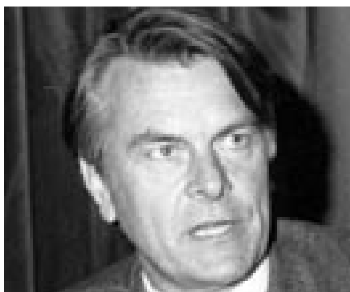

David Owen was one of the 'Gang of Four' who, together with Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers, launched the Social Democratic Party in 1981. He was the Leader of the SDP between 1983–87, but when a majority of members voted for merger with the Liberal Party, he clung on to a diminishing group of supporters until he accepted a humiliating defeat. In this biography, a fellow-member of the Gang of the Four, **Bill Rodgers,** assesses David Owen's political career and record.

BIOGRAP

Owen had a distinguished career behind him in the Labour Party; between 1977–79, he was Foreign Secretary in James Callaghan's Labour government, dealing with constitutional problems over Southern Rhodesia. He supported the United Kingdom's membership of the European Community but grew critical of further European economic and monetary integration. He left the House of Commons in 1992 and then played a significant role in peace-keeping in Yugoslavia.

With ambition, energy and ability, David Owen also had a streak of authoritarianism, suffering not only fools but men and women of comparable talents and similar values. Hoping to reshape British politics, he made a crucial error of judgement in not bringing together his social democrats and the Liberals. Owen's was not a wasted life but his achievement fell significantly short of his potential.

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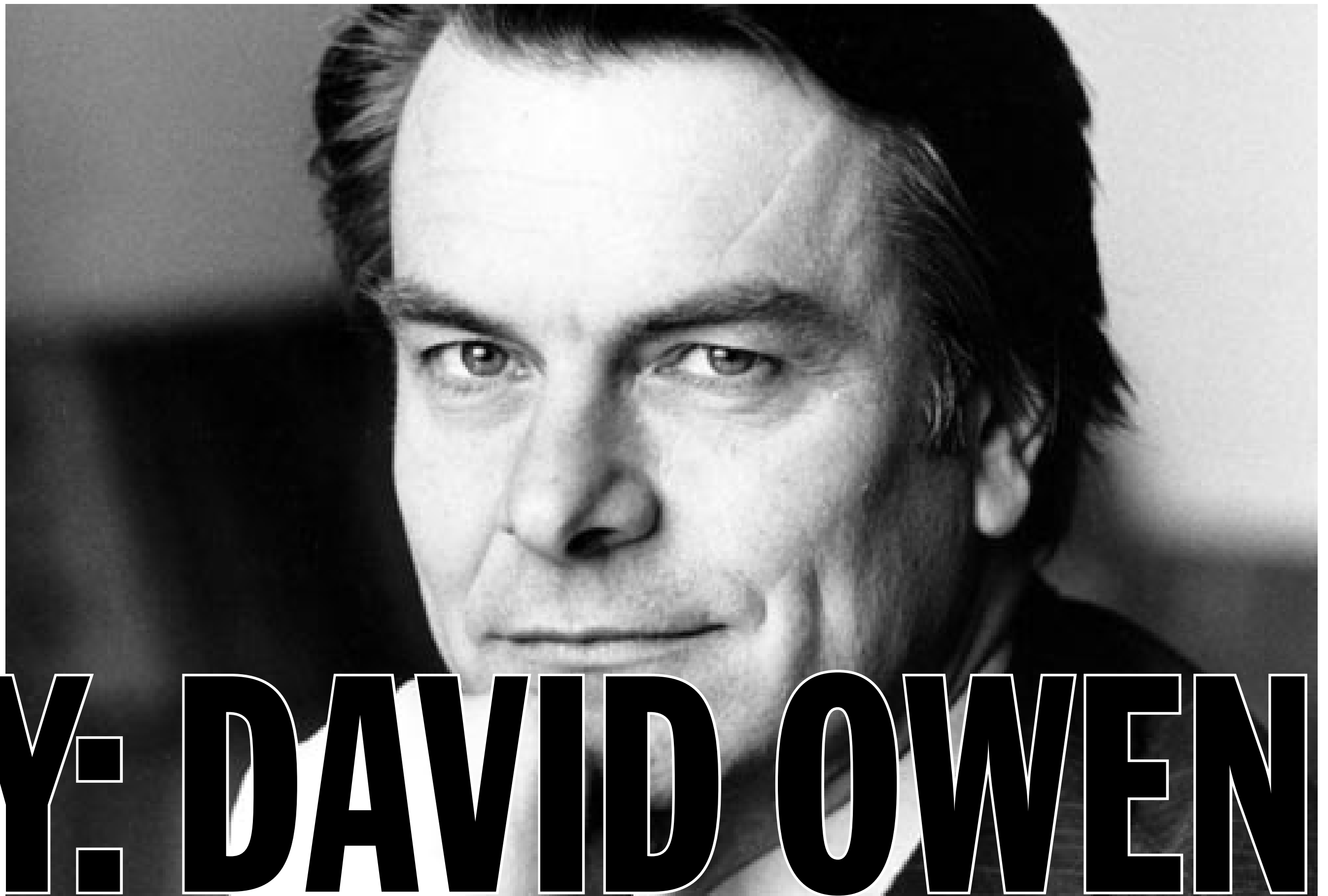
David Anthony Llewellyn Owen was born in 1938. Three-quarters Welsh, his father, Dr John Owen, was a general practitioner and his mother, Molly, a dentist. The family home was in Plympton, Devon, but during the war Owen grew up in Monmouthshire and Glamorgan, often looked after by his grandfather, to whom he became devoted. At the early age of seven he became a boarder at Mount House School near Tavistock and, later, at Bradfield College, Berkshire. From there he went to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge and, as a medical student, to St Thomas's Hospital, London.

