

FOURTH PARTY,



**Matt Cole
explores the
medium-term
impact of the
'continuing' SDP**

The years 1988–90 were painful ones in

David Owen addressing the conference of the 'continuing' SDP, September 1988.

the fortunes of the newly-merged Liberal Democrats and their former allies.

The former were reduced to a share of the vote and public disregard both

reminiscent of the 1950s, whilst the latter – in the form of Dr David Owen's 'continuing' SDP – waged a campaign against them which ended in farce.

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The continuing SDP's final demise was met with sighs of relief across the political spectrum, but the comment of Robert Harris that week was both perceptive about the past and prescient about the immediate future:

I was about to write that the SDP is dead, but actually it is worse than that. The SDP is one of the undead. Every time it is buried, its wounds gaping, it insists on crawling from the grave. It is a horrible, ambulatory reminder of busted dreams and broken loyalties: better for everyone if it could finally rest in peace.¹

Though short-lived and in some respects risible, the Owenite SDP – like the Liberal Party itself in a more sustained way in even its weaker periods – had a greater impact upon the other parties than has been recognised. Its influence as a ‘fifth column’ within other parties has been visible even recently.

Commentary on Owen's strategy at the time and afterwards was harsh. An early party history from an SDP activist predicted that ‘If [Owen] continues to lead a rump SDP... he might just possibly be able to build up the SDP as a mass movement ... But the odds on that are very long.’² A year later Stephen Ingle contended that ‘The SDP has moved to the periphery of British politics.’³ Alan Hayman's Essex dissertation *Dr Owen's SDP: A Study in Failure* confirmed this tragi-comic analysis as the party collapsed in 1990,

and Owen himself described the period as one of ‘knocks and humiliation’ at the end of which ‘we have failed’.⁴ Ivor Crewe and Anthony King touched upon the continuing SDP in their history of the party, only to dismiss it contemptuously:

The Owenite enterprise did not merely fail – in the event it was always doomed to fail. No rational politician would have undertaken it or even dreamed of undertaking it. The launch of the SDP in 1981 had been rash enough, and it had failed. The launch of the continuing SDP was rash to the point of absurdity. David Owen began as Napoleon and ended up as Baron Munchausen.

The whole project, they concluded, ‘Could only be described ... as being completely potty’.⁵ However, the passage of eight years since that appraisal, together with the reflections arising from the twentieth anniversary of the Limehouse Declaration, offer an opportunity to consider whether this short-term reaction painted an incomplete picture. The following is an attempt to test the impact of that apparently futile project not only against its own aspirations, but also against those functions of political parties which are the usual yardsticks: development of policy; recruitment of personnel; and penetration of the electorate. The picture which emerges from an examination of the fates of the key actors and the knock-on effects of the party's brief existence suggests that the continuing SDP is worth a second look, and offers some

interesting parallels and contrasts with earlier rivalries and breakaways in Liberal history.

Background

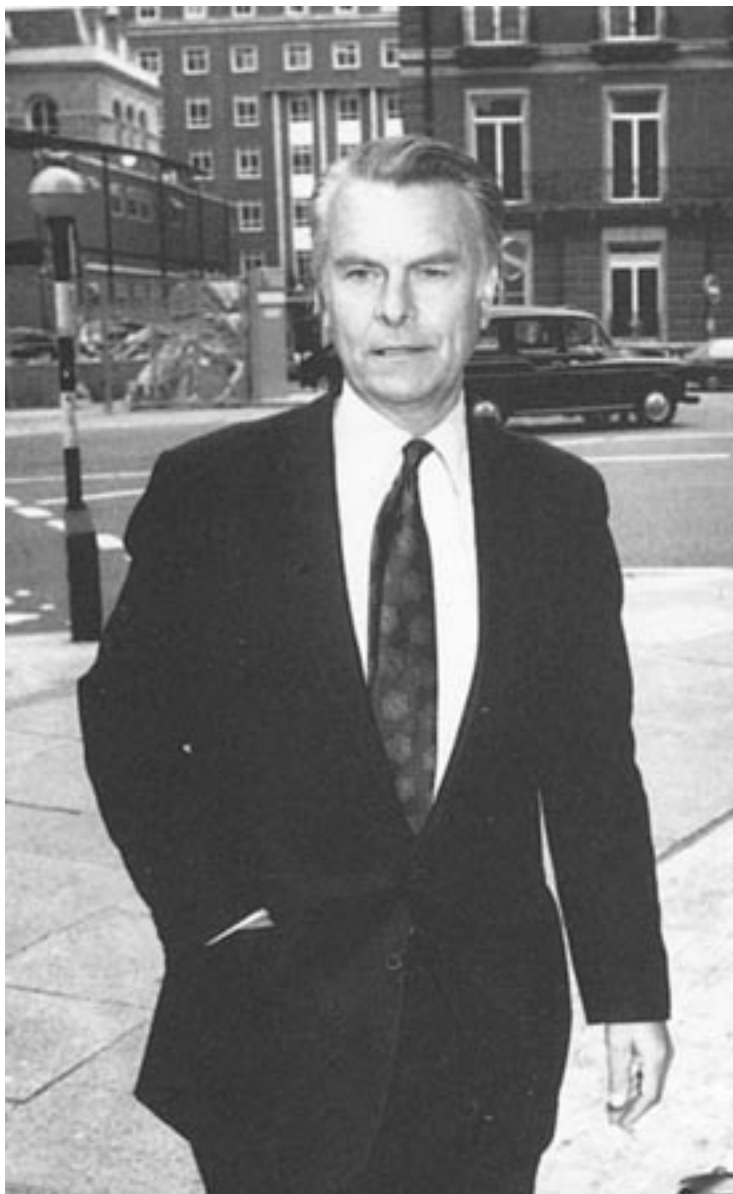
The continuing SDP was born out of the merger between the Liberals and the Social Democratic Party. After two general elections fought by these parties in an electoral and broad policy alliance, the SDP fell into an acrimonious and irreconcilable dispute about how their relations with the Liberals should develop. One faction, appearing to represent the majority opinion in the party, favoured merger of the two parties as the only means of projecting a clear public image of leadership and policy, of avoiding the waste of resources in negotiating seat allocations and policies and in avoiding the duplication of conference and office activities.

