whim often appeared to matter more than objective judgement.

The first negotiating meeting was held in Maidstone on 12 December 1981, two months after the negotiating framework had been agreed. The SDP negotiator was John Horam (now Conservative MP for Orpington). I accompanied him. The Liberal national negotiator was Hugh Jones, the Party's Secretary-General. The day was frosty. So was the meeting. The Liberals were extremely reluctant to cede any seat where they had any significant degree of organisation. Armed with our ranking list, we demanded what we believed to be a fair mixture of good and bad seats. The meeting broke up with little achieved. A similar pattern was followed in the handful of other meetings held before Christmas.

It took an outburst from Bill Rodgers over the New Year, suspending the talks until a more constructive attitude prevailed, to inject real momentum into the negotiating process. As the year progressed, my priority became how to ensure that rough parity of outcome was achieved. Agreement was reached in the JNG that the Liberals could retain their top 50 ('golden') seats and that the SDP would then have two-thirds of the next 150 ('silver') seats. Reaching this outcome was tricky, given the number of regional negotiations which were taking place. I regularly trudged up to Hugh Jones' dusty lair in the Liberal Party headquarters (then part of the National Liberal Club) for a glass of wine, a dry biscuit and careful consideration of the silver seat list (which he was not allowed to admit to his party ever existed). All but 50 seats were allocated by August 1982 and, as the September conferences approached, Roy Jenkins and David Steel horse-traded the rest.

The gold-and-silver approach was vindicated by the 1983 election results. They showed that if the Alliance had won 100 or more seats (our working assumption during 1981–

82), there would have been parity between the parties. As we only won 26 seats between us, it was hardly surprising that the Liberals had the majority (17 to the SDP's 6).

Despite the success of the pre-'83 seats negotiations, it was clear that such a national approach would not be acceptable again. Local Liberal associations had hated it from the start and their national leadership had found it irritating and embarrassing to have to soothe the annoyance of associations and candi-

By mid-1985, David Owen had adopted a rather more pragmatic view. After returning from Colchester where I had been to explain why they couldn't have joint selection, I explained to him in frustration that we would win the nomination in any event. 'Let them have joint selection then' was his reply.

The process still required delicate negotiations to complete and Andy Ellis (now Liberal Secretary-General) and I were sent to several places to arbitrate. One particularly diffi-

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dates in seats which were to be fought by the SDP. On the SDP side there was also a recognition that a national deal was politically unachievable. Agreeing to devolve negotiations to area party level was relatively easy for the SDP. The problem which quickly arose, and bedevilled the whole of the process, was the request from many SDP constituencies to have joint selection of candidates by members of both parties living in the seat. There were two variants of this option: joint 'closed' selection where a shortlist was drawn from members of one party; and joint 'open' selection, where there was a shortlist drawn from members of both parties. David Owen, now SDP leader, saw both these devices – but particularly joint open selection – as a threat to the selection of Owenite candidates, and feared that SDP applicants would temper their views to gain Liberal support. This view was not assuaged when Parry Mitchell – a textbook Owenite – won one of the first joint open selections in Salisbury, and I was given the unenviable task of travelling the length and breadth of the country explaining to local parties which wanted joint selection that they could not have it.

cult area was Kirklees, and Andy and I spent a tedious evening hearing from representatives of the two parties why they should both fight Dewsbury. As we left the splendours of Dewsbury's Victorian town hall to return to the station, we walked across the open market. One stall caught my eye. 'Eat tripe, don't talk it!' it proclaimed. Unfortunately this principle was not enforced during the negotiations.

Following the acceptance of a package of 25 joint open selections by the National Committee in July 1985, the seats allocation was soon completed. Although some 78 seats had changed hands between the two elections, the SDP fought 306 seats in 1987, only five fewer than in 1983.

The two rounds of seat allocation were unprecedented in British politics. In one sense the process was a great success. The seats were allocated on a broadly equal basis and the deal held across the country. (The two parties only fought each other in three seats in 1983, where local Liberal associations ignored the national seats deal.) The unintended consequence of the process, and one which was anathema to the Owenites, was that, by the end, increasing numbers of activists were

questioning the need, and in some cases the viability, of the two parties maintaining their separate existence. There were a number of reasons for this, not least the experience of fighting elections jointly on the ground. But the huge amount of additional time spent in negotiating on seat allocation and, in the case of many SDP local parties, the need to have an argument with the national party about joint selection, led many activists to see merger as the logical option. From my national standpoint, the thought of having to organise a third round of seat negotiations after 1987 was deeply depressing.

