

Social Democracy Barrier or Bridge ?



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Published by Liberator Publications, 34 Hackford Road, London SW9 0RF, from where additional copies can be obtained (please enclose 30p or 30% of the cost, whichever is the greater, to cover postage and packing). Typeset by Blackmore Press, Shaftesbury, Dorset. Printed by Lithosphere, 467 Caledonian Road, London N7.

A liberator Publication

75p

liberator publications

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY—BARRIER OR BRIDGE?

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Chapter 1—Introduction

British politics is currently in a remarkably volatile state. The long trend since 1951 away from an overwhelming vote for two major parties has, apparently, accelerated again after its slight reversal at the 1979 General Election. The mid-term popularity of the Liberal Party, which is particularly marked during a Conservative Government, has been considerably aided by the harsh dogmatism of the present government and a divided and bewildered Labour opposition.

A totally new factor is the formation of a fourth party, the Social Democratic Party, mainly, though not exclusively, out of right-wing Labour ranks who have concluded that it is now impossible to reverse the leftward trend of the Labour Party. It is clear that, at the present time at least, the SDP is a popular and attractive option to many electors who are justifiably fed up with the failures of the past. The media, concerned more with novelty than analysis, has demonstrated its considerable gratitude for a new political 'angle' and this, together with a leadership comprising individuals with considerable experience in government, has encouraged support for the SDP extra to that which the Liberal Party could expect to win.

All the parties have to respond to this new challenge. On the face of it, with the SDP making overtures to the Liberal Party for an electoral pact and, potentially, a parliamentary coalition thereafter, the Liberals have the least problem. Any Liberal who believes that is making a grave error. The SDP is at one and the same time the greatest opportunity and the greatest danger to Liberalism for thirty years. Without careful philosophic analysis and political vigilance the relationship could be that of the spider and the fly.

So far virtually all that has been written and debated has been primarily concerned with strategic opportunities rather than a consideration of philosophy and policy. This publication aims to redress that imbalance.

Chapter 2—Historical Background

Left-wing parties have always argued over the competing claims of collectivism and individualism. From 1872, when the First International foundered on the dispute between Marx and the followers of Bakunin, down to the recent tensions between Mitterand and Rocard, there have been constant problems in maintaining a united progressive alternative to conservatism.

At different periods of history each aspect has been in the ascendancy. Britain has been no exception. The emphasis during the nineteenth century, as parties based on political philosophy began to be formalised, was on extending individual civil rights and it was only towards the end of the century that socialist views on the use of the state to enforce greater equality began to be widely developed.

By the turn of the century the growing influence of the Independent Labour Party began to impinge on the Liberal Party which had hitherto had a virtual monopoly of radical and working-class votes. In its efforts to retain control of what it regarded as its natural constituency the Liberal Party withdrew candidates in certain by-elections in favour of "Labour" representatives and eventually Herbert Gladstone and Ramsay Macdonald concluded an electoral pact which gave Labour its first significant block of seats, in the 1906 Parliament.

Some—but by no means enough—senior Liberals perceived that the 'split' between Liberal and Labour was not primarily about degrees of 'leftness' but was between individualism and collectivism. Indeed some 'advanced radical' Liberals were replaced by much more staid Labour candidates. The strategic parallel today with 1906 will be discussed later.

At the same time as an electoral compromise was being compounded with Labour, Liberal thinkers were grappling with the philosophical implications of the public mood and its legitimate rejection of the immense material inequalities and class-based privileges that dominated Britain before 1914. T. H. Green was the pioneer of the "New Liberalism" with his lectures in the 1880's on the involvement of the state in enhancing freedom and, by the early years of the twentieth century, John Hobson and Leonard Hobhouse were endeavouring to bridge the widening gap. In one sense they were successful—so much so that they, together with Graham Wallas and Lawrence Hammond, are sometimes described as being both liberals *and* social democrats.

The evidence before 1914 tends to suggest that the gap between Labour and Liberal Parties was unbridgeable but the traumatic effect of the First World War, and the immense impetus it gave to socialist feelings, effectively put Labour in the ascendancy thereafter. Liberals of immense integrity and intellectual power, including Ramsay Muir, Ernest Simon, William Beveridge and Maynard Keynes, succeeded in retaining a distinctive Liberal identity, not least through the preparation of a series of radical, innovative yet practical reports on the state of the country. Liberalism today owes an immense debt to those whose confidence in the need for

liberal values encouraged them to maintain the Liberal cause. We must not lightly weaken what they struggled to bequeath to us.

The Labour Party has itself always been a coalition of different views and groups, some more, some less socialist. Despite the fact that conservatives, and, for that matter, Liberals, have regularly played on extremism within the Labour Party, the gradualists, or social democrats, have invariably been the dominant faction, particularly within the parliamentary party.