The other section of the party, which included its leader, David Owen, and two more of its five MPs, quickly refused to participate in any negotiations about merger or any internal decisions about the future of the party. Recognising the strength of opinion in favour of merger, Owen argued that it was best for those who favoured it to join the Liberal Party in its adapted form, and for those who did not wish to do so to relaunch the SDP as an independent force.

As negotiations got underway to establish the constitution and policy of the merged party, Owen's supporters made appeals to the SDP membership under the titles ‘Grassroots’ and ‘Campaign for Social Democracy’ (echoing the ‘Council for Social

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The end: David Owen arrives at Broadcasting House in June 1990 to announce the demise of the 'continuing' SDP.

were converging on the ground of the 'social market', and even the SDP's own heritage was a matter of dispute. In this competitive game of policy musical chairs, the SDP was at a marked disadvantage, having few established principles or proposals to guide it.

As a result, according to those involved in, or close to, the project, there was no meaningful strategic plan for the party. Even in retrospect its objectives are 'difficult to disentangle', according to a former adviser to Dr Owen who chose not to join the new party: "Strategy" implies medium- to long-term aims, which is the wrong way of thinking about the continuing SDP'. In fact, many of the party's leading figures, including Owen himself, confided to one another privately that they had had little hope of the project's success from its outset. After the party's collapse, they claimed that they had been misled as to the level of its membership (publicly said to be 11,000), and that it had never reached the 10,000 they had stipulated as a minimum.

If the SDP had a strategic aim, it was survival, and this meant that, in Owen's words, 'The SDP must be ready to practise what it preaches about pacts.'⁷ This referred to a deal with the Liberal Democrats whereby the SDP would face no opposition from them in a number of seats. There were discussions about this between the party leaderships, but they were frosty and fruitless; the Liberal Democrats were reluctant to give Owen legitimacy by establishing a new Alliance, and would therefore only do so on terms of joint selection, which Owen rejected as merger by the back door. Those, such as David Alton, who argued for closer relations at Liberal Democrat conference fringe meetings or in the press were met with open hostility by colleagues.⁸ Only in the seats of the two SDP MPs standing in 1992 did the Liberal Democrats make any concession by

Democracy' he had launched with his colleagues whilst still in the Labour Party), and five days after the official foundation of the Social and Liberal Democrats, Owen relaunched the SDP, on 8 March 1988, as a 'fourth force' in British politics.

The justification for an independent fourth party remained somewhat vague, as it had at the establishment of the SDP seven years earlier. There were differences of policy reflecting tensions within the Alliance over defence and certain matters of economic and environmental policy, themes Owen struck upon in his 1988 conference speech, stressing 'security, democracy and prosperity', and emphasising the need to recognise the favourable elements

of Thatcherism. Owen argued that the distinctive element of the Alliance's appeal – its 'boldness and bluntness'⁶ brought to it by the SDP – had seen the third party's vote rise from 19 per cent to 25 per cent, and that this would be lost in a single centre party.

In fact the chief motives of those engaged in the continuing SDP were either negative or retrospective: they rejected what they regarded as the 'unreliable' and 'left-wing' Liberal Democrats (on the grounds that they had always refused to join the existing Liberal Party), and they were loyal to Dr Owen himself. The SDP faced the problem that it was trying to find a market niche in a crowded system in which all opposition parties

withdrawing from the contests – after balloting local activists, and following the withdrawal of the SDP from the Vauxhall by-election in June 1989.

In the key contests of Epping and Richmond (Yorkshire) during 1988–89, the two centre parties competing with each other allowed the Conservatives to keep the sort of seat they had traditionally lost to the Alliance in mid-term. The latter by-election, in February 1989, marked the high point of the continuing SDP's performance, and was the only contest in which the party showed that it might win a parliamentary seat. The SDP candidate, local farmer Mike Potter, ran William Hague a close second and left the Liberal Democrats looking like spoilers.

But Richmond was a flash in the pan. Even had Potter won, a split in the SDP was already brewing between those in the leadership who had never been fully convinced of its prospects and voices in the membership who accused them of defeatism and betrayal. In May 1989 it was announced that the SDP could no longer operate as a national party, and would contest the Euro-elections on a 'guerrilla' basis. At the 1989 conference in September, Rosie Barnes MP revealed that the SDP would be targeting a mere ten seats at the next general election.

