



Chris Husbands
The Politics of Confusion

The old loyalties have weakened and the two-party system is now under threat

The success so far of the SDP has clearly been based almost entirely upon negative rather than positive motives, upon protest voting and perverseness rather than upon any genuinely and consistently articulated ideology of the political 'middle ground'. However, it is important to recognise the nature of the factors that have underlain the SDP's growth, because they may have implications for its short and medium term development. It must be appreciated that those considerations which have been adduced to predict the likely evanescence of the SDP may in fact imply the reverse, that its support may not be quite so volatile after all. The SDP's general lack of policies; the lack-lustre nature of most of its leadership; the deadbeat character of some of the MPs and local councillors whom it has attracted; the self-confessed political naivety of many of its activists; the fact that one of its few widely known policy positions — continued membership of the EEC — is opposed by many of its nominal supporters': in a more rational political world where voting behaviour was predicated upon balanced and informed judgements about competing alternatives, these defects would quickly be fatal, producing uncertainty and disillusion even among its most favourably disposed supporters. However, the SDP's rise has occurred in a political climate in which negative voting has become so widespread that considerations of this sort may impinge only slowly upon the motives and attitudes of those voters disposed towards the party.

Part of this article argues that the SDP has been established at a time when political circumstances were perhaps at their most auspicious for the party's success. To be sure, this was not intentional since events in the Labour Party were the precipitating causes of the SDP's foundation; even so, it will be shown that its take-off has occurred at a time when several long term and short term factors

have coincided to produce the most propitious situation for a new party making an appeal largely on the basis of spurious novelty.

There are certain voting trends in British politics that are by now well known and have been widely discussed. There is the decline in support for the two major parties. In October 1951 96.8% of the United Kingdom's turnout of 82.5% voted Labour or Conservative. By May 1979 only 80.8% of votes were cast for Conservative or Labour on a turnout of 76.0%, and the Conservatives' overall majority of 43 seats was won, as in 1970, from the support of barely a third of the eligible electorate.

As well as a trend away from the two major parties, there has been a corresponding decline in the strength of partisan attachment to these parties, even among those who nominally identify with them. This trend is now also well known, having been documented by a succession of poll data since the early 1960s.² One consequence of the decline in the proportion of the electorate with strong partisan attachments has been increased political detachability and volatility among the electorate. Symptoms of this are several.

One is dramatic oscillation in the support of the individual major parties, as reported month-by-month in the opinion polls, whether this has been for the government or the opposition party.³ The Gallup Poll's month by month support for the 1951-55 Tory Government never rose above 48% or fell below 40%. The support for the 1955-59 Tory government varied between 48% and (briefly) 33.5% and registered almost no impact at the time of the Suez crisis. The range for the 1959-64 Tory government was from 50% to a brief minimum of 31% at the time of the Profumo affair. The 1966-70 Labour government at one point early in its term had the expressed support of 53.5% per cent of the electorate, though it also reached a

new nadir in May and June 1968 of 28%. The 1970-74 Tory government ranged between 47% and 31.5% and the last Labour government's support varied from a maximum of 48.5% to a minimum of 30%. The Thatcher government has never been supported by more than 42% and at 26.5% its November Gallup Poll rating plumbed depths reached by no other recent government.

Electoral volatility has also revealed itself in dramatic swings against the sitting government in parliamentary by-elections since the mid-1960s. Swings of up to 20% and more have become far from unknown in by-elections in the last fifteen years.

Finally, there has been the widely discussed phenomenon of the 'class dealignment' of British politics over the past two decades, ie, the decline of the relationship between class membership and voting behaviour. In October 1964 the percentage advantage in favour of the Conservatives over Labour among upper middle class voters was 53%; by May 1979 it had declined to 44%, still high but a marked fall nonetheless. Complementarily, in October 1964 Labour's per-

one consequence has been increased political volatility among the electorate

centage advantage over the Conservatives among working class voters was 28% but by May 1979 it was only 7%. In the latter election skilled manual working class voters and their wives who opted for one of the two major parties divided their loyalties almost equally between Conservative and Labour.

