

# CHRONOLOGY OF THE SDP

Compiled by Mark Pack

<b>1979</b>	3 May	General election won by the Tories. Defeated Labour MPs include Shirley Williams.
	June	Social Democrat Alliance (SDA) reorganises itself into a network of local groups, not all of whose members need be in the Labour Party.
	July	'Inquest on a movement' by David Marquand appears in <i>Encounter</i> .
	22 November	Roy Jenkins delivers the Dimpleby Lecture, 'Home thoughts from abroad'.
	30 November	Bill Rodgers gives a speech at Abertillery: 'Our party has a year, not much longer, in which to save itself.'
	20 December	Meeting of Jenkinsites and others considering forming a new party, organised by Colin Phipps. Robert Maclennan declines invitation.
<b>1980</b>	January	NEC refuses to publish report from Reg Underhill detailing Trotskyite infiltration of Labour.
	1 May	Local elections. Liberal vote changes little, though seats are gained with large advances in Liverpool and control of Adur and Hereford.
	31 May	Labour Special Conference at Wembley. Policy statement <i>Peace, Jobs, Freedom</i> , including pro-unilateralism and anti-EEC policies, supported. Owen is deeply angered by vitriolic heckling during his speech.
	7 June	Owen, Rodgers and Williams warn they will leave Labour if it supports withdrawal from the EEC: 'There are some of us who will not accept a choice between socialism and Europe. We will choose them both.'
	8 June	Williams warns that a centre party would have 'no roots, no principles, no philosophy and no values.'
	9 June	Roy Jenkins delivers lecture to House of Commons Press Gallery, calling for a realignment of the 'radical centre'.
	15 June	Labour's Commission of Inquiry backs use of an electoral college for electing the leader and mandatory reselection of MPs.
	24 July	SDA announces plans to run up to 200 candidates against Labour left-wingers.
	1 August	Open letter to members of Labour from Owen, Rodgers and Williams published in the <i>Guardian</i> .
	9 September	David Marquand speaks at Liberal Assembly. David Steel says Labour rebels have six months to leave the party.
	22 September	Group of twelve MPs, led by Michael Thomas, publish statement in <i>The Times</i> , calling for major reforms in Labour's structure.
	29 September – 3 October	Labour conference at Blackpool votes to change method for electing its leader. Unilateral disarmament and withdrawal from the EEC are passed as policy. Shirley Williams and Tom Bradley refuse to speak from the platform on behalf of the National Executive Committee (NEC).
	15 October	James Callaghan resigns as Labour leader.
	4 November	First round of Labour's leadership election (Healey 112, Foot 83, Silkin 38, Shore 32).
	10 November	Michael Foot elected leader of Labour, defeating Healey 139–129.
	21 November	Owen announces he will not stand again for the Shadow Cabinet.
	28 November	Williams announces she cannot be a Labour candidate again given Labour's current policies.
	1 December	Labour proscribes SDA.
	10 December	Meeting in Williams' flat, including Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, who outline considerable possible support for a new party.