Although he had been taken to a meeting addressed by Aneurin Bevan during the 1950 election campaign, Owen played no part in student politics. But in his early twenties he joined the Labour Party, which was looking for good, young Parliamentary candidates in the rather bleak political territory of the south-west. Owen was invited to a selection conference at Torrington. He was chosen to stand, and in the 1964 election he came third behind the Tory victor and Mark Bonham Carter (who had won the 1958 by-election, then lost the seat in 1959). But this experience whetted Owen's political appetite. Within eighteen months he stood for the marginal Tory seat of Plymouth Sutton and won with a comfortable majority (there was no Liberal candidate in 1966, and previously Liberal votes were helpful to Labour).

As a new Member of Parliament, and ahead of his maiden speech, Owen was invited to become Parliamentary Private Secretary (PPS) to Gerry Reynolds, the Minister of State for the Army. Henceforth, defence and health were to be two of his significant themes throughout his years in the House of Commons.

Given the factions within the Parliamentary Labour Party, he was quickly drawn into the 1963 Club – held in memory of Hugh Gaitskell, the former Labour Leader. Over regular dinners, he met Tony Crosland and



HY: DAVID OWEN

Roy Jenkins, then rising stars in the Wilson cabinet, and junior ministers like Dick Taverne and Bill Rodgers. He also became a close colleague of both David Marquand and John Mackintosh, who were among the 1966 intake of Labour MPs.

The Labour government had a secure majority of almost a hundred seats but it suffered a precipitate decline up to and beyond the devaluation of sterling in November 1967. There was a serious loss of by-elections (fifteen during the Parliament) and there was widespread discontent with the Prime Minister and his style. Owen had originally greatly admired Tony Crosland, the author of the revisionist and influential book *The Future of Socialism,* but he now saw Roy Jenkins as the strongest alternative to Harold Wilson. During the hot-house arguments and among the armchair conspirators who were calling 'Wilson must go', Owen was prominent.

But in July 1968, with the approval of Denis Healey, Harold Wilson appointed Owen as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence for the Royal Navy. It was a shrewd choice. The Prime Minister recognised that Owen had ability and would respond to ministerial opportunities. In addition, in his Plymouth constituency he would benefit from the historic naval vote. This turned out to be the case, and in 1970 Owen held on with a majority of nearly a thousand votes as Ted Heath replaced Wilson at Number 10.

