



TELEVISION AND THE SDP

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The time when media commentators and political scientists sat steadfastly in front of TV sets clutching stopwatches, had, we all thought, long since passed. It became increasingly apparent that the scenario of television bias against the Left was played semantically and visually *within* the structures of formally balanced broadcasting — a scenario documented by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, the Centre for Mass Communications at Leicester, and the Glasgow Media Group. The much heralded advent of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) has changed all that. We are on the verge of nothing less than a rewriting of the rules governing access to political television.

Outside a general election campaign, the SDP is able to sustain a high degree of televisual publicity by virtue of the journalistic category of 'news value'. However, as far as a general election is concerned, a party's 'newsworthiness' has not yet so far been allowed to intrude significantly into the proportionally representative schedules of the campaign. Even the National Front, around whom headline stories erupted following demonstrations at Leicester and Southall less than two weeks before polling day in 1979, did not receive any more attention *as a*

political party than the SNP. The airwaves, during general elections, are policed according to a well established system of access, a system that may now, in the wake of the Social Democrats, be discarded.

Existing policy and practice

The rules governing the access to party political broadcasts (PPBs) are based upon the *Aide Memoire*, agreed between the BBC and the political parties in 1949, later revised by the BBC, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party on 3 April 1969. A somewhat elusive body, known as the Committee on Party Political Broadcasting, consisting, usually, of the three main parties, the BBC and the IBA, meets annually to allocate the number of political broadcasts on television and radio, to be granted the parties for that year. The allocation of PPBs is related to the number of votes cast at the previous general election. In practice, this criteria extends only as far as those parties yielding votes of several millions: the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Parties. For a new party to receive the benefits of a PPB they must put up fifty candidates nationally. More importantly the criteria regulating PPBs — a form of proportional representation — extends to include all forms of access to airtime during the campaign. Inevitably, the beneficiaries of such broadcasting policy are the three major parties, whose combined presence leaves little space for anyone else. Their regulated dominance is exemplified when one considers that in 1979, the largest minor party (after the Liberal Party), the Scottish National Party (SNP), received just less than one-twelfth of each of the major parties' (Labour or Conservative) vote in October 1974, and accordingly received access to just less than one-twelfth of each of the major parties share of the programmes.

The logic of this system is to maintain the status quo. For a party to develop a sufficient electoral mandate to enable them to play any significant part in the television election, they

must do so outside the TV arena. This inevitably makes it difficult for a party like the Ecology Party, despite the comparative success of their European counterparts, to break into British political life. For the SDP, to 'break the mould' of British politics, they need the support of television.

Present policy would not seem to favour the televisual chances of a new party which, like the SDP has no electoral base at all. It could be argued that the SDP do have a mandate—consisting of the votes cast for the fourteen sitting SDP MPs at the last election — but even if this argument is accepted it would not entitle them to a meaningful share of election television. The votes collected by the thirteen Labour and one Conservative MP, sitting under the banner of Social Democracy amount to, in total, 313,664 — a fairly paltry figure in comparison with the SNP's 839,617 in October 1974, or to the Liberal Party who had more than seventeen times that number of votes behind them when entering the 1979 campaign.

There are three possible alternative systems which could be appropriated to circumvent this problem. The most radical — and the least likely -- option would involve a movement towards a pluralistic media, a form in which the traditional rights of hegemony would no longer be the sacred

heritage of the already dominant political forces, etched as they are into the structure of British political life. Such a movement would open the floodgates to a multifarious spectrum of political opinion, of which the SDP would be but a part. The reluctance of television to take such a step—furthering the cause of groups from the National Front to the Socialist Workers Party -- has its testimony in the existing system.

Indeed it is ironic that the structure of a television election which has so effectively silenced political voices outside the three main parties, should now be challenged by a party whose overwhelming commitment is to the status quo.

A more likely alternative would be to adopt the criteria used in the USA to give John Anderson a televisual voice during the last presidential election — namely, the opinion poll. The irony of such a method is that success in opinion polls is substantially affected by media coverage; the astonishing success of the SDP in the polls so early in their history can hardly be attributed to anything else. The mandate required to break into general election television would be reduced to a self-fulfilling prophecy, placing even greater power in the hands of television editors and producers. Furthermore, for programme planning to be

at the whim of such an unstable barometer would make the orchestration of a television election very difficult indeed.

A third and most likely option would involve the alliance between the Liberals and the SDP. The Liberal Party has already (under the existing system) a sizeable televisual space reserved during an election campaign for David Steel and his small collection of MPs. If the SDP were granted the right to encroach on this space, such an alliance would be wholly to the SDP's advantage. Since the Liberal Party themselves would clearly suffer from such an arrangement, the terms of any electoral coalition would hinge largely on them.

What is at stake here should not be underestimated. To allow the SDP to go where no new party has been before, via a restructuring of the rules governing election television, would inevitably have an effect on voting. Given that the very existence of the SDP involves bad publicity for the Labour Party, this effect could be to the serious detriment of Labour's chances. Furthermore, it heralds a new phase in the relationship between television and the state, from negative intervention (sustaining the status quo) to positive intervention, granting the televisual media power to 'break the mould' of British politics. D

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