A campaign had already been running since before that March to oust John Cartwright MP as Party President in favour of John Martin, the candidate in the Kensington and Chelsea by-election of July 1988, who had pointed to 'the urgent need to build an effective campaigning party built from the grassroots upwards' and had said that the party should tell its MPs: 'Some of the things you have done or may be thinking of doing are deeply damaging to the task of rebuilding the party in the country.'⁹ Martin's campaign was merely the culmination of tensions which had existed from the outset, as Owen's account of the

by-election confirm, dismissing Martin as 'a most tiresome person' obsessed with 'niche politics' which entailed controversial attitudes to race relations. Martin had been selected against Owen's preference for the high-profile black National Committee member Roy Evans.¹⁰

Their 1989 Scarborough conference was the SDP's last, and ended with Owen addressing delegates on the steps outside the conference venue because of a bomb scare – a characteristic moment of simultaneously comic and heroic tone. Although another was planned for September 1990 in Malvern, the terminal state of the party was evident to all but its most resilient supporters long before that date. In the three by-elections in early 1990, the SDP gained a total of under 1,800 votes: the first, Mid-Staffordshire, demonstrated that even in promising territory and with an energetic, if tiny, group of activists, the SDP was reduced to a wrecking campaign against the Liberal Democrats; the second was a bizarre attempt in the Upper Bann by-election which secured 154 votes, and the third, and the 'official' SDP's last, gained only one vote more, and was in Bootle, painfully close to the 1981 SDP triumph in Crosby, as Owen later recalled. Roundly beaten by Screaming Lord Sutch's Monster Raving Loony Party and five other candidates, including an independent Liberal, the SDP finally gave up. National Committee member Danny Finkelstein conceded that the SDP now 'look like the lunatic fringe. We have now gone past the point where the party is helping the politics.'¹¹ Most humiliating of all had been the national press reports at the close of the campaign confirming that Owen had seriously considered rejoining Labour.¹²

When the SDP's National Committee considered Owen's proposal to suspend operations on 3 June 1990, only three of its twenty-one members (two of these being John Martin and the

Bootle candidate Jack Holmes) voted against. A small group attempted to continue the party, even posting candidates at elections, but with Owen's sympathy rather than his support. In South Wales, an SDP candidate fought the Neath by-election of April 1991, and SDP councillors retained, lost and then regained their seats into the late 1990s. Even by the end of 1990, however, these members were believed to number fewer than 1,000.¹³ The meeting which Owen hosted at the Commons to celebrate the SDP's tenth anniversary in March 1991 was a reunion for nostalgic purposes only.

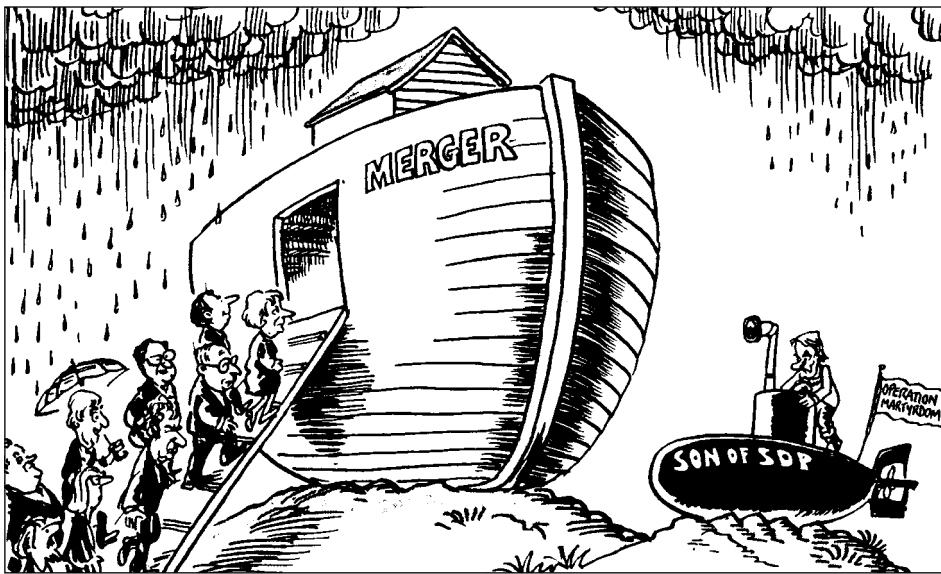
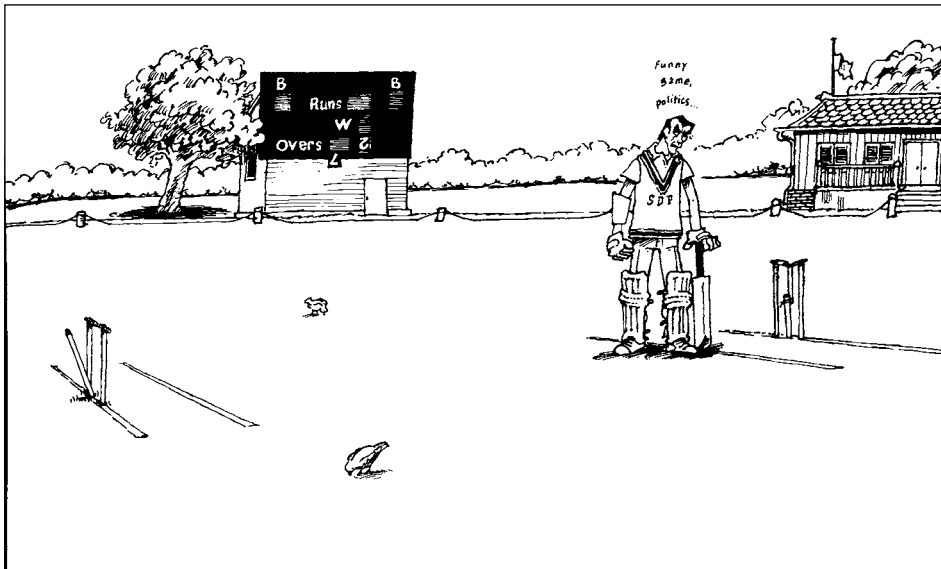
Policy

Two features of its circumstances make it unlikely that the continuing SDP's policy programme has had much impact upon the other parties. First, its programme was itself uncertain and, second, other parties were in any case converging upon much the same policy territory as that already occupied by the SDP, a realignment of the left symbolised by the writing of Professor David Marquand at the time.¹⁴ 'What will an Owenite splinter party stand for?' asked Marquand caustically: 'The answer is embarrassingly simple. Owen.'¹⁵ The party was forced into a position in which to be distinctive it would need to adopt dramatic and untried policies which would grab headlines. These were likely to appear inconsistent or unrealistic, however, such as the commitment to an even more libertarian privatisation of electricity than the Conservatives proposed, alongside the continued state ownership of the coal industry; or the symbolic but controversial idea of a 0 per cent inflation target with a growing economy. The party's policy focus was further distorted by its limited membership and tiny coterie of MPs (three) and peers (only five were named in initial recruitment literature).