It is only in the past few years, as the poverty of the social democratic analysis of the rapidly changing social situation has been exposed, that the socialist faction has been able to increase and consolidate its influence within the Labour Party. It is the failure of social democracy that has led to the present situation in the Labour Party and not the other way round. It is social democrats who should have the crisis of confidence, not libertarians.

It is not part of my case to suggest that, historically, social democracy has of necessity been harmful or unnecessary. Insofar as it tended towards centralism and uniformity it has always been vulnerable to a libertarian critique but, given the actual choices at the time on, say, the mines or the railways, plus the apparently infinite prospect of economic growth, it is only with hindsight that one can see the fundamental error of direction. Suffice to say that the 1945-1951 Labour governments represent the pinnacle of the achievements of social democracy. They laid the foundations of a comprehensive health service, built a considerable social security edifice on the earlier work of Lloyd George and Beveridge, and put into practice the definitive Butler Education Act of 1944.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, 1951 was the Liberal Party's lowest point. Society was being transformed by the reforms of the post-war Labour government and disillusion with the resultant bureaucracy and the inability to meet rising expectations had barely set in. However an apparently ungrateful public proceeded to opt for private rather than communal prosperity and put the Tories into office for the next thirteen years. It says a great deal for the social democratic consensus that the Tories made no serious attempt to reverse the reforms of 1945-1951—apart from denationalising steel, which, in any case, many social democrats were prepared to accept.

By the time of Labour's return to power in 1964 the first stirrings of a new libertarianism had sprung out of a growing dissatisfaction with materialism. While Labour had been fighting itself to a standstill over Clause 4, Liberals, under Jo Grimond's leadership, were developing radical ideas that Labour—including the social democrats—were unable to come to terms with.

Liberals rejected the obsession with planning, largeness and bureaucracy and encouraged human values and a consciousness of scale. Also Liberals increasingly focused on the community and, by the time Labour was defeated in 1970, had thought through a fully-fledged "dual approach" philosophy which involved political activity both within the existing constitutional framework and also in identifying and working with groups and campaigns in the community, outside the conventional structure.

The Liberal movement's commitment to community politics was no

casual coincidence but a conscious response to, and identification with, the many radical and alternative groups that rejected the materialistic and militaristic attitudes that have dominated Western society—and particularly it politics—for generations. No political party can avoid grappling with the macro economic and social issues of the day but neither should it stifle the ‘gut feeling’ that it is in rebuilding communities and community feeling, in producer co-operatives and socially useful work, in ecologically sound energy development, in participation in music, drama and other arts, and in an unselfish internationalist outlook that the real answer to economic recession and urban violence lies.

It is my contention that this is essentially a libertarian and not a social democratic analysis and prescription. Chapter 3 endeavours to examine how far the founders of the SDP conform to the traditional definition of social democracy:

“SOCIAL DEMOCRACY: that part of the socialist and labour movement which accepts the democratic structure of the state and postulates social changes by means of reform rather than revolution.

“The post-war experience and the growing economic difficulties in the West made the social democratic idea of ‘planning in freedom’ less convincing than in the immediate aftermath of war. The prospects for social democracy are connected with the prospects for democracy in general and its continuing political vitality in facing the problems of social and economic change.” (Dictionary of Modern Thought, ed A. Bullock and O. Stallybrass, Fontana, London. 1977).

Chapter 3— Social Democracy and the SDP

Anyone wishing to treat the SDP fairly and to make an objective analysis of its philosophy and policy has a considerable problem. Firstly there is not much of it about; secondly, some of what there is is contradictory; and, thirdly, it may not be entirely fair to apply what is traditionally regarded as social democracy to the SDP.

For instance, if one wishes to link up the present situation with a historical perspective one might accept Ian Bradley’s analysis (*The Times*, 24 February 1981) “. . . while there may be widespread agreement on immediate practical policies to be pursued in Britain’s present predicament there are significant philosophical differences”. Referring back to the New Liberals of the early 1900’s he comments that those “who remained in the Liberal Party did so because they put the pursuit of liberty before the pursuit of equality and preferred voluntary action where possible to compulsory action by the state. Those who joined the Labour Party did so because they took the opposite position”.

Obviously it is all a question of balance. Gross inequalities are inimical to liberty and a lack of liberty inhibits the struggle for equality. Even so, on the basis of their writings, David Owen (the first two chapters of “Face the Future”), David Marquand (“Taming Leviathan”) and Evan Luard (“Socialism at the Grass Roots”) at least would fit more comfortably into the Liberal Party than a traditional social democratic party.

