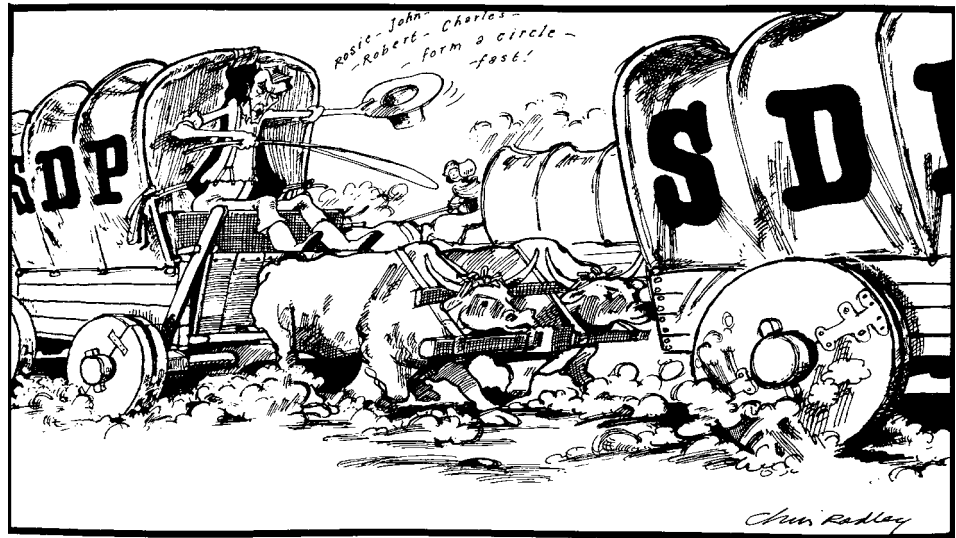


MERGER AND AFTE

The Alliance's 1987 election campaign was unimpressive and the outcome was disappointing. Pressure for merger between the SDP and Liberals began to mount almost immediately – in opposition to the wishes of David Owen. Nevertheless, Owen believed he could win the party's ballot over opening merger negotiations, and use his victory to force out his Jenkinsite critics within the SDP. It was a fatal miscalculation. This final selection of cartoons by **Chris Radley**, from the *Social Democrat*, charts the SDP's last year, and the infighting between the merged party and the Owenite rump that followed. Commentary by **Mark Pack**.



Merger? (3 July 1987)

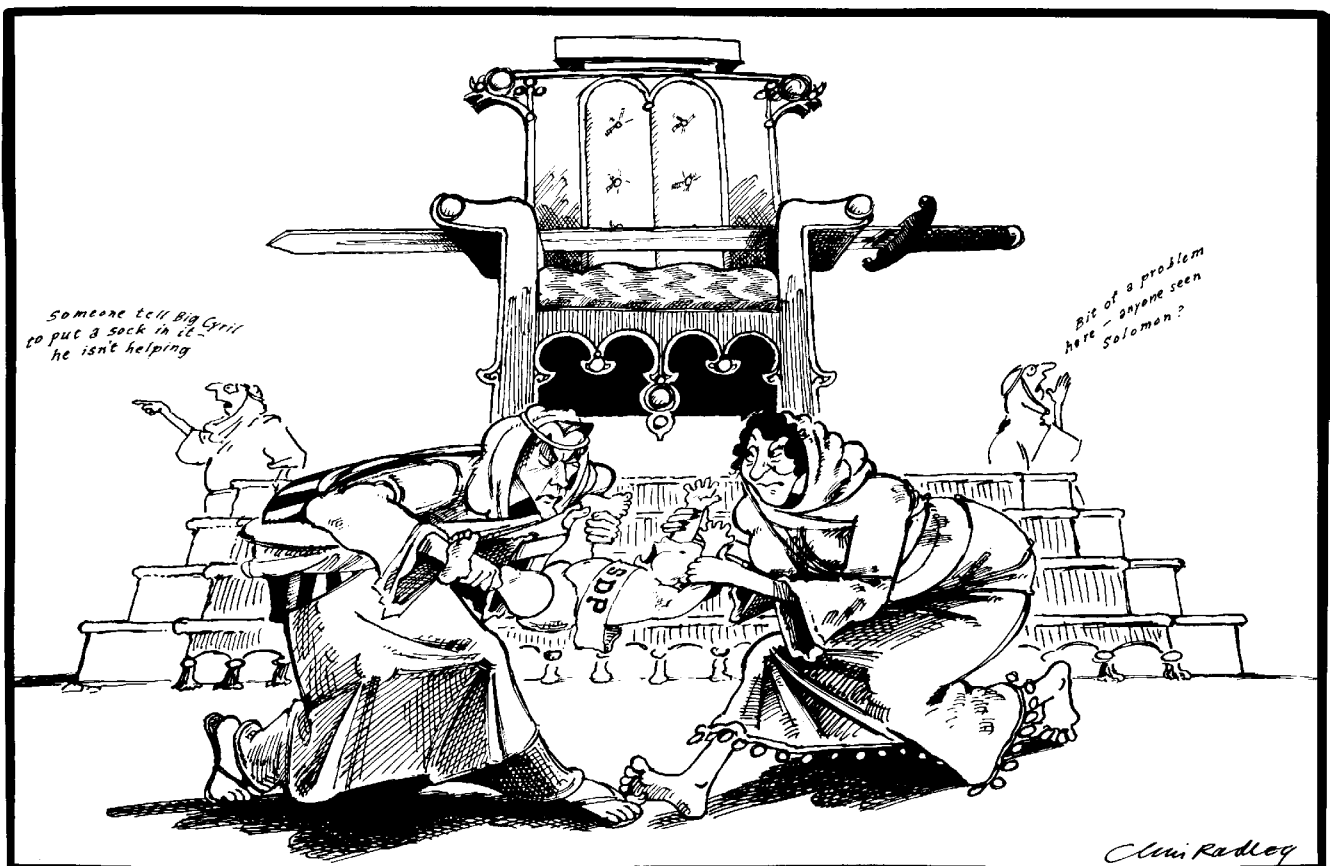
David Owen, seen here circling the SDP's wagons and calling out to the party's other MPs (above), was the main defender of the SDP's independence after the 1987 general election.

The Gang of Four splits (17 July 1987)

Arguments over merger split the old Gang of Four, with Shirley Williams – along with Bill Rodgers and Roy Jenkins – supporting the SDP merging with the Liberals to form a new party. Owen did not agree.



ERMATH: 1987–89



Squabbling to obscurity (14 August 1987)

The Bible tells a story of two women arguing over their children – whose is dead and whose is alive? – to which Solomon suggests the answer is to cut the one living child in two and to give each woman half of it. A similarly self-destructive cycle gripped the SDP at this time, with the continuing arguments for and against merger risking making the whole question irrelevant as the public turned away from the bickering, and support for both the SDP and

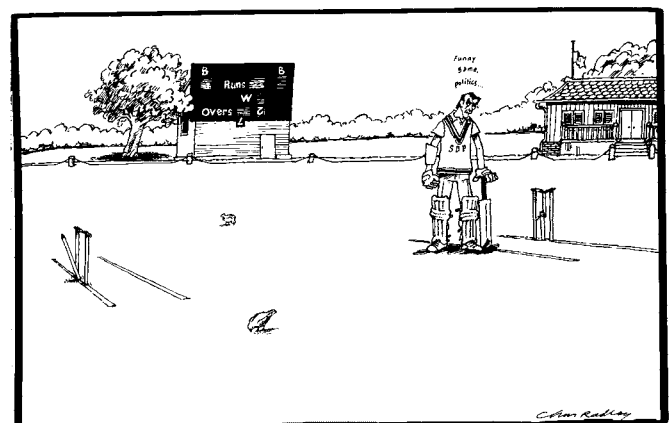
Liberals collapsed. Pictured here are Owen and Williams, leaders of the dispute within the SDP. ‘Big Cyril’ is again the Liberal MP Cyril Smith, who was still regularly indulging in outbursts of public anger (see 24 June 1983).

