

The 1988 Leadership Campaign

Following this year's leadership election for the Liberal Democrats, *Harriet Smith* looks back to the party's first such election.

At 3.45pm on Thursday 28 July 1988, Paddy Ashdown MP was declared as first leader of the newly-merged Social & Liberal Democrats. He won 71.9% of the votes cast in the ballot, while his only opponent, Alan Beith MP, polled 28.1%. Turnout was 72% of a total membership of 80,104.¹

The results of the election for the first President of the party were also announced on the same day. The winner was Ian Wrigglesworth, a senior figure in the former SDP, who beat Des Wilson and Gwynoro Jones, both Liberals. Although this result was closer than the leadership, there was an inevitability to it — eleven years ago, there was a strong feeling that the two most senior figures in the party should represent both old parties, although this feeling was not always shared, particularly among some ex-Liberals.

Merger and after

The build-up to the leadership campaign began as soon as the party was formally merged in March 1988 — David Steel had made it clear that he did not want to continue as leader after the struggles of the Alliance days, and David Owen had gone off into his own wilderness. At that stage in the party's development, there were still serious divisions between former Liberals and former SDP members.²

Potential candidates for the leadership were identified almost immediately. Paddy Ashdown was already well-known in the party before he became an MP in 1983, mainly as a result of the Youth Charter he formulated as a result of his experience of working with unemployed youngsters. His unusual background (for a Liberal) as a soldier and diplomat also attracted attention. Once elected, he quickly made a name for himself as someone who was not

scared to say what he thought, frequently got into trouble as a result of indiscreet conversations with the press, and displayed boundless, indefatigable energy. He was widely recognised within and outwith the party as someone to keep a (wary) eye on.

Alan Beith was a complete contrast — a quiet Methodist lay-preacher, he embodied traditional Liberal values and beliefs and was seen as someone who would guard the Liberals' political integrity. He was also a very strong Parliamentary performer. Other potential candidates talked about within the party and mentioned by the press and media were Russell Johnston, Malcolm Bruce and Robert MacLennan, briefly leader of the SDP at the time of merger. In the end, however, they all decided not to stand and Bruce became Chair of Ashdown's campaign. David Steel, as outgoing Liberal leader, and Jim Wallace, as Chief Whip, stayed strictly neutral throughout the campaign.

The election was an all-member ballot using the alternative vote system. This was a unique method for electing a leader among the major political parties in the UK. In both the Labour and Conservative parties, leaders were (and still are) elected by MPs and other sections of the party using electoral colleges, and in the case of the Conservatives, a complicated series of ballots. The one-member-one-vote system of election used in the Liberal Democrats' 1988 leadership election attracted considerable attention from the press because of this.

As with the 1999 election, there was an artificial 'cold war' period before the serious election period started, but as there was no moratorium on campaigning before the official campaign, the period was used for intensive behind-the-scenes negotiations with potential supporters. Because of the recent merger, it was seen as essential for leadership candidates to

have support from ex-SDP members as well as ex-Liberals. Both teams also spent their time planning their press and media strategies, the timetable for keynote speeches and hustings, and general publicity.

Just before the real contest started, Alan Beith's campaign got off to an unfortunate start when one of his supporters — reputedly Alex Carlile — released a list of fifteen reasons why Ashdown was not fit to be elected. Beith eventually condemned the letter after intervention from David Steel and other senior party members, but the move had introduced a sour note.

The campaign begins

By the time nominations closed on 24 June 1988, both candidates had attracted a strong list of supporters. Ashdown's key lieutenants were Malcolm Bruce MP, Archy Kirkwood MP, Tim Clement-Jones, Des Wilson (*deus ex machina*) and Alan Leaman. Other MPs who supported Ashdown included Matthew Taylor, Richard Livsey, Ronnie Fearn and Menzies Campbell. Tom McNally, Lindsay Granshaw, Anne Sofer, Denis Sullivan and David Marquand were his high-profile SDP backers, later joined by Roy Jenkins and Shirley Williams.³

Beith's team was chaired by Geraint Howells MP; supporters included Cyril Smith, Alex Carlile MP, David Alton MP, Lord (George) Mackie, Richard Wainwright, Annette Penhaligon, Andrew Gifford and Rev. Roger Roberts.⁴ The contrast between a radical, cross-party approach to the development of the new Social & Liberal Democrats, and the more traditional approach to perpetuating old-style Liberalism in the new party could not have been more marked.

