Nearly all the SDP's MPs were defeated in the 1983 general election, and a disappointed Roy Jenkins stood down as leader, handing over to David Owen. Nevertheless, the Alliance had made a major impact, almost winning more votes than Labour. This second instalment of cartoons from **Chris Radley**, with commentary by **Mark Pack**, illustrates what were perhaps the SDP's happiest years, between 1983 and '85 .

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Two parties, one purpose? (24 June 1983)

David Steel and David Owen were the leaders of the Liberals and SDP respectively during the 1983–87 Parliament; Owen had succeeded Jenkins after the 1983 election.

The Owen–Steel relationship was frequently less than harmonious. The joke about Steel and Jenkins had been that one was a social democrat leading a liberal party whilst the other was a liberal leading a social democratic party. But Owen was definitely not a liberal – he was an SDP member, proud of its independence, and had firmly blocked any possible moves to merge the two parties after the 1983 election. As Jenkins put it, Owen 'essentially regarded the Liberal Party as a disorderly group of bearded vegetarian pacifists'.

Cyril Smith ('Big Cyril') was a Liberal MP and frequently very critical of the SDP. The 1980s were regularly punctuated by bursts of anger and outrage from Smith over the leadership of the Liberal Party and the Alliance.
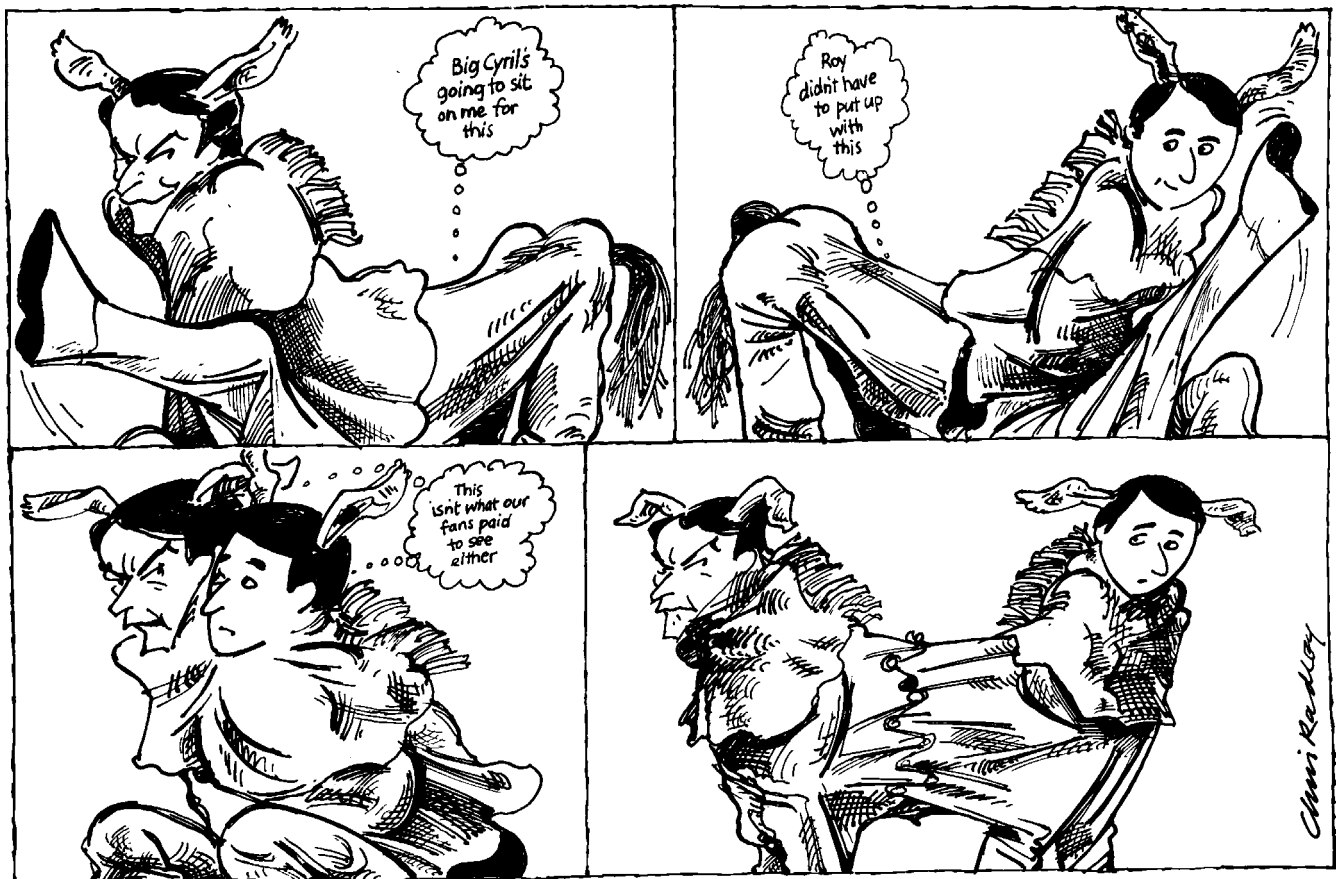
THE SDP 1983–85
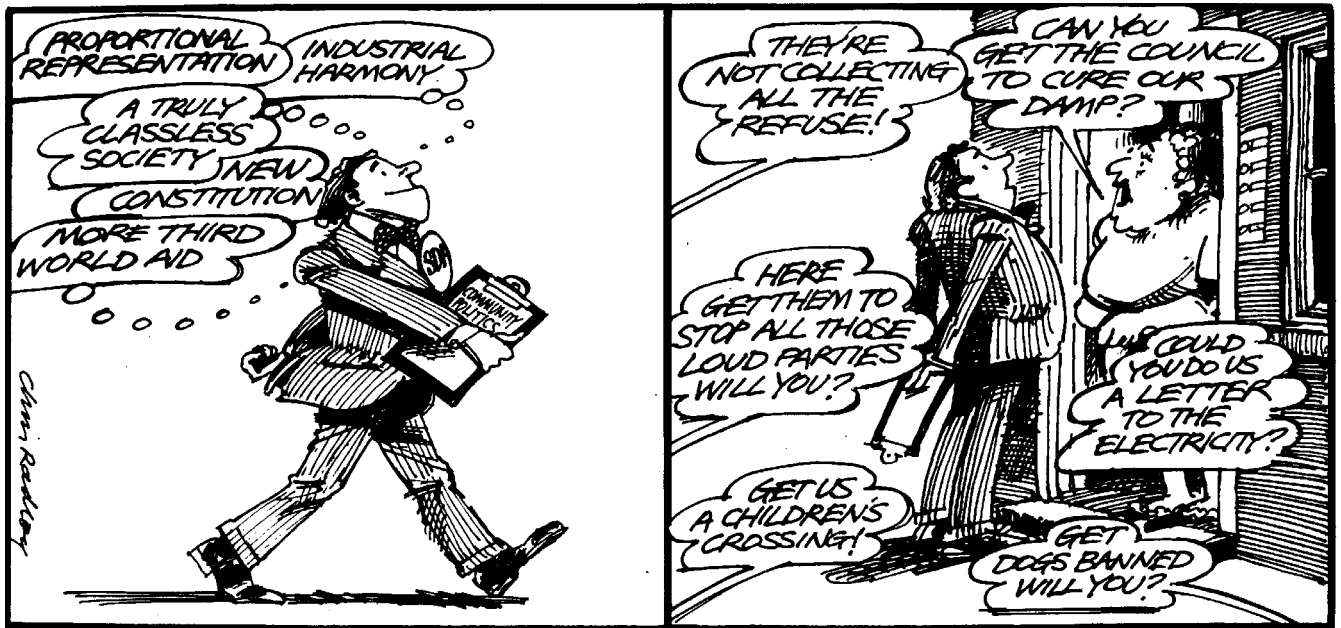
Pavement politics
(5 August 1983)

