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Realignment

the case of the Liberals

'... the average man, having tried the last Labour government, is now despairingly led to believe that if Thatcher Conservatism fails — as I believe it will — the country has no alternative but to turn to the sort of East European socialism advocated by the new masters of the Labour Party.

I believe my main task now is to give shape and substance to an alternative, both as a coherent set of policies and as a central point from which to redraw the map of British politics'. David Steel, *Sunday Times*, February 1980.

Can he do it? Does this view of politics correspond closely enough to what people feel to give him a chance, and can he make the Liberal Party credible not just at local level but also as a force people can envisage leading the country?

The combination of the Liberals with the new Social Democrats has plainly struck something of a chord with the public, even allowing for the undoubted fact that the twanging has been greatly amplified — and at least in part produced — by the news media.

Much the greater publicity has naturally been given to the new phenomenon, and there is inevitably a certain jockeying for position between Liberals and Social Democrats.

But David Steel has so far avoided being swamped by the gushing over the Social Democrats by welcoming them as belated converts. His party, as the long-term occupiers of the ground they both now intend to occupy and extend, has a bigger role to play in British politics than for many years.

The Liberal bridgehead

Since December there have been the first solid signs of widespread

Liberal gains in council by-elections since Mrs Thatcher was elected to power in Westminster. If this grows to produce a large number of gains in the county council elections, as Liberals everywhere are predicting, the party will be well ahead of the schedule set during the 1970-74 parliament — it was two to three years after Edward Heath's June 1970 victory that the Liberals reached an earlier peak. In 1973 they fought six by-elections in England, and won three of them. In August that year the Gallup poll registered nearly 30% Liberal support.

During the 1959-64 Tory government a similar though rather lower and shorter-lived 'Liberal revival' took place. In the spring of 1962, 2½ years after the October 1959 election, Gallup gave the Liberals 25% in its poll, many council seats were gained, and Eric Lubbock overturned a huge Conservative majority in the Orpington by-election.

A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT?

But is there any reason to suppose that this period of disillusion will mark the end of politics as we have known it, whereas at the 1964 election the Liberals only won nine seats against six in 1959, and in 1974, despite a much increased vote, could only push up from 11 to 14?

No one is going to worry unduly if disgruntled Tory voters go off for a brief fling over the next year or two. But we would be very foolish to assume that history moves merely in cycles. To distinguish more fundamental factors from the dramatic ups and downs, we need to look at some longer term trends.

Upwards with hesitations

Table 1 records the changing Liberal fortunes in the ten general elections between 1950 and 1979. It gives a picture of dramatic ups and downs — far more dramatic than those of the Conservative and Labour Parties. This is partly due to the fact that a 5% change in the Liberal vote is much bigger proportionately than a similar change in the much larger votes for the other parties, and partly due to the greater variation in the number of candidates the Liberals put up.

Even allowing for these factors, however, it does still seem that the Liberal vote is subject to great fluctuation, a conclusion borne out by Figure 1, which shows the occasional massive surge of support recorded by opinion polls, often dying away almost as fast as it arose.

Can we draw any long term conclusions from these figures? One recurring theme was confirmed by the 1979 election — the Liberal Party loses support in a period of Labour government. It reached its nadir after the 1945-51 Attlee government. Their notional electoral support — the total percentage of the vote they could expect if they put up candidates in all, instead of only some, seats — fell by a third between 1964 and 1970 and by virtually the same proportion between February 1974 and 1979. This pattern has existed as long as there has been a Labour Party.

Looking at the election results in the light of this very pronounced tendency, we can see a longer term swell under the troughs and peaks. 1979 was better than the result at the end of the previous Labour period of office in 1970, and a great deal better than 1951. Similarly, the 1974 vote was better than that at the end of '13 years of Tory misrule' in 1964. And the increase to the 1974 figure was much more rapid than to 1964. The opinion polls show a similar picture. In the two years after the 1970 election Gallup never recorded more than 10% saying they would vote Liberal in an election: since the last election the figure has never fallen below that figure, fluctuating between 11½ and 20%.

It is thus indisputable that the Liberal Party started the Thatcher period in its strongest electoral position for many years. Where do they go from here?

They reckon — correctly, in my view — that their hope of ending the existing polarity in British politics does not lie in the break up of the Conservative Party. For all the divisions within it, and despite the loss of 4½% of the popular vote since its peak year of 1955, it is hard to see the Conservatives falling below the position of one of the two biggest parties.

The Liberals see their best chance, therefore, in replacing a declining and fragmented Labour Party as the principal focus for an alternative government. This is suggested by the hope evident in the title of a recent Liberal pamphlet, *Labour at 80 — Time to Retire* and, for example, throughout David Steel's open letter to the 'Gang of Three' in the *Guardian*, August 8, 1980. He asks, 'How do we create an electoral coalition which can not only beat the Tones, but go on to give Britain the reforming and radical government it so desperately needs?'