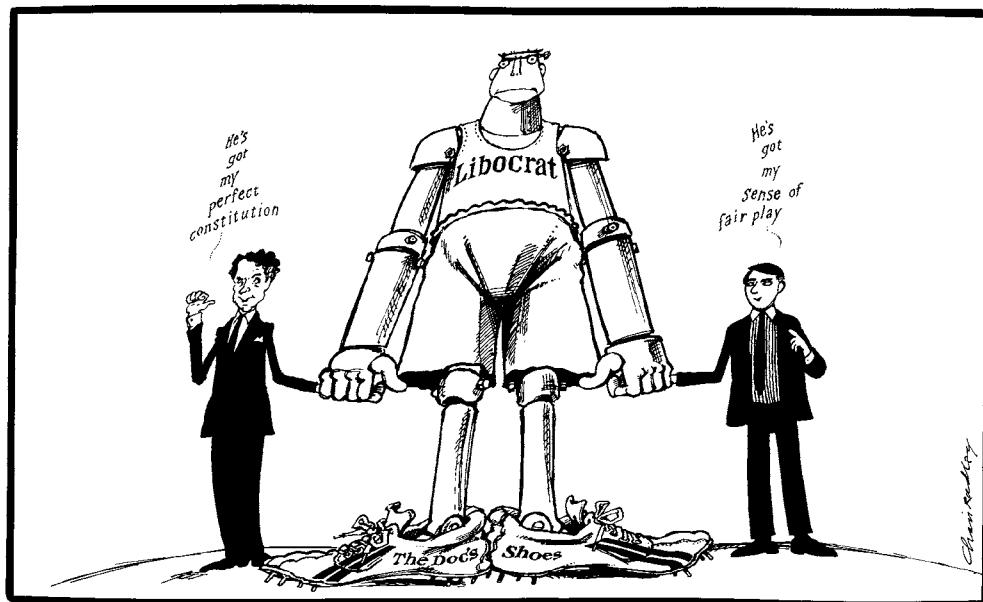
Owen on his own (18 September 1987)

The progress towards merger between the SDP and Liberals, left David Owen a forlorn-looking figure on the political scene, largely abandoned by his colleagues,

members and voters. This was exacerbated when, in the end, Charles Kennedy and Robert

Maclennan – two of the four other SDP MPs – backed merger.





messy process, with the Liberals not being able to get what they wished from the SDP, particularly on defence, whose leader in turn could not stop Owen wanting to go off and form his own splinter party.

Trying to put it all together again (11 December 1987)

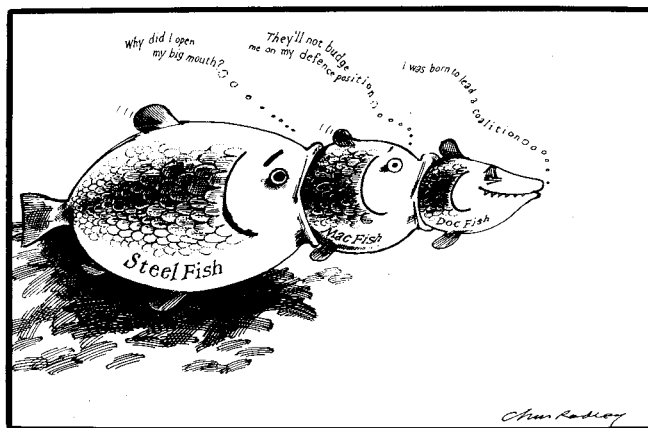
Whether or not the two parties could be merged into a cohesive and coherent new party was a matter of protracted dispute, most publicly revealed in the long discus-

A new leader (9 October 1987)

