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Labour, Liberal and SDP Conferences 1981

Conservative Research Department

1. THE LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE

At the Labour Party's 80th Annual Conference, held at Brighton from 27th September to 2nd October 1981, the Right of the party was able to claim crumbs of comfort from Mr Healey's win in the Deputy Leadership contest and certain changes in the National Executive Committee, but the Left won where it mattered and obtained the Conference's approval of extreme policies on the economy, disarmament, Europe, private health, education and the police. As **Mr Alex Kitson**, Chairman of the Labour Party and acting General Secretary of the TGWU, said: "This conference and this conference alone, decides the principles of policy and it is the Parliamentary Labour Party which then implements those principles. I say quite frankly that unlike the services of this or that individual, the policies agreed by the Party are not dispensable" (*Daily Telegraph*, 28th September 1981).

As he tries to hold this declining party together, Mr Michael Foot's task is not enviable. Fundamental divisions of opinion remain, and with the constituency parties, which are proceeding with compulsory reselection of MPs, so overwhelmingly dominated by Bennite activists, the struggle for power in the party will undoubtedly continue. (Since the conference, Mr Ben Ford, the Labour MP for Bradford North, has been 'sacked' in favour of a Trotskyist.) The moderate forces in the Parliamentary Party were further weakened in the week following the conference when five Labour Members of Parliament left the Party and joined the Social Democratic Party (see p. 403). This tally has since increased by the addition of Mr Eric Ogden, MP for Liverpool, West Derby. The Labour vote fell disastrously in the Croydon North-West parliamentary by-election on 22nd October, and a Labour GLC seat was lost to another defector to the SDP, Mrs Anne Sofer, on 29th October.

Deputy Leadership

The bitterly contested fight for the Deputy Leadership of the Party came to its climax at a special Sunday evening session at the opening of the conference. The election was the first to take place under the controversial system of an electoral college, the structure of which was agreed at a special conference at Wembley on 24th January 1981 (see *Politics Today* No. 3, 23rd February 1981). In the college, trade unions took the largest share of the vote, 40%, and MPs and the constituency parties had 30% each.

On the first ballot, Mr Healey won 45.4% of the votes, Mr Benn 36.6% and Mr Silkin 18.0%. With Mr Silkin dropping out of the second ballot, Mr Healey went on to win by the narrowest of margins, a mere 0.85%. He collected 50.43% of the votes and Mr Benn won 49.57%. The largest share of Mr Healey's vote came from the unions – just under half his total – while a similar proportion of Mr Benn's came from the constituency parties. Altogether 462 constituency parties voted for him in the second ballot, against 115 for Mr Healey.

The position among the trade unions was complicated, however, by the way in which the largest union, the Transport and General Workers' Union,

exercised its 1,250,000 block vote. Its behaviour highlights the lack of real democracy in the Labour Party's voting systems. Shortly before the conference the TGWU carried out a consultative ballot of its members. Seven out of the union's ten regions showed votes in favour of Mr Healey, and among branches, 767 preferred Mr Healey, 362 wanted Mr Benn, and 340 opted for Mr Silkin (*Times*, 25th September 1981). In defiance of the views of the union membership, however, the TGWU national executive advised its delegation to the conference to vote for Mr Benn. As it happened, the TGWU's vote went on the first ballot to Mr Silkin, who is sponsored by the union, and on the second to Mr Benn.

Mr Benn's victory was denied, however, by the abstention of some 37 MPs in the second ballot. On the first ballot, out of 254 who were eligible to vote, 125 MPs voted for Mr Healey, 65 for Mr Silkin, and 55 for Mr Benn. The remainder, including Mr Foot, took no part in the voting. In the final vote, 137 MPs cast in favour of Mr Healey and 71 for Mr Benn. Among the 37 who abstained were some noted Left-wingers, such as Mr Neil Kinnock, Miss Joan Lestor, Mr Stanley Orme, Mr Douglas Hoyle, Mr Jeff Rooker and Mr Joe Ashton.

It was little surprise then that Mr Benn and his supporters should have spent much of the rest of the week attacking the parliamentary party for their alleged betrayal. **Mr Benn** said he wanted the parliamentary party "to have a better internal democracy so that it is never again told it is there being a dog licence issued by the Prime Minister. It is there to be the spokesman of the working class movement" (*Guardian*, 29th September 1981).

Mr Benn elaborated his views in an interview in the Communist newspaper, the *Morning Star*. He said there was a need for a new grouping in the party, under the name of the Labour Representation Committee, by which title the Labour Party was known between 1900 and 1906. Such a body would, said **Mr Benn**, "bring the Parliamentary and the rank and file and the trade union activists together ... You can't mobilise the rank and file without also having people who are going to work for it in Parliament" (*Morning Star*, 1st October 1981).