What changes have there been over the last 30 years that make him think an alliance based around his party can replace Labour, as Labour replaced it after the First World War?

Surviving and reviving

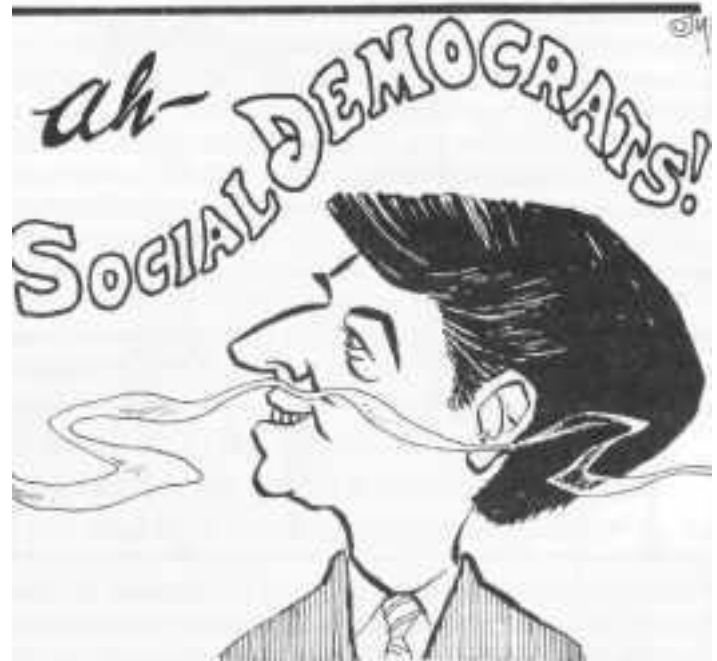
The centre of gravity of the Liberal Party has certainly shifted since 1950. A case could be made out for the view that in the 1950s the Liberal Party only survived by courtesy of the Conservative Party. Indeed, if party leader Clement Davies had accepted Churchill's offer of a coalition in 1951, it might easily have followed the Liberal Unionists of 1886 and the Liberal Nationals of 1931 — gobbled up by the Tories altogether.

In 1955 only one Liberal MP — Jo Grimond in Orkney and Shetland — won a seat against Conservative opposition. It is possible that two of the Welsh MPs — Davies in Montgomery and Roderic Bowen in Cardigan — could have survived Tory intervention, though Rhys Morris's small majority over Labour in Carmarthen would almost certainly have been wiped out.

Most striking, however, was the situation in England at that election. The only two Liberals elected got in because of quite explicit arrangements with the Conservatives, in Huddersfield and Bolton.

If the Tories had not supported them in this way, the Liberals would have been reduced to three MPs — two in rural Wales and one in the most distant constituency in Britain.

Which came first, electoral deals or similarity in politics, is one of those questions which cannot be satisfactorily resolved. What is clear is that the two did in fact go together. The leader of the party until



—THE WHIFF OF POWER

September 1956, Clement Davies, had in 1935 been a 'Simonite' Liberal National, and therefore virtually a Tory. He and the beneficiaries of the Bolton and Huddersfield arrangements voted at the end of October that year for the Tories' ultimatum to Egypt preparatory to the Suez adventure.

This period, with the Liberals virtually a minuscule appendage of the Conservative Party, was the end result of 40 years of decline, during which time they had been comprehensively replaced as the party of change by the Labour Party. In the period before and just after World War I the growing and vigorous labour movement attracted reformers in droves to its own party. Many of them were Liberals, and many of the Liberals' more positive ideas were taken over by Labour, having proved too radical for the Liberal leaders themselves to follow them through. This growth of the Labour Party was partly the result of, and partly itself encouraged, a shift in the balance in the Liberal Party towards its small business wing, and politically to the right, making it less capable still of working with trade unionists.

But paradoxically this failure gave it a particular niche in politics which allowed it to survive: it was, and remains, the party of those who want reform without an attachment with the organised working class. If the labour movement had succeeded in the difficult task of gathering round itself all the reforming forces in British society, perhaps even that niche would have disappeared. But in fact with each successive failure of the politics of right-wing Labour since the war, the space for the Liberals has grown. They have been able to at least partly fill it because a strong leadership has drawn a new generation of radicals into the party and shifted it — in modern terms, of course — back closer to the position it occupied before the Labour Party became the main party of reform.

Liberals — the radical appeal

It was under the leadership of Jo Grimond that the Liberal Party swung round to the left and began to search for the only role which could save it, in the long term, from completely disappearing.