The leaders of the SDP are, however, fond of asserting their identity with social democracy as traditionally accepted and with other European social democratic parties. Edward Lyons, for instance, wrote (*Yorkshire Post*, 13 April 1981) “Social Democracy in Western Europe is not new and after 1945 its objectives, towards which it made considerable progress in an era of economic growth, were equality of opportunity, full employment, economic growth and abolition of poverty”. Shirley Williams, in her book “Politics is for People”, describes Ralf Dahrendorf as “one of the most far-seeing thinkers of our time” and then quotes him as saying “It is easy today to pour irony over the political syndrome which marks the climax and crisis of modernity. It is all the more important to emphasize that in many respects the social democratic consensus signifies the greatest progress which history has seen so far. Never before have so many people had so many life chances”. What Mrs. Williams fails to point out is that the quotation is from a chapter entitled “The End of the Social Democratic Consensus?” and that elsewhere in the same book Professor Dahrendorf states that “For the time being, a new liberalism is the only visible hope for an attempt to tailor reality to fit the potential rather than to cut the potential to fit reality”.

A further problem in any critique of SDP philosophy and policy is reconciling its early enthusiasm for virtually perpetual consultation of its membership with its strenuous denial that the members will be allowed to alter aspects of the Limehouse Declaration. Already six months have passed and

there is no sign yet of a formal SDP Conference and, therefore, as yet no constitution nor official policy, nor indeed any official basis for negotiation.

David Owen's interview with Robert McKenzie in the BBC 2 series "The Pursuit of Power" dwelt on the question of whether SDP members could, in their party conference, vote to take Britain out of the EEC. David Owen replied (*The Listener*, 25 June 1981) that anti-EEC individuals could belong to the SDP but would have to recognise that the Party "has been founded very firmly on the basis of commitment to remaining in and fighting its corner and holding its end up in Brussels". Robert McKenzie then asked the crucial question: "Aren't you, then, saying that your party conference cannot overturn the essentially elitist decision of the minority who lead the party?" David Owen then equivocated but eventually suggested that membership of the NATO alliance and of the European Community are likely to feature in the permanent constitution of the party.

More recently (*The Guardian*, 31 July 1981) CND has deliberately set out to change official SDP policy. The CND advertisement was immediately described by William Rodgers as "misleading" and "pretty sharp practice". He went on to say, "Let there be no question about the fact that in our original Limehouse Declaration we said the official policy was for multilateral disarmament along with proper defence of Britain through membership of NATO".

These statements ought to ring warning bells for Liberals (and for that matter for prospective SDP members) with their implication that the items in the Limehouse Declaration are immutable. Quite apart from the practical problems involved in negotiating with the SDP on this basis, it demonstrates a rather more fundamental problem that worries me much more than the practicalities of finding points in common for a short-term alliance. There is a confusion of means and ends within the SDP.

I find it very difficult to glean from the writings of the Social Democratic leaders any clear view of what kind of society they are working towards. I can get certain glimmerings but, as I explored in my *Liberal News* article (17 March 1981) it is even difficult to be sure of what motivates Social Democrats, of what *instinctively* they are for or against.

A party constitution can, of course, contain whatever the party wishes it to contain but it would be highly unusual for it to contain policy rather than philosophy. The preamble to the Liberal Party Constitution sets out the aims of liberalism and marks of a liberal society. It is a statement that is expected to stand for a considerable period of time.. (The preamble to the Liberal Party Constitution has lasted, with only minor textual updating, for forty-five years).

In contrast, policy is the method by which the aims are reached and is in a virtually continuous state of progress depending on the many variables that form the current political agenda. Thus a statement of the aims of preserving world peace and the eventual abolition of all weapons, and of developing European unity, would fit comfortably into a constitution whereas a commitment to NATO and the EEC can, arguably, be undermined and altered by circumstances—not least by the attitudes of NATO and the EEC themselves.

The nearest one can get to an image of a social democratic society is to look at those continental countries, notably Scandinavia and West Germany, that have had a post-war preponderance of social democrat governments. It is possible to argue, as Ian Bradley does (*The Times*, 4 August 1981) that it is an attractive image of countries "more prosperous, less classless and perhaps more fraternal than our own".

The key difficulty is that this is a backward look. I do not believe that we now have the option in Britain to create the social conditions of West Germany, even if we wanted to. Nor do I believe that the continental countries can themselves postpone similar economic and social problems to our own for much longer. There are world-wide factors involved which are creating an entirely new global balance between haves and have-nots. The changes already wrought by the major oil producing countries are only the first signs of fundamental pressures.