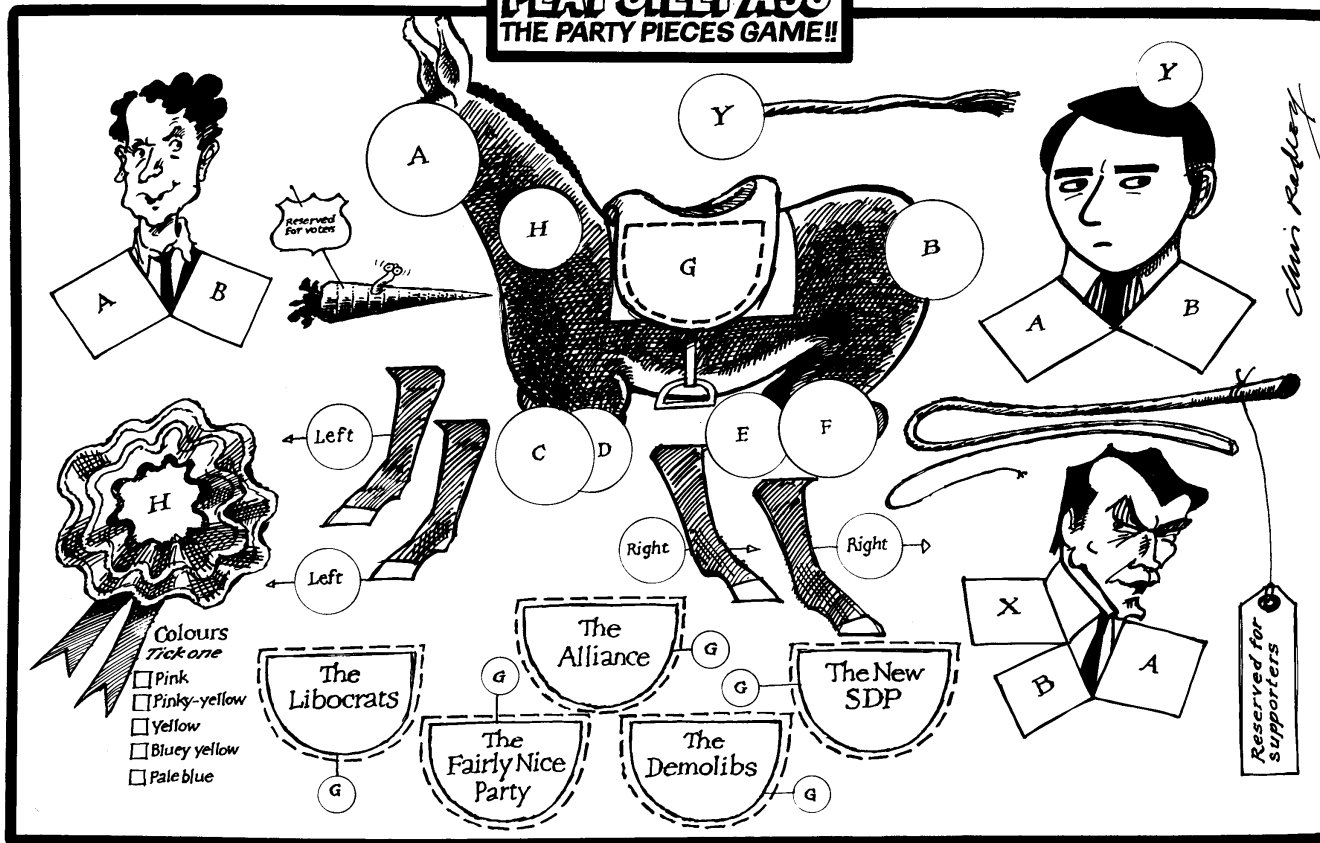
Robert Maclennan (pictured above left) took over briefly as SDP leader after Owen's resignation following his party's vote to open negotiations with the Liberal Party on merger. David Steel (pictured above right) remained the Liberal leader.

Merger, merger, merger (20 November 1987)

The merger process was a protracted one, resulting in the parties becoming largely introverted for many months, as reflected in the frequent cartoons in the SDP newspaper about the negotiations (right). It was a



PLAY SILLY ASS THE PARTY PIECES GAME!!





sions over the party's name. For those closely involved it was a crucial and emotional issue, though for many outside it all, going through several different suggested and actual names in a short period of time was more suited to comedy than to politics.

The new party nosedives (15 February 1988)