From the beginning he sought a 'realignment of the Left'. He wanted to siphon off the substantial desire for radical reform from the Labour Party and channel it into support for what he considered a new political force, uncontaminated by the bureaucracy, collectivism

Table 1 Liberal Election Statistics 1950-79 Great Britain only

Year	%	'Electoral support'*	Candidates	MPs	Second places
1950	9.3	10.5	475	9	17
1951	2.6		109	6	9
1955	2.8		110	6	11
1959	6.0		215	6	26
1964	11.4	16.5	361	9	55
1966	8.6		308	12	26
1970	7.6	11.0	328	6	26
1974 Feb	19.8	22.0	517	14	145
1974 Oct	18.8	18.8	619	13	102
1979	14.1	14.8	576	11	81

*This column should be treated with caution, and is included partly as a corrective to the previous column. It is meant to give an estimate for what the Liberal vote would have been, had they stood in all British seats, allowing for the fact that they would have received fewer votes in the seats they did not in fact contest. Figures 1964-79 from the appropriate *British General Election* volume.

or anti-individualism of socialism. Only in this way could the Conservative Party be challenged with serious hope of success.

According to David Steel, Grimond 'saw the Liberal Party's role more as the catalyst to bring that about rather than the vehicle to propel him into Number Ten at the head of a Liberal administration. His policy profoundly shocked more traditional Liberals dedicated to a simplistic return of a Liberal Party government, and although the party was devoted to him personally they were suspicious of what one prominent lady described as his "a-whoring after foreign women".'¹

Whatever the literal truth of that account — it coincides closely with Steel's own approach — there is no doubt that Grimond went out of his way to attract current members of the Labour Party like John

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Pardoe, and to compete with Labour for the allegiance of others. David Steel himself treats as only 'an exaggeration' the claim that he was close to joining the Labour Party in 1959, and suggests he might well have done so if Gaitskell had permanently defeated the Left and the unions in his attempt to abandon Clause Four of the Labour Party constitution.

Grimond encouraged the 'radicals' in the party and gave them their head, without worrying too much whether the party or he himself would agree with all they did and said. After all, there was no immediate prospect that he would have to put policies into practice; the main thing was to generate some excitement, give the impression a new movement was growing and attract people with ideas and enthusiasm.

In this he was successful. Policy statements and pamphlets churned off the presses. The Young Liberals and the Union of Liberal Students were by the mid 60s shocking many in the main party by their radicalism which fused, or at least formed an alliance with, the 'community politics' which has since won Liberals so many council seats — and even achieved some success at the parliamentary level.

Jeremy Thorpe, who took over from Grimond in 1967, always gave the impression of wishing that 'Jo's Red Guards' would go away. His too naked and obvious ambition — the other side of which was the despair on his face as the Liberal losses rolled in in the 1970 election — led him to fear that they would do or say something to lose him some vital group of voters.

To be fair, however, Thorpe had a much more difficult task than Grimond; namely to move the Liberals on from being an amiable group with some interesting if unrealistic ideas to being a party with its teeth in 'the red meat of power'. And in February 1974 he came quite close to it, with 6 million votes, 14 MPs and a hung parliament. But his ill-managed talks with Edward Heath, as well as throwing

Table 2 Dealignment in figures

	1964	1970	1974	1979
% of electors with very strong Con or Lab identification:	40	39	26	20
% of Labour identifiers:				
in favour of more nationalisation:	57	39	53	32
in favour of spending more on social services:	89	60	43	30
who do <i>not</i> believe unions have too much power:	59	40	42	36

Figures from the *British Election Study* at Essex University.

doubt on his own judgement in a crisis, showed that he did not have behind him a coherent political force which could be thrown into negotiations with other parties. Leading Liberals sounded off in all directions at the hint of a deal, thus tying Thorpe's hands completely.

This confusion must have dismayed future leader, then chief whip, David Steel, since realignment, inevitably involving the possibility of all sorts of deals, was the basis of his political life. So he raised the issue again in a party political broadcast that summer, arguing for a government of national unity: 'We are ready and willing to participate in such a government if at the next election you give us the power to do so'. Thorpe fought the October 1974 election seeking not the ability to hold the balance of power, but 'a total breakthrough'. In fact he achieved rather less than in February, and Steel resigned the post of chief whip; he was out of sympathy with Thorpe and saw no future for the Liberals in this all or nothing approach.

He was elected leader in July 1976 on the basis of a 'readiness to work with others wherever we see what Jo Grimond has called the break in the clouds — the chance to implement any of Liberal policies'. And in his first Assembly speech as leader he said, to furious demonstrations from a section of the delegations: 'We must not give the impression of being afraid to soil our hands with the responsibilities of sharing power. If people want a more broadly based government they must vote Liberal to get it. And if they vote Liberal we must be ready to help provide it.'

The Lib-Lab pact

It is therefore clear that the Lib-Lab pact of 1977-78 was no chance, one-off event, but a dry run for a future coalition government, and part of a political project started 20 years before.