The Labour Party was now in opposition, and with George Brown's defeat in Belper, a vacancy occurred for the Deputy Leadership. Roy Jenkins stood and won over both Michael Foot and Fred Peart, the centre-right, anti-EEC candidate. It now looked as if the old Gaitskellites – who were beginning to be called Jenkinsites – were coming back to power, with Owen amongst them. But within less than two years, this expectation fell apart. In the first place, Harold Wilson changed his mind about supporting entry to the European Community; in the second, and as a consequence of a referendum, Roy Jenkins resigned the Deputy Leadership.

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Owen was one of the sixty-nine rebel Labour MPs who voted for entry to the EEC in defiance of a three-line whip. Unlike some other rebels, Owen was not sacked, but four months later he resigned from the Opposition Front Bench in sympathy with Roy Jenkins. Among others resigning was George Thomson, who left Parliament to become a European Commissioner when the Conservative Government had completed its European legislation, and Dick Taverne, who was to become the victim of his intolerant constituency party.

For much of the next two years the Jenkinsites were excluded from the mainstream of the Parliamentary Labour Party. They kept together, meeting at regular lunches at their homes. Among them were David Owen, David Marquand, John Roper and Robert Maclennan. As an informal team they helped to formulate Roy Jenkins' speeches,

which led to *What Matters Now,* a short book setting out the broad range of his political direction. They were all anxious to show that Europe was not their only concern, and Owen brought forward his own Children's Bill on adoption. In the autumn of 1973, Roy Jenkins returned to the Labour front bench. He demolished the reputation of the Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, Anthony Barber, on the eve of the Christmas recess in an outstanding Parliamentary performance. But given the state of the Labour Party, most Jenkinsites thought that Labour was unlikely to win the general election, and some hoped they would not.

In the event, Harold Wilson did become Prime Minister for a second term. Jenkins now reluctantly found himself Home Secretary again but made it clear to Wilson that some of his close friends and colleagues, including Owen, should be included in the government. Barbara Castle, who had become Secretary of State for Social Services, also welcomed the idea of Owen joining her department as Parliamentary Secretary; and later in the year, following the second 1974 election, he moved up as Minister of State for Health, soon becoming a Privy Counsellor.

Owen got on well with Barbara Castle. He was knowledgeable and hard-working in dealing with difficult negotiations over the new consultants' contracts and pay beds. She liked his style and he, in turn, liked her, although she complained about his lack of consistency and changes of mood. But when Callaghan succeeded Wilson at Number 10 and sacked Castle, Owen stayed on at Health for several uncomfortable months. Then, in September 1976, when Roy Hattersley was promoted into the Cabinet, Callaghan put Owen into the vacancy he left as Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Tony Crosland, the Foreign Secretary, was initially less than enthusiastic about Owen, who had transferred his loyalty from Crosland to Jenkins seven or eight years earlier. Nor was Crosland entirely happy about the sort of arrogant, good-looking, middle-class man, who seemed much like himself. But Owen made himself useful about those matters which bored Crosland, which were not a few.

Then, five months later, Crosland had a stroke and Owen was left in charge of the Foreign Office for a few days until Crosland's death. He was steady and confident in filling this gap and, to everyone's surprise, the Prime Minister appointed him Foreign Secretary at the age of 37.

Since the death of Ernest Bevin in 1950 and during the Cold War, the Prime Minister of the day had been effectively his own Foreign Secretary (there had been twelve of them in twenty-five years), dealing directly with the President of the United States and European leaders. But Owen was now fourth or fifth in the cabinet hierarchy, with frequent exposure at home and abroad. He spoke with authority, especially when trying to resolve the constitutional problems of Southern Rhodesia. Cy Vance, Jimmy Carter's Secretary of State, was much taken with Owen – a friendship that was to endure in different circumstances when they worked together in Bosnia fifteen years later.