Ashdown launched his campaign in his constituency, Yeovil, on 1 June. Beith followed the next day, launching his effort from the cottage in Cheshire where he was born. The election process was similar to this year's,

but with a few differences. In 1988, hustings did not begin until after nominations closed, and every member of the party received notification of the date of the hustings. Each hustings — there were seven — had a specific policy area as a theme to which each candidate spoke, followed by general questions. The subjects were:

- Local government/environment
- Constitutional reform
- Health
- Economy and industry
- Education
- Home Affairs
- Foreign Affairs and Defence

This enabled Ashdown and Beith to articulate clearly their policies on these areas, plan press releases and maximise publicity for their policy positions and their views of the party's future. It was an effective way of enabling the candidates to set out their vision for policy development, then giving members a chance to ask questions about their more general concerns.⁵

In addition to the official hustings, other groups in the party held their own. There were Green and Women's hustings (on the same day), and Association of Liberal Councillors', Young Social & Liberal Democrats' and Parliamentary Candidates' conferences. Ashdown

CAMPAIGN FOCUS **PADDY ASHDOWN**
The Ability to Run - the Willingness to Lead...

"WE MUST WIN THE BATTLE OF IDEAS"
PADDY ASHDOWN MP

Paddy Ashdown launched his campaign in Yeovil on June 1st by giving his enthusiastic supporters a clear message: "Our party can become the party of new ideas and it can change the course of British politics".

As pledges of support flooded into Paddy's campaign headquarters, he was quick to point to the importance of uniting the Party and preparing it for the tasks ahead. "The next general election campaign starts now," he said. "We must push aside the tired and old-fashioned Labour Party. It has failed the cause of reform and must be replaced. And we must go on to become the alternative to the Tories that people will be looking for in the 1990s".

Our ideas of community, liberty, and internationalism will become even more relevant," he said, "as Britain struggles with the legacy of Mrs Thatcher. We must bring the 'green' perspective into the centre of policy thinking. We must create a political ground for Liberalism and Social Democracy and confront the new agenda".

A Winner . . .

Paddy outlined his strategy for power in his very first speech of the campaign.

"The balance of power can never be an end in itself. Our real objective is, step by step, to become the Government of Britain. Of course we want to share power but we want to share it with the people, not with the old parties".

Looking to the future, he called for the Party to give a higher priority to building up its membership and to the concerns of young people. He argued that it should be more effective in serving its members, and that MPs should work more closely with the rest of the Party on its campaigns and policy development.

Matthew Taylor, the youngest MP in the Commons, stressed Paddy's qualities for the job. "Our Party needs a winner," he said. "Someone who can give it coherence and take it into power. Paddy is certainly a winner. Look what he's achieved in Yeovil as a constituency MP and in Parliament where he is known in all parties as an energetic and effective speaker. He outshone both Labour and Tory front benches on the Education Bill. Now we must give him an overwhelming mandate to lead our Party".

... With Vision

He was backed by Richard Livsey MP, the leader of the Welsh Social and Liberal Democrats. "We need a leader who is excited by political ideas, and not afraid to give a lead; someone who has a vision of the sort of Britain Social and Liberal Democrats are working for, and who can communicate it to the electorate; someone who will be sensitive to feelings and views within our Party and who will be open to new ideas. Paddy Ashdown is such a man. He knows that Britain needs a new direction and a new kind of leadership."

During the campaign, at meetings and events throughout the country, Paddy will meet thousands of members of the Social and Liberal Democrats. It is not just a campaign for the leadership of the party. It is the beginning of the campaign to put our values and policies where they belong — in Government and into action.