'Class dealignment' has been of particular significance among certain sections of the electorate. It is noticeable, for example, among younger middle class voters, although younger working class voters in 1979 were not significantly less pro-Labour than older ones. However, it is perhaps the regional variations that are most interesting. Labour support among manual workers and their wives ranged in 1979 from 32% in the South West to 60% in the North of England.⁴ Such differences are also suggested by the variations in swing to the Conservatives from region to region. The pro-Tory swing, calculated upon total votes cast, between October 1974 and May 1979 was 6.5% among Greater London constituencies and 6.9% in the rest of the South East. In the West Yorkshire conurbation it was 3.5% and in seats in the Greater Manchester conurbation it was only 2.9%.

CHANGES IN PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENTAL COMPETENCE

These long term trends all establish the political context in which it has been possible for a party such as the SDP to break through the barrier of minimum electoral support and become a seemingly viable alternative. However, there are other factors that have been additionally favourable and that have in fact been causes of some of the 'loosening' of the political system already discussed. These factors have to do with the expectations of the public about governmental competence in various areas of economic management. In order to appreciate what these are and to see how they have changed, it is valuable to adopt a more historical perspective.

The argument is set out in part by inferences from the accompanying graphs, which are highly revealing about the sort of economic factors that have affected the popularity of different governments.⁵ Four separate periods of government since 1966 are considered in turn.⁶

The 1966-70 Labour government

The Wilson government of 1966-70 began on a pinnacle of public sympathy but, within little more than a year, it was supported less

than was the opposition and, within eighteen months, it was entering the nadir of its popular appeal. However, there are certain paradoxes about the trends in its support. Its ratings held reasonably steady during the earlier period of its term of office when wages were barely keeping pace with prices. The decline in Labour's support occurred at the time when there was a modest improvement in the average standard of living, although the parallel paths of the two series from mid-1968 to late 1969 show that in this period increases in the actual cost of living were about commensurate with increases in wages. One reason for the Wilson government's lack of popularity was its dubious competence in handling unemployment. The levels of unemployment in that period were minuscule from the perspective of the present. Even so, the rate of unemployment more than doubled between 1966 and 1970, much of the increase occurring in the first year of the government's term of office. Labour's popularity seems to have survived this but it was undoubtedly affected by the continued refusal of the Wilson government to adopt policies that would substantially ameliorate the situation, and the rate persisted at a plateau of 2.2 to 2.5% for the final three years of its term.

The 1970-74 Tory government

Unemployment remains a factor in accounting for the Gallup Poll ratings of Heath's 1970-74 government. The rate rose gently but steadily until early 1972 and this was undoubtedly a factor in the early and sharp decline in popular support for the Heath government till mid-1971. The later decline in unemployment was not sufficient substantially to improve the ratings of this government in the latter part of its term of office, when it was also afflicted by a growing level of Liberal support. Yet there is one very clear and perhaps surprising aspect about the Heath government's term of office; the average standard of living improved fairly steadily and consistently throughout the period, as is shown by the increase and the divergence of the two series, the general index of retail prices and the wage-rate index. The only suggestion of future difficulties on this subject is the slight upward turn in the retail price index in consequence of the world economic upheavals after the Yom Kippur War. Even so, the Heath government's popularity was affected by its attempt to impose a strict public-sector pay policy and, ironically, by the fact that retail prices — irrespective of any average trends in real wages — rose by more than 10% a year from mid-1970 to early 1974,

¹ This finding and certain others reported later in the article have been taken from various polls carried out by NOP Market Research Limited, some conducted on behalf of *The Observer*. I am grateful to both NOP and also *The Observer* for permitting me to take information from unpublished tabulations.

² See, for example, Ivor Crewe, 'The Labour Party and the Electorate', in Dennis Kavanagh (ed), *The Politics of the Labour Party* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982); and Paul Olive, 'Realignment: The Case of the Liberals', *Marxism Today*, May 1981, pp 12-18.

³ Norman L Webb and Robert J Wybrow (eds), *The Gallup Report* London: Sphere Books, 1981, pp 168-185.

⁴ Richard Rose, 'Class Does Not Equal Party: The Decline of a Model of British Voting', *Studies in Public Policy* No 74 (Glasgow: University of Strathclyde, 1980), pp 20, 34 and 40.

⁵ The graphs show levels of support reported quarter-by-quarter by the Gallup Poll for the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Parties; the lines plot the three-month averages.