Liberals have been grappling with these new and immense political imperatives. For instance, the debates on philosophy, values and programme at the 1979, 1980 and this year's Assemblies respectively are a crucial central response to the scores of separate but connected debates within constituency associations and local council groups around the country. The role of Party HQ, the central committees and policy panels is crucially two-way. Despite the lack of resources much has been done to maintain a flow of ideas and information. Given the point Liberals have reached—and I am far from claiming a monopoly of virtue—one would hope that the advent of an entirely new party would bring a spurt of original thinking which would boost a proposed alliance. Search as I might, I have not yet been excited by social democracy—old or new.

Ralf Dahrendorf's conclusions are highly significant and have not had sufficient attention paid to them. He spans both German and British politics and has written and lectured considerably on the situation facing Western European democracies. His consistent conclusion, which is examined further in Chapter 4, is that a new concept and dimension of liberty is required:

"The issue today is not how to be social democratic, much as this may agitate the victims of adversary politics. The issue is what comes after social democracy. If this is not to be a Blue, Red or Green aberration, it will have to be an imaginative, unorthodox and distinctive liberalism which combines the common ground of social-democratic achievements with the new horizons of the future of liberty." (*After Social Democracy*, Unservile State Group, 1980)

The SDP is caught in a trap. If it tries to batten on to the social democratic tradition, in the belief that to acknowledge such roots is electorally helpful, it emphasises the "damaging charge" as mentioned by Peter Jenkins (*The Guardian*, 12 June 1981), ". . . that it was (Roy Jenkins') form of consensus politics which brought us all to where we are now". Jo Grimond put it more starkly:

"The Social Democrats when in office were not famous for their reforming zeal. They were hardly in the forefront of the battle over workers' participation, co-ops, the break-up of the nationalised industries or home rule for Scotland and Wales. The Right-wing of the Labour Party has been the conservative state socialist wing responsible for the present set-up in the nationalised industries. Have they now suffered a conversion such as would

make St. Paul look as though he had executed a gentle halfturn on a bicycle?" ("Spectator", 11 April 1981).

If, on the other hand, the SDP wishes to stress its newness it needs to tackle new issues with new policies, or at least to bring new thinking to bear on old problems. Otherwise Ian Bradley's conclusion will gather support:

"The Gang of Four have constantly stressed the newness and radicalism of their policies and approach. It comes, perhaps, as a slight disappointment after these promises to find that their clearest policy commitments of all are to those now rather aging distinctly unradical institutions the EEC and NATO." (The Times, 4 August 1981)

Some SDP leaders have, to be fair, written at length on their views. Perhaps the fault lies with me, but I confess to finding their works frustrating. Shirley Williams provides a very pragmatic blueprint of social democratic policies (Politics is for People, Penguin, 1981). Much of it is sensible and supportable; some, such as her support for a "modest steady growth rate" and her enthusiasm for new technology I dissent from; but overall it does not inspire me.

David Owen's book (Face the Future, Cape, 1981) is much more substantial, and is more puzzling. The opening chapters—on the libertarian strand of socialism and on the decentralist tradition—are splendid: thoroughly radical and enthusiastic. Owen writes:

"What is needed is a socialist philosophy outside the restrictive confines of much of the present polarised political debate, which asserts the radical democratic libertarian tradition of decentralised socialism, which revives the concept of fellowship and community within a participatory democratic society, and which sees change not as a threat but as a challenge".

It continues in like vein, even with the virtually obligatory quote from John Stuart Mill, through to the following:

"The decentralist socialist case which at the start of the century was diffuse and utopian, was in retrospect bound to be defeated by the organisational and practical arguments for centralised socialism, particularly when that form of socialism had never even been tried. Half a century later, after the experience of centralised government through the two post-war periods, it is possible to identify its off-spring, corporatism. For the decentralist analysis to carry conviction the nature of corporatism must be exposed and its further extension rejected."

Absolutely! We're right with you so far, David. But alas, it is all downhill after that and the book gets bogged down by a thoroughly professional but highly detailed analysis of recent political history. It is almost as if (at least) two different people had each written chapters. And how can one and the same person be so forthrightly radical as the above quotations and then be so centrist as to describe a Social Democrat as follows:

"He or she is a fusion of the best of both parties. He has the social conscience of the old Labour Party—a commitment to a high-quality free health service, good education, a sensitive understanding of the need for social services for the old and disabled—and the Conservative tradition of readiness to accept that we live in a market economy, with a need to sell in the free world, to make profits in return for hard work. And we have to decide what level of tax is necessary to fund state obligations yet does not stifle initiative. If we can combine those two strands it will be the first time in Britain, because the Labour Party have hang-ups about their commitment to state nationalisation—vital in our view for say gas and railways—and the Tories have considerable antipathy towards the public sector." (Company Magazine, July 1981)

I am aware that there are those Liberals (and Social Democrats) who regard all this as nit-picking and feel that we ought to be concentrating on what unites us so as to get on with an alliance. I do not subscribe to that view, indeed I regard it not only as fundamentally damaging to the political process but also as unhelpful to an alliance.