"WHY I'M BACKING PADDY"

I am delighted to give my wholehearted backing to Paddy Ashdown's campaign to become the new Leader of the Social and Liberal Democrats. By sheer energy and hard work, he built up a highly motivated local team to win Yeovil where he has since consolidated his base.

I know Paddy wants to lead an effective team in and out of Parliament uniting MPs, Candidates, Councillors and the Party organisation into an effective national political unit.

He is increasingly effective in Parliament, leading the opposition to the Education Reform Bill.

There come to know him as a man of high ideas and enormous energy to promote and develop them. Under his leadership I believe our Party will become a force of new and radical ideas aimed at challenging the outdated right and persuading the electorate that we represent the credible alternative to the Tories.

Paddy has the talent, energy and ideas to be an effective and successful leader of our Party.

MALCOLM BRUCE MP

"Paddy has combined one of his leadership qualities by the way he has handled the education portfolio — consultative, purposeful, innovative, hard-working and high profile: just what we need!"
ANNIE SOFFER

and Beith used these opportunities to make speeches on the future of the party and on policies relevant to the audience. A never-to-be-forgotten hustings was the Liberal Movement's⁶ in Wolverhampton, where a large number of radical Liberals (including members of Ashdown's team) got together to make very clear their hostile views about the former SDP. Ashdown was given a hard time whereas Beith was welcomed openly.

In addition to formal and informal hustings, both candidates used invitations from local associations as opportunities to put across their views on various concerns. There was also — as in 1999, and in good

ALDC tradition — leaflet distribution, telephone canvassing and, for the first time in a leadership election, extensive use of the press and media.

Political differences

A year before the election, Ashdown had already begun to articulate the political creed which he espoused throughout his leadership, and which eventually led to the development of the Joint Cabinet Committee with New Labour in 1997. He began an article in 1987 with the words: 'The realignment of the Left in Britain has always been seen in terms of realign-

ment of political forces. This is a pity, since what we need is a fresh assembly of new ideas.'

He argued throughout the campaign that a united, democratic, *new* party should not be afraid to re-think policies where necessary in order to 'make the message forward looking' (Ashdown's phrase). His underlying theme throughout was that choice and individual freedoms were the entitlement of every citizen, but that with that entitlement must come rights and responsibilities. New thinking should include looking at the social security/benefits/welfare system, putting green politics at the top of the agenda, and using the market wherever possible to promote prosperity. In 1988, these were new, challenging ideas, and were a conscious effort to move forward from the ideas and policies of the Grimond era. This did not mean that the Grimond legacy was rejected; the opposite was true. Grimond's clarity of thinking, new ways of looking at politics in his day, and his determination to succeed were crucial to the development of Ashdown's political philosophy. He felt, however, that the new party was the ideal, and possibly only, opportunity to expand and redirect those ideas in keeping with a different political age. Eleven years ago, those ideas challenged conventional political wisdom; eleven years on, they have become common currency.

Beith's message was based on more traditional Liberal thinking. By nature a less radical figure than Ashdown, he appealed to members who felt threatened by the centrist, professional, non-inclusive approach of the former SDP. Although both candidates shared a fundamental belief in Liberal values, Beith harked back to the former Liberal Party as his vision for the future. Unlike Ashdown, he rejected the idea of overtaking Labour, saying, 'The Leader should set the party the challenge of developing policies for the next general election based on those values and on our traditional belief in achieving a free and fair society, creating a safer planet and sustain-

FOCUS

SOCIAL & LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

More & more People are Saying:

ALAN BEITH DESERVES TO WIN

In Parliament
Nancy Seear, Geraint Howells and Sir Cyril Smith are three of Britain's best loved and most respected Parliamentarians. They say Alan Beith deserves your support as a strong voice for the Party in the Commons.
Sir Cyril says: I consider Alan Beith to be a grafter, a man of the highest integrity.
Geraint Howells says: Alan Beith listens to people and we can trust him to develop our Party along democratic lines.