Mr Ken Livingstone, Labour leader of the Greater London Council, told a Trotskyist weekly newspaper, *Socialist Organiser*, that the vote for Mr Benn marked a Left-wing advance. He said that the vote was "a major achievement for the Left. Three years ago Healey was the next Labour Prime Minister – now he's clearly a spent force. The transformation of the Labour Party into a socialist party is clearly irreversible now that process has begun" (1st October 1981).

Left-wingers argue that although they just lost the vote, it was, in the words of **Mr Benn**, "a victory, because from the very beginning right to the end – and we are nowhere near the end – we have won the argument" (*Daily Telegraph*, 28th September 1981).

National Executive Committee

A more serious setback for the Left came in the results of the elections for the 29 member National Executive Committee. The committee elected at

last year's conference had a Left majority of 19 to 10. As a result of co-ordinated action among Right-wing trade unions, led by the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers under its president, Mr Terry Duffy, five Left-wingers were removed: Mr Bernard Dix of NUPE and Mr Charlie Kelly of UCATT (Building Workers) from the trade union section, and Mrs Margaret Beckett and Mrs Renée Short, MP, from the women's section. In addition, Mr Eric Varley, MP, replaced Left-winger Mr Norman Atkinson, MP, as party treasurer. Mr Varley secured 3,859,000 votes to Mr Atkinson's 3,252,000.

These "moderate" advances lose some significance when it is considered that they were expected to have materialised at the 1980 conference, but failed to do so when the AUEW delegation decided by one vote to support the Left-wing ticket (see *Politics Today*, No. 19, 1980, p. 329).

The constituency section remained solidly Left-wing, however, re-electing all seven members: Mr Tony Benn, who came top of the poll, Mr Eric Heffer, Mr Dennis Skinner, Mr Frank Allaun, Mr Neil Kinnock, Miss Jo Richardson and Miss Joan Lestor. But the votes for Mr Kinnock and Miss Lestor dropped considerably owing to the operation of a Bennite "hit-list" in reprisal for their abstentions in the Deputy Leadership contest along with about twenty other Tribune Group MPs, known as "Healey's Fifth Column".

The new committee is evenly divided between Left and Right, with Mr Foot holding the balance. Such is the measure of the shift in the Labour Party's centre of gravity that this life-long Left-winger is now being considered a moderate.

Left-wing Policies

Alternative Economic Strategy. The conference gave its overwhelming support to promises of more nationalisation, more state planning and controls in the economy and increased public spending, by any future Labour government. It accepted without dissent an NEC statement, *The Socialist Alternative*.

In addition proposing the abolition of the House of Lords, the complete withdrawal of Britain from the European Community and threatening drastic increases in taxation, an attack on pension funds and life assurance companies and the abolition of the right to buy council houses and of independent schools, this document declared: "We believe it is wrong that private individuals should, through ownership of the means of production, reap the benefits of the collective effort of others and exercise an intolerable power over the lives of others". It added: "Our long-term goal is to substitute private ownership by these diverse forms of common ownership" (i.e. nationalised industries, workers' co-operatives, or municipal - local council-owned - ventures); in other words, the complete implementation of Clause 4, involving the abolition of every part of the free enterprise system in industry, business and commerce. The document carefully did not provide a shopping list of firms or industries for nationalisation in the earlier stages of the Socialist plan, but stated: "We will establish a publicly-owned stake in each important sector of industry

and take back sections of public industries which have been hived off by the Tories ... We will also extend the frontiers of public enterprise by encouraging the existing nationalised industries to diversify into new activities".

The conference also carried a motion proposed by the supposedly moderate General and Municipal Workers' Union, calling for "the control of investment, trade and inflation, and an improvement in the quality of life based on socialist policies of state intervention, industrial democracy, the extension of public ownership and the growth of public services".

Another motion to win the overwhelming approval of the conference was proposed and seconded by members of the Trotskyist Militant Tendency. It asserted "that there is no way forward for the working class within the framework of capitalism and pledges the next Labour Government, under Clause IV Part 4 of the Labour Party Constitution, to bring into public ownership the commanding heights of the economy".

Replying to the debate, **Mr Benn** said he accepted the latter as "more than just a vague constitutional aspiration, but a clear intention of our policy, that we should move away from capitalism to socialism" (*Daily Telegraph*, 28th September 1981). He also said that "we are never ever, ever going back to the old policies of wage restraint as a means of saving capitalism" (*ibid.*).

Conference approved a resolution opposed to incomes policy, proposed by AUEW - TASS, the white collar section of the engineering union. This resolution also had the backing of **Mr Arthur Scargill**, the Yorkshire miners' president and leading candidate for the succession to Mr Joe Gormley, the NUM's general secretary. He told conference: "Time and time again the Labour Party has been elected into power and tried to implement capitalist policies better than the Tories. We want to see no more of that from the next Labour Government" (*Guardian*, 29th September 1981).

In contrast to the standing ovation which greeted Mr Benn, **Mr Healey**, who opened the debate, received only restrained applause, after warning against making promises which could not be fulfilled. This was despite his endorsement of the Labour Party's alternative economic strategy as one thing on which the whole of the movement was united: "We were united in producing these documents: we must unite in selling these documents to the people of this country" (*Guardian*, 29th September 1981).