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guided policy changes in both major parties, but these claims are at best difficult to measure, and at worst implausible.

The continuing SDP's enthusiasm for the free market and its interest in internal markets within the public sector were carried to the Conservative government both by the individuals whose careers are described below, and also via the Social Market Foundation, a think-tank established in 1987, but relaunched in 1992 with the support of Lord Skidelsky. Danny Finkelstein, one of those who went on to join the Conservatives, claims that William Waldegrave has confirmed that important elements of the Conservative Government's health reforms took substance from David Owen's *Our NHS* of 1988. 'The continuing SDP's biggest impact,' he argues, 'was in public service reform.'

The SDP also reflected Owen's growing scepticism about the right conditions for European Monetary Union: in September 1991 the SDP devoted a ten-minute party political broadcast to the threat to national sovereignty posed by the EU. These ideas dovetailed with the development of the Tory left's Euro-scepticism, epitomised by Stephen Dorrell, a close ally of Danny Finkelstein, in the run-up to the 1997 general election.

The Social Market Foundation provided a vehicle for the continuation of several SDP policy initiatives after the party's collapse, and became a home for some of its keenest thinkers. Finkelstein became its Director in 1992 and was succeeded by another former Owenite, Rick Nye. However, the SMF was not without contacts in the Labour Party, as was necessary for a research body in a period of electoral change. Another of its board members, former Owen adviser Alex de Mont, argues that it provided neutral territory in which Labour spokesmen could discuss free-market ideas, and express support for them with political impunity. The

How the cartoonists saw the beginnings of the 'continuing' SDP – Chris Radley (*Social Democrat*, 18/9/87) and Gibbard (*Guardian*, 7/8/87 and 1/2/88).

Memos to Modernisers issued with considerable publicity under Finkelstein and Nye, and the fact that 'the Blairites used the SMF as a platform for their own political and tactical purposes' allowed the continuing SDP to make an unexpected and less perceptible impact on New Labour. Labour ministers continue to use the SMF as a safe spot from which to fly some of their more controversial policy kites. Although he left the SDP for Labour after the merger, de Mont acknowledges that 'Owen is one of the most policy-focused politicians on the Westminster scene'.

Despite all of this, it is at least as easy to point to Owenite policies neglected by other parties as to find ones adopted by them. Where common ideas do exist, the continuing SDP is as likely to have been their conduit as their cause, and where it could claim to be the originator, the cause would usually be details supplied by personnel rather than any fundamental principles.

Recruitment

If one of the functions of political parties in a democracy is to recruit and prepare actors at all levels of the system, it is difficult to argue that the continuing SDP had no impact in this field. Indeed, at certain points in the SDP's final demise, other parties' leaders could scarcely conceal their anxiety about the remaining Social Democrats' destination, behind the obligatory mask of disdainful indifference. Even if the number of activists to be won over was minimal, the SDP name proclaimed a heritage, recognised by the electorate, for which the other parties were prepared to bid.

Whilst in policy terms the most obvious route for Social Democrats might have been to the Liberal Democrats, this was not a path that would have led to political promotion for many. First of all, as Denver and Bochel have shown,¹⁶ the majority of those from the original SDP

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who stayed in politics had already joined the merged party, and this, together with continuing SDP's campaign material and the testimony of leading Owenite figures, all suggests that the remaining Social Democrats harboured a distinct contempt for the Liberal Democrats, exacerbated by the bitter contests of 1987–90. These last diehards of a civil war were unlikely voluntarily to take up the case of their own nemesis. Nonetheless, Ashdown was eager to extend the olive branch to Owenites, saying, in June 1990, that 'they will be welcome to join us and continue the battle we started together'.¹⁷ Indeed, the National Organiser of the continuing SDP, Ian Wright, became a close adviser to the Liberal Democrat leader, and accompanied his 1997 election tour.

Labour Party policy had also moved in the right direction to attract many Social Democrats, as Owen had already publicly acknowledged by conceding that he would have no difficulty working in a coalition government led by Kinnock. A Labour spokesman was careful to tell the *Sunday Times* on 3 June 1990 that continuing SDP members 'should either come home to Labour, or join us for the first time to help build a better Britain for the 1990s'. Some from the original SDP, including Michael Young, veteran of the 1945 campaign, had already gravitated back to Labour, and others such as David Sainsbury followed them from the continuing SDP into Blair's government. Such was the influence of various former and continuing centrists in the Blair administration (mostly ones who had abandoned Owen after the merger) that Paul Foot was moved to give an audit of their positions as political consultants and policy advisers under the title 'Return of the Whigs: or how the SDP and the Liberal Democrats got into government' in *Private Eye* in January 1999. Others not formally allied to the party, such as Polly Toynbee, continue

to play a significant role as (sometimes critical) supporters of the Blair project on many issues in the media.