Much of the initial impetus for the SDP was based on high political principles. But when it came to winning votes on the ground through grassroots campaigning, the SDP found – as the Liberals had a decade and more previously – that more mundane issues came up on the doorstep. SDP activists slowly learned from their Liberal colleagues the importance and techniques of 'pavement politics', with all-year-round community newsletters rather than wordy policy leaflets. Despite some local successes, however, the SDP never quite managed to put down the same firm local roots which the Liberal Party had, and as a result remained far more vulnerable to national swings against the Alliance.

A new Labour leader
(19 August 1983)

Neil Kinnock took over as Labour leader after the 1983 general election. He faced a formidable task in making Labour electable again, and his critics claimed that the left's continued strength was in fact dooming it to further defeat. Kinnock saw the Alliance as splitting the natural Labour vote, and so crushing them and uniting the anti-Tory vote behind his party was one of his targets on the road to rebuilding Labour as a party of government.

More common sense, please (18 November 1983)

David Owen (pictured right, above, with Thatcher and Kinnock) provided the SDP with a harder political and ideological edge than that shown in the party's early days – encapsulated 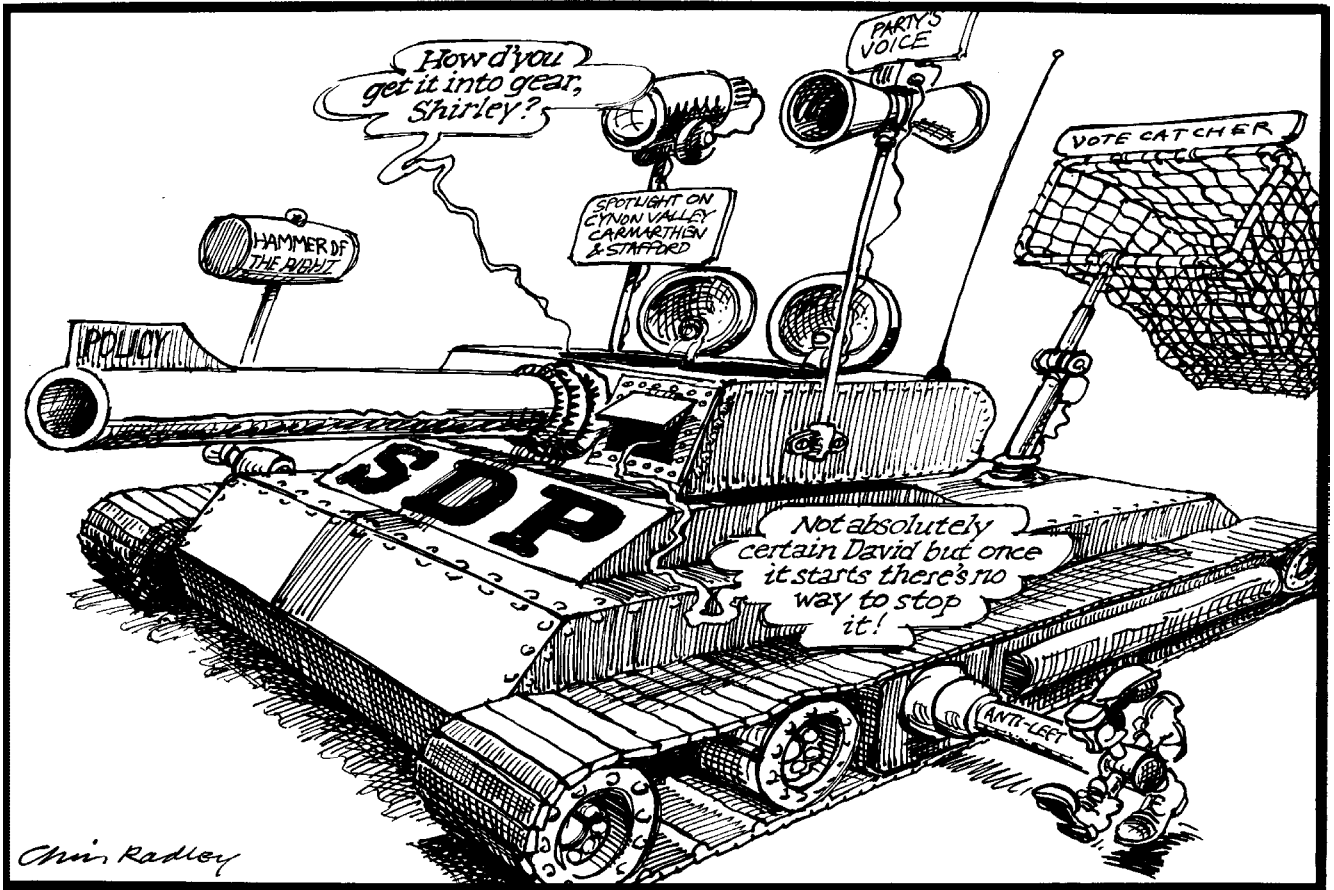in his slogan 'tough and tender'. However, the SDP's overall approach was still very much one of 'let's ignore outdated and divisive ideology and get on with applying some common sense'.

The two old parties (10 February 1984)

During the mid-1980s, the Alliance continued to position itself as the newcomer, offering an alternative to the

old and failed Labour–Tory duopoly under Kinnock and Thatcher (pictured prancing around the secret garden, left). Though from different ends of the political spectrum, they both revelled in ideology and happily supported the cosiness of a two-party, first-past-the-post political system.

**By-election bandwagons (23 March 1984)**
Much of the Alliance's political success relied on getting a successful bandwagon going. A good Parliamentary by-election result could bring an upsurge in interest, media coverage and improved opinion poll ratings, all of which could feed off each other and produce a bandwagon effect. The bandwagon frequently ran out of steam, however, and needed another by-election boost to start it rolling again (above).