In terms of positive policies the Liberal Party got very little out of it - proportional representation for direct elections to the European Assembly and devolution, the only two positive measures mentioned, both failed. Indeed it is striking that the first two items in Steel's first draft of an agreement were not substantive policies at all, but details of how the pact would work day to day.

In his book *A House Divided* he makes strenuous efforts to persuade us that Callaghan was doing more than simply use Liberal votes as long as he could do so without giving anything away. But it looks very much as if an elaborate charade was being played out to help Steel to continue to sell the pact to an increasingly restive Liberal Party. If this was so, it was successful, for the Special Assembly Steel had to face in January 1978 did not in the end tie him down with specific conditions, but allowed him to end the pact fairly tidily.

The dry run had shown that the machine could just about be kept on the road. But how would it perform if called upon to carry a real load? And what direction would it carry it in? Steel has insisted on getting endorsement of the principle of being prepared to work with either Labour or the Tories. But I have to agree with the meaning if not the language of a remark of Callaghan's, which Steel reports without comment: 'I can't quite imagine you crawling into bed with Margaret Thatcher.' Indeed since then Steel has publicly stated that he would not enter an alliance with Thatcher.

David Steel himself has a record of decency which makes it hard to envisage: he sponsored and piloted through parliament the Abortion Act 1967, he fought Callaghan's Bill to keep out East African Asians in 1968, he was president of the Anti-Apartheid Movement 1967-70.

The growth points in the Liberal Party are being produced by the community politics radicals — and after the May 1979 election he appointed one of them to be his personal assistant. He also has the reputation of listening to party opinion far more than Jeremy Thorpe.

Changing voting patterns

At the same time as the Liberals have been positioning themselves to

be a non-socialist alternative for people who want to get the Tories out, the classic picture of British politics as split between two parties whose support derives mainly from different occupational classes has also been changing.

In their study of the five elections 1964 to October 1974², Ivor Crewe, Bo Särilvik and James Alt show that over this period the partisan feelings of electors towards Labour and Conservative parties weakened markedly; that party support corresponded less to the class of the sample questioned; that Labour partisanship weakened particularly sharply among young working class trade unionists; and that the decline in Labour's support (though not in that of the Tories) was associated with long term disagreement with Labour policies on nationalisation and disapproval of 'union power'.

These findings correspond well with the most remarkable feature of the February 1974 election: that with an unpopular government the principal opposition party not only failed to capitalise on the situation, in terms of votes, but actually finished up with fewer votes than the government, having declined from 44% to 38% of the total poll.

The process continued in 1979, at least as far as Labour is concerned: there were fewer Labour 'partisans' than Tories for the first time since the data — recorded in 1963, and they were weaker than ever in their attachment. All except the strongest Labour supporters had views closer to official Tory policies than Labour ones on the majority of issues in 1979. In these circumstances it is not surprising that Labour partisanship has steadily weakened over at least the last 15 years.

Another new study, by Richard Rose³ using a large (about 10,000) Gallup sample, points in the same direction — an increasing fluidity among the electorate. Rose finds that voters' social position as a whole 'has been of declining significance from 1959 to 1979, accounting for 21.0% of the two-party division of the vote in the earlier election, and 12.1% most recently.'

Most strikingly, within that generalisation, the biggest decline has been in the fit between occupation and voting: 'In 1959, the electorate was first of all divided into middle and working class groups, the former 84% Conservative, the latter, 60% Labour. . . . By contrast, 20 years later the biggest division in the electorate was that separating owner-occupiers from tenants; the former were 67% Conservative, and the latter, 61% Labour'. There has also, he says, 'been a steady decline in Labour's advantage among manual workers who see themselves as working class, from a lead of 42% in 1964 to 20% in 1979'.

At the 1979 election, 'the largest single social group — English Protestant urban manual workers, the presumptively 'core' group of working class politics — divides its votes equally between the Conservative and Labour parties (43.5% each)'.

The point of quoting these studies is not to suggest that Labour cannot win elections in future; but the electorate is clearly more fluid



than for many years. Nor is the point to suggest that Labour cannot win with a left programme. Labour's leaders over the years have not exactly set about winning or reinforcing people's support for socialism. Indeed, it is only by recognising the failure of the Wilson-Callaghan years and providing a vision of the future that Labour can hope to succeed at the next election — and given the changes since the war, a revived '45 will scarcely be adequate to the task either.

But until and unless such a revitalised socialism is put before the people, the crumbling of the postwar two-party dichotomy makes the situation progressively more favourable for a party with the good fortune not to have been in office for 60 years, which can present itself as radical, can challenge the Tories as (in Edward Heath's words) 'the party of unemployment', but has no commitment to socialism or links with the unions.

THE CHALLENGE FOR LIBERALS

Faced with this apparently golden opportunity — a collapsing economy, a hard-faced Tory government, a leftward-moving Labour Party, a less socialist electorate, a higher electoral base to start from, a bigger core of activists and fairly attractive councillors and candidates — how can the Liberals fail to become, with the Social Democrats, a decisive force?