Also shown in each graph are the trends in the corresponding periods of three economic series: the seasonally adjusted rate of unemployment in Great Britain, excluding school leavers; the basic weekly wage rates for manual workers in all industries and services; and the general index of retail prices for all items.

⁶ This emphasis on economic factors is not intended to imply that these are the only determinants of government popularity.

compared with less than 5% per annum during the 1966-70 Wilson government. In December 1971 43% of the electorate thought unemployment the most urgent problem facing the country, while only 21% ascribed this status to the cost of living. However, by September 1973 the respective percentages were 3% and 59%.

The 1974-79 Labour government

It is the Wilson/Callaghan government's term of office that brings us to the era when there is the clearest relationship between government popularity and the cost of living. This is shown in the relevant graph, as is the decline in the relationship between, on the one hand, unemployment and its rate of increase and, on the other, governmental support. The rate of unemployment rose steadily throughout the first year of the 1974-79 Labour government but there was no precipitate decline in its popularity of the sort that a comparable trend after June 1970 had seen for Heath's government. True,

The very public nature of the Deputy Leadership battle was an extra blow to the popular support of the party

Labour's support descended a little from an artificial pinnacle achieved after the October 1974 election but it remained quite surprisingly stable until after the third quarter of 1976. The sudden downturn began with the sterling crisis in the autumn of that year, when the retail price index began to increase at a rate faster than that of manual workers' wages. Labour's deep unpopularity persisted through most of the period between late 1976 and late 1977, when there was an average absolute decline in the standard of living of most of the population. True, Labour's recovery in the polls began a little before the trend of improved living standards became well established, partly perhaps because of the attempt to prevent further increases in the rate of unemployment through various regional policies. Even so, the relationship between the lack of popularity of the 1974-79 Labour government and trends in the cost of living is unexceptionable, as is the failure of Labour's support to decline significantly in response to the doubling of the rate of unemployment in the first year of its term.

A new pattern of political responses to economic factors established itself for the first time in the 1974-79 period. There seems to have developed in most of the electorate at that time a greater indifference to increased levels of unemployment, perhaps because most people themselves were not unemployed, perhaps because it was increasingly felt to be something over which governments had little real control, and perhaps too because of a decline in sympathy for the plight of the unemployed. Instead, the evidence of these series, as well as of opinion-poll data on perceptions of the most urgent problem facing the country, suggests that prices and the cost of living became one of the most important of the public's yardsticks for assessing governmental competence during the first couple of years of the 1974-79 Labour government. The Wilson/Callaghan administration was assessed mid-term on this criterion and found deficient by a large number of voters.

The Tory government since 1979

Like Mr Heath after June 1970, the Thatcher government had almost no honeymoon period of popularity; in fact, its first major act of economic policy was to increase the rate of value-added tax to 15%, a change that had immediate negative effects upon the cost of living. Labour went into the ascendant in the opinion polls. There was a very slight decline in the level of unemployment after May 1979, doubtless a hangover from policies adopted by the previous

Labour government towards the end of its term, but thereafter the rate of unemployment, even seasonally adjusted, began a precipitate increase that accelerated from the second quarter of 1980; the official figure stood at over 11% in the final part of 1981. However, Conservative support remained relatively immune to the effects of this increase until at least the last quarter of 1980, when the sharp fall in Tory support in the polls was clearly a consequence of the apparent government indifference to spiralling unemployment rates, indeed its active pursuit of policies whose consequence could only be more unemployment.

The 1974-79 Labour government had apparently received the absolution of many voters while it presided over an unemployment increase of more than 100% in four years. The Thatcher Government achieved this same multiple of increase in barely two years but there was clearly a limit to public indifference to the upward trend, especially as — with such high absolute levels — its effects ramified throughout the population and far beyond those immediately and personally affected. Opinion-poll data also bear out the increasing public unease about unemployment as 1980 progressed; as late as June of that year the recent concern about inflation and the cost of living at the expense of a reduction in unemployment was borne out by the Gallup Poll. By November 1981 71% of those asked thought unemployment was the most urgent problem facing the country; only 10% gave this status to the cost of living.

Even so, there is an interesting analogy between trends in the cost of living and the loss of support for the Conservatives to the benefit of the SDP. The relationship between prices and wages remained reasonably constant after the increase in the retail price index immediately after the beginning of Mrs Thatcher's term of office. True, the rise in manual workers' average wages has never exceeded that of the retail price index (taking the second quarter of 1979 as the base in each case) but, until the second quarter of 1981, the two series were close to each other. Then occurred a sharp divergence as increases in prices began dramatically to exceed wage increases, a process that will have been particularly marked in certain public-sector employment though far from exclusively confined to this part of the labour force. It compares, in fact, with the performance of the same indices in the final quarter of 1976 during the previous Labour government.

In 1976 the effect of this decline in real wages was to the benefit of the Conservatives and at the expense of Labour; there is little suggestion in the Gallup Poll data at that time of any direct benefit

to many voters the novel and untried but seemingly viable promise of the SDP has a visceral appeal

for the Liberals, though a slight local peak in the first quarter of 1977 may have been at the expense of the Conservatives. In 1981, however, the scenario was rather different since circumstances had altered. In fact, even though probably adventitiously, one might say that the situation in early 1981 was uniquely propitious for the breakthrough of the new party; disaffection with the Conservatives had developed during the previous year as public unease turned to impatience over the increase in unemployment. The further factor detaching support from the Conservatives was their clear failure to maintain real wages, a failure that had become more than evident in the public awareness by the middle of the year. Of course, in many circumstances this Conservative decline would have benefited the Liberals or Labour or both. Indeed, the Liberals clearly did achieve some short term benefit from Conservative decline in the first quarter of 1981. This was short-lived and at 15% the end-of-year level of support for the Liberals alone is hardly remarkable.

The Case of the Labour Party

Let us briefly consider why the Labour Party has not benefited from the decline in Conservative support, as self-evidently it has not. During 1981 its percentage of intending voters has fallen almost simultaneously with the Conservative loss. As recently as January 1981 Labour's percentage support in the Gallup Poll was 46.5%, a lead of 13.5% over the Conservatives. A month later the figure for Labour was down to 35.5%. The intervening event was the Wembley Conference on 24 January and it would be naive to deny the damaging effects of this. The outcome of the Conference was widely seen as divisive for the Party and, more crucially, was interpreted as a victory for 'the Left'. This latter was precisely the angle pushed by most of the hostile media.

The story of Labour's decline continued during most of 1981. In September's Gallup Poll its support stood at 36.5%; by October the figure was 28%. The very public nature of the Deputy Leadership battle, perhaps a necessary purgative from one perspective, was nonetheless an extra blow to the popular support of the party. There seems a clear relationship between the latter event and the breakthrough of the SDP to be the senior partner, if only in electoral terms, of the new Liberal/SDP Alliance. In September the SDP's percentage of support was 17.5%; by 29 October it was 26.5%. The Croydon North West by-election of 22 October may have contributed to this, but it is suggestive that the Croydon victor was a Liberal and yet the Gallup Poll increase in Liberal support from September to October was a modest 2%.

THE FATE OF THE ALLIANCE

Of course, the question at this point is whether current levels of support for the Alliance can persist. In order to attempt an answer to this it is necessary to revert to a historical perspective. During periods of Labour government, as between 1966 and 1970 or 1974 and 1979, Liberal support tends to limp along. There have been occasional peaks to be sure, but only in the most exceptional circumstances has it reached 15% and often it has fallen below 10%, as an inspection of the earlier graphs will confirm. However, as every armchair psephologist knows, things are usually rather different during periods of Tory rule. There has been much talk recently of Orpington, Sutton and Cheam, and so forth. Indeed, during the final eighteen months of Mr Heath's government Liberal support climbed steadily and was well above 20% for four heady months in late 1973. Of course, in February 1974 the Liberals won 19.3% of the total vote.

The period since May 1979 has not been quite like that, despite some local election successes. If the rise in Liberal support in the

the current depth of Labour's unpopularity as an opposition party is unprecedented

first quarter of 1981 appeared the start of a revival, this was soon brought to earth by figures for the rest of the year. If anything, on the basis of the aggregate figures, the rise of the SDP nipped any straight Liberal resurgence in the bud; no wonder David Steel realised that the only way for the Liberals to gain anything from the present political situation was in alliance with the SDP. Let us see whether received knowledge about the Liberal vote can be of any assistance in foretelling the likely future success of the SDP.