Unemployment. As its solution to solving the problem of unemployment, the conference carried, against the advice of the NEC, a motion calling for a 35 hour week, additional holidays, increases in wages, pensions, social benefits and public expenditure, a lower retirement age and selective import controls. Another successful motion called for a campaign against youth unemployment and active opposition to "any scheme of national community service for young people - compulsory or voluntary".

Disarmament. After last year's conference at which four conflicting motions on defence were passed, the party moved towards a less unambiguous Left-wing position this year. It approved by 4,596,000 votes to 2,306,000 a nine-point motion proposed by the TGWU, instructing the NEC to "ensure that

the next election manifesto includes an unambiguous commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament".

It also reaffirmed Labour's commitment to oppose the introduction of Cruise and Trident missiles and the neutron bomb; demanded the closure of all nuclear bases, British or American, on British soil or in British waters; called on more Labour councils to declare their areas as 'nuclear free zones'; called for substantial cuts in defence spending; and pledged its support for the World Disarmament Campaign and for European nuclear disarmament.

After a one-sided debate, the party's leading front bench spokesman on defence, **Mr Brynmor John**, walked out of the hall when he was denied an opportunity to speak. He said: "It's a really shabby trick to deny both sides of the argument a proper opportunity to address the conference ... I'm going to write a protest to Mr Kitson (the conference chairman) in case he does not understand I can write as well as talk" (*Daily Mail*, 1st October 1981). Only two non-unilateralist speakers were heard, and both were given a hostile reception. **Sir John Boyd** of the AUEW asked for "one instance in history where defencelessness has saved a country from being attacked" (*ibid.*). In fact it was **Miss Joan Lester**, sometimes described as the 'Aldermaston Amazon', who spoke for the party on defence, and she declared that the Labour Party was now "the political arm of the unilateralist cause" (*ibid.*).

The vote on the unilateralist motion fell just 11,000 short of the two-thirds majority that would have made it automatically part of the party programme. But when set alongside the party's opposition to unilateralism between the years 1960 and 1979, this vote appears all too ominous.

The sinister mood of the party on defence matters was also highlighted by the voting on a motion calling for British withdrawal from NATO. While this was defeated, the vote of 5,206,000 votes to 1,619,000, compares to that on an equivalent motion last year, which was beaten by 6,279,000 to 826,000.

Another motion which claimed that "civil defence planning was a sham which prepared people for the inevitability of nuclear war ... (and) will be used to suppress dissent and preserve the ruling elite", was also carried. A resolution from the anti-unilateralist electricians' union, EEUPTU, which advocated multilateral disarmament, was defeated on a show of hands.

European Community. The conference gave its expected approval to a demand for withdrawal from the EEC, by 6,213,000 votes to only 782,000. **Mr Eric Heffer**, for the NEC, argued that "British withdrawal from the Common Market was an essential part of the Labour Party's alternative economic strategy to build a Socialist Britain as part of a Socialist Europe" (*Daily Telegraph*, 2nd October 1981).

As their cause was so obviously doomed, supporters of continued British membership were forced to resort to a call for a referendum on the question. A resolution to this effect was rejected, however, by 5,830,000 to 1,072,000.

Control of the Police. The growing antipathy towards the police which has been evident recently in some sections of the Labour Party was expressed in a motion which called for the disbandment of the Special Patrol Group, allowing the police to join trade unions, the introduction of "effective democratic control" of police forces, and the ending of "surveillance of political and trade union activists".

It was approved by 6,035,000 votes to 839,000, well above the two-thirds majority required for its inclusion in the party programme.

The proposer of the motion said that "the police were the only part of public society which is not subject to democratic control", and the seconder, a delegate from Manchester, Moss Side, said that the virtually unlimited power of chief constables must be curbed (*Daily Telegraph*, 2nd October 1981). A former Home Office Minister, Mr Alex Lyon, MP, said that decisions about whether to adopt community policing or reactive policing, and whether to use CS gas or bullets should be made by "elected representatives ... and should not be taken by chief officers" (*ibid.*).

Nationality Law. The conference approved on a show of hands motions to repeal the present Government's Nationality Act and the 1968 and 1971 Immigration Acts, and to permit all those who have been removed from Britain under the present immigration laws "to return if they wish".

Local Government. A resolution moved by Mr Ted Knight, leader of Lambeth Council, declaring that Labour councillors should refuse to make the cuts required by legislation proposed by Mr Heseltine, was carried by a large majority. **Mr Knight** said: "Are we not to say there is a point when the Labour Movement will decide that Heseltine's and Thatcher's law is too high a price to pay?" (*Daily Telegraph*, 29th September 1981).

Other Left-wing Proposals. The Left's continued dominance of policy at the conference was reinforced on many other issues. Motions were approved in favour of:

- the abolition of all private medical practice inside and outside the National Health Service.
- the public ownership and control of the pharmaceutical and medical supply industries.
- "increased worker and patient involvement in the control over the National Health Service".
- the long-term abolition of fee-paying in private schools.
- support for Labour councils refusing to sell council houses.
- renationalisation of parts of British Rail sold off by the present Government.
- the restoration of rating on farming land and buildings (cf. SDP policy, p. 400).
- the repeal of the 1980 Employment Act.

Other motions were adopted calling for the long-term reunification of Ireland, mandatory United Nations sanctions against South Africa, and the restructuring of the world's economic and trading systems on the basis of the Brandt Commission's report. A new Freedom of Information Act was

demanding, to replace the Official Secrets Act. The conference called for legislation to reduce maximum prison sentences and abolish imprisonment for minor offences, with more money made available for alternatives such as community care schemes and hostels.

Constitutional Changes. The conference found itself in characteristic confusion when it first approved a motion that would have given the National Executive Committee the final say in the writing of the Party's general election manifesto, and then rejected the amendment to the Party's constitution that would have given effect to the change. As the conference also decided to reinstate the rule which permits constitutional changes to be discussed at conference only once every three years, it is unlikely to consider this question again until after the next general election.

Membership. The Party's individual membership subscription is to be increased in 1982 from £5 to £6 per member, with a special rate of £2 for non-wage earners. For the first time the Labour Party has compiled a more realistic figure of individual membership. The recorded total membership total for 1980 was 260,226 full members and 87,930 pensioners. In previous years the figures had automatically credited constituency parties with 1,000 members each, which had produced inflated totals in excess of 650,000.

2. THE LIBERAL ASSEMBLY

Alliance with the SDP

The Liberal Assembly, held at Llandudno from 15th to 18th September 1981, endorsed by an overwhelming majority the principle of an alliance with the SDP, but it was clear that there remain fears and doubts about possible conflicts over both organisation and philosophy. Underlying these fears is the very considerable anxiety among Liberals that the SDP, which has already attracted several Liberal activists, and which may 'poach' large numbers of seats which the Liberals hope to gain, may end by taking over and swallowing up the Liberal Party, which has not governed Britain for 60 years.

What provoked Liberal alarm was the threat by **Mr David Steel** on ITV's *Weekend World* on 13th September that he might disown Liberal candidates who stood in defiance of agreements between the two parties. He said: "We wouldn't give help from the centre to candidates or associations who were being difficult" (*Daily Telegraph*, 14th September 1981). The National Executive of the Liberal Party also agreed on a moratorium – later declared to be advisory, not mandatory – on the selection of new Liberal candidates.

Reactions to Central Dictation

Mr Cyril Smith, MP, said in Llandudno that any attempt to instruct local Liberal parties would be "catastrophic": "They are asking people to be rebellious ... I do not believe the Liberal Party is the sort of party where the constituencies will be dictated to by a central bureaucracy in London" (*Daily Telegraph*, 15th September 1981). **Mr Michael Meadowcroft**, Chairman

of the Liberal Steering Committee, declared: "We cannot hide the fact that Social Democracy and Liberalism are on different roads. Liberals believe in spreading power to communities. Traditional social democracy is over-centralised" (*ibid.*).

Other adverse reactions by the Liberals were recorded. **Mr Trevor Jones**, prospective candidate for West Dorset and Chairman of the Association of Liberal Councillors, declared that "it would be folly for Liberals to give up anything for which they have struggled for so long – like territory" (*Times*, 14th September 1981). **Mr Stuart Mole**, Mr Steel's personal assistant and candidate for Chelmsford, contrasted the Liberal interest in local politics with "a strong tendency among the SDP to look on elections as a means to get to Westminster with the best star quality, rather than developing a special rapport with voters" (*ibid.*). **Mr Dick Hains**, President of the London Liberal Party, disapproved of Mr Steel's "lemming-like desire to jump into bed" with certain new SDP recruits, and added: "Many people fear it (the SDP) is likely to become another Labour Party" (*Times*, 14th September 1981). **Mr William Wallace**, vice-chairman of the party's Standing Committee, said: "The SDP must not be allowed to deteriorate into a refuge for all those who jump off the sinking Labour party ... we can't work very easily with those who are jumping to save their skins, and whose records and attitudes are evidently illiberal" (*Daily Express* and *Daily Telegraph*, 17th September 1981).

Mr Alan Beith, a Liberal MP, criticised the refugees from Labour Party reselection conflicts, like the ex-Labour Islington councillors who had defected to the SDP. He described them as "machine men whose machines had broken down and ceased to deliver", while the Young Liberals launched a leaflet declaring: "Too many Liberals have fought too hard for too long against these same people – part of the corrupt local Labour machine – to make common cause with them now" (*Daily Mirror*, 14th September 1981).

In a speech to the Association of Liberal Councillors during the Liberal Assembly, printed in *Liberal News* of 29th September, **Mr Cyril Smith** further set out his reservations. "One does wonder if Labour had won the last election, what would now be the position. I suspect three of the four (SDP leaders) would be in a Labour Cabinet and Roy Jenkins would be where he really belongs – in the Liberal Party ... Let it be clear that some of us fear that in having (an alliance) we will not only see the break up of the Labour Party, but in the long term, of the Liberal Party as well, certainly the Liberal Party as we know it." So far as electoral arrangements were concerned, Mr Smith was adamant: "I urge Liberals to stand where, after discussion and frankness, they still feel they should stand. I am totally opposed to pressure on Liberals to withdraw when they believe they should not do so."

Policy Developments

Mrs Shirley Williams warned the Liberal Party about "rejoicing in a sterile purity of doctrine and unsullied isolation" (*Daily Telegraph*, 16th September 1981). But **Mr Meadowcroft** pointed out several serious doctrinal differences between the parties. For example, the SDP appeared to believe in economic growth to generate increased wealth which they wanted to distribute: "The

Liberals accept that you can't, and think that even if you could, it wouldn't necessarily be worth having." Hence, he argued, the Liberals' belief in ecology, their opposition to nuclear power – and a potentially very different approach to such a problem as inner city decay (*Times*, 14th September 1981).

The most significant policy development at the Assembly was a defeat for the Liberal leadership on the issue of nuclear weapons. The Liberal Party, which has always been opposed to the introduction of the Trident missile system – essential if Britain's nuclear deterrent is not to become obsolete – voted to oppose the deployment of Cruise missiles in Europe. An amendment favoured by the party leadership, which called for the deployment of Cruise missiles to be deferred for two years while a balanced reduction of weapons was negotiated, was defeated by 754 votes to 485. While Mr Steel immediately reserved the position of Liberal MPs, two of these, Mr Richard Wainwright (Colne Valley) and Mr David Alton (Liverpool, Edge Hill) had voted with the nuclear disarmers. **Mr William Rodgers**, the SDP Defence spokesman, agreed that the vote was a move towards unilateralism by the Liberals and said bluntly: "... this was a wrong decision".

The Assembly vote flew in the face of vigorous advice from a number of Liberals. **Mr David Penhaligon**, MP for Truro, was greeted by calls of "rubbish" when he said, "If you vote for the resolution you are increasing the possibility that another day will come ... when the Soviet Union invades Britain. The Russians have not stopped storing SS20s; don't vote for this motion until they do." **Mr Richard Moore**, a former candidate for the European Parliament, described the anti-Cruise vote as "an emotional spasm passed by the warm-hearted and soft-headed" (*Daily Telegraph*, 18th September 1981). **Mr Viv Bingham**, the newly elected President of the Liberal Party, described himself as "an old pacifist" in his opening address and made clear his view that the conference should reject the advice of the leadership and vote against nuclear weapons (*Daily Telegraph*, 16th September 1981).

What is ironical about the Liberal vote is that their SDP allies broke away from the Labour Party largely because of that party's increasing commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament. Yet, on 15th September 1981, at a fringe meeting at the Liberal Assembly, Mr Roy Jenkins pledged the full support of the SDP to Mr Pitt, the Liberal candidate (and eventual victor) in the Croydon North-West by-election, despite Mr Pitt having made it clear that he is himself a convinced unilateral disarmer and indeed a pacifist. As **Professor Lord Beloff**, who left the Liberal Party for the Conservatives some years ago, asked in a letter to *The Times* on 18th September 1981: "Does full support from the SDP mean that Dr Owen will go to Croydon to speak for him; if so what defence policy will he be recommending? Does not (this) throw the gravest doubt on the sincerity and credibility of the Liberal – SDP alliance?"

An Inappropriate Alliance

As **Mr Ferdinand Mount** commented: "He (Mr Steel) had delivered his party wholesale into an alliance with the survivors of the more illiberal govern-

ments in British history. A large number of Liberals were, and are, extremely unhappy about the alliance. They see their separate identity gradually vanishing along with their separate electoral support, and all to the benefit of a party midwived if not created by their own leader" (*The Standard*, 22nd September 1981).

A recent article by **Mr Jo Grimond**, entitled "How Liberal is Social Democracy?" in the *Journal of Economic Affairs* (October 1981) shows how confused the Liberals and their allies are: "I was startled to hear Mrs Shirley Williams advocating a prices and incomes policy on the grounds that it was essential for planning the economy. An incomes policy may be needed, but Mrs Williams' statement gives me the impression that she believes in over-all state planning ... we should not delude ourselves into thinking that an incomes policy is other than a serious infringement on freedom ... Nor have the Liberals explained how it is to be worked, and even if they had, it is certainly not the permanent answer to our economic troubles ...

"At present the Liberal – Social Democratic alliance occasionally looks too much like a half-way house on the old road of state socialism. It will spend more than the Tories but rather less than Labour. It sometimes seems to hark back to the days of Gaitskell. Such compromises may win votes but they will not improve the country ..."

3. SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY CONFERENCES

The SDP is a party which tries to disguise the fact that its chief personalities and its identifiable policies have been on and off the political stage for twenty years by resorting to what **Mr Francis Pym**, Lord President of the Council, has called "bogus novelty and razzamatuzz" (Felixstowe, 24th October 1981). So it was perhaps not surprising that the SDP should hold a conference in not one, but three places: in Perth on 4th and 5th October, in Bradford on 6th and 7th, and in London on 8th and 9th. This peculiar arrangement, designed to emphasise the party's interest in decentralisation, involved a vast concourse of politicians, party officials and journalists travelling about the country rather like Trotsky in his armoured train during the Russian Revolution. It also meant that only those attending the Perth Conference could discuss decentralisation of government, foreign affairs and defence; only those attending at Bradford could discuss unemployment, housing and industrial relations; and only those attending in London could discuss constitutional reform, education and local government.

This disadvantage was, however, less than it might have been, since rostrum speakers at each conference tended to express vague generalisations over the whole arena of political and social affairs, and very few firm policy commitments were forthcoming from the platform.

A Problem of Identity

The vacuity of the SDP's policies was only equalled by confusion about the nature and direction of the party. Nor is this surprising; an opinion poll carried out by the BBC2 *Newsnight* programme of people attending the three conferences showed that 55.6 per cent had not previously belonged

to a political party, while 30.2 per cent were formerly Labour, 6.8 per cent formerly Conservatives and 7.4 per cent formerly Liberals. **Dr David Owen** proclaimed in Perth, "We are not a Party of the soft centre" (*Times*, 6th October 1981). Later in the week **Mr Roy Jenkins** said that the SDP did not wish to become "a Mark Two Labour Party" (reflecting the SDP's frustration at having obtained so few defectors from the Conservative Party), while **Dr Owen** denied that the party wished to be "a Mark Two Liberal Party" (reflecting the SDP's thinly disguised scorn for the inability of the Liberals to "break the mould" of British politics over the past sixty years).

Mr Jenkins further declared: "We have established a new style which has brought politics back from the professionals to the people" (*Times*, 5th October 1981). As **Mr George Gale** commented in the *Daily Express*: "They are not 'the people' who have been gathering this week. They are, on the contrary, the people who know what's good for the people" (6th October 1981). One delegate, **Mr Clive Lindley**, a former Labour parliamentary candidate and now Chairman of the SDP's Membership Services Committee, said: "This Party is full of achievers" (*Times*, 6th October 1981) – a strange comment given the abject failure of the SDP's leaders either at governing the country when they were members of a Labour government or at surviving in the party of their original choice.

Policy Proposals

A number of discussion papers, published before the Conferences, gave an indication of what SDP policy might be in various areas. On economic policy, the SDP, like the TUC and the Labour Party, pressed for reflation, irrespective of the consequences, and for further devaluation of sterling ("recently the pound has fallen but not far enough"). Unlike the Liberals, who favoured a statutory pay policy, the SDP went no further than a voluntary policy. The proposals on industrial relations, which would not generally be objectionable to Conservatives, also called for "positive" job discrimination in favour of women, the disabled and ethnic minorities.

More objectionable proposals were made in the fields of housing, education, farming, foreign affairs and structure of government. There should be a "progressive reduction" in mortgage tax relief for owner-occupiers, and the statutory right to buy council homes would be removed: the decisions should be left to local authorities, which would deny the "right to buy" where Labour (and possibly SDP) councils held sway.

While the discussion paper on education accepted that in a free society it was not possible to prevent the existence of independent schools and the charging of fees, these schools were attacked vigorously: "... the competitiveness they promote is destructive. Their educational objectives are perverted by their need to sell success". So their charitable status and all "existing support" under tax relief should be "withdrawn". An even wider threat to education standards lies in the SDP proposal to abolish the existing GCE and CSE examinations in favour of the introduction of a "system of school-leaving statements".

As a major blow to all involved in farming, the SDP proposed the *re-rating* of agricultural land and buildings.

Perhaps the most disruptive proposals were those to set up new *regional* elected assemblies and authorities to administer health, education, economic and industrial planning, water supply, local transport, the environment and the arts. In Scotland and Wales there would be devolution on these lines to elected *national* assemblies. Scrutiny of EEC affairs should also pass to the European Parliament.

A number of the debates at the conferences, however, proved to be inconclusive, and failed to endorse or reject the proposals in these discussion papers.

Decentralisation. The party spokesman, **Mr Robert MacLennan**, MP (formerly Labour) for Caithness and Sutherland, outlined an SDP constitutional package, comprising reform of the House of Lords, a Bill of Rights and a further restructuring of local government. His most important commitment, however, was to a Scottish Assembly, for which even the last Labour Government had failed to obtain sufficient consent: "... it is our intention to establish at the earliest possible date a Scottish Assembly; and let there be no doubt that we shall not make the mistake of those whose temporary commitment was motivated by political expediency". He criticised Labour's previous proposals for failing to give a Scottish Assembly adequate tax raising powers, thus indicating that the SDP's proposals would not only involve even more tax and bureaucracy than those of his former Labour colleagues, but would create a veritable nightmare of conflict with the Westminster Parliament.