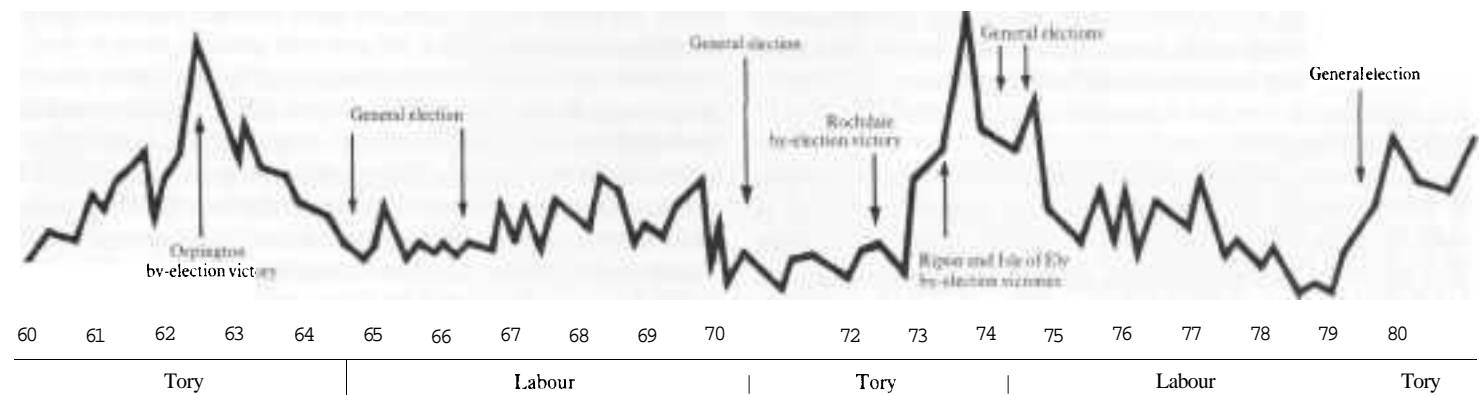
There are several factors which could each on its own make more

¹ David Steel, *A House Divided*, p2.

² 'Partisan De-Alignment in Britain 1964-74' in *British Journal of Political Science*, April 1977.

³ 'Class does not equal party', *Studies in public policy*, No. 74, Strathclyde University.

Fig 1 Liberal rating in the Gallup Poll 1960-81



difficult the achievement of an electoral breakthrough.

First, the sheer size of the electoral task, given the electoral system.

Second, the fuzziness, still, of the Liberals' image, caused at least in part by something deeper: the incoherence of their ideology.

Third, the possibilities of a conflict between the Liberals and the Social Democratic Party.

A mountain to climb

If the Liberal Party is to have enough leverage to force either Labour or Conservative to agree to proportional representation — a key part of Steel's strategy for remoulding British politics — they will have to

positioning themselves to be a non-socialist alternative for people who want to get the Tories out

win something like 50 seats. Is this scale of advance really possible?

They came within striking distance in February 1974. In votes they advanced to such an extent that both major parties declined for the first time since 1922. Despite standing in 100 fewer seats than Labour, they won more than half as many votes as Labour. In England their voting strength was 2/3 that of Labour and in the south of England outside Greater London they actually polled higher than Labour did — 2,247,000 to 2,207,000. Between them, in this area, Labour and Liberal outvoted the Tories more than 55:45, though the Tories won 101 of the 124 seats. Steel must be looking at this part of the country with particular hope, especially as this voting pattern is very similar to that in his own constituency up to 1964, after which he won it in a by-election by squeezing the Labour vote.⁴

The fact that the Liberals' voting success did not translate into Members at Westminster — in February 1974 they won only four seats to Labour's 19 even in non-metropolitan southern England — is an example of a problem which will continue to plague them.

In addition to the unfairness of the British electoral system to any party with less than (in a three-party situation) a third of the votes, the Liberal Party suffers from having its support spread relatively evenly throughout the country and throughout the social spectrum.

Because a significant amount of class voting still exists between the other two main parties, and constituencies usually contain an imbalance of classes; and because Labour and Conservatives show great regional variation, the Liberal vote is usually more clustered round the average than other parties. They therefore achieve many respectable results, lose few deposits — and win few seats. Steed and Faull⁵ calculate that, as an example, if there were a uniform swing in England at the next election such as to give Liberals, Labour and Conservatives one third of the votes each, the Liberals would still only get 56 seats, to the Tories' 179 and Labour's 252.

This argument depends not only on the social profile of the three parties remaining the same as in 1974, but also on a projected increase in Liberal support being uniform. In 1979 it was not. The best-placed candidates did substantially better than average, and so did a small number of effective 'community polities' Liberals.