Media coverage (25 May 1984)
The Alliance's relationship with the press was a strange
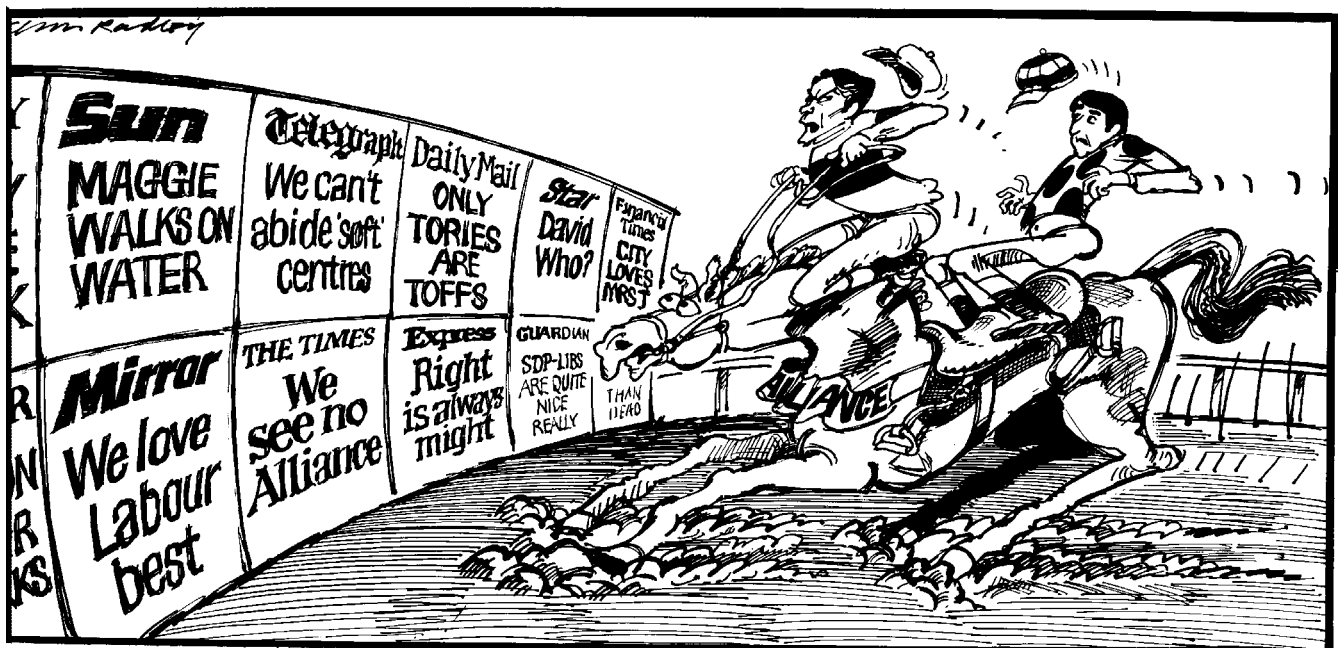
one. Critics dismissed the Alliance, and the SDP in particular, as a media-fuelled creation. Those within the Alliance, on the other hand, frequently complained at the lack of media coverage. Amongst newspapers, editorial lines urging people to vote for the Alliance were very rare.

Triumph in Portsmouth (22 June 1984)

Michael Hancock was the victorious SDP candidate in the Portsmouth South by-election (right). Although the European elections on the same day brought the Alliance no victories, the by-election triumph in what had been a safe Tory seat gave the Alliance an important boost. This victory highlighted an irony in the SDP's electoral appeal – although its founders had split from Labour and initially talked about replacing the Labour Party, the SDP made much greater inroads in areas of Tory support. It was Tory rather than Labour MPs who had most to fear from an insurgent SDP at the next general election and


it was largely Tory rather than Labour councillors who lost their seats to the SDP.

Left, more left and yet more left (3 August 1984)

The continuing power and extremism of the Labour left was a key reason why the SDP continued to attract support. The left-right divisions within the Labour Party manifested themselves in many ways during the 1970s and 1980s. Issues about how the party should be run were as important as policy differences, and indeed both were important in triggering the original defection of the Gang of Four. The rules as to how incumbent Labour MPs could be deselected, and so not able to re-stand as Labour Party candidates at the next general election, were a frequent source of friction. The left wanted party activists to be able to deselect MPs, believing that placing such power in the hands of committees and meetings would benefit their greater enthusiasm for the nitty-gritty of faction fighting. The soft left and right tried to outflank them by trumping their de-