In the Party
Alan Beith brings experience and skill to the Leadership race, having taken on many of the most challenging jobs in the Liberals, Alliance and now the Social and Liberal Democrats. People who want a Leader in touch with the membership are supporting Alan Beith. He has already led calls for reform of the Party's membership system following widespread dissatisfaction from old and new members alike.
Gwyn Griffiths, a Chairman of the MLP, says: During the merger negotiations we saw in Alan someone who listens to ordinary members and reflects their concerns, while others kept safely on the sidelines.
People from all sides of the Party are backing Alan, including Chris Wainman, Zerbano Gifford, Rachael Pitchford, Julie Horton, Joyce Rose & David Alton.

In the Regions and Nations
Alan Beith's unrivalled commitment to strong nations and regions has won him the support of people like Lord Mackie and Elaine Morris, Gwyn Griffiths, Joan Smith & Neville Phillips, Richard Wainwright and Chris Foote-Wood.

In the Council Chambers
As a Parish and District Councillor, Alan Beith learnt the skills and qualities that will make him a Leader who values consultation and accessibility above all else. He chose local government as the theme of his first hustings speech, in Birmingham, and will make sure our Councillors get the support and prominence they deserve.
People who want a Leader who understands local government, because he actually served in it, say Alan Beith deserves to win. People like Chris Willmore, John Shipley, David Shutt, Rev. Roger Roberts and Annette Penhaligon are backing Alan.

With YOUR Support he will Win

able future and decentralising and devolving power.’

Relations with Labour

Ashdown wanted to lead a party that, at that time, he genuinely believed could become a natural alternative government to a Labour Party then in a state of chaos. Neil Kinnock was being battered on all sides by opposing forces within the Labour movement, and their credibility had reached an all-time low. In October 1987, Ashdown wrote: ‘... Labour was determined to conduct a major rethink. It was also evident that they intend to move back to the centre ground as fast as their little legs and left-wing will allow. If they succeed, they will at last arrive at where we were twenty years ago. The Labour Party is about to learn again, and painfully, that Thatcherism will not be defeated by defending the past.’

He believed then that as long as Labour was vulnerable, there was a chance that a strong Liberal Democrat party could overtake them at the polls. The key to achieving that was to build what he described as an efficient, modern party of teamwork that could develop and promote radical policies, and not be afraid to take on the new challenges posed by new technology, globalisation and the communication revolution. He wanted to create an effective, coherent party which was capable of achieving real power.

Beith took a different view of how the party could achieve electoral success. At the launch of his campaign, he said: ‘I am not prepared to see the next general election handed on a plate to Mrs Thatcher or her successor while we conduct a battle for second place with the Labour Party ...’ His style was to do things through the party in the traditional Liberal way; he contrasted his experience as Deputy Liberal Leader and former Chief Whip with Ashdown’s political inexperience and impetuous approach. The implication of this was that Ashdown was the risky choice, someone who was likely to take decisions without consulting first.

Differences in temperaments

This difference in approach and character was picked up by the media. Ashdown was accused of running a slick American-style campaign. One example of this was his campaign Focus, which was distributed to all party members, and contained his formal manifesto. It was a mixture of the traditional and the new, using colour, clear pictures, a specially designed letterhead and eye-catching graphics. Beith’s was a more traditional black-and-white presentation that stressed his political experience and his long history of commitment to the Liberal Party.

Ashdown was also accused of running ahead of the rest of his team, taking decisions and then informing them of what he had decided, and of impromptu unscripted media briefings which left his supporters wondering what was coming next. Beith ran a less flamboyant, more controlled campaign which took few risks and emphasised continuity.

The candidates’ widely differing campaign styles and their basic points of disagreement were epitomised by the debate over the party name. It was an important and potentially divisive issue in the new party, unimaginable though it is today. The long title was the cumbersome Social & Liberal Democrats, which inevitably became ‘the Salads’. Ashdown was happy to adopt the short title ‘Democrats’, not a very popular view among his campaign team, let alone among the party as a whole. Beith — with foresight — preferred Liberal Democrats. This issue was to become one of Ashdown’s biggest problems at his first conference, and continued to haunt him until the party finally (in 1989) became the Liberal Democrats.