Any partnership that chooses to ignore basic differences contains within itself the seeds of impending disaster. Superficiality in political thinking, a fondness for short-term "solutions", and a preference for personalities rather than policies, have been the bane of this country since the war and have contributed considerably to the state we are currently in. Liberals, of all people, with a long history of struggle, ought not to be so mesmerised by the possibility of success as to suspend critical judgement.

Judgement is particularly important in relation to the question of equality. I began this chapter linking the different views of equality with a historical perspective and I want now to end it with an examination of the present Social Democrats' emphasis on equality and its implications, particularly for economic growth.

Most of the leading Social Democrats have expressed themselves clearly enough. Shirley Williams says, "A modest steady growth rate could be attained in the industrialized countries providing that inflationary pressures could be restrained and providing also their was sufficient demand. . . . But decentralization and participation are not necessarily conducive to equality. . . . It is a difficult balance to get right. Redistribution of income and wealth through taxation. . . . must continue". (Politics is for People).

David Owen, in a section entitled, "The Pursuit of Equality", writes "Economic growth is necessary to improve Britain's housing stock, to provide jobs for an increasing workforce, to provide for jobs enrichment, and to relieve the tedium of assembly-line production. We will not be able to do this without greater resources. . . . Individual acquisition . . . cannot satisfy everyone's needs and so the nation, city, town or village is driven to make collective provision and this is more equitable and allows more people to achieve their goals". (Face the Future).

David Marquand said at the 1980 Liberal Assembly "Arena" meeting "Equal political rights are not enough—a far greater redistribution of resources is also essential. . . . Redistribution, however, requires a reasonably rapid rate of economic growth. . . . Personal freedom would be meaningless without a much more egalitarian distribution of resources and powers. We would continue to have to make trade-offs between liberty and equality". (Liberalism and Social Democracy, LPD, 1980). Edward Lyons wrote in the Yorkshire Post (13 April 1981) that equality of opportunity was one of the objectives of social democracy, and continued "It is obvious both that social democracy will seek to encourage balanced growth to assist its objectives and that class war impedes such growth".

These views can be traced back to the Social Democrats' guru, the late Anthony Crosland. In a recent book of essays "The Socialist Agenda—Crosland's Legacy" (Cape 1981) David Lipsey writes ". . . growth plays an indispensable role in 'achieving equality without intolerable social stress and a probable curtailment of liberty', namely it enables 'the better-

off to accept with reasonable equanimity a decline in their *relative* standard of living because growth has enabled them (almost) to maintain their *absolute* standard of living despite redistribution. . . . The belief in social equality. . . . still remains the most characteristic feature of socialist thought today' and the one which Crosland wholeheartedly embraced." (Lipsey's quotes are from Crosland's writings)

In the same book Professor Raymond Plant contributes an essay "Democratic Socialism and Equality" which is an agonised but excellent discussion of the moral case for equality and the immense price of achieving it. Liberals cannot dodge the issue. Insofar as equality is usually only expressed in financial terms, the problems of narrowing income and wealth differentials have immense connotations for other key political values, such as personal liberty, state intervention, diversity in communities and pressure for economic growth. At different times, even in recent history, there have been arguments for action in an illiberal direction for the supposedly greater cause of equality.

For the Liberal there are aspects of equality that are absolute. These include equality of esteem and equality of treatment. There can be no compromise with the view that each individual, whatever his failings and weaknesses, is intrinsically worthy of respect—by virtue of his humanity if not his deeds. This view should be at the root of all our educational and penal policy.

The Liberal also should accept that identical human needs should be equally met. The diabetic requires insulin, whether in London or Calcutta; the artist deserves the means of expression, whether black or white. Within the scope of such definition our present inequalities are intolerable. The resulting lack of self-respect is a significant component of the volatile mixture that is now beginning to explode in our inner cities. The Liberal emphasis is on "being" an individual rather than on "having" things.

Economic quality is another matter. Whether through nature or nurture man appears to need incentives to work and to yearn for tangible evidence of material success. Paradoxically there is general assent to the justice of equality, combined with an equally general rejection of the means of achieving it on a broad scale. Even so the crisis in Western capitalism would appear to demonstrate that not only is international inequality morally obscene but that judicious use of the possession of vital raw materials and an industrialised workforce can begin to achieve by force what could not be gained by persuasion. The recent talk of a "Fourth World" indicates the effect of this new dynamic.