1. Violent Swing to left.

2. Short Sharp Revolution.

3. Commit Everything.

4. Collect Reward.
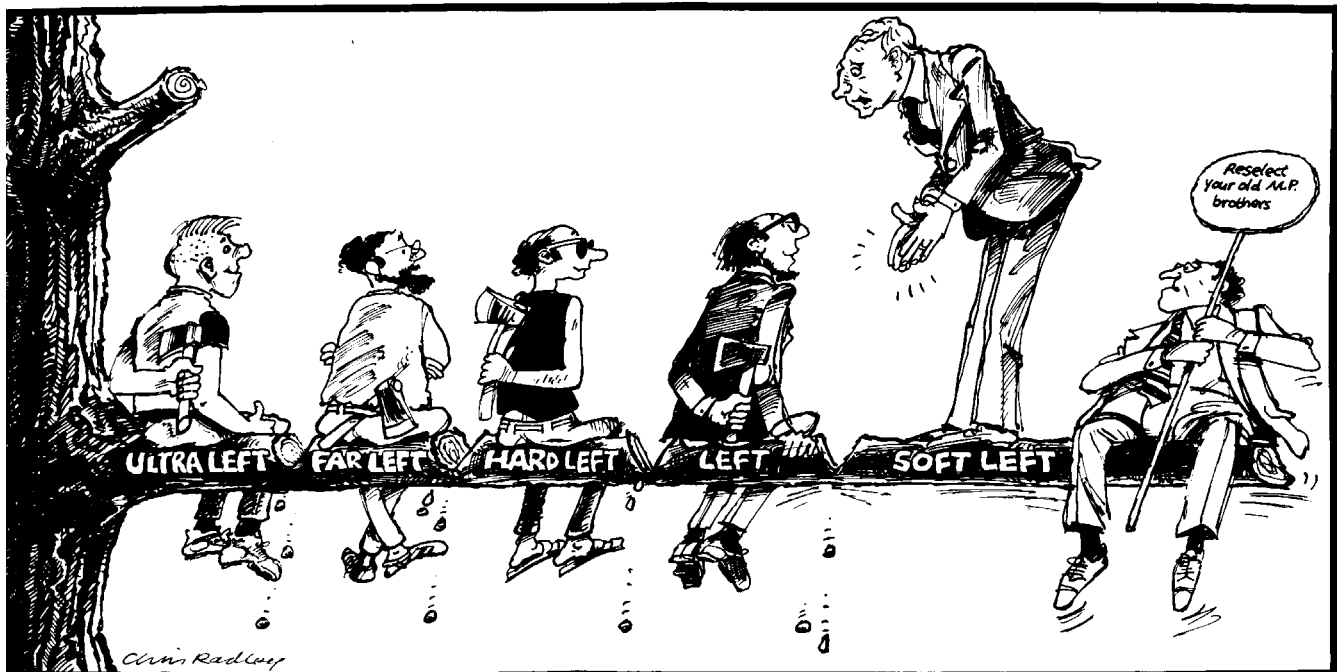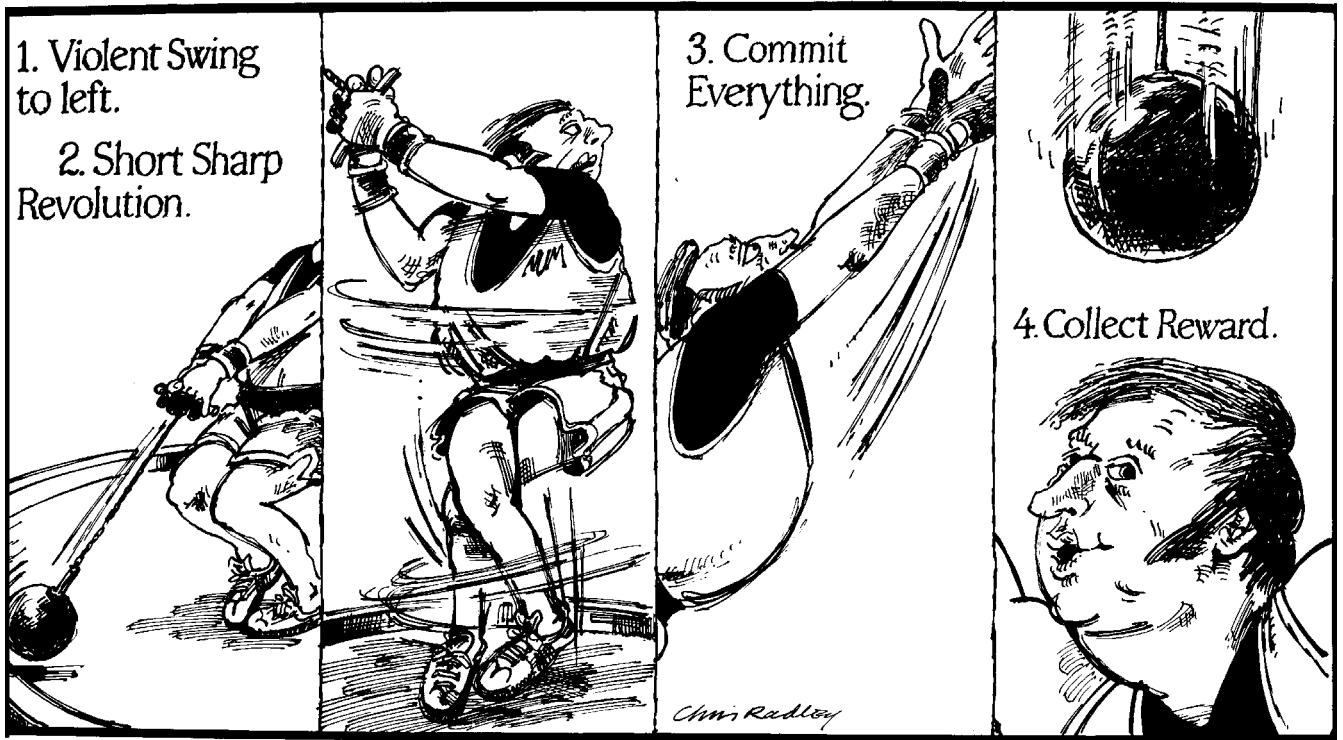
mand for democracy with counter-proposals for more democracy – taking power away from activists and meetings, and giving it instead to all members with postal ballots.

To ballot or not to ballot? (24 August 1984)

The tactics of Arthur Scargill, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) leader during the miners' strike, were often criticised as counter-

productive. Most notably, his refusal to hold a ballot of union members before calling the strike alienated many, yet he would have been almost certain to win such a ballot had he called it.

Saving the GLC? (21 September 1984)

Faced with the Tories' desire to abolish the Greater London Council (GLC), its leader, Ken Livingstone (pictured below right) resigned,
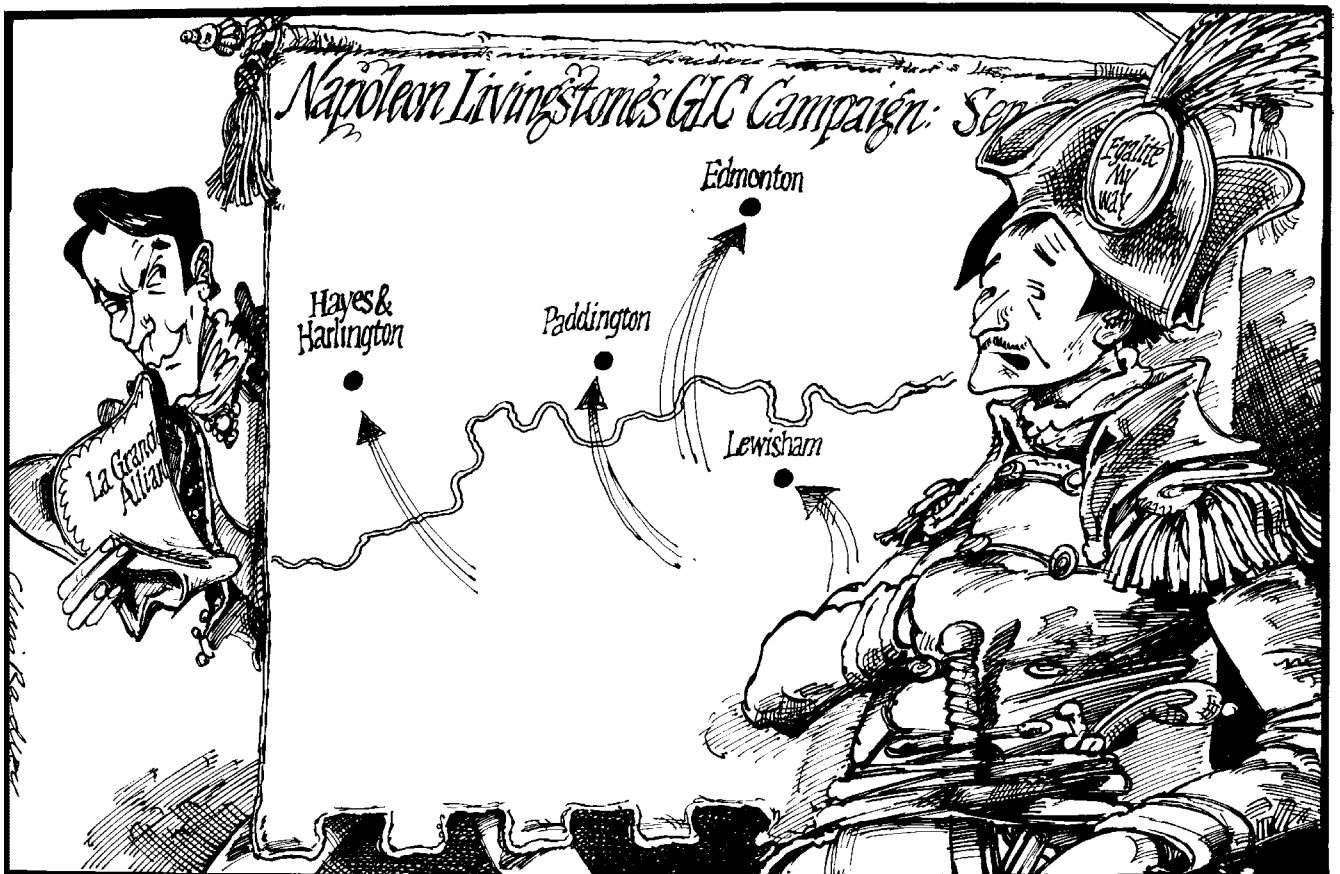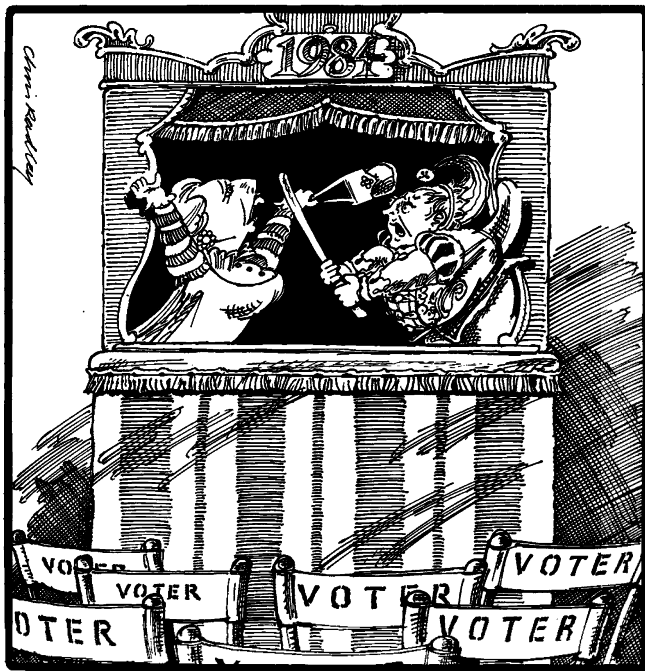
with three other colleagues, in order to fight by-elections as a referendum on its future. The Tories responded by boycotting the elections, but the Alliance fought them, coming a rather distant second in each case. (The Alliance did, however, gain one seat in a by-election in 1985.) Once the dust had settled these by-elections did little to further the cause of the GLC – which was in due course abolished – or the Alliance.