The most pertinent recent research on this subject is that carried out by Alt and his colleagues on the Liberal supporters of February 1974.⁷ The Liberal vote of that time was shown to be a diverse and temporary assembly of voters; a small, reasonably stable Liberal core, concentrated in regions and constituencies of persisting Liberal disposition, was supplemented by a larger group of voters who

— if one can characterise them rather unkindly — had something of the nature of a Poujadist rabble. The recent study of Hilde Himmelweit and her colleagues, using the data-base of a London male sample (ie, an area without any great continuing tradition of Liberal support), claims that the Liberal vote is even more diverse; consistent Liberals in this sample were almost non-existent and one of the major conclusions of the research was that different individuals constituted the Liberal vote at successive general elections.⁸

In essence therefore, it seems likely that current SDP support consists of some former Conservative voters (those with weak partisan attachment) who in rather different political circumstances would have been part of the 'Poujadist rabble' component of a strong Liberal revival, supplemented by numerous one-time Labour supporters. Poll data collected on Alliance supporters at the beginning of October 1981 show that, in the aggregate, they lack special social distinctiveness. Alliance supporters have a very slight tendency to be younger (below 45) and to reside in the South of England rather than in Wales and Scotland.⁹ However, such disproportions are not dramatic and in effect the Alliance's support, like that of the Liberals in February 1974, mirrors a social profile of the electorate as a whole.

A passing whim?

If the SDP's support really is ephemeral, one might not be too concerned about the likely permanence of the Alliance. The political 'homing instinct' that usually asserts itself as a general election approaches might be expected to operate once again. Yet there are reasons why this scenario may not simply be repeated. The two major parties may well remain unpopular; political interest and sophistication (as opposed to what pass as such among some political analysts) are for most voters perhaps as poorly developed as in any western electorate; to many voters the novel and untried but seem-

In the month of St Valentine, wouldn't you just love a subscription to Marxism Today?

The rates for one year are:
Inland individuals £7.80, institutions £10.40
Overseas individuals £10.40, institutions £13

Send to Central Books,
 14 Leathermarket, London SE1 3ER

Yes! I would love a subscription to Marxism Today, starting with the _____ issue.

I enclose my cheque/PO for £ _____

Name _____

Address _____

MT Feb 82



ingly viable promise of the SDP has a visceral appeal. In a survey conducted by Butler and Stokes in 1969 only 17% of those interviewed said that they had 'a good deal' of interest in what's going on in politics and an additional 39% said that they had 'some' interest, though one doubts whether the latter answer implies major political sophistication.¹⁰ In a survey conducted by the author among white voters in various English cities in 1978 and 1979 only 10% of respondents answered 'a good deal' to the same question and a further 29% said 'a fair amount'.

The present troubles of the Labour Party may perhaps prove themselves reparable before the next general election, but it must be recognised that the current depth of its unpopularity as an opposition party is unprecedented; even in October 1960, at the height of the unilateral disarmament divisions, it was supported by 37% of the electorate against a still popular Tory government. On the Tory side, Mrs Thatcher may do some sort of U-turn, there may be an attempt temporarily to reflate the economy before the next election (perhaps paid for by what is left of North Sea oil), or Mrs Thatcher may disappear in a genteel *coup d'état* inside the Tory party. However, even were any of this to happen, one wonders how effective it would be in reclaiming lost support. The Tories may now be perceived by the electorate to have done just too much wilful damage to the economy to be allowed to recover their earlier electoral pre-eminence.

The fundamental fact about the British electorate is that its major positive expectation of any government is the appearance of competence, particularly (though not exclusively) competence in such specific economic areas as maintenance of real wages. Among the large body of voters whose political interest is minimal there is little concern about the means that produce success on this criterion. It seems unexceptionable that Mrs Thatcher would be riding high in the polls if monetarism, though producing unemployment for 11% of the labour force, had given a cornucopia to everybody else. It is the combination of unacceptably high unemployment and the failure to maintain real wages that has cost the Conservatives such amounts of popular support during 1981. And the record of the 1974-79 Labour government was not one of consummate skill and success. The 1976 sterling crisis; the general decline in the value of sterling; the cut in living standards from late 1976 to late 1977; the reduction in public expenditure; the exposure of the dubiousness of

its claim to any special competence in relations with the trade unions after the conflicts over pay policy in late 1978 and early 1979; the hobbling along in Parliament with a permanently precarious majority: these factors all affected the general reputation of Labour governments for competence and capability. In fact, since the mid-1960s economic problems have simply become too intractable for successful management and hence there is a constant and indeed growing core of dissatisfied and volatile voters.