A Leader in the *Times* commented: ‘Mr Beith stands very much for the apostolic succession of the old Liberal tradition. His expressed regret at the adoption of the short trade description “Democrats”, and his wish to rescue the word Liberal

for the party’s short title symbolises his attitude ... Mr Ashdown, on the other hand, does not conceal his dislike of harking back and is quite happy with “Democrats” ... He is the risk-takers’ choice, and not much is achieved in politics without risk.’

A less contentious point of difference between the candidates was their handwriting! In an effort to discredit Ashdown, Andrew Gifford (one of Beith’s lieutenants) had examples of their handwriting analysed in the hope that the result would prove that Ashdown was completely unsuited to be leader. Unfortunately for the Beith campaign, it backfired. The graphologist interpreted Ashdown’s writing as being that of a natural leader; Beith’s was that of a cautious, careful person who did not like taking risks and did not have strong leadership potential. Somehow or other this information found its way into various broadsheet diaries and tabloid gossip columns ...

It was ultimately Ashdown’s desire to take risks with the future that ensured his success. His approach was more acceptable to the ex-SDP element (which at that time made up less than one-third of party members) and to those ex-Liberals who feared that a traditional Liberal-style leader would restrict the new party’s appeal to potential new members and voters. The press also played a role in promoting the vision of a radical new party at a time when British politics was in a state of turmoil, with Thatcher increasingly being seen as a threat to the country’s future, the Labour Party at odds with itself, and the nationalists and Greens beginning to attract attention.

1988 and 1999 compared

The 1988 campaign was very different from the recent one. People then were looking for something new and exciting, a leader who could drag the new party out of the doldrums created by the Alliance. Ashdown came along at exactly the right moment. In 1999, after eleven years of his lead-

ership, most members were at a loss to know what they wanted. He had succeeded in leading the party to greater heights than for nearly seventy years, had embraced a new style of politics in his relationship with Labour and was without doubt one of the most dynamic politicians in Britain. The new leader would be someone very different to him, and someone who had a very hard act to follow.

The 1999 electoral mechanism was less agile than in 1988: the hustings process was more laborious and began before nominations closed, went on for much longer, and the way it was organised meant that candidates had less opportunity to talk in any detail about where they wanted to take the Lib Dems. This was compounded by having five candidates, only two of whom, Kennedy and Hughes, were serious contenders. Inevitably there was less time for contenders to articulate their visions, and the system whereby each had to answer the same question in turn made it almost impossible for anyone to stand out, or to express radically different views from the others. The debate about the party's future and direction went round in circles, with all the candidates basically agreeing about general policies with few specifics mentioned.

It was also more difficult to engage the media, who assumed it would be a Kennedy walk-over until near the end when Hughes began to gain ground. The media's main concern, unlike in 1988 when they scented a genuine battle between differing philosophies, was on the Liberal Democrat relationship with Labour. The only candidate who might have stimulated a real debate about 'the project' (as the Joint Cabinet Committee became known), was Don Foster who openly espoused closer links with Labour, but he withdrew his candidacy before nominations closed.