These activists have for the most part, however, been recruited to Blair rather than to Labour, and former Social Democrats such as Alex de Mont have testified to a 'smell of bad eggs' surrounding those who joined Labour from the SDP at the local level. 'The tribalism of Labour is stronger than that of the Tory Party,' de Mont points out, and the mythology of treachery which is woven through the party's history is as strong with regard to Owen as to any other 'traitor'. Even at national level, where Owen had made his most explicit overtures to Labour rather than to the Tories as his party floundered, a relatively warm reception from Kinnock's office and Kinnock's allies was ultimately curtailed, in part because of the embittered public reaction of Shadow Cabinet members such as John Prescott to the prospect of a rapprochement. Robert Harris wrote in the *Sunday Times* on the SDP's collapse that 'a certificate of good health from the doctor could win over waverers in those marginal seats required for victory ... where people still wonder if Labour has recovered from its sickness'¹⁸ – but he concluded that the price Labour would pay in terms of the division Owen's return would provoke would be prohibitively high.

Whilst the Blair 'big tent' project had provided a vehicle for some political talent sustained by the continuing SDP, the Conservatives were the party best placed and most willing to offer a home to former Owenites. At national level the Conservatives made considerable efforts – which became public through favourable coverage in the Tory press – to woo Owen himself. These included some mischievous public praise (and a private invitation to join) from Margaret Thatcher at the time of the SDP's relaunch, and direct discussions with Major

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and members of his Cabinet in early 1991. These attempts were scuppered by Owen's own disinclination and his stipulation that he could only join the Cabinet as a Social Democrat, and on the understanding that the other two SDP MPs would not be opposed by the Conservatives at the next general election.

However, this was not the end of the relationship. Throughout the continuing SDP's existence there was a contingent of activists who served their apprenticeship in the Young Social Democrats and SDP Students organisations, and who subsequently went on to take leading official roles in the HQ and National Committee of the relaunched party. Their views were characterised by concern with economic liberalisation, rigorous fiscal policy, and a more cautious line on defence and European integration than the Liberals had favoured. It was this group which remained in social contact after June 1990, while still being associated with the three Social Democrat MPs as a locus in Westminster. It was at a meeting in one of the MPs' rooms at the Commons watching reports of Major's election as Conservative leader that they discussed their decision – in some cases privately arrived at long before – to join the Tories. Through contacts in late 1991 with Chris Patten and Jeremy Hanley, a group of twenty of these activists was brought together to throw their support behind Major in February 1992 at a press conference hailing them in a letter of personal (but not party) support from Owen as 'some of the brightest and best' of the SDP's talent.

No smell of bad eggs has surrounded these figures, some of whom were nurtured with great enthusiasm first by Major, and then Hague. Danny Finkelstein, previously leader of the Young Social Democrats and latterly an adviser to Owen, was appointed head of the Conservative Research Department, and was succeeded by another former

Social Democrat as he took up a Conservative candidature in Harrow East in 2001. Ralph Leishman, an SDP candidate at both the general elections of the 1980s, became the Tory challenger to Liberal Democrat Ray Michie in Argyll & Bute in 1997, and it was former Social Democrat Steve O'Brien who retained Eddisbury for the Tories at a 1999 by-election. There were also defections to the Conservatives amongst sitting SDP councillors. Indeed, the rise of the Owenites within the modern Tory Party was noted as early as December 1992, and has since alarmed some Conservatives: a resentful Hywel Williams complained that 'Daniel Finkelstein and his close friend David Willetts ... were at the heart of the confusion, born of intellectual failure, that characterised the Major Government's last eighteen months of ineptitude.' It was the influence of Finkelstein and his former SDP associates that Kenneth Clarke is said by Williams to have had in mind when he instructed Brian Mawhinney to 'tell your kids to get their scooters off my lawn'. Jon Craig reported in the *Express on Sunday* on 7 February 1999 that 'Several shadow ministers and senior backbenchers last week beat a path to Hague's door and that of Chief Whip James Arbuthnot to demand a clear-out of the leader's lacklustre advisers ... "Why has William allowed the SDP to take over the Tory Party and its policy-making process?" asked a former cabinet minister.'

This episode reflects the experience of breakaway Liberals, and of the official party when seeking co-operation, throughout the twentieth century. It is the experience of finding a relatively warm public welcome from the Conservatives (as in 1886, 1918, 1931, 1951 and 1974) but little policy influence; and meeting reluctance, resentment and hostility from a Labour Party whose platform was similar to the Liberals' (as in 1924, 1929, 1945, 1964 and 1974). There is also an echo of the departure of libertarian

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economists in the post-war period to the Conservatives via the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Adam Smith Institute and other bodies.

Electoral impact

It is in the electoral field that the most measurable and least questionable of the continuing SDP's achievements are to be found. This may be ironic given the pitiful level of those achievements in terms of raw results, but to assess the impact of those results it is necessary to look outside the little world of the SDP's own electorate.