Just as the experience of the seat negotiations led local activists and national figures to question the viability of a continuing two-party alliance after 1987, broadly similar considerations applied in three other areas with a large national input, namely Parliamentary byelections, general election campaigning and policy formulation.

Parliamentary byelections were the oxygen of the Alliance, breathing new vigour and support into third-party politics even in times of national doldrums. From Warrington in 1981 to Greenwich in 1987, SDP byelection organisation had benefited greatly from Liberal help. In Warrington – the first ever SDP byelection – Liverpool Liberals dra-gooned by Trevor ('the vote') Jones enthusiastically supported Roy Jenkins. By the time of Greenwich, six years later, senior Liberal campaigners such as Chris Rennard were fully integrated into SDP campaign teams. Under the leadership of Alec McGivan, the SDP had introduced innovations into byelection campaigns, not least the use of high-volume target mail shots. This had gained Liberal respect to the extent that large numbers of Liberal activists were prepared to travel and help as byelection foot soldiers. Equally, SDP politicians, staff and activists regarded it as axiomatic that they would visit Liberal byelections. Both parties fairly quickly realised that they both benefited equally from byelection success, or, as in Darlington, suffered equally

from failure.

General election campaigning activity was arguably the least successful area of Alliance cooperation. Although joint press conferences were held and joint party election broadcasts were produced, the national campaigns of 1983 and 1987, for different reasons, were unhappy affairs. In 1983, the greater popularity of David Steel compared to Roy Jenkins led to the farce of the Ettrick Bridge summit at which Jenkins was effectively replaced by Steel as leader of the campaign only days before polling day.

In 1987, Owen and Steel distrusted both their professional party staff, and each other, to such an extent that they excluded staff from election planning and ran virtually independent campaigns. It was a recipe for confusion and produced predictably confused results. Nowhere was this lack of a coherent structure demonstrated more clearly than in the area of party election broadcasts. Neither leader would relinquish personal control of the broadcasts to staff and so, when the campaign began, virtually no work had been done on them. John Pardoe and John Harris, joint chairs of the day-to-day campaign committee, were given responsibility at the last minute, leading to the production of the famous 'rabbit' broadcast which featured Rosie Barnes and her family's pet. Having seen the final edit of the broadcast, John Harris returned to Cowley Street claiming that it would be 'either a triumph or a disaster'. He was right. Unfortunately it was not a triumph. All the campaign professionals involved with the 1987 election were convinced that such amateurism was crazy. It helped fuel their support for merger.

Policy was an area both of great success and of the Alliance's greatest presentational disaster. The Limehouse Declaration and other early SDP policy statements caused no great Liberal alarm, and Shirley Williams and David Steel were able to launch a 'A Fresh Start for Britain' document in the spring of 1981 with the minimum of fuss. Further joint statements were produced and

joint commissions established, notably the Fisher Commission on constitutional reform, which again were able to agree on both the framework and detail of Alliance policy. No issues of unacceptable policy difference emerged and, during the 1983 election, differences within the Alliance had much more to do with personality than policy.

The disaster occurred on defence policy. A joint commission produced a report in June 1986 which said Britain should retain its independent deterrent and decide on a replacement (or not) only when Polaris was coming to the end of its natural life 10–15 years later. David Owen vehemently rejected this suggestion, saying that it was 'the sort of fudging and muddging' he had left the Labour Party to avoid. In response, and amid scenes of confusion, the Liberal Assembly at its Eastbourne in September 1986 passed an anti-Alliance, unilateralist motion. Although Steel and Owen patched up their relations, the Eastbourne vote was a godsend to the Alliance's opponents and demonstrated an inherent flaw in the Alliance. Nobody doubted that there was a large majority of members of the two parties combined who opposed unilateralism. The nature of the parties' relationship and the segregation of their decision-making meant that this majority had no outlet through which to express itself.

Six years after the Alliance was formed, the experience of negotiating the division of Parliamentary seats, fighting byelections and national elections and forming joint policy had led me to the firm conclusion that an independent SDP was neither politically necessary or organisationally viable. Nothing that has happened in the first decade of the life of the Liberal Democrats has shaken that view.

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