A political Santa Claus

The SDP may therefore burn itself out but only after its own incompetence has been painfully and expensively demonstrated by a period in government where it has to put its practice where its mouth is. The lack of deep political appreciation among most SDP supporters means that, despite their diverse 'Poujadist rabble' character, the party's apparent novelty may permit the short term denial of almost any number of evidences of incompetence and of lack of clarity on policies. Only failure in the arena of actual government will reveal its weaknesses and vapidity; thus, its much vaunted lack of coherent policies — something frequently adduced by supporters of both traditional parties to predict the SDP's demise — may be fatal in the long term but may be less destructive over a shorter or medium term period.

In September 1897 an eight-year-old girl wrote in distressed terms to the *New York Sun* seeking an editorial denial of the heresy circulating among some of her friends that there was no Santa Claus. The *Sun's* response was one of the most famous in American newspaper history: 'Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus', it said and proceeded to deride the scepticism of a sceptical age. In present political circumstances, when both major parties have shown them-

⁷ James Alt *et al*, 'Angels in Plastic: The Liberal Surge in 1974', *Political Studies*, XXV (September 1977), pp 343-368.

⁸ Hilde T Himmelweit *et al*, *How Voters Decide: A Longitudinal Study of Political Attitudes and Voting Extending Over Fifteen Years* (London: Academic Press, 1981), pp 157-175.

⁹ These poll data were collected by NOP Market Research Limited and their findings have been made available to me on the basis described in Footnote 1.

¹⁰ David Butler and Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain: The Evolution of Electoral Choice* 2nd ed; London: Macmillan, 1974, p 451.

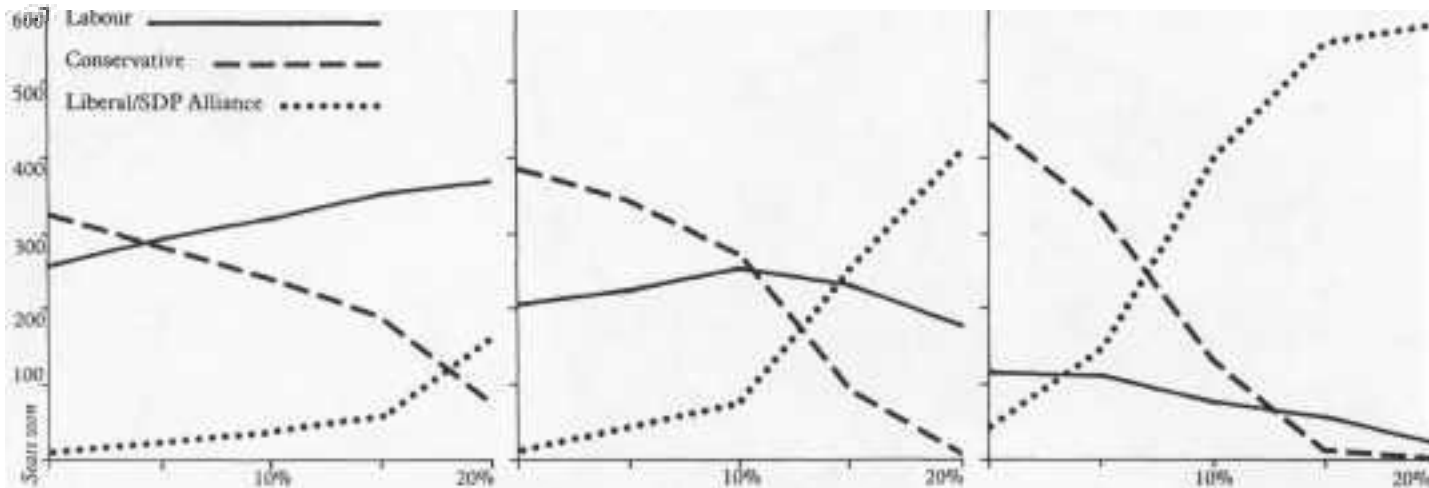
How 602 Parliamentary seats might be distributed,

if Tory losses to the Alliance were the percentages shown on the bottom axis, and if:

A Labour's '79 percentage was unchanged in each seat

B the Alliance gained 10% from Labour's '79 percentage in each seat

C the Alliance gained 20% from Labour's '79 percentage in each seat



The calculations assume that net changes between Tory and Labour are nil

selves incapable of managing a capitalist economy over a length of time with any reasonable success, there are numerous voters who wish or hope that there is a political Santa Claus. Of course, there is not. Harsh economic realities must be faced over the next decade and yet meaningful debates about future alternatives to Thatcherism are certainly not taking place inside the Liberal/SDP Alliance, whose actions if in office would doubtless show themselves as inefficacious as those of their predecessors. 'Alternative Economic Strategy' is not part of the vocabulary of those many voters who — confused, uncertain and profoundly nervous at the prospect of any 'left' solution — are attracted to any other apparently reasonable alternative.

POSSIBILITIES AFTER THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION

Finally, it is worth considering briefly just what might be the outcome in parliamentary terms of a general election fought with the intervention of an electorally significant Liberal/SDP Alliance

The SDP may therefore burn itself out but only after its own incompetence has been painfully and expensively demonstrated

against politically enervated Labour and Conservative Parties. The accompanying graphs present an approximation of what the distributional outcomes might be among 602 of the current 635 parliamentary constituencies in the United Kingdom.¹¹ Of course, the next general election is likely to be fought on drastically revised boundaries and it is far from clear how such redistricting might affect the figures of seats won, although it will not to benefit Labour. The 602 seats exclude those in Northern Ireland, the Speaker's seat of Cardiff West, and all those where a candidate other than Conservative, Labour or Liberal was first or second in May 1979.

The situation that most approximates the end of 1981 is that where there is a 20% Conservative loss in the central graph. In fact, if the standings of the major parties and the Alliance (Liberal and SDP combined), as reported in the November 1981 Gallup Poll and compared with the May 1979 results, were replicated among the 602 seats in the analysis, the outcome would be: Alliance, 348; Labour, 234; and Conservatives, 20. A slightly different estimate, calculating

on the basis of separate recent poll data first in England and Wales and then in Scotland, would give the distribution: Alliance, 342; Labour, 239; and Conservatives, 21. The major reason for the special vulnerability of the Conservatives to a large scale and widespread Alliance surge is that, though Conservative majorities are on average only slightly less than are Labour ones, as many as 80 Conservative seats were won against Liberal runners-up in May 1979. Labour has only two such seats: Bethnal Green and Bow and Greenock and Port Glasgow, the latter being the seat of the SDP defector, Dr Dickson Mabon.

These anticipations of the possible distribution of parliamentary seats are not entirely an academic exercise but may have some bearing on the current imbroglio within the Labour Party. If Labour were to lose, say 10% from its 1979 percentages relatively uniformly across all constituencies and if the Conservatives recovered a little to lose 12 or 13% in similar manner, the outcome could be a minority Labour group as the largest single party; clearly, this outcome might be very different with a few percentage shifts in one or the other direction and redistricting complicates the issue, as does the possibility of successful Nationalists and the certainty of a phalanx of Northern Ireland Unionists. Even so, a minority Labour group could indeed become the largest political faction. Such an outcome would produce unprecedented constitutional wrangling and a Labour Party in such a position (almost certainly dominated by right wingers) would probably woo the Alliance for support. Thus, the current concern on the Left of the Labour Party about the purge of its activists may be paranoia but equally it is based on a recognition of what may be the only currently viable strategy for the party's right wing if it is to survive.

The prognoses are depressing from just about every left perspective. History seldom simply repeats itself in cyclical fashion but one cannot help thinking nervously of parallels with the minority Labour administration of 1929-31.

¹¹ I am grateful to the SSRC Survey Archive at the University of Essex for making available to me the constituency-level election data upon which the calculations have been based.

The calculations have been done on the basis of straight absolute percentage gains and losses of votes by the respective parties since the May 1979 result. Clearly, there are some considerable approximations in this analysis and some strong assumptions.