In a small way a similar change has been wrought within Britain. Some groups of workers have achieved by brute industrial force what decades of conscience hawking failed to deliver, and have left far behind those with arguably an equal case but no 'muscle'. Compare, for instance, the relative changes in the pay of miners and nurses.

The practical problems of reducing inequality are considerable. Leaving aside equality of opportunity, which is easier to achieve but which makes little contribution to improving society given that it merely raises the plateau of competition for an unchanged number of desired positions, one is left

with equality of distribution. Many of the symbols of parity with those better off than oneself are literally unattainable by everyone (such as the cottage at the seaside) and, given that virtually everyone commits themselves to the maximum, particularly in regard to housing, it would require the most draconian and disruptive laws to enforce a levelling down. Furthermore there are so few wealthy individuals—relatively—that even to confiscate a substantial 'excess' would only generate a tiny sum for everyone else. In other words, to achieve by force the liberal end of equality would require such illiberal means as to render the eventual achievement more destructive than the inequality it replaced.

Nevertheless Liberals must strive to diminish inequality by Liberal means. For instance, the example of the Mondragon Co-operatives in Northern Spain in steadily bargaining away the differentials between the highest and lowest pay within a co-operative demonstrates the most valid way of moving in the right direction. A reduction in the inflation rate would also enable the lower paid more easily to receive proportionally greater increases than the well off.

Questions remain for Social Democrats and Liberals on the balance between liberty and equality. It is encouraging that at least David Marquand appreciated this when he said at the "Arena" meeting at the 1980 Liberal Assembly:

"Social democratic administrations have improved people's standard of living. However, when confronted with the crisis of alienated, powerless individuals in the traditional benevolent post-war state, social democrats have had nothing to say. Thus the time has come to re-examine our inheritance. It would be better to give more emphasis to individual action and to develop a decentralised libertarian version of social democracy. This view might provide the basis for a dialogue with others." (Liberalism and Social Democracy, LPD, 1980).

Chapter 4— Liberalism and Social Democracy

Before one can turn to the urgent question of strategy it is important to consider how much common ground there is; whether the common ground is on important subject areas; and whether the common ground will survive long enough to be effective.

There are some specific policy disagreements. For instance, Liberals are committed to a “no-growth” philosophy and are opposed to nuclear power. Whereas the Social Democrats are committed to pursuing economic growth and are split on nuclear energy. (David Owen for, and Shirley Williams against). On immigration the Social Democrats have a particularly illiberal record, with Roy Jenkins, William Rodgers and Dick Taverne even voting for the appalling 1968 Immigration Act. This appears not to be just a momentary aberration: David Owen in a recent magazine interview made the following comment:

“We are over the main tide of immigration to this country but I don’t think you can stop it entirely nor can you abandon all controls. I would continue with the pattern of control we have now, but I would try to administer it with more humanity towards individual cases than at present.” (“Company”, July 1980).

The experience of Liberals regularly involved in immigration cases is that the ‘pattern of control we have now’ is discriminatory in its aims and is in urgent need of drastic alterations, rather than picking up the pieces of a few individual cases where someone knows how to make a fuss.

It was significant also recently when the prevention of Terrorism Act came before the House of Commons for renewal, that the Liberal MPs were amongst the few members opposing it—with the SDP MPs in the opposite lobby.

On other important issues there are substantial differences of emphasis. Not only on the equality-liberty question discussed in Chapter 3, but on decentralisation, on planning, on the nature of employment and work, and on the purpose of education. The evidence suggests—and I hope that one is not wearing excessively orange-coloured glasses—that in each case Liberals have the more radical position. Ian Bradley (admittedly another Liberal) puts the point clearly: “. . . the Liberal Party has been the home of non-conformists, individualists and libertarian radicals. In more recent years it has made the first tentative steps towards providing a political philosophy for a post-industrial society based on the principles of ecology, local community action and zero economic growth. Neither Labour social democrats nor left-wing Tories have shown much interest in either of these two areas.” (*The Times*, 27 February 1981).

These matters need to be emphasised, not to be bloody minded about Social Democrats, but to make Liberals realise that they have nothing to be apologetic about. The increased popularity and media exposure of Liberals and Liberalism should be grasped with enthusiasm and confidence. If there is an alliance with other political forces then Liberals have a considerable contribution to make. We have made constructive use of our years in the

political wilderness. The 1960’s were a decade in which Liberalism realised its relevance anew in the light of the failure of Labour’s state corporatism and the failure of the Tories’ final imperialistic fling at Suez, and began to produce new ideas and new activists under Jo Grimond’s inspiring leadership. The 1970’s, in contrast, were years in which the new ideas were drawn together and consolidated within the philosophic framework of community politics and the dual approach.

