

# New Labour

In 1995, John Dickie, Liberal Democrat councillor in Camden and Federal Executive member, quit the party and joined Labour. **Neil Stockley** relates the story of this defection to Labour.

## A progressive's dilemma

In November 1995, John Dickie quietly approached the Labour Whip on Camden Council and calmly said, 'I'd like to join the Labour Party.' In that moment he suddenly ended his twelve years' intense involvement with the SDP and the Liberal Democrats, during most of which he had regarded Labour as saddled with ideological baggage.

The switch did not result from any major changes in his political beliefs. Dickie is clear that he believes as strongly as ever that government should play an active role in promoting a strong, efficient economy and a fairer society. What had changed, as he saw it, was the political environment. The question had always been one of strategy. What was the best vehicle to make his political views a reality? For Dickie, the answer, once so clearly the centre parties, was now Labour.

### The SDP

John Dickie became politically aware during his late teens. In the 1983 general election, during his A-level year, he delivered leaflets for the SDP candidate in Morecambe and Lonsdale. At that time, the SDP appeared to be the only party he could support. Whilst Labour had a 'strong social concern', he could not accept its shift to the far left, which included such policies as the nationalisation of key industries, unilateral nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from the Common Market. Dickie believed that the Thatcher Government was making some long-overdue changes to Britain's economic and industrial structures. But he was appalled at its lack of concern for the social downsides. As for the Liberals, 'they simply didn't register in Morecambe.'

At Oxford, Dickie became a committed SDP activist — President of the SDP Club, Student Union Secretary and Alliance candidate for the Student Union presidency. He gained a new perspective on political strategy from the history of Oxford's student politics. The social democrats had frequently broken away from the 'extreme left'-dominated La-

bour Club and had eventually become recognised by the national party and generally acknowledged as the principal centre-left grouping. Likewise, Dickie believed that the SDP-Liberal Alliance could displace Labour as the main centre-left force and win power. In the mid-1980s, this was by no means incredible. Labour had just suffered a massive defeat and, still a doctrinaire socialist party, was making little headway. In the cut-and-thrust of media politics, Neil Kinnock was frequently eclipsed by the SDP Leader, David Owen.

### The Liberal Democrats

By the end of the 1980s, this strategy was all but destroyed. First, the 1987 general election saw Labour confirmed as the leading centre-left party. Second, the merger of the SDP and Liberal Party turned into a debacle. Dickie supported the move, in order to ensure the survival of his brand of politics. The failure of the Alliance's 'dual leadership' had proved to him that keeping two parties with separate identities was not a viable strategy. Third, the new party got off to a bad start. It had dismal ratings in the opinion polls. In the 1989 elections for the European Parliament, the Liberal Democrats came fourth, polling well behind the Greens. Dickie, like many others, now believed that a divided 'centre-left' had no chance of defeating the Conservatives.

Despite all this, he remained determined to 'make the merger work'. In part, this was an emotional, almost tribal commitment: he wanted to prove the anti-merger SDP members wrong. Dickie now concedes that he could have joined Labour and backed Neil Kinnock's drive to scrap the party's most doctrinaire policies. But, at the time, Labour still seemed 'too left-inclined'. In the Liberal Democrats, there were large numbers of people who shared his brand of 'sensible politics.' The new party stood for the sorts of economic and social policies he had supported most strongly in the SDP and the Alliance. Now an activist in

Hampstead and Highgate, he worked hard to ensure that the Liberal Democrats survived.

## Realignment

By 1992, like many Liberal Democrats, Dickie hoped for a hung parliament, which would put the party in a position of influence. But the Conservatives' fourth victory in a row left him deeply depressed for the future of centre-left politics. In particular, Dickie despaired at the split in the anti-Tory vote. He strongly backed Paddy Ashdown's call, in May 1992, for Liberal Democrats to 'work with others to assemble the ideas around which a non-socialist alternative to the Conservatives can be constructed.' Dickie then became one of the party's most enthusiastic advocates of cooperation and 'realignment' on the centre-left.

