

THE LIBERAL and Social Democratic Parties in Britain have amalgamated to form a new Party. What is the background to this new arrival on the political scene?

Immediately after the 1979 General Election, the Liberal Party seemed to be exhibiting a slow, but definite, come-back. Eleven M.P.s did not sound a lot, but these numbers compared favourably with the six who had been returned monotonously at each General Election of the 1950s; while the number of Liberal voters had increased very considerably: fewer than a million in 1951 and 1955, well over four and a quarter million in 1979.

The Liberal Party of nine years ago was beset by several fundamental political weaknesses, of which three stood out conspicuously. Firstly, the electoral system was (and is) tilted heavily against a third Party whose support is not strongly localised in particular regions. As Liberals never tired of pointing out, the Conservative Party with a little over three times as many votes as the Liberals, had more than thirty times as many seats.

Secondly, the Liberals were chronically short of money. Their funds bore no comparison with those of the Conservative Party, which can always attract money from business interests, or of the Labour Party with its heavy reliance on the automatic subscriptions of Trade Unionists too lethargic to "contract out" of the political levy. Thirdly, the Liberal Party could not produce a convincing Front Bench of people with experience in Ministerial office.

As Liberals of those days sometimes admitted, their real hopes were pinned on something dramatic happening to break the mould of British politics: some major schism in either the Conservative or the Labour Party, which would deeply alienate large and important sections of that Party, and bring them into association with the Liberal Party. Such a development could well overcome all three problems. The personalities would come over, the money would start to pour in, and popular support could be brought to a pitch where the electoral system proved an advantage rather than the reverse.

IN THE very early 1980s, there seemed a real hope that this was happening, although perhaps not quite in the manner originally anticipated. More than 25 Labour M.P.s, including several former Cabinet Ministers, broke off from the Labour Party to form the Social Democratic Party. Many important Conservatives were visibly uncomfortable with the policies and leadership style of Margaret Thatcher, and one of their M.P.s also defected to the SDP.

Thus the new SDP was an important force in politics. Its rank-and-file membership was a good deal less than that of the Liberals, but it had a lot

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more MPs, and seemed to offer the political credibility which the Liberals lacked. Out of these political realities was born the "Alliance". The Liberal and SDP leaderships arranged that their respective candidates should not oppose each other, but should fight approximately half of the British constituencies each. Roy Jenkins, it was agreed, would appear in the next General Election, and in any Political negotiations which might follow, as a kind of overall leader of the Alliance.

At the 1983 General Election, this strategy appeared to be vindicated. Granted, the Alliance did not perform as well as sanguine anticipations suggested, and most of the MPs who had transferred to the SDP were unseated. On the other hand, the Alliance's Parliamentary representation of 23 was better than anything that the Liberals had produced for close on fifty years.

Much more impressive was the popular vote. The Conservatives had secured a shade over thirteen millions, but the Alliance won more than seven and three quarter millions, which ran the Labour Party's figure of a little under eight and a half millions very closely. A relatively small swing of votes could credibly establish the Alliance as challenger to the Conservative government within a few years.

AT THAT point, the Alliance rather ran out of steam. It continued to do well in by-elections, winning several seats in the ensuing four years; but it certainly did not look like a movement poised for a major breakthrough. Just what went wrong is difficult to analyse. Labour's decision to choose a new leader who was not too frightening to the moderate section of the Party was certainly important in stemming defections to the SDP.

More curious was the loss of internal momentum in the Alliance itself. Nobody seems to have disputed the view that current arrangements between the two component Parties should continue both at national and local levels, but at the same time nothing happened to weld the Alliance together, even though - to all appearances - there was every reason for expecting a gradual development in the direction of complete fusion. The degree of cooperation between the two Parties

varied considerably from place to place; and in local elections, the success or otherwise of Alliance candidates tended to follow closely the measure of cooperation between the local Parties.

At the 1987 General Election, the mood of the Alliance was less happy than it had been four years earlier. No overall leader was chosen this time, and it was not difficult to discern considerable differences on some matters, particularly defence, between Liberal leader David Steel and Dr David Owen of the SDP. Each, of course, claimed to speak for his Party in such matters; but it would probably be truer to say that both Parties exhibited a wide, and overlapping, range of opinions on these questions.

When votes were counted, the Alliance representation almost held: 22 seats, against 23 in 1983. The SDP fared noticeably less well than the Liberals: five seats against seventeen. More important was the unseating of Roy Jenkins and the failure of two of the SDP's other former Ministers to secure election. This left David Owen as the one ex-member of a Cabinet to return to Parliament on the Alliance benches.

The overall Alliance vote dropped somewhat, and the margin behind Labour became considerable. Yet - and this remains perhaps the most remarkable feature of the 1987 Election - the Labour Party certainly did not cover itself with glory. After four years of "moderate" leadership, despite the obvious public unease with Thatcherism and the weakness of the Alliance, Labour made an overall gain of only twenty seats.

Thirteen of those twenty were in Scotland and Wales, England - the north as well as the south - was practically untouched. There was, and is, still no reason for considering the Alliance incapable of one day overtaking Labour.

ALMOST immediately the 1987 General Election was over, some people in both the Liberal Party and the SDP began to press vigorously for amalgamation. In the ensuing period, that pressure was sustained. Despite the continued opposition of David Owen, it took place. Are the two Alliance Parties now doing what ordinary political prudence prescribed that they should have done four or five years ago? Superficially the answer seems to be yes; but in fact the situation has changed dramatically over those years.

Thirty years or so ago, when the Liberal party was suffering disastrously, there was one compelling argument which kept enough enthusiasts within its ranks to save it from total disintegration. That argument was that politics ought to be about positive things rather than negative things. The overriding reason why Liberals shouldn't vote Conservative to keep out Labour, or vote Labour to



• David Steel

keep out the Conservatives, was that Liberalism stood for unique policies, which neither other Party was likely to support.

To a considerable extent, that argument has worn thin in more recent years. The traditional Liberal commitment to Free Trade, for example, was jettisoned in favour of support for the Common Market. Yet, even to this day, the Liberal Party does stand for some policies which are both distinctive and traditionally Liberal. As recently as last October, for example, many readers of this magazine were heartened to hear of the Liberal Assembly's renewed assertion of support for the taxation of land values.

HOW FAR has the new Party preserved traditional Liberal policies? Its essential ideas are set out in the Preamble. This document does not derive from any kind of Assembly of either the Liberal Party or the SDP - or, indeed, of the two Parties together. It has been cobbled together by the leaderships, or a section of the leaderships, of both existing Parties.

The Preamble for the new Party is not an encouraging document. There is no reference, for example, to the taxation of land values. Indeed, there seems to be no reference to any policy at all which either Party favours to which the other has no commitment. If this Preamble is a sample of what is to come, the overriding appeal of the new Party will not be its Liberalism - or, for that matter, its Social Democracy - but the wholly negative argument that it isn't Socialist and it isn't Thatcherite.

There is nothing intrinsically good or intrinsically bad in a merger of the Liberals and the SDP, and there is certainly nothing sacred in the name of a Party. What matters is the Party's policies, and its prospect of setting those policies into effect.

The new Party is still unformed clay on the potter's wheel. Its SDP members - and, for that matter, a very large proportion of its Liberal members - have had little exposure to traditional Liberal policies. It is the task of those Georgists who choose to work through the new party to expound the policies they favour in a way which the members can understand, and which is likely to attract their support.