

*A Diary of Two Parliaments: 2 vols.: H W Lucy*  
How the Punch sketch writer viewed the party  
combat; naturally stronger on personalities than  
issues.

## Book Review

*The Launch of the SDP 1979-1981*  
**Report of witness seminar in *Contemporary***  
***Record*, Vol 7, autumn 1993, No. 2**

*Reviewed by Malcolm Baines*

*(A witness seminar is an exercise in oral history at  
which participants in events are gathered together and  
invited to discuss them before an audience.)*

This seminar forms part of a series of article in the  
same volume discussing the history of the  
organised Labour right from the 1960s to the  
present. The discussion includes individuals from  
both wings of the SDP, including some such as  
Roger Liddle, Alec McGivan and Christopher  
Brocklebank-Fowler who are still active in the  
Liberal Democrats.

The participants began by discussing the origins of  
the SDP and agreed that it revolved around the  
three key issues of Europe, unilateralism and  
constitutional change within the Labour Party,  
where later Social Democrats took a view distinct  
from that of the Labour mainstream. That these  
issues defined the views of many leading Social  
Democrats is itself significant in the light of later  
conflicts within the Alliance and the Liberal  
Democrats.

The seminar also raised, if it did not resolve, those  
questions which are likely to be addressed by  
future historians of the SDP. Should the SDP have  
competed with the Liberal Party or should it have  
fought them at the ballot box? Was there genuinely  
a 'window of opportunity' for a new third party?  
Was the SDP's ultimate failure due to its own  
mistakes or due to the strength of the UK political  
system?

The participants considered how far the  
weaknesses of the SDP contributed to its lack of  
success. the most interesting of those that they  
highlighted was that the leaders of the SDP had  
already been defeated in the Labour Party's  
internal battles, and therefore were demoralised  
and exhausted before the new party began. Too  
many of its new supporters viewed it as a charity  
to give passive endorsement to, and not a vehicle  
for active participation. The SDP's lack of  
innovative policy is also considered. As its leaders  
had spent the previous decade fighting in the  
Labour Party, they had not had the energy to  
devise new ideas. it became a negative, anti-  
Labour Party; while its new supporters were  
wedded to the idea that the UK's problems could  
be resolved by consensual discussion, rather than  
fresh and radical ideas.

Fundamental to the SDP, not least because they  
ultimately broke it, were its relations with the  
Liberals. two-thirds of the National Committee's  
time was occupied by this. What came across from  
the seminar is the depth of the contempt of most  
ex-Labour Social Democrats for the Liberals. A  
typical view was that "they were a daft party, they  
were badly organised, it was chaotic."  
Consequently, the 1983 allocation in which the  
Liberals fought rather more than half the seats, is  
seen as an unmitigated disaster, which condemned  
the SDP to parliamentary oblivion.

The article is therefore of great interest, especially  
since it places the SDP in the context of a  
breakaway from the Labour Party. It concludes by  
trying to justify the whole adventure in terms of  
the party's legacy within the Liberal Democrats  
and on the 1990s Labour Party. especially  
absorbing in the light of developments since 1983 is  
the initial disdain for alliance with the Liberals and  
the extent to which many ex-Labour Social  
Democrats felt betrayed by Roy Jenkins'  
sympathies for them. This seminar is one of the  
first perspectives on the SDP's early history; a  
subject hitherto only addressed by contemporary  
accounts such as Hugh Stephenson's *Claret and*  
*Chips*, and as such should be read by all those  
interested in the formation of the SDP.