At this year’s Assembly, at Llandudno, the Party has before it the draft of a mid-term programme “Foundations for the Future”—which is the culmination of a crucial three year progression of political thinking, following on the debate on philosophy at Margate in 1979, and on Liberal Values at Blackpool in 1980. The Party has sought to prepare itself for the challenge of the 1980’s facing an extreme and harsh Conservative Government and a doctrinaire yet divided Labour opposition. We have not been content to rely on purely protest votes coming to us, and each Liberal member has a central “bank balance” on which to draw for local application—and negotiation.

The current proposed basis for an alliance is a “A Fresh Start for Britain”, described as a “Statement of principles commended by a joint working party of Liberals and Social Democrats”. The Statement is certainly brief. It has two paragraphs of analysis, three on policy and two paragraphs promising discussions on policy and organisation.

So far as it goes the statement is unobjectionable. Inevitably, and legitimately, it is silent on points of analysis and policy on which the parties differ. My own reaction to it is that, if one leaves aside the references to “the deepening crisis”, it is curiously redolent of Liberal statements of the early 1960’s—a sort of “New Orbits” repeat. Because of that it is frustratingly unsatisfying; it’s all right while one reads it, but soon afterwards one wants something more substantial. A sort of political equivalent of Chinese food. And so far as the causes of the crisis are described as being *entirely* the result of internal political and sociological factors, it is seriously at fault in omitting the world-wide, post Imperial, causes resulting from the beginnings of Third World industrialisation, the high costs of oil, and the subsidised exported productions of non-EEC countries, including COMECON members.

Jo Grimond’s analysis of the Statement (*“Spectator”*, 27 June 1981) should be read in full but his conclusion is particularly important:

“This document is admirable in many respects and is not to be blamed for its lack of detail nor for its failure to cover the whole ground, though some omissions—for example, education—may give trouble. But to me it leaves open the question as to whether its authors are searching for a middle ground—a reformed and diluted variety of statism, a mixed economy in which the mixture is to be much as now (which may be popular); or whether they intend to strike out for a new highly decentralised political economy with drastic changes in our methods of running industry, competition, workers’ ownership, and so on; in fact a total alternative to state socialism.”

Probably the best one can say about the statement is that, firstly, it illustrates how little the two parties easily have in common; secondly, how much more relevant to our current problems is the full, distinctive, Liberal analysis and programme; but thirdly, it will do as a basis for an electoral alliance if one believes that there are *other* compelling reasons for one.

Chapter 5—Strategy

It is because I believe that politics is important and that proposals to ally two separate parties are of immense significance, that I urge detailed and careful consideration of the pros and cons involved. I accept that to gain proportional representation—as an immense benefit to political debate and decision making, rather than to the Liberal Party—is worth a high price, though for Liberals to go into a PR election in a weakened state has serious implications. I accept also that co-operation between parties is essential in a Parliament in which no single party has a majority. Finally, I accept that the time is short for Britain; I share David Marquand's "nightmare" that at the next election the voters might be asked to choose between "two dangerous approaches to politics at the moment, that of the present Tory Cabinet, which wants to roll back the state and cut public expenditure, without worrying about the costs, and that of the neo-Marxist left which sees politics as a war-to-the-death between opposing class interests". (Liberalism and Social Democracy, LPD, 1980).

If Liberals and Social Democrats would in effect cut each other's electoral throat then David Marquand's question is relevant, and one to which this booklet has addressed itself: "Do Liberals and Social Democrats agree enough to fight together against the other two?"

It is also crucial to pay due regard to the protection of the Liberal Party's interests *within* an alliance. Some of those who are keenest on an alliance—who tend to be Liberals who have not won an election in their lives—have had an unfortunate tendency to caricature those of us who have serious reservations about the style and content of an alliance as being "happier that the Liberal Party should stay small and unsuccessful than it should grow in success with allies who share its prescription". (Liberals and Social Democrats, David Hughes, Poland St. Publications, 1981). That is far from the case, but I do want to be sure that the content of an alliance can honestly and confidently be recommended to the electorate as an answer to the country's problems.

An alliance would gain for Liberals the support of a number of parliamentarians with considerable experience in Government, extra media coverage and the help of SDP members and activists in Liberal-fought seats. It could lose for us, particularly in the urban areas, those radical activists who have been attracted to the Liberal movement precisely because of our community politics emphasis and our opposition to the centrist politics—often identified locally with social democrats—that have had such a long-term detrimental effect on our cities.