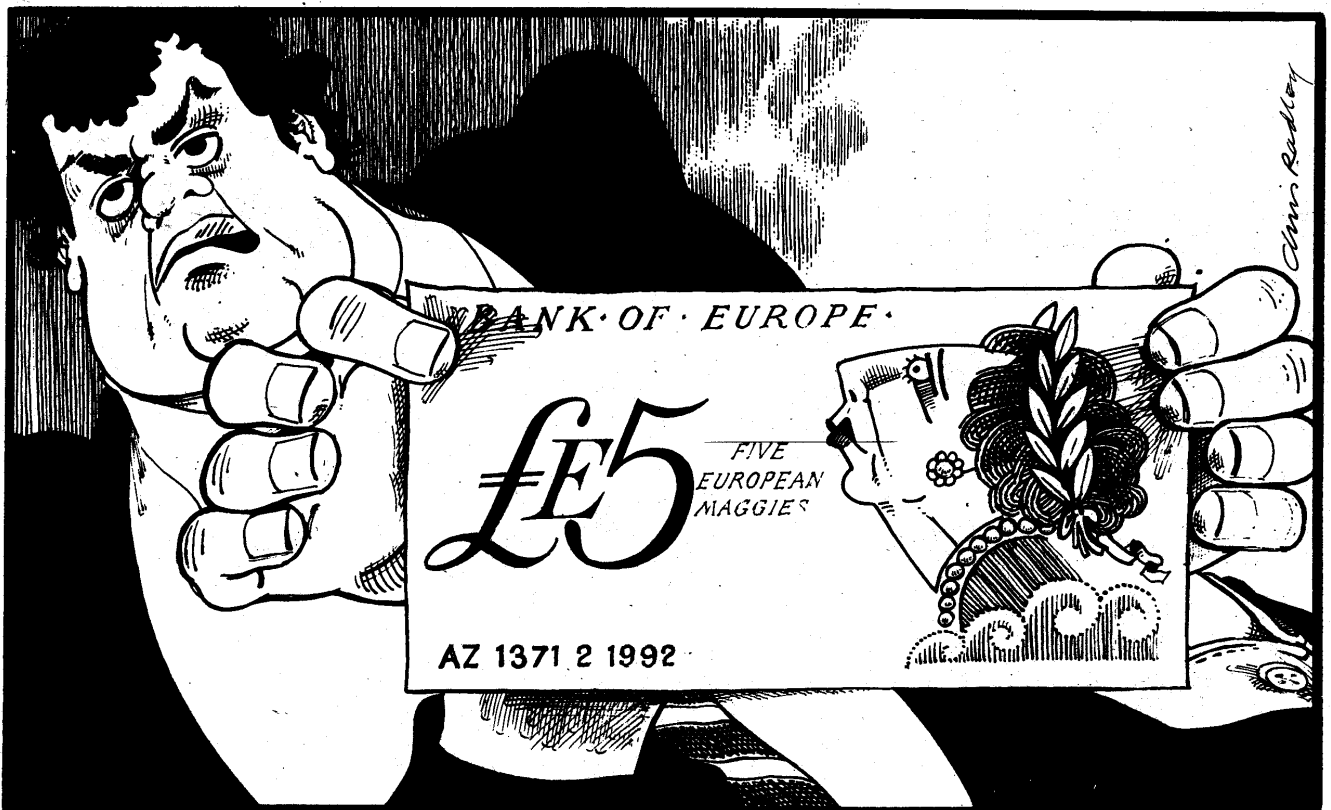
As a new party slowly and painfully emerged from the merger process, it found public support very difficult to come by: opinion poll ratings, membership and finances all collapsed. The party teetered