Is activism enough?

One successful community activist is Councillor Eric Flounders who, in Bethnal Green and Bow, was the only Liberal in England to come second to Labour (the MP is Ian Mikardo). He achieved a swing from Labour of 14.7% on the basis, he says, of only three functioning wards out of eight — and those in the traditionally solid Labour area. Activity has now spread to seven wards, including areas represented by Liberal MPs before the war, and Flounders is confident of winning 21 of the 24 council seats in the parliamentary constituency in 1982.

The GLC election may be a pointer to whether his hopes are justified that the work at local level can turn this seat where 60-70% used to vote Labour into a Liberal one next time.

Stuart Mole, in Chelmsford is a community activist who had already built a big base by 1974. In the effort to unseat Norman St John Stevas, the Liberals have squeezed the Labour vote down from 46% in 1970 to 9% in 1979. Between 1970 and 1979 their own vote rose from 8% to 42%. After the redrawing of the parliamentary boundaries, and taking account of by-elections since the May 1979 District Council elections, it now looks as if Mole would defeat Stevas in a general election.

Where it exists, then, Liberal activism can produce the electoral goods. But there are not many areas where Liberals have taken on, on a mass scale and over a long time, the genuinely hard work of taking up masses of local complaints, delivering regular and lively locally-produced 'Focus' news/propaganda sheets. The 1979 party Assembly declared that 'Community Politics should remain the primary strategic emphasis of Liberalism'. This is happening in rather more places than it was before, even in a few parts of London, generally one of the most backward areas in Liberal terms: in Shoreditch, next door to Tower Hamlets, Jeffrey Roberts won a by-election after such work in an almost 100% council housing ward with a swing of 40% against Labour.

But Liberals will concede that there are no more than 20-30 seats where the level of activism is such as to bring parliamentary success. They rely on a '1974 plus' effect of a generally higher level of Liberal activism (leading to, they hope, control of the Isle of Wight County Council this year and a crop of District Councils in 1982 and 1983) and a stronger groundswell of support which together will take Liberals from second to first place in many of their best areas. If this happened they would expect to win 50 seats even without the Social Democrats, and the 20 best with 'very big majorities'; but clearly local activism alone will not bring the breakthrough.⁶

Images and policies

For a party to win through electorally on a national scale, it has to have a clear national political appeal, and to be able to present a clear image, with sharply focused policies, to the electorate.

If nothing else, the Liberal Party conveys an image of a nice party, with nice policies, a nice leader, and nice candidates who get the streets cleaned.

Its trouble is that throughout the postwar period, it was indeed, in the popular mind, almost nothing else.

In their study of the Liberal surge in votes of 1974⁷, Alt, Sarlvik and Crewe found that image played a much bigger part in people considering voting Liberal than in the case of the other two parties. So far as issues are concerned only half of even those who voted Liberal had even one preference for Liberal policy over Labour and Conservatives, against a comparable figure of 70% for the other parties. (Of course this may be partly because, the Liberals being fewer, the issues which concerned them were not put to the people questioned in the survey.)

Liberals were marked out more by general feelings than by views on particular policies. They tended to feel that both unions and big business have too much power, and their degree of dissatisfaction, both with the two main parties and with a range of aspects of life in general, was relatively great. This echoes the view of Michael Steed that 'powerlessness' is a big factor; otherwise put, the protest vote.

And as Alt, Sarlvik and Crewe say, 'A diffuse image, or lack of widely known policies, may be an asset in the short term, but the question of whether a long term electoral breakthrough can be made without a more specific image continues to hang over the Liberal Party'.

This has been partially recognised, at least for the last few years, by the Liberal leadership. It is now their practice to eschew the production of more and more policies, and concentrate on pushing forward and making more concrete those they already have — in particular constitutional reform including proportional representation, long term incomes policy (which they alone espouse openly), 'industrial partnership' and support for the Common Market.

But it is difficult for the Liberal leaders to come out with a clear, distinct and challenging set of policies because of the danger that it would contain of exposing the division in the party between 'centre party Liberals' like Lord Wigoder, Chief Whip in the Lords ('We are, in fact, a centre party, despite the views of a few of our activists who endeavour to adopt some other stances') and the more radical Liberals and their 'community politics' approach.

It was noticeable, for example, that the ten point economic programme issued in January ignores the resolution passed at the 1979 Assembly calling for an economic policy that 'does not depend on continued economic growth' and the 1980 Assembly commitment to the phasing out of nuclear power, and makes only limited proposals for the involvement of workers in decision making in industry.

Radicals and centrists

The growth-point is still, as it has been for years, the radical, community politics section, which developed out of the 'red guard' Young Liberals of the mid to late 60s. After the 1970 election failure a group of them met to consider what to do. Some thought they should leave en bloc and join the Labour Party (as Peter Hain in fact did some years later). But in the end they stayed, and won at least formal acceptance of the 'community politics' strategy at the 1971 Assembly, which has been reiterated with growing majorities at Liberal Assemblies ever since, as it has been seen to produce the goods in terms of electoral success.