In 1993, with such former SDP colleagues as Tom McNally and Dick Newby, he co-founded *The Reformer*, an internal Liberal Democrat journal, to make the case for realignment. In a series of forthright editorials, Dickie argued that if neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats could win on their own, then the two parties should work together wherever possible. In time, this could lead to a new party configuration, with most progressives living under one political roof. Under this scenario, he suggested, the Conservatives' hegemony could be ended. A political party, he argued should be a 'vehicle for achieving power and implementing its policies, not a talking shop'. And he ridiculed the notion that the party should embark on a new 'long march' to power, arguing that, unlike Liberals in 1990s Britain, 'Mao had a map'.

Even at this stage, Dickie had no desire to change parties. He perceived John Smith, who succeeded Kinnock as Labour's leader in 1992, as 'decent and capable' but 'representing the past, not the future'. True, he had frustrations with the Liberal Democrats, most notably over the party's culture of decentralisation. This came to a head in 1993, with the allegations of racism by the Liberal Democrat group in Tower Hamlets. Dickie was depressed by the fact that the party could not expel

those he regarded as troublesome councillors. But he was still a 'tribal' Liberal Democrat and, indeed, more of an 'activist' than ever. He became Treasurer of the Party in England, a member of the Federal Executive, the Federal Conference Committee and numerous policy working groups, and, in May 1994, a councillor in Camden.

## New Labour

John Dickie's decision to change parties can be directly traced to September 1994, when Tony Blair became leader of the Labour Party. Blair immediately set about shifting his party on to the electoral 'middle ground', making huge changes to the party's policies, image and strategy that were more radical than anything Kinnock had attempted. Blair rapidly dominated the media and political agenda. 'New Labour' was born.

Dickie saw his reasons for staying with the Liberal Democrats rapidly disappearing. He still agreed with many Liberal Democrat principles and policies. But he could see no real differences between Blair's political aims and the original reasons he had joined the SDP. For him, there was a social democratic party that could win power. It was 'New Labour'. Labour was no longer out in left field. Its politics were now his politics. The Liberal Democrats did not need to replace 'Old Labour', in order to deliver the type of policies Dickie believed in. New Labour would do that anyway. Of course, the Liberal Democrats might work with Blair. The party system could change. But, then and there, social democracy had a new and exciting opportunity.

Dickie's decision to join Labour appears to have been as much an emotional as an intellectual process. He recalls the year following Blair's election as Labour leader as others would the slow death of a marriage, with memories of 'restlessness, confusion, angst.' By the time of the Liberal Democrat conference in September 1995, he felt more and more detached from the party. 'We were sitting there passing all these policies but the real world was facing a choice between Major's Tories and a modernising, social democrat

government.' The congenial 'tribe' to which he had been so loyal now seemed more like an irrelevant sect.

## Life with Labour

Leaving the party in which he had invested so much time and energy was undoubtedly a traumatic experience. Friendships with a few Liberal Democrats became 'a little strained', in part because they were no longer sustained by shared experiences. On the whole, however, Dickie believes his Lib Dem friends respect his decision, however strongly they disagreed and tried to dissuade him. On joining Labour, Dickie did not attack the Liberal Democrats in public. He is firm that he divulged no party secrets; nor was he asked to do so by his new comrades. Four years on, he retains some affection and a strong interest in the Liberal Democrats. Indeed, many of his friends and business associates are active party members. To take the divorce analogy further, it is almost as if the former spouses remain good friends.

Within the Labour Party, Dickie concentrates on his role with the Labour Group on Camden Council. In 1998, he was elected for a safe Labour ward and is now vice-chair of Camden's Finance and Education committees. He finds the Labour Party 'more political, more policy-oriented' than the Liberal Democrats. Blair in government is 'pretty much' delivering his personal brand of politics. But Dickie clearly wishes that he could again be in the same party as many Liberal Democrats, with whom he sees mostly 'contrived' political differences, and believes that the political realignment that started in 1983 has not yet finished.

Dickie has few regrets about his defection. He admits to some feelings of guilt for not letting his federal party activity slowly ebb away before he quit. But for John Dickie, the bottom line is his firm belief that in switching to Labour he did 'the correct and honest thing.'

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