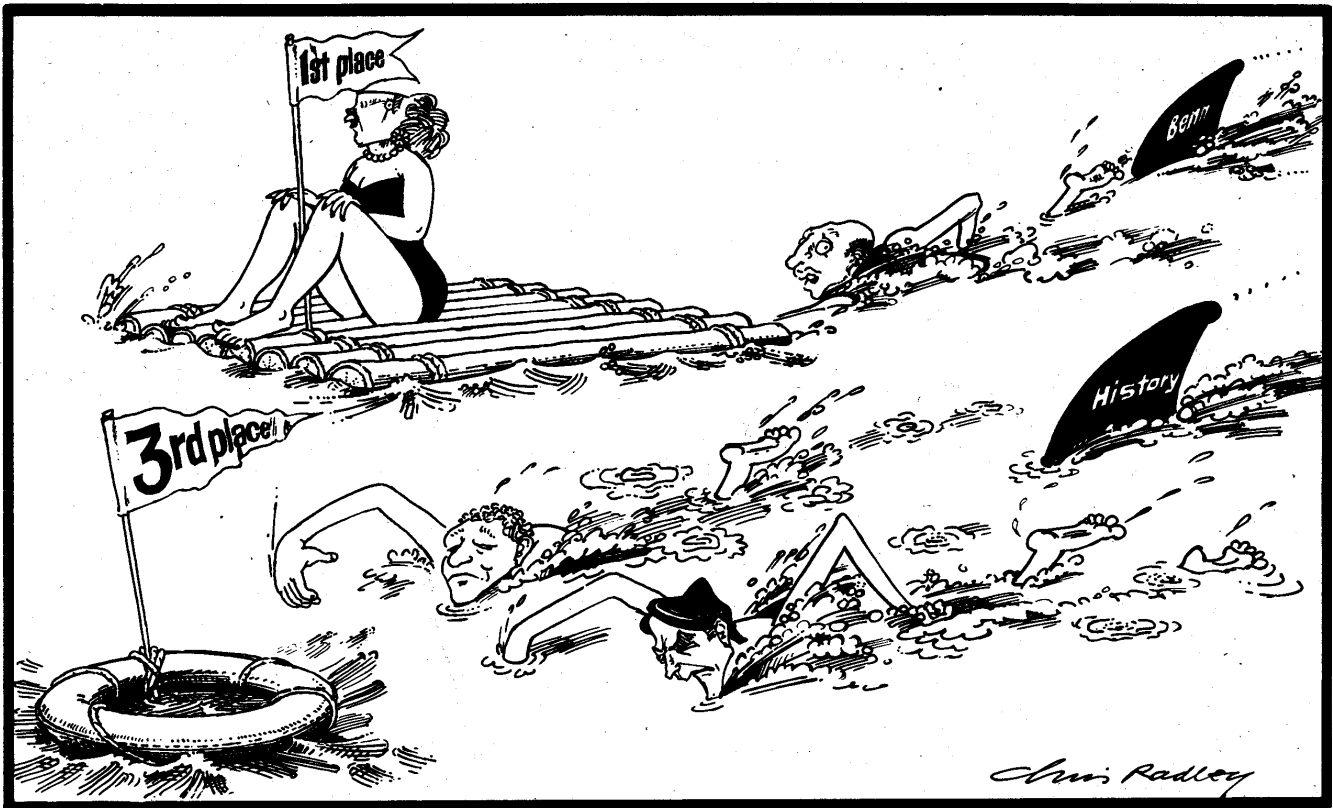
on the verge of disappearing from the political stage completely (above).

European Monetary System (July 1988)

The question of Britain's

place in Europe loomed over the latter years of Mrs Thatcher's premiership. The passage of legislation enabling the creation of a single European market in the mid-1980s passed largely without controversy, despite its importance in building





a version of the European Community which Margaret Thatcher and many in the Conservative Party came resolutely to oppose. What did attract contemporary controversy was the future of sterling. Since 1979 the Conservatives had tried various schemes of floating and managed exchange rates, although the latter depended on international cooperation. Elsewhere in the European Community momentum towards, first, fixed exchange rates, and then a single currency gathered. Some senior Tories – most notably Geoffrey Howe and Nigel Lawson (pictured, displaying some-

thing Mrs Thatcher might like about the process) – were keen supporters of sterling entering the European Monetary System of fixed exchange rates. Although Mrs Thatcher was eventually forced to agree to this, she was never a fan of the idea.

Wrong place, wrong race (August 1988)

David Owen refused to accept the verdict of the SDP's members who voted for merger. He set up a splinter party, the 'Continuing SDP'. For a brief period his party appeared to offer a serious electoral challenge to the

merged party as it struggled to recover from the debilitating merger process. With both parties frequently in single figures in the opinion polls, they seemed to many to be irrelevant to the main Tory-Labour political battle. Paddy Ashdown, the new party's leader, is here (above) pictured racing David Owen to third place in the polls.

Leading the right? (February 1989)

The Continuing SDP managed occasionally to threaten the merged party in the polls; their high point was coming second in the Richmond

(North Yorkshire) by-election in early 1989, after which Ashdown was moved to float an idea of an electoral pact. However, David Owen continued to move sharply to the right; this cartoon (below) presents him an a leadership debate with Mrs Thatcher, moderated by Robin Day.

In practice, however, Owen's party never had the membership or organisation to pose more than a sporadic threat. It continued to do badly in local elections and as Ashdown began to get a grip on his own party – which eventually settled on the name 'Liberal Democrats' – the challenge from Owen faded away.



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