Indeed many of those who vote for it only do so for the electoral success, and do not really accept the approach, which as well as the redressing of grievances, involves for the real radicals encouraging people to take and use power for themselves. Such an approach, if seriously pursued could raise the possibility of the kind of self activity and struggle which the Left sees as an essential prerequisite for the establishment of socialism. This is not surprising, since some of the radical Liberals argue (in private) that they are not far distant from a kind of libertarian socialism.

Over the next year or two Liberals of this variety could win control of a number of District Councils; it will be interesting to see what they do.

These forces represent an element in liberalism and the Liberal Party which can work with, and indeed contribute to a democratic alliance, sufficiently broadly conceived. They encompass the successors of those who, 45 years ago, were addressed by Stephen Spender (in his version of the case for communism, published by the Left Book Club) as 'those who care for freedom more than for the privileges which have given freedom of intellect to individuals in one particular class; those who are prepared to work towards a classless communist society, if they are convinced that freedom will be enlarged in that way'.

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But even this section of the Liberal Party is for the most part limited by a failure to realise that individuals and individualism are not enough to achieve change and that social forces and the bodies which organise them are also necessary. They are, for example, dismissive of and partially hostile to the unions. The individualism which underpins the ideology of this section can also, of course, act as the justification for the radical Right exemplified by Ronald Reagan and to some extent by Margaret Thatcher; and the more radical the individualism, the greater the danger of elements of right wing policy being incorporated.

But these are not yet, and perhaps do not have the ideological weight to become, the dominant force in the Liberal Party. That's still exemplified by the MPs who, we should not forget, mostly represent constituencies which would otherwise return Tory MPs. The party as a whole remains committed to a free enterprise, capitalist ideology and politics, and it is a reforming and democratising version of this which it will present to the electorate. The need for an alliance with the Social Democrats will make this tendency more definite, and in so doing increase the underlying tensions between the Liberals' two wings. In the end, one can only wait to see which, if any, section manages to impose permanently its view of the constellation of elements which should make up the Liberal approach as it bids for political power.

⁴Incidentally, it is clear that figures for Britain on a whole hide significant trends in votes for other parties too. Thus taking, for example, the nations of the mainland, in 1979 in England, electoral support for the Tories was at its highest since the war, except for probably 1955 and just possibly 1959. In Wales, they had their greatest support since at least 1935. In Scotland their support has collapsed since 1955, when they won more than half the votes there. It is this, plus the defection of the Northern Ireland Unionists, which gives the false impression of a general decline in Conservative votes and leads some people to think that 'Thatcherism', though a tougher form of Conservatism, has shallower roots among the people as a whole. By contrast, Labour's decline up to the 1979 election, though not so sharp anywhere as the Tories' in Scotland, is spread through all three countries.

⁵'First Past the Post': *The Great British Class Handicap*, Michael Steed and David Faull, published by Liberal Action Group for Electoral Reform.

⁶The Liberal Party's national organisation is very weak by comparison with Labour and Conservative, and could not even attempt to substitute for local activity. The latest estimate of membership (no national records are kept) is 150,000-200,000 compared with about 300,000 individual membership for Labour and 1½ million (on a looser basis) for the Tories. Including the 11 MPs, there are probably no more than 50 people working full-time for the Liberal Party. Unlike the Labour and Conservative Parties, it can balance its books, but the money involved is much less — £300,000 was the total headquarters budget in 1979.

⁷'Angels in Plastic: the Liberal Surge in 1974', *Political Studies*, Vol. XXV, No. 3.

The Social Democrats

The main question now, though, about the Liberal part in the possible realignment of politics, is clearly the Social Democratic Party. It is clear that the Parliamentary Labour Party and the right wing union leaders are sufficiently scared of its possible success to have forced Michael Foot to 'fight again' in October, despite his call at the Wembley conference for the decisions reached there to be accepted.

A number of Social Democrats had, as Labour candidates, only small majorities in 1979, and it would be surprising if, with a Conservative revival at the end of their term of office, at least some of these were not lost by Labour either to the sitting MPs or to the Tories.

At least as important is the likelihood that the new party will finally shake loose the many Labour voters whose attachment, as I argued earlier, has become less and less firm over the last 20 years. There are 40 Labour MPs with majorities of less than 5%, and they must be very worried.

Whether a Social Democratic Party on its own can do more than queer Labour's pitch must still be very doubtful, despite the remarkable opinion poll results. It is so far not only a head without a body, it is also a head with very few thoughts in it. Its policy statements so far, in addition to containing such classic ambiguities as 'equality without stifling enterprise', hardly amount to more than an expression of the uncontroversial view that Britain would be a nicer place to live in if it were rather more like heaven.