Jim Callaghan's biographer says that David Owen 'soon showed his capacity as a strong, if sometimes domineering, minister' with an 'authoritarian temper'. He was often unpopular amongst officials, who found him impatient and irascible. It was said that he had sacked six different government drivers because he had been dissatisfied with all of them. When Ivor Richard (the British Ambassador to the United Nations, a former colleague in the Commons and a Defence Minister) attended the Tony Crosland Memorial Service at Westminster Abbey, Owen called Richard in to voice his disapproval.

His supporters said that Owen was blowing fresh air into the fusty corners of the Foreign Office and shaking up its traditional habits and ideas. But there were times when his style – youthful, informal, iconoclastic – overran his judgment. When he recommended Peter Jay, a close personal friend and the Prime Minister's son-in-law, as ambassador to Washington, he damaged his and Callaghan's reputations.

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In 1975 David Owen had not played any significant part in the European referendum. Now, as Foreign Secretary, he stayed close to the Prime Minister, expressing scepticism about monetary union. In the principal cabinet committee, of which he was chairman, he showed no preference for ministers who were either pro- or anti-Europe, and his old colleagues felt that Owen was unenthusiastic about moving the European Community forward.

In 1979 Labour lost the election with its smallest share of the vote since the 1930s, although Owen held his own seat at Plymouth (now Devonport, after boundary changes). But in the Parliamentary Committee – the Shadow Cabinet – he was elected near the bottom of the list, and Callaghan moved him to the junior role of shadow Minister for Energy. In the House of Commons it was said that Owen had been over-promoted and was a loner, lacking political roots.

When, in 1977, the Campaign for Labour Victory (CLV) – an organisation formed to defend and promote the democratic centre-right of the Labour Party – was launched, Owen supported it more in name than in practice. But after the election, he began to speak out against the Militant Tendency, although he rejected any possibility of leaving the Labour Party and committed himself to fighting inside through 'ten years of hard slog'. He was highly critical of Roy Jenkins' Dimbleby Lecture, *Home Thoughts from Abroad,* in November 1979, implying that Jenkins was now on the fringe of politics and out of touch with those who would save the Labour Party.

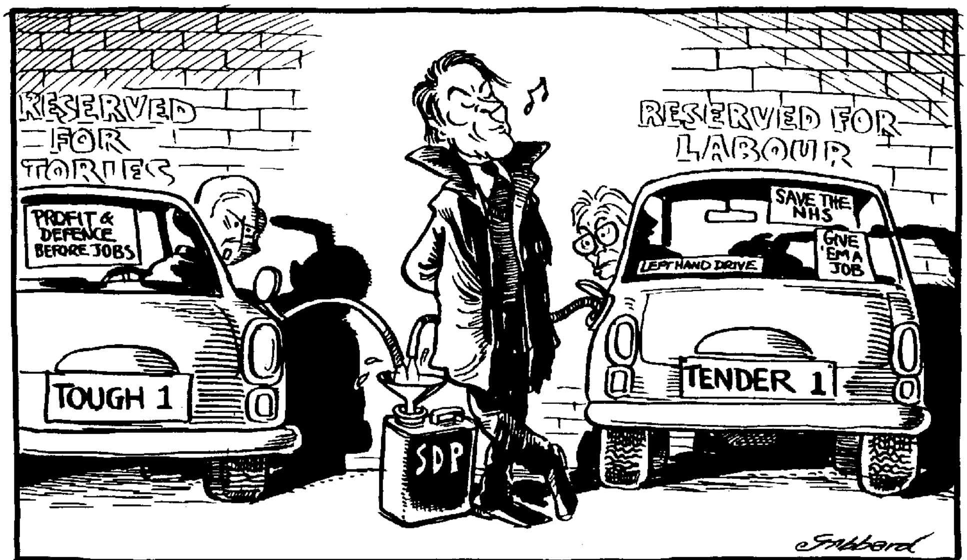
Then suddenly, he changed gear. At a London conference in

May 1980, dominated by Tony Benn, he made an angry, brave impromptu speech on defence that was noisily heckled. As a result he felt personally affronted at the treatment of a recent Foreign Secretary and saw for the first time the extent to which the left had captured the Labour Party. He now began to move with increased momentum towards a break with the party.