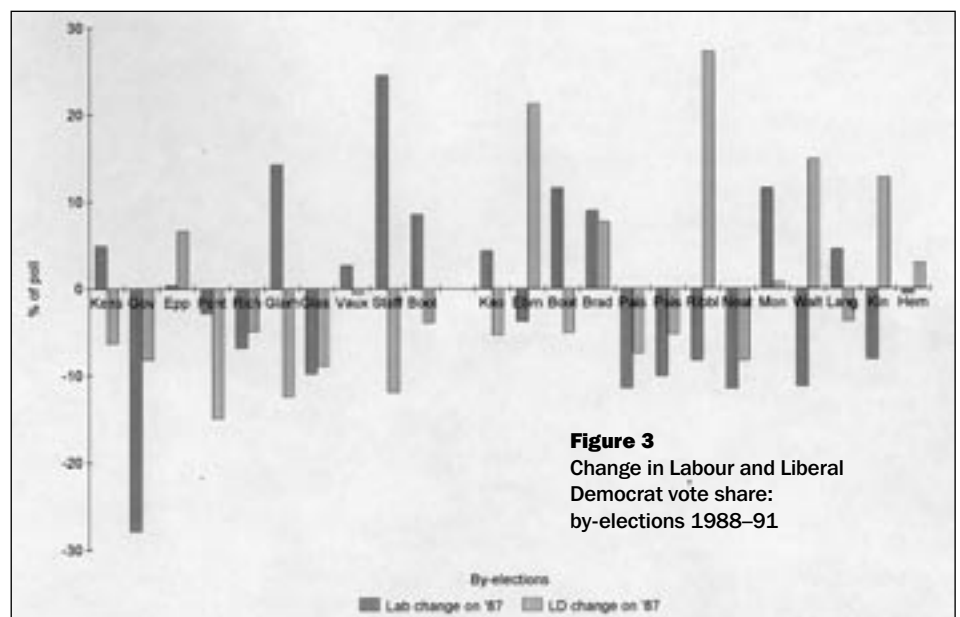
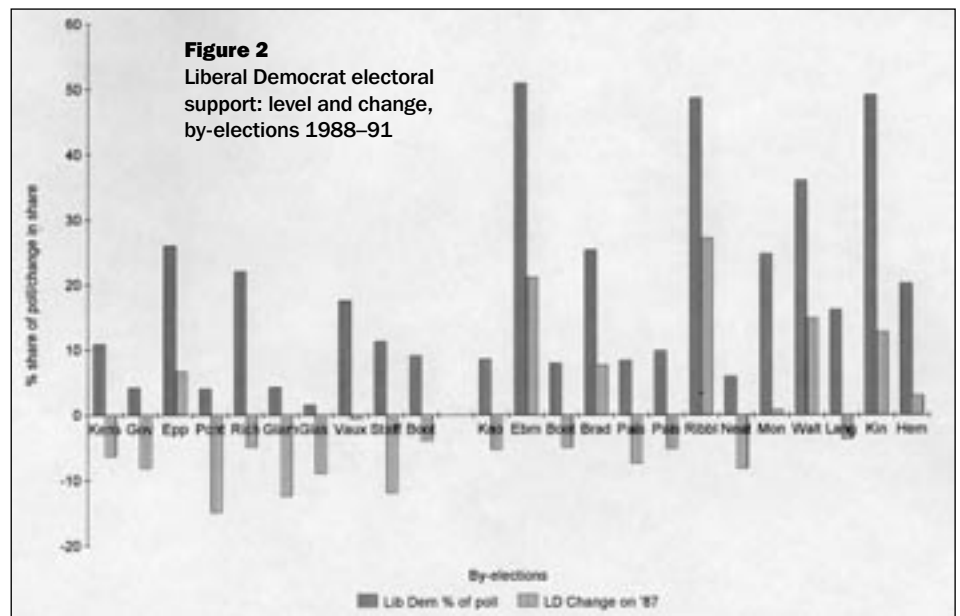
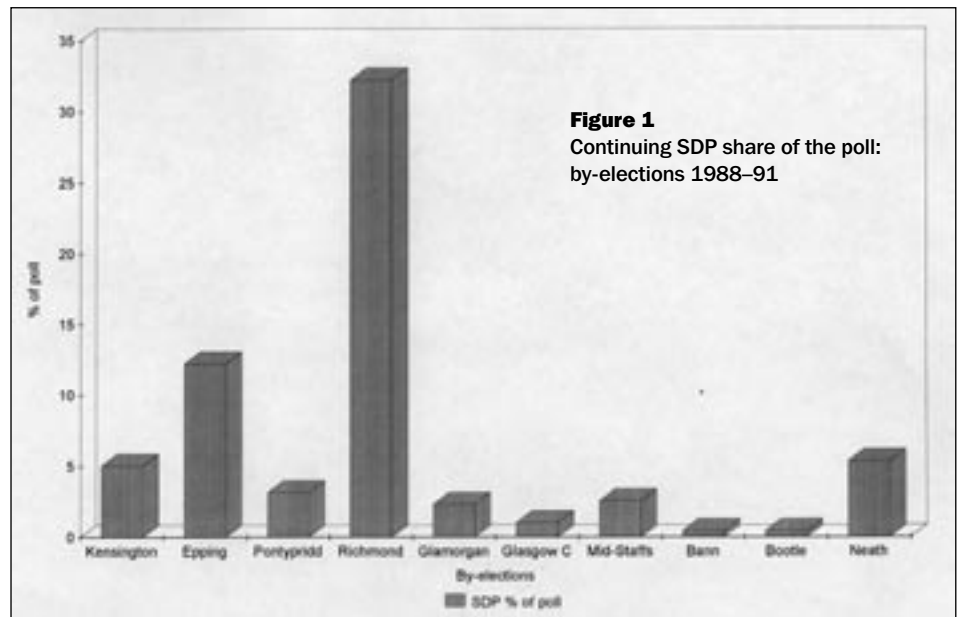
The limited nature of the continuing SDP's support is indicated in Figures 1–3. The party lost its deposit in two-thirds of the parliamentary by-elections it fought; only in one did it make a serious challenge to the incumbent party. In the 1989 Euro-elections, no continuing SDP candidate secured as much as 5 per cent of the poll, despite the party's restricting itself to thirteen contests. Of 195 opinion surveys conducted by the five main organisations during 1988–90, only one (taken after the Richmond by-election) showed the SDP in double figures.¹⁹ Data for council elections are less convincing as a measure of support since they are more vulnerable to local factors, personalities and incumbency, but the tally of wards won hardly contradicted the figures for parliamentary by-elections and Euro-elections. It cannot be argued that the continuing SDP posed a major, sustained, direct competitive threat to any other party. It did, however, make a difference.

The Liberal Democrats were unable to reoccupy the conventional role of the third party whilst a fourth one persisted, and this delayed the re-emergence of that third force for over two years. Figure 2 shows that in the eight parliamentary by-elections contested by both centre parties, the Liberal Democrats were able to raise their share of the

vote over that of the Alliance in 1987 in only one by-election, whereas they bettered that share in seven of the twelve contests without an SDP candidate after June 1990. The average Liberal Democrat share of the vote, at 11.08 per cent, fell by 7.16 per cent in the eight contests with the SDP (closely coinciding with the average 7.34 per cent of the poll won by the continuing SDP in these contests). At 25.41 per cent, the Liberal Democrat poll share rose by an average of 4.98 per cent in the twelve 'free runs' after June 1990.

Most importantly, it was only after the demise of Owen's party that the Liberal Democrats were able to reoccupy their role as the conquerors of Tory heartlands in mid-term by-elections such as at Eastbourne and Ribbles Valley, despite at least two seats presenting themselves as classic opportunities for capture before 1990. In the Euro-elections of 1989, which saw the Liberal Democrats pushed into fourth place nationally behind the Greens, with 6.2 per cent of the vote, they suffered especially badly in the thirteen seats where they faced SDP competition. Here their share of the poll averaged just 5.2 per cent, and never rose above 10.8 per cent. In two Euro-seats, the Liberal Democrats were actually beaten by the SDP.

During the existence of the continuing SDP, the Liberal Democrats' poll rating in any of the five main organisations' findings never rose above 14 per cent, and for the great majority of the period was in single figures. Within a year of the SDP's closure, the figure had reached 19 per cent, and after March 1991 no survey by any organisation found a level of support for the Liberal Democrats below 12 per cent. The confusion in the centre ground which left over three-quarters of Gallup's respondents in 1990 unable to name the Liberal Democrats accurately is as unsurprising as it is evident from this data. It was with good reason that Paddy Ashdown described



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the episode of the SDP's final collapse as 'The end of a very important week. The key message to get across to the public is not that the SDP has folded, but that the rifts in our own ranks have been healed, with most of them joining us.' But on the same day Ashdown continued wearily: 'To bed around midnight, still worried that Labour will get more benefit out of Owen's demise than we will.'²⁰

The direct impact of the continuing SDP on Labour is less obvious from the electoral data in Figure 3. The fracturing of the third party might have left the way open for an earlier Labour recovery than expected, although the official Opposition does not seem to have been able to make advances in parliamentary by-elections outside the usual territory of traditional Labour heartlands such as Bootle and Tory-Labour marginals such as Mid-Staffordshire. The average level of Labour support, and shift in support from 1987, did not alter significantly with the demise of the continuing SDP. In an odd way, the battle for the centre ground may merely have paralleled the tensions generated within Labour over the policy review after 1987, throwing into ever sharper relief the distinctive unity of purpose of the Conservatives.

The Conservatives were undoubtedly the chief electoral beneficiaries of the activity of the continuing SDP, since although their vote fell in most contests at all levels, the effect of this decline was mitigated by the tripartite division of the opposing vote. Nowhere was this better demonstrated than at the Richmond by-election in February 1989. Here the future Conservative leader William Hague's entry into the Commons was facilitated by a serious challenge from each of the three opposition parties, the confusion of which was worsened by the absence from the campaign of any major polls until the final week. According to Hague's biographer 'It was really

good luck which presented him with the circumstances in which he could win ... A single Alliance candidate would have meant certain victory for they [the Liberal Democrats and SDP] polled more than 54 per cent of the vote between them on the day.'²¹ The feuding family of opposition parties gained a new member at the 1989 Euro-elections, at which the Greens (who may also be thankful to the continuing SDP for their brief moment in the sun) gained 15 per cent of the vote, and the Conservatives took advantage of their opponents' weak image and split vote to retain 35 per cent of the vote and 41 per cent of the seats.

It is not possible to say how far this situation benefited the Conservatives, but that it did is barely disputable. When we consider the speed with which Margaret Thatcher came under pressure to resign six months after the Owenites' collapse, and the narrowness of John Major's victory in 1992, almost any factor which impaired the effectiveness and public image of the opposition might be considered pivotal in the Conservatives' fate. The rapprochement between the Liberal Democrats and Labour was made more painless by the removal of the 'treacherous' figure of Owen from the scene, and William Hague could scarcely have led the Conservatives in 2001 had he not entered Parliament in 1989. We can only speculate here about the impact of the Owenites upon subsequent events and their timing, but that they had none seems most unlikely.

Conclusions

It is a commonplace theme of science fiction writing that those who travel in time should beware of altering even the least detail of life in the past, lest that change set off a chain of events resulting ultimately in more significant developments. Nothing, it is said, is without consequence. Perhaps

the same may be said of minor parties, for whilst the continuing SDP was during its existence no more than the side-show its supporters now acknowledge (and many were aware of at the time), and its pretensions to contest for power were even laughable, it nonetheless had an important impact upon all the main parties and the party system. Its apparent irrelevance disguises, and at the same time is the most convincing proof of, the interconnectedness of political parties' identities and fortunes.

These conclusions rest on only a preliminary survey of the evidence, and involve counterfactual speculation. We know that roughly 50,000 people who were in the SDP and the Liberals never joined either party (or, in most cases, any other) again. We have to ask ourselves whether the continuing SDP rescued some of the ideas, voters and activists that would otherwise have gone the same way, but instead remained active even after the SDP's final disappearance. And has that made no difference? There may be more than bravado to David Owen's conclusion that 'Only historians will be able to judge the value of putting policies before party, the impact of the SDP's ideas, the extent of our influence and the worth of the policies we pioneered',²² even if we doubt his claim – made somewhat tongue-in-cheek in 1982, but recalled more seriously by *The Times* in 1991, and reiterated with equal solemnity by Owen himself in 2000 – that the SDP may have 'saved the Labour Party.'²³

It is easy – and easily defensible – to dismiss the ostensible aims of the continuing SDP as 'completely potty'; it is wrong to go from that to overlooking the impact that its members, their actions and ideas have had on major parties in the period since the relaunch and demise of the SDP. Certainly, no law of nature prohibits potty people from affecting public life, intentionally or not.

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Matt Cole is a research student in Modern History at the University of Birmingham, where he is examining the Liberal Party's identity during the post-war era. He is also a Visiting Lecturer at Birmingham University's Centre for Lifelong Learning and a Tutor of History and Politics at King Edward VI College in Stourbridge. His work on the SDP was funded through a Research Associateship with the Open University.

The author wishes gratefully to acknowledge the co-operation of Alex de Mont and Danny Finkelstein, from interviews with whom in April 2001 direct quotations not otherwise attributed are taken, and of Mr Hedley Bryers, for access to papers relating to the continuing SDP.

- 1 Robert Harris, *Sunday Times*, 3 June 1990, Review Section, p. 8.
- 2 Dennis Outwin, *The SDP Story* (Hartwood, 1987), pp. 77–78.
- 3 Stephen Ingle, 'Liberals and Social Democrats: End of a Chapter or End of a Book?', *Talking Politics* Vol 1 No 2, Politics Assn 1988, pp. 47–51.
- 4 David Owen, *Time to Declare* (Penguin, 1992), p. 765.
- 5 Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 450–51.
- 6 David Owen, *Sticking with It* (Campaign for Social Democracy, 1987), p. 1.
- 7 David Owen, Letter to SDP members, May 1989.
- 8 See for example the article by Alton and John Cartwright, 'Unite, and Victory is Ours', in *The Times*, 25 February 1989, and the letter in the previous day's *Independent* from nine leading Liberal Democrats, headed by Shirley Williams and David Marquand, stressing the damage done by Owen, and the need for his supporters to join the Liberal Democrats outright rather than seek another alliance.
- 9 John Martin, Circular to CSD Representatives 20 March 1989, and earlier appeal.
- 10 Owen, *Time to Declare*, p.745
- 11 See Andrew Grice, 'David Owen's failed SDP to be wound up today', *Sunday Times*, 3 June 1990.
- 12 For an early example, see Victor Smart, *Observer*, 25 February 1990.
- 13 David Denver, 'The Centre', in Anthony King et al., *Britain at the Polls 1992*, p. 116.

- 14 See David Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma* (Heinemann, 1991).
- 15 Cited in Ingle, 'Liberals and Social Democrats: End of a Chapter or End of a Book?.'
- 16 David Denver and Hugh Bochel, 'Merger or Bust: whatever happened to members of the SDP?', PSA Elections, Public Opinion and Parties conference paper, September 1993.
- 17 See Grice, 'David Owen's failed SDP to be wound up today'.
- 18 Harris, op cit.
- 19 For confirmation of these and other poll figures below, see David

- Denver, Ivor Crewe, Pippa Norris, et al (eds), *British Elections and Parties Yearbook* (Frank Cass, 1991, 1992 and 1993).
- 20 Paddy Ashdown, *The Ashdown Diaries, Volume One 1988–97* (Allen Lane, 2000), p. 88.
- 21 Jo-anne Nadler, *William Hague: In his Own Right* (Politico's, 2000), p. 134.
- 22 Owen, *Time to Declare*, p. 765.
- 23 Owen, 'The Legacy of the SDP' in Brian Brivati and Richard Hefernan, *The Labour Party: a Centenary History* (Macmillan, 2000), p.166.

LETTERS

The Risorgimento and the Liberal Party

Piers Huggill's review of Beales and Biagini's *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy* (*Journal of Liberal History* 42, spring 2004), misses the opportunity to comment on the significance of Italian politics in the formation of the British Liberal Party.

Between 1846 and 1859, British political parties were in flux. In 1852, a coalition of Whigs and Peelites formed a government under Lord Aberdeen with the support of various independent and radical liberals but that government fell apart under the stresses of the Crimean War. From 1855 to 1859, infighting between these liberal factions prevented Lord Palmerston from forming a stable government and left room for Lord Derby to re-establish credibility for a Tory party that had remained in a minority throughout the period.

As the critical events in the Risorgimento unfolded in the late spring of 1859 they coincided with a British general election and wrong-footed the Conservatives who had played on fears of the imperial ambitions of Louis Napoleon of France in his alliance with the Sardinians

against Austria. When Austria took on the role of aggressor, Liberal sympathies for those Italians struggling to be a nation and to be free could be given voice.

The election did not give the Conservatives a majority but left Derby in government. Would the opposition be able to mount a challenge? The famous meeting in Willis's Rooms was held to test the willingness of the various factions to work together. In his scene-setting speech to the meeting, as reported in *The Times* on 7 June, Palmerston mentioned only two policy issues, franchise reform and Italy:

In adverting to the war in Italy, his Lordship dwelt on the signal failure which the Government had met with in their endeavours to maintain peace between the contending parties and contended that a Cabinet, which had manifestly lost all weight in the Councils of Europe upon so momentous a question as that of peace and war, was not fit to be any longer intrusted with the conduct of our foreign relations.

As is well known, the meeting decided to table a motion of want of confidence in Derby's government and Palmerston formed an administration which