On local government, **Mr MacLennan** made the extraordinary statement that "the case for decentralisation was as strong in Lambeth as it was in the Lothian region of Scotland" (*Guardian*, 6th October 1981) – implying that a suitable SDP slogan might be 'all power to the local government Soviets', even if they were run by Mr Ted Knight or Mr Ken Livingstone. A note of sanity was sounded by **Mr Mike Thomas**, MP (formerly Labour) for Newcastle-upon-Tyne East, who warned the party that "it would have a battle on its hands persuading people to accept more reform after the failure of local government and health service reorganisation and the 'debacle of devolution' during the period of the last Labour Government" (*ibid.*).

Defence. Although there is as yet no serious challenge to the Party's official line, set out by Dr Owen, of support for the deployment of Cruise missiles and opposition to the modernisation of the British nuclear deterrent by investing in Trident, the genesis of a unilateralist group in the SDP might develop from a fringe meeting attended by Monsignor Bruce Kent, General Secretary of CND, and Professor E.P. Thompson. One delegate expressed the hope that the SDP would follow the Liberals and vote for unilateralism (*Guardian*, 6th October 1981).

Economic Policy. While **Mr William Rodgers** said that no government could commit itself to open-ended public expenditure, he went on to argue for expenditure on the North Seas gas-gathering pipe line, the Channel Tunnel and full electrification of the railways. He added: "Let us be cautious about believing that every lame duck must live" (*Guardian*, 6th October 1981).

The most detailed policy to be unveiled at the conferences was that for the so-called 'inflation tax'. This bureaucratic nightmare, first produced by the Liberals in 1973, was spelt out by **Mr Roy Jenkins**. He said that after discussions with both sides of industry, "the Government would announce guidance on the rate of growth of hourly earnings the country could afford over the coming year. If an employer increased the average hourly earnings of his employees by more than this, his excess payments would be subject to a tax" (*Times*, 10th October 1981). As **Mr Geoffrey Smith**, political correspondent of *The Times* and not usually critical of the SDP, wrote: "One may question whether the proposal ... will really solve the problem that has bedevilled all British incomes policies after a while: the failure to allow for the varying circumstances of different companies. What about companies that need to employ more skilled personnel if they are to expand? Can they do so without exceptional increases in their average hourly pay rates? Might not what is intended as a tax upon inflation turn out to be also a tax upon expansion?" (10th October 1981).

Mr David Blake, Economic Editor of *The Times*, was even more devastating in his attack on the idea, and explained in detail how it would not work. He concluded: "The more you look at the idea of an 'inflation tax' proposed by Mr Roy Jenkins the sillier it becomes. As a first attempt by the Social Democrats to put forward new ideas in economics, it is deeply disappointing. It contains most of the defects of the other kinds of incomes policies which are on offer and a few more besides ... While there is nothing wrong in presenting old claret in new bottles, Mr Jenkins and the Social Democrats ought at least to taste it to make sure it is good before serving it up to the public" (*Times*, 29th October 1981).

Mr Jenkins was even less convincing on the subject of public sector pay. He simply stated that, "If – and this is essential – public sector payments were fairly related to pay in the private sector, the restraining influence of the tax would be felt throughout the economy" (*Times*, 10th October 1981).

Education. This is a subject on which the SDP is potentially deeply divided, with Mrs Williams wishing to abolish the independent schools because of their alleged divisiveness, and other elements in the party shrinking from such a drastic policy. According to one report, "The Social Democrats invited leaders of Britain's public schools to start talks about ways of integrating with the state system. The Party is also to review the tax privileges enjoyed by public schools. The two moves are clearly aimed at defusing the issue of private education which threatens to be one of the most sensitive for the Social Democrats, and at finding a formula which will enable the Party to paper over the differences within its own ranks on the subject" (*Financial Times*, 9th October 1981).

Mr John Roper, MP for Farnworth and SDP spokesman on education, spoke along these lines in the debate on 8th October, and promised a review of the taxation system which "by an abuse of charitable status is encouraging social division". He added: "I believe that several leading figures in the present private sector who have justifiable pride in the educational vocation of these schools but share our concern about the

social division which they prolong would welcome our search for such a policy of integration. We would be failing in our duties if we did not point out that the existence of a significant sector of private education has divided and continues to divide our society" (*Guardian*, 9th October 1981). When one candidate argued against removal of charitable status as a "matter of expediency", **Mrs Anne Sofer**, who had just resigned as a Labour GLC councillor and was standing as an SDP candidate in the same seat (which she subsequently won), said that she was shocked that "so early in the life of the Party we are talking about expediency" (*ibid.*).

Organisation and Leadership

Almost more time was spent and more discord displayed on the issue of how the SDP leadership should be elected than on any policy issue. This subject, it will be remembered, was the one which proved the final straw for the original founders of the SDP and caused them to leave the Labour Party. Two of the four founders, Mr Jenkins and Mr Rodgers, remained consistent in wanting only MPs to elect their leader. The other two, Mrs Williams and Dr Owen, wanted MPs to do no more than nominate candidates, while the choice should be made by every party member. A constitutional conference was planned for early 1982 to debate the matter.

In the debate on the subject on 6th October, there were angry accusations that the party had "betrayed" a promise given to its members at its launching, that elections would be on the basis of one man, one vote. A delegate from Blackpool said that as secretary of a local Labour Party he had suffered from long constitutional wrangles and added, "I do not wish to repeat that experience". The debate however, was continued on 8th October. A Mr Cargill said: "Are you asking us to go back to our people in the country and to tell them their MP is to have a reduction in his powers within the House of Commons – that he will have no power over who is his leader?" (*Daily Telegraph*, 7th and 9th October 1981). **Mr Mike Thomas**, MP, said "that he had never dreamt that the party would do anything other than elect its leader by one member, one vote. I thought we were about breaking the mould of British politics; I thought we were about founding a truly democratic party ... Our new party should have started as it means to go on, by keeping its promises to its members" (*Guardian*, 9th October 1981).

Another cause of concern inside the Party arose over its deliberate attempt to avoid the practice of existing parties by organising itself locally on an area rather than a constituency basis. There were complaints about local parties not being able to keep some of the money they raised: "We are far too centralised and authoritative," said Mr Rawlinson of Worcester. "There are 416 rules, and there are far too many 'shalls' in them" (*Guardian*, 5th October 1981).

Labour Defections

During the course of the SDP conferences, no fewer than five Labour MPs defected to the SDP. They were Mr James Dunn (Liverpool Kirkdale), Mr Tom McNally (Stockport South), Dr Dickson Mabon (Greenock and Port Glasgow), Mr David Ginsburg (Dewsbury) and Mr Robert Mitchell (Southampton Itchen). Their defection, which brought the number of SDP

MPs to 21, compared with only 12 Liberal MPs, incidentally weakens the cause of moderation in the Labour Party. The first four voted for Mr Healey in the second ballot in Labour's election for the deputy leadership, and the fifth abstained. As **Mr Geoffrey Smith** wrote: "If more and more right-wingers desert, can the (Labour) Right come into its own? Every time a Right-winger moves over to the SDP the task of those who remain in the Labour Party becomes more difficult" (*Times*, 10th October 1981).

Not all these defectors were welcome to the alliance. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that Mr Dunn had joined the SDP after initially approaching the Liberals who were threatening to take his seat at the next election (9th October 1981). **Cllr. Richard Kemp**, a Liberal, who leads the electoral negotiations with the SDP in Liverpool, said: "He is not the kind of man we are looking for ... We are worried about the number of Right-wing Labour MPs and councillors who are joining the SDP and we believe if the SDP became dominated by people like that there would be no grounds for a political agreement between the two parties ... We have opposed him in the past and it would take a lot to persuade us not to oppose him in the future. In fact, we have told the SDP that they can't just be a ragbag for everyone to come over, if they want to be in alliance with us ... We have been waiting for years for Kirkdale and we are not going to give it up easily" (*Guardian*, 8th October 1981).

Three members of the ruling Labour group on Lambeth Borough Council, including the ex-leader, Mr David Stimpson, also defected from Labour to the SDP. Mr Stimpson told the conference on 9th October that rates in Lambeth had risen from 60p in the pound in 1978 to 172.5p this year — but failed to explain why he had remained in the Labour group throughout this time.

Conflict over Crosby

On 6th October Mrs Williams announced to the conference in Bradford her desire to be selected as SDP/Liberal candidate for the forthcoming Crosby by-election. **Mr Michael Meadowcroft**, Chairman of the Liberal Assembly Steering Committee, said: "She botched Warrington and botched Croydon. Why should she now botch Crosby?" (*Daily Express*, 7th October 1981). **Mr David Steel** also complained of Mrs Williams's failure to contact the Crosby Liberals, who thus heard the news "second hand from the platform of the Conference" (*Times*, 10th October 1981).

The tension between the 'allies' was indicated, first, by one member telling the conference in Perth that it would be "electoral madness" to allocate seats to Liberals simply because they had traditionally come second to Conservative and Labour in the past. Secondly, **Mr Tony Forester**, an SDP councillor in Brighton, said the party would not be built "by acting as a rubbish transfer-station for the other parties, or by letting the Liberals fight all the best seats" (*Times*, 10th October 1981). Finally, the treasurer of the Liberal party in Crosby, **Mr Sime**, resigned after accusing Mrs Williams of "bulldozing her way into Crosby". He claimed that if local members had been given a free choice they would have selected Mr Hill [the original Liberal prospective candidate] (*Times*, 29th October 1981).