To be fair, the Social Democrats themselves recognise this. John Horam, one of the 11 Labour MPs initially committed to the CSD, wrote in the *Guardian* a week before, 'Social democracy has itself to be revitalised, if people are to see once again its positive virtues'. He is right to be concerned. At present it looks as if the Social Democrats are attempting to present the consensus politics of the last 30 years — which got us into this mess — as a fresh initiative.

Prospects for alliance

An alliance between the Liberals and the Social Democrats is plainly necessary if they are not to cancel each other out.

The Social Democrat leaders have always recognised this, and have had no party to convince. David Steel has recognised it and has so far had an easier time convincing the Liberals than he might have expected; perhaps the experience of the Lib-Lab pact is paying off.

There is still resistance, based on resentment of the Liberals being used as a 'doormat', on opposition to 'socialism', and (from some radicals) on opposition to 'soggy centrism'.

But Steel is plainly determined not to let slip this chance to achieve what he has worked all his political life for, and he is ably backed up in inner-party struggle by his mentor Jo Grimond, who still carries weight with the 'radicals'.

Steel's step by step approach — that there could be no real joint discussion of policy until the new Social Democratic party was formed, and that policy discussions must precede any electoral co-operation — should allow him to carry his party along.

The Liberal Party is strong enough to insist that any alliance is constructed in such a way as to prevent the Social Democrats breaking free of their embrace, having used them to get going. Its national and local organisation, though small, does at least exist. It has over 1,000 councillors, and will have substantially more after the May elections. In February the Gallup poll showed it with 20% support, higher than at any time since its *annus mirabilis* of 1973; at the equivalent time into the Heath government it was hovering around the 10% mark, and continued to do so for a further nine months. Finally, in David Steel the Liberals have the leader most people would like to see at the head of any new grouping. Liberal supporters of an alliance can argue that

the Social Democrats would be prisoners of the Liberals. In other words, it could be sold to Liberals as a way of prising loose a significant section of Labour voters to, in the long term, vote Liberal.

There would of course be a lot of messy problems. The seats at present held by at least four of the Social Democrats face drastic changes in the parliamentary redistribution due before the next election, and who is to say that they have a prescriptive right to one of the new seats in the area, over the local Liberals? The Liberals in Social Democrat Richard Crawshaw's Liverpool Toxteth seat are already selecting a candidate and hold seven of the 12 council seats in the constituency. David Steel has given an undertaking that no local Liberal Association will be forced to give way, and the Young Liberals have already said they will insist on fighting any such seat the main party does not.

But in the end it seems likely that the bulk of Liberals will feel that they have more to gain than they have to lose by some sort of arrangement.

The Left's Response

Such a combination would be a significant force. It would stand a good chance of winning a substantial block of seats in 1983/84, and while some of them would be Tory seats in the south of England (where the alliance would help the Liberals squeeze the Labour vote) Labour could lose a number of seats either won by the alliance or handed to the Tories by splitting the vote.

Does Labour face a re-run of February 1974, when even the massive unpopularity of Heath and the decline of his vote could not prevent Labour's vote falling too? Or will a polarisation at the top of politics be matched this time by a process at the base which will enable Labour to win on a programme of fundamental change?

Which of these occurs will depend to a great extent on whether the Liberal/Social Democratic group or the Labour Party succeeds best in developing and campaigning for a programme which corresponds to people's felt needs and is seen as a credible and realistic alternative to the Thatcher years. At present there is a danger of the Left being so buoyed up by success that this need will be ignored.

This article is not about a programme for a Left victory; but having raised the problem, I ought at least to suggest some areas where the Left will have to develop its approach if it is to win.

One key element must be the transformation of the degree of control people have over their lives and their environment. The growth of people's feeling of powerlessness, referred to earlier, suggests that this would tap a deep vein of popular support. The injection of such democratic demands could sharply change people's perception of the Left's programme and political activity in all fields: in the locality and in the workplace; in the defence of public services and in the demand for public ownership. In any case, each democratic demand won and successfully used, however small, increases people's confidence in their own capacities, and raises afresh the issue of the extension of democracy in the control of the basic processes of society. Socialism must and can be linked with the issue of democracy. At present the Liberals have a 15 year start on us; it is they who are identified with these issues. What we need to do is not deride their proposals, but come up with our own, actually fight for them, and help people to see that the logic of the process goes far beyond what most Liberals would be prepared to contemplate.

If we cannot make democracy an integral part of our vision, the Liberals will have this vital question to themselves. It could transform their otherwise not very inspiring programme of incomes policy, Keynesian reflation and support for the Common Market into a vote winning package. Between 1970 and 1974 the Liberals on their own increased their popular support from 11 to 22%. Starting from about 15% in 1979, they and the Social Democrats together could block the way to a Labour victory in 1984. □