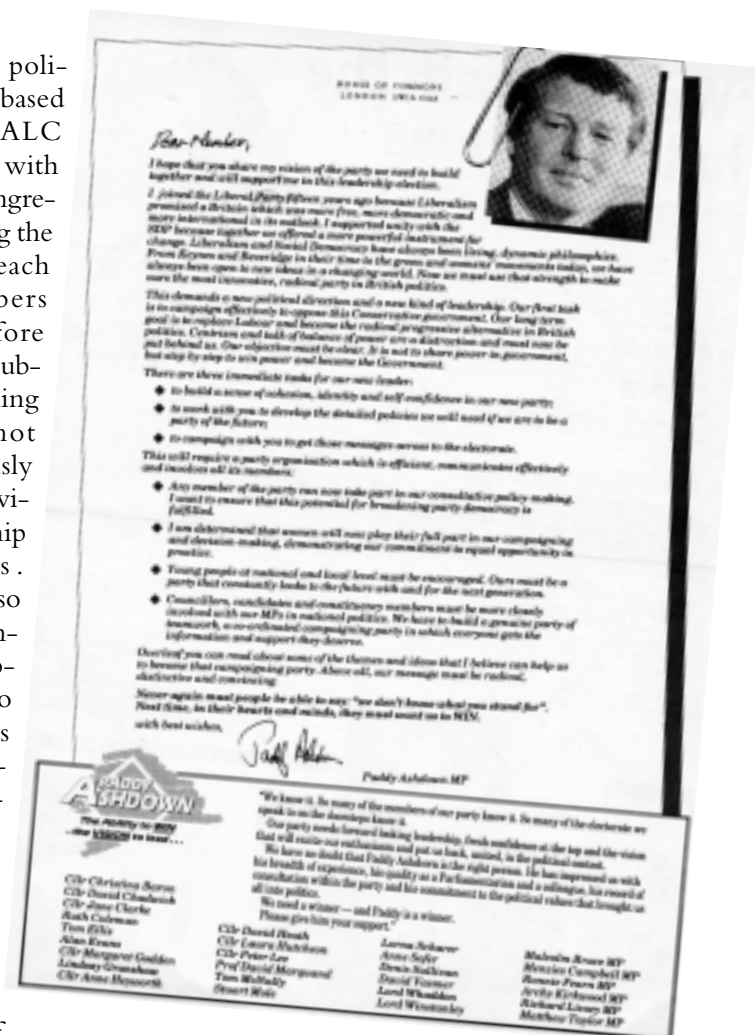
In 1988, Ashdown and his team took the opportunity in his campaign to exploit the Liberal ability to win hearts and minds through

community politics. It was based on classic ALC techniques, with the added ingredient of using the media to reach the members (and therefore the general public), something that had not been seriously tried in previous leadership elections. Ashdown also used the contest as an opportunity to articulate his political vision on issues which were unwilling to tackle — for example reform of the social security system. The campaign was sometimes controversial, and frequently exhausting, but it was an exciting time, as were the sometimes fraught but interesting and ultimately successful years that followed. Where next?

Harriet Smith was Paddy Ashdown's Press Officer during and after the 1988 leadership election.

Notes:

- 1 The turnout in the 1999 leadership election was 61.6% of a membership of over 85,000. There will be many explanations for this, but the most likely one is that in 1988, members were voting for the new leader of a new party, and the contest was based on principles, ideas and the future of a party that was still reeling from the wreckage of the Alliance. By 1999, the party was established and successful, and the leadership election more of a quasi-presidential contest than a battle about new ideas.
- 2 At the general election the previous year, the Alliance had polled 22.6% of the votes, and had 22 MPs. The campaign had been characterised by difficult exchanges between Owen and Steel, and



- a year later feelings still ran high.
- 3 Tim Clement-Jones was past Chair of the Liberal Party; Des Wilson was an outstanding campaigner for social justice issues; Alan Leaman was co-author of the Youth Charter and an active Young Liberal. Tom McNally (formerly Jim Callaghan's speechwriter), Lindsay Granshaw, Anne Sofer, Denis Robertson Sullivan and David Marquand were leading lights in the SDP.
- 4 Richard Wainwright was a former Liberal MP, Annette Penhaligon was David Penhaligon MP's widow and an influential figure in the Liberal Party in her own right, Andrew Gifford was previously David Steel's Head of Office, and Rev. Roger Roberts was an eloquent, influential, Welsh Liberal.
- 5 In the 1999 hustings, each candidate was given five minutes to explain in general terms why they would be the best leader, and then another five minutes to answer questions. After a short break, three or four pre-prepared questions were asked of all the candidates in turn.
- 6 The Liberal Movement was established after merger to campaign for Liberalism within the SLD. It lasted for about four years as an effective voice in the new party.