Punch and Judy show (5 January 1985)
The Punch and Judy leit-motif (above) features regularly in third-party politics as a means of encapsulating opposition to the two main parties spending so much time criticising each other.

Disharmony in the Alliance (2 February 1985)
Frictions in the relations between the Liberals and SDP often seemed to dis-

tract them from fighting the Tories and Labour (above).

The allocation of seats to Liberal or SDP candidates for the general election was a particular point of conflict. An underlying difference in approach generated much of the tension. David Owen's belief was in the Alliance as a temporary measure to se-cure realignment of the party system, after which the SDP could return to being a fully independent party. Many others saw the Alliance as a staging post towards merger between the two parties.

Economic reform (16 February 1985)
Margaret Thatcher's drive to reform the British economy (left) came at a high price – including unemployment
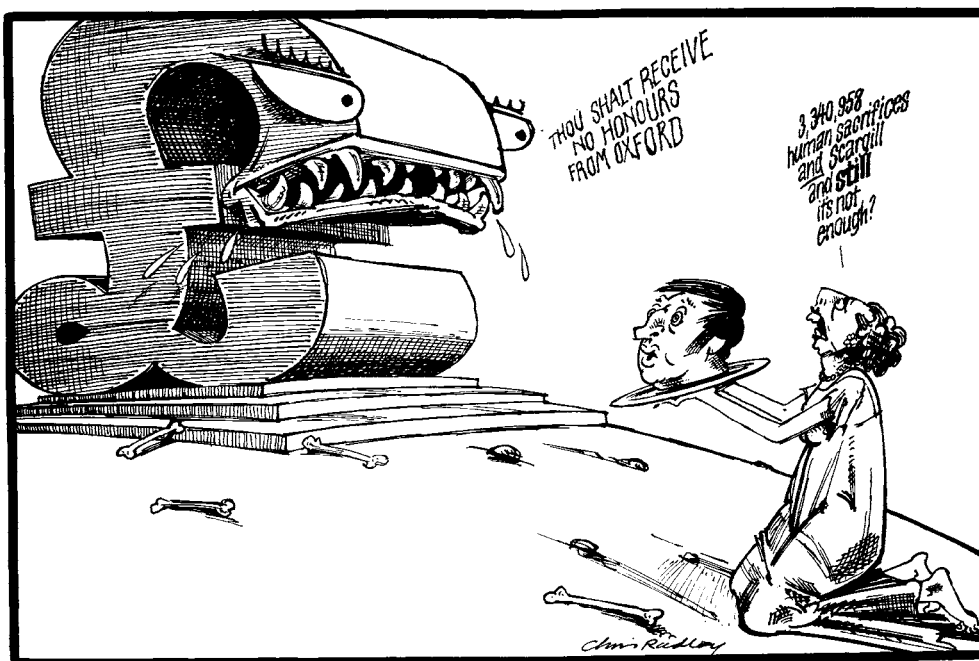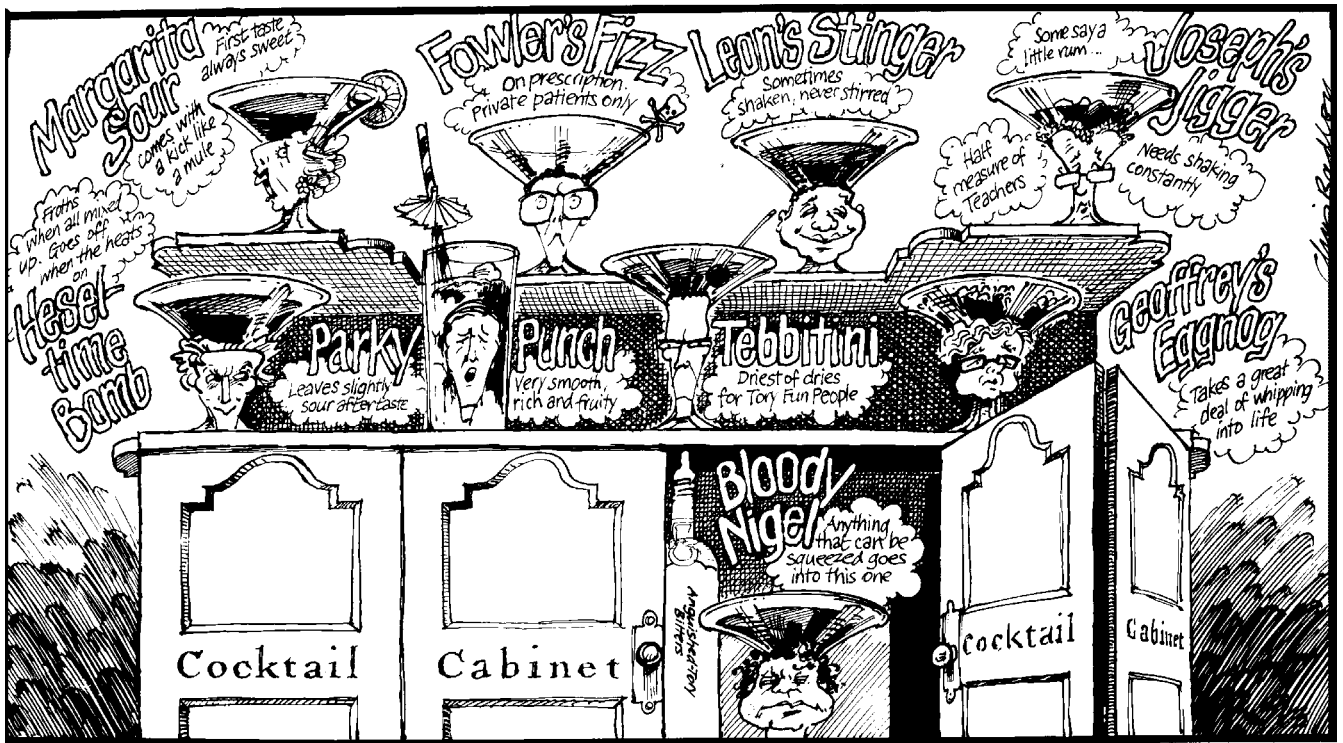
of over three million and the long-running and bitter miners' strike. The strike ended in the eventual defeat of the NUM and broke the miners as a significant political force. (The head in the cartoon is that of their leader, Arthur Scargill). Thatcher was refused an honorary degree from Oxford University after a revolt amongst its academics, many of whom were very hostile to her political approach.

The Tory cabinet (24 May 1985)
All the people caricatured in this cartoon (above) were leading Cabinet members of the 1983–87 Thatcher administration.

The SDP's high point (4 October 1985)
The SDP's autumn 1985 conference in Torquay was probably the party's high point – riding on the back of electoral and opinion poll success and with relations within the Alliance comparatively cordial. However, as the cartoon below presciently warns, the travails of a third party in a first-past-the-post electoral system, along with the fact that the Alliance was not even a single united third party, meant it would be easy for it all to go wrong.