Within days, on his initiative, he joined Shirley Williams and Bill Rodgers in a public statement, rejecting any suggestion from the Labour left that Britain should withdraw from the European Community. Five weeks later Owen and Rodgers, as members of the Shadow Cabinet (Williams had been out of Parliament since 1979) challenged Callaghan to justify a series of internal policy changes that leant heavily towards the left. Then on 1 August 1980, Owen, Williams and Rodgers, the 'Gang of Three', as they became known, wrote an open letter to their fellow members of the Labour Party, saying, 'We are not prepared to abandon Britain to divisive and often cruel Tory policies because electors do not have an opportunity to vote for an acceptable social alternative'. It was now plain that the Labour Party was getting close to a split.

However, Williams and Rodgers were still reluctant to leave Labour, and Owen also recognised that there would be a further delay if Denis Healey was elected as Callaghan's successor. But when on 10 November Healey lost and Michael Foot won, Owen was off the leash. For two months he was single-minded in coaxing anxious Labour MPs closer towards a break, and hoping that the 'Gang of Three' would go together.

But he was much less enthusiastic about the prospect of the 'Gang of Three' getting together with Roy Jenkins to make the 'Gang of Four'. He saw Jenkins as 'old hat', a failure, having left the House of Commons for Brussels, being twenty years older than himself and already too close to the Liberals. He was also aware that a group of Jenkinsites, like Dick Taverne, David Marquand and some non-Parliamentarians, were close to Jenkins and treated him as the king over the water; and he knew that the Dimbleby Lecture had made Jenkins many friends who looked to him to lead the realignment of the left. Jenkins said that he was prepared to support any one of the three – Owen, Williams or Rodgers – as leader to make the new party a success, but Owen was determined that he alone would lead. In the gap between the publication of the Limehouse Declaration in late January 1981 and the launch of the SDP in March, he proposed that he should become the Chairman of the Parliamentary Party (until a leadership ballot) and Jenkins should be relegated to fund-raising for the new party.



'Tough and tender' became Owen's slogan – combining a market economy, strong defence and compassion for the sick and unemployed. ('Guardian', 13 September 1983)

Owen was quick to disagree with the views of Jenkins, Williams and Rodgers about the SDP's relations with the Liberal Party. In the first place, he took exception to the proposal that the SDP and the Liberals should join together at the next general election, dividing the seats equally. Then, a few days later, he complained that Williams and Rodgers had too readily agreed with David Steel at the Anglo-German Königswinter Conference on a joint statement of principles, including the two parties agreeing to form two commissions to develop policy. Owen's constant theme of opposing any coming-together between the SDP and the Liberals persisted until 1987.

When the SDP had been established, Owen began to find his feet in a difficult, hostile House of Commons. He was not a natural speaker in debate and seemed to force out his words with difficulty. But he stood his ground and his pronouncements carried weight. When the Falklands War broke out in April 1982, Owen was first inclined to oppose Margaret Thatcher's determination to repossess the islands but he was persuaded very soon to support military action. In the coming weeks, he spoke with a conviction which raised his profile both inside the Commons and outside. As a consequence, he became a strong runner to challenge Roy Jenkins as leader of the SDP in the ballot of members. He lost by 20,846 votes to 26,256 (in a turn-out of 75 per cent) but it was a much closer outcome than would have been anticipated a few weeks earlier.

Owen, however, was disappointed and he made no special effort to support Jenkins in preparing for the general election. And while Owen was sulking in his tent, Jenkins found difficulty in adjusting to a less respectful House of Commons than he had previously known. As a result, and shaken by an unsuccessful by-election at Darlington, the SDP was not fully prepared when the

election was called in May 1983. Jenkins had become Prime Minister-designate in the Alliance (the partnership of the SDP and the Liberals) with David Steel as his deputy, but as the campaign failed to make progress it was proposed by the Liberals that their role should be reversed. In a tense argument at Steel's home at Ettrick Bridge, the SDP team – including Williams and Rodgers – opposed any change in the Alliance leadership. However, Owen sat on his hands, claiming that the Alliance leadership was a personal matter between Jenkins and Steel and for them alