

Impact of the sdp on british politics



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How much lasting impact has the SDP had on British Politics?

On August 1st 1980 Shirley Williams, David Owen and Bill Rodgers published their famous 'Gang of Three' statement: an open letter in the Guardian 'rejecting class war, accepting the mixed economy and the need to manage it efficiently' (Glover, 2006). Following the Wembley conference of 1981 which passed rule changes strengthening the power of left-wing activists over candidate selection and the party leadership, the Gang of Three was joined by President of the European Commission, Roy Jenkins to form a new centrist party, the Social Democratic Party which threatened to change the nature of British politics (Bill Jones and Philip Norton , 2013). Nicholas Watt argues that: " The SDP transformed the Labour Party without winning many parliamentary seats, or by creating a major political force at Westminster." (Watt, 2013)

The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics defines the term ' social democracy, social democrat' as: ' The title taken by most Marxist socialist parties between 1880 and 1914... In Britain, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) was a late nineteenth century Marxist group which was eventually absorbed into the Communist Party' (McLean, 2009, p. 490).

The conventional view is that the SDP split the anti-Tory vote and helped to keep Margaret Thatcher in power for a decade. However, the party's history as argued by Ivor Crewe and Anthony King concluded that this transient new force, if anything, reduced the Tory majority (Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, 1995).

Furthermore, an 'Alliance' between the old Liberals and new SDP was a potent electoral force at two general elections in the 1980s. Together, in 1983, they garnered 25.4 per cent of the vote but less than 4 per cent of the seats. The attempted breakthrough in 1987 failed when they mustered only 22.6 per cent of the vote (Bill Jones and Philip Norton, 2013). However, after 1989 the newly merged party, the Liberal Democrats, has fought to resist a classic third-party squeeze, as the two main parties converged to the centre ground after Thatcherism (Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, 1995). Additionally, as a result of the 1997 general election, it can be argued that the Liberal Democrats are faced with a series of fundamental questions regarding their electoral future and party profile, which may have a wider impact upon the nature of British politics (Andrew Russell and Ed Fieldhouse, 2013).

Accurately evaluating the impact of the SDP and the Liberal-SDP alliance on British politics is not an easy task. Ivor Crewe and Anthony King argue that it was negligible (Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, 1995). Labour's transformation, they suggest, 'owed almost nothing to the SDP' since it occurred largely after the demise of the Alliance in 1987 and it was arguably a response to election defeats in 1983 and 1987 which would have happened regardless of the SDP's existence (Robert Garner and Richard Kelly, 1998, p. 171).

It can be argued that the existence of the SDP did not prevent Conservative election victories nor did it alter the policies pursued by the Thatcher governments. Furthermore, it can also be argued that the party which arose following the merger between the Liberals and the SDP differed little, in

character or electoral performance, from the old Liberal Party (Robert Garner and Richard Kelly, 1998).

The SDP wished to ‘break the mould of British politics’ (McLean, 2009). It can be argued that it proposed a new, or at least rarely articulated amalgam of strong social liberalism with fairly strong economic liberalism, under the slogan of ‘the social market economy’. In addition, in conventional terms, it was left-wing on social matters and right-wing on economic matters (McLean, 2009). However, this strategy faced two problems:

Firstly, although there was no increasing group of voters to whom this mixture appealed, typically well-educated people in professional rather than commercial occupations, it can be argued that they were not numerous enough to be electorally significant (McLean, 2009).

Secondly, it can be argued that some members of the SDP preferred to present themselves as the continuing Labour Party when the real Labour Party was seen as having moved far to the left. This was the basis of an appeal to a quite different sector of the electorate; but it arguably involved much stronger support for corporatism and the traditional left in economic matters (McLean, 2009).

There is an alternative, more generous, interpretation of the SDP’s contribution to British politics in the 1980s. Firstly, although the Alliance arguably failed to break the mould of British politics, it can be argued that it failed to do so only because of the electoral system which above all, gave Labour the time to reorganise after the 1983 election (Robert Garner and Richard Kelly, 1998). Furthermore, the fact that the large number of votes

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won by the Alliance were not converted proportionately into seats brought the issue of electoral reform firmly on to the political agenda, where it has remained. Secondly, it can also be argued that the organisational structure of the new Liberal Democrat Party was influenced by the SDP, which made it much more centralised and efficient (Robert Garner and Richard Kelly, 1998).

It is largely true that the Alliance's direct electoral impact on Labour was minimal. The formation of the SDP raised the prospect of a viable attack on Labour strongholds, something which the Liberals had been unable to do (Robert Garner and Richard Kelly, 1998). The Alliance, therefore, hoped to fulfil a realignment on the left with a new centre-left party replacing Labour. It can be argued that this strategy had not been successful in the past because the electoral strength of the Liberal Party had been concentrated in Conservative areas. Additionally, it can also be argued that Liberal revivals, therefore, in the early 1960s and between 1970 and 1974 – had occurred largely as a result of discontent with Conservative governments. The effect was to benefit the Labour Party, such as in February 1974 (Robert Garner and Richard Kelly, 1998).

The SDP never looked likely to fulfil the task of realigning the left. Like the Liberals before them, the electoral strength of the Alliance was in primarily southern – Conservative seats. Indeed, survey evidence suggested that, as Ivor Crewe argues: “SDP supporters place not only their party but themselves in the centre; they are, in fact, fractionally to its right. Typically SDP supporters do not see themselves as moderate but left of centre-voters abandoned by a leftwards drifting Labour Party. They see themselves as ‘middle of the roaders’.” (Bogdanor, 1985, p. 54)

Ironically, it can be argued that the Alliance was a bigger threat to the Conservatives, coming second in about two-thirds of seats won by that party in 1983, and had the Alliance achieved marginally better results in 1983 and 1987, a hung parliament at the very least could have resulted, with Labour being the likely beneficiary. However, despite this, many in the Labour Party perceived the Alliance as a threat and its existence, therefore, provided one incentive for hastening the speed of the party's transformation. Furthermore, had Labour not begun the process of transforming its images and policies, it is plausible to argue that the Alliance would have become a serious threat to Labour's position as the major party on the centre-left of British politics (Robert Garner and Richard Kelly, 1998). Luke Akehurst argues that: "It was not the SDP that provided Britain with a landslide centre-left victory and 13 years of progressive government, but a renewed and regenerated Labour Party. Labour's best days were ahead of it, not behind it." (Akehurst, 2012)

Most SDP members who joined the Liberal Democrats still remain in the party. However, Roger Liddle rejoined Labour and went on to become Chairman of the international think tank Policy Network and he has arguably had a major impact on modernising the Labour Party's political philosophy. Liddle also became Special Adviser on European matters to Tony Blair. Danny Finkelstein, joined the Conservative party and became a close aide of both John Major and William Hague (Bill Jones and Philip Norton, 2013).

In conclusion, it can be argued that the SDP has had a lasting impact on the Labour Party in the twenty-first century, as Steven Fielding argues: "The party at the start of the twenty-first century may be a highly cautious social democratic organisation; but recognisably social democratic it remains. If the

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state has advanced modestly and in novel ways since 1997, Labour's purpose in office is the same as it ever was: to reform capitalism so that it may better serve the interests of the majority." (Bill Jones and Philip Norton , 2013, p. 83)

However, arguably most important of all, the SDP strengthened the political reputation of the Liberals. The national status of Owen and Jenkins helped the Liberals become somewhat more than a foundation of surprise by-election results and a party for people who live in rural areas such as the Western Country and the Scottish Highlands. Finally, the SDP also assisted the Liberals in attracting attention from the media for their policies.

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