It is particularly difficult to contemplate an alliance with a new party before it has formulated its constitution and held a formal party conference. There is not, strictly speaking, any formal Social Democratic Party body with which to negotiate and it is not sufficient nor healthy to leave everything to Parliamentary Parties—particularly when, as over the candidature at the Croydon North-West bye-election, the Party has had to protect the Liberal interest in the face of an ambivalent leadership. What-

ever does transpire must be dependent, for each partner, on the other's ability still to deliver its share of the partnership following, for instance, its annual conference.

Liberals need to be aware not only of the benefits that an alliance may bring but also of the dangers that are inherent in a deliberate ceding of influence, both in policy and electoral terms. The history of electoral pacts makes grim reading for Liberals. One of my tasks whilst Local Government Officer at Party HQ in the mid 60's was to go to a number of northern towns and try to persuade the local Liberal Associations to abandon their local election pacts with Conservative or Labour parties.

In each and every case the pact had become bigger than the Party. An alliance that had been entered into to gain seats had to be maintained to save seats, and the Party's organisation had withered away in the seats not fought. Although in some places, such as Southport and Rochdale, we have now transcended the former pact, in many other places, including Bolton, Keighley, Halifax and Huddersfield, Liberal fortunes still lag behind neighbouring towns, largely, I believe, because of the earlier pacts. The parallel with 1906 has also occurred to Robert McKenzie. In his interview on 11 June 1981 in the BBC 2 series "The Pursuit of Power", he put the point to David Steel:

"By the way, have you ever looked at how the Labour Party got off the ground? There was a secret agreement between the Liberal Chief Whip, son of Gladstone, and the nascent Labour Party to arrange standing down for each other, on a secret agreement—and I know you believe in open government openly arrived at—but the Labour Party I suspect would never have got off the ground in 1900, 1906 unless Herbert Gladstone had said, 'look boys, you give us these, we'll give you those' and that's how it happened."

Quite so, and unless the Liberal Party, and its leadership—national and local—is ready and able to negotiate more skilfully than hitherto there is a danger that, *after* the next election, the Party could end up, not with the decisive role, but dependent on the SDP.

There is an old blues song, recorded only once, before the war, entitled "I'm tired of fattening frogs for snakes". It would hardly be to the benefit of the country as a whole, and to the political movement whose cause we have struggled to maintain until the very time when its relevance is increasingly recognised, if we were to hand over our considerable assets without substantial gains for liberalism.

It is a mistaken view of putting the national interest before party interest if one is not convinced that the outcome would be beneficial. It may well be a fine line but we must at least have the confidence to negotiate from strength.

Chapter 6 — Conclusion

I want to see the next election fought by a powerful team of Liberal candidates on a forthright radical Liberal manifesto. The Party's Two-Year Plan commits us to the adoption of 500 candidates by 1983 and that seems a reasonable base. If, on the basis of an *additional* document, such as the Statement of Principles, the Liberal and Social Democratic Parties agree that some of the remaining seats shall be fought by the SDP in return for endorsement of the Liberal team of candidates, then so be it.

Realignment on the Left of politics has been our aim for twenty-five years and we need to ensure that an alliance *is* a realignment of the Left and not the Centre. Liberals, who see the key political spectrum running from diffusion of power to corporatism—private or public—always have difficulty in relating to parties who perceive themselves along a different spectrum, from public ownership to private ownership. But the art of political negotiation is the achievement of the possible; and the stark reality is that much is currently possible. I would welcome a Social Democratic critique of Liberal philosophy and the Liberal programme. There is everything to be gained by a better understanding of where we agree and where we do not.

I said in the philosophy debate at the 1979 Assembly that electoral success might fall into our grasp but that political success had to be worked for. I believe that the truth of that is now vividly apparent. This country has an appallingly low level of political interest and discussion. Along with religion, politics is regarded as a divisive, unhealthy subject for discussion. Elections are not won by parties, they are lost by Governments.

The British electorate has had an ostrich-like belief that things were not particularly bad and that something would always turn up. The last few years have at last frightened at least some of the public and have undermined trust in *both* parties that have been turn and turn about in office for fifty years. What terrifies me, standing where I stand in a huge northern city with all its pressing needs, is that the public sees the SDP, with its newness and its courageous leaders who have risked their careers in leaving Labour and Tory parties for it, as another soft option which yet again relieves them of the need for deep, rigorous thinking about the kind of society that is desirable and possible.

The economy, unemployment, alienation, discrimination, lawlessness all shout that we simply do not have the luxury of time nor of soft options. All of us have to grapple with the aims we want as well as the means available to us. I want to be convinced that social democracy has a real contribution to make to that debate. With such conviction the alliance deserves all support; without it it is a dangerous diversion.

Michael Meadowcroft August 1981

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