<b>1981</b>	6 January	Jenkins returns to Britain from Brussels.
	12 January	Liberals publish ten-point plan for economic recovery. Several Labour MPs publicly welcome it.
	14 January	Meeting of the 'Gang of Four' (Jenkins, Owen, Rodgers and Williams) at Williams' flat.
	18 January	Gang of Four meets at Rodgers' house, and agree to issue a joint statement following the Wembley Conference.
	24 January	Labour Special Conference at Wembley. New electoral college for electing the leader gives trade unions the largest share of the vote (40%, with 30% for MPs and 30% for constituency parties). Owen fails to get 'one member, one vote' adopted. Opponents include Neil Kinnock.
	25 January	Limehouse Declaration issued by the Gang of Four.
	26 January	Nine Labour MPs join the Council for Social Democracy.
	30 January	Owen tells his local party he will not be standing for Labour at the next election.
	31 January	Joint rally by SDA and Association of Democratic Groups, chaired by ex-Labour foreign secretary Lord George-Brown.
	5 February	Advert published in the <i>Guardian</i> sees 100 people declare their support for the Council for Social Democracy and elicits 25,000 letters of support. Alec McGivan is appointed organiser of the Council.
	9 February	Council moves into offices in Queen Anne's Gate. Williams resigns from NEC.
	20 February	Two Labour MPs resign whip and sit as social democrats.
	2 March	Ten Labour MPs and nine peers resign whip and sit as social democrats.
	17 March	Christopher Brocklebank-Fowler becomes the only Conservative MP to join the Council.
	26 March	Official launch of SDP in Connaught Rooms, Covent Garden, complete with high-tech directional microphones. More than 500 press attend.
	April	Anglo-German Königswinter conference, where Rodgers, Williams and Steel meet and agree on the outlines of an alliance between their parties.
	7 May	Local elections. Liberal vote rises thanks to increase in number of candidates; take control of Isle of Wight and hold balance of power on eight county councils. The few independent social democrat candidates make little impression.
	16 June	Publication of <i>A Fresh Start for Britain</i> , a joint Liberal-SDP policy statement, along with photo opportunity of Steel and Williams sitting on the lawn of Dean's Yard, Westminster.
	16 July	Warrington by-election. Labour's majority cut from 10,274 to 1,759. Jenkins (Alliance candidate) comments, 'This is my first defeat in thirty years of politics and it is by far the greatest victory that I have ever participated in.'
	September	Liberal Assembly at Llandudno. Jenkins and Williams address fringe meeting. Motion calling for electoral pact overwhelmingly carried. Steel calls for delegates to 'Go back to your constituencies and prepare for government'. SDP rolling conference. Travels by train between Perth, Bradford and London.
		Alliance launched.
	22 October	Croydon Northwest by election won by the Liberal Bill Pitt.
	October	Healey defeats Benn's challenge for the Labour deputy leadership by just 0.426%.
	26 November	Crosby by-election won by Shirley Williams.
	December	Gallup poll shows 51% would vote Liberal/SDP.
<b>1982</b>	3 January	Rodgers breaks off negotiations with Liberals over seat allocation for forthcoming general election.
	25 March	Jenkins wins Glasgow Hillhead by-election.
	1 April	Liberal/SDP negotiations over division for seats for general election are concluded.
	2 April	Argentina invades the Falklands.
	23 April	Ballot of all SDP members backs 'one member, one vote' for electing party leader.

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	6 May	Local elections. Liberals win five times as many seats as SDP, which makes a net loss.
	3 June	Tories gain Mitcham & Morden in by-election caused by Bruce Douglas-Martin resigning his seat on defecting to the SDP in order to stand again under his new party's colours.
	14 June	End of the Falklands war.
	2 July	Jenkins defeats Owen to be SDP leader.
	September	Williams elected SDP President.
<b>1983</b>	24 February	Simon Hughes wins Bermondsey by-election.
	24 March	Darlington by-election: SDP candidate slumps to a poor third. Labour's victory saves Michael Foot's leadership.
	5 May	Local elections. Labour wins control of Liverpool (from a minority Liberal administration) as Alliance's national vote slips, though number of seats increases.
	29 May	Ettrick Bridge meeting, where Steel attempts to remove 'Prime Minister designate' title from Jenkins.
	9 June	Mrs Thatcher wins general election, and Alliance (25.4%) just fails to win more votes than Labour (27.6%). Liberals move from 13 to 17 MPs, SDP slump from 29 to 6 MPs. Rodgers and Williams defeated.
	12 June	Foot announces he will not stand again as Labour leader.
	13 June	Jenkins resigns as SDP leader.
	22 June	Owen becomes SDP leader unopposed.
	7 July	David Steel starts three months' sabbatical.
	28 July	Liberals fail to win Penrith & Borders by-election by just 553 votes.
	September	SDP conference at Salford rejects proposals for joint selections (with Liberals) of Euro and Westminster candidates and any chance of merger before the next election. After Harrogate Liberal Assembly Cyril Smith announces his departure into self-imposed exile.
<b>1984</b>	3 May	Local elections. Alliance makes net gains of 160 seats, but SDP vote continues to slip.
	14 June	European elections. Alliance wins 19.1% and no seats but SDP wins Portsmouth South by-election.
	20 September	Steel defeated at Liberal Assembly over calls to withdraw Cruise missiles from Britain.
<b>1985</b>	2 May	Local elections. Alliance gains over 200 seats and twenty-four out of thirty-nine English county councils end up under no overall control. SDP wins a larger increase in its vote than the Liberals.
	4 July	Liberals win Brecon & Radnor by-election. During July (and again in September), Alliance briefly tops opinion polls.
	September	Successful SDP conference in Torquay marks high point of party's strength and self-confidence.
	3 December	Over 15 million watch John Cleese present a party political broadcast on PR for the SDP. Probably the largest ever audience for a PPB.
<b>1986</b>	8 May	Liberals win Ryedale by-election and just fail to gain West Derbyshire. In the local elections, Alliance gains control of Adur and Tower Hamlets and makes a net gain of around 380 seats.
	5 June	Alliance Defence Commission reports, avoiding decision on Polaris. It is criticised by Owen. Owen and Steel subsequently explore options for Anglo-French co-operation over nuclear deterrence (the 'Euro-bomb').
	18 July	Liberals narrowly fail to win Newcastle-under-Lyme by-election after a hard-hitting campaign which draws criticism from David Steel.
	23 September	Liberal Assembly defeats leadership over Alliance's defence policy. Cyril Smith publicly makes his peace with Steel at the Assembly.
<b>1987</b>	26 January	Re-launch of Alliance at Barbican rally. Joint Alliance Parliamentary spokespeople announced.
	26 February	SDP wins Greenwich by-election.
	12 March	Liberals hold Truro in by-election caused by David Penhaligon's death in December 1986.
	7 May	Local elections. Alliance gains over 450 seats. Labour again regains control of Liverpool, but overall Labour loses and Conservative gains lead to Mrs Thatcher calling a general election.

	11 June	Mrs. Thatcher wins the general election. Alliance's vote drops by 2.9%. SDP falls from 8 to 5 seats, Jenkins defeated at Hillhead. Liberals win 17.
	13 June	Owen gives press conference where he appears to reject any attempts at merger.
	14 June	Steel announces to the media his support for merger. Owen fails to receive his message before being contacted by the press and accuses Steel of trying to bounce a merger on him.
	June	SDP National Committee decides to hold a ballot on whether to negotiate over merger with Liberals.
	2 July	'Yes to Unity' campaign launched by SDP members to support merger negotiations in the ballot.
	5 August	Result of SDP ballot: 57% – 43% (25,897 – 19,228) in favour of merger negotiations.
	6 August	Owen resigns as SDP leader.
	29 August	Maclennan becomes SDP leader.
	17 September	Liberal Assembly votes for negotiations over merger with SDP (998 – 21).
	September	Merger negotiations begin.
	10 December	Merger negotiators agree on 'New Liberal Social Democratic Party' (or 'Alliance' for short) as the new party's name but forced to rethink after the Liberal Party Council protests.
<b>1988</b>	13 January	In the early hours of the morning, merger negotiators agree on 'Social & Liberal Democrats' as the name, with no official short name. 'Dead parrot' policy document ( <i>Voices and Choices for All</i> ) issued and then withdrawn.
	23 January	Special Liberal Assembly in Blackpool approves merger (2,099 – 385), subject to a ballot of members.
	31 January	SDP conference in Sheffield approves merger (273 – 28), subject to a ballot of members. Owenites largely abstain or are absent.
	2 March	Results of ballots of Liberal and SDP members on merger announced (Liberals vote for merger by 46,376 – 6,365 and SDP by 18,872 – 9,929).
	3 March	Press launch of Social & Liberal Democrats.
	7 March	Constitution of new party comes into force at midnight.
	8 March	Continuing SDP launched with backing of three MPs (Owen, Barnes and Cartwright)
	10 March	Public launch of Social & Liberal Democrats.
	5 May	Local elections. Despite significant seat losses, the Social & Liberal Democrats still win 385 seats compared to the SDP's six.
	28 July	Paddy Ashdown elected leader of Social & Liberal Democrats, beating Alan Beith by 41,401 to 16,202.
	26 September	Social & Liberal Democrats agree to use 'Democrats' as party's official short name.
	15 December	Epping Forrest by-election. Split of votes between Democrats and Continuing SDP gives Tories easy victory.
<b>1989</b>	23 February	Richmond (Yorkshire) by-election. Continuing SDP just fall short of victory as split of centre party votes hands victory to William Hague, the future Conservative leader.
	March	Continuing Liberal Party launched, headed by Michael Meadowcroft.
	4 May	Local elections. Continuing SDP loses twenty-two of the thirty-four seats it was defending.
	13 May	David Owen admits publicly that Continuing SDP can no longer function as a national party.
	June	Euro elections: Democrats win only 6%, being beaten easily by the Greens into fourth place. Continuing SDP candidates score even worse.
	September	Last SDP conference held in Scarborough.
	16 October	Social & Liberal Democrats change name to Liberal Democrats following ballot of party members.
<b>1990</b>	24 May	Bootle by-election: Monster Raving Loony Party candidate, Lord Sutch, secures his most notable election result, out-polling the Continuing SDP candidate.
	3 June	Continuing SDP's National Executive votes to suspend its constitution, close its HQ and place its remaining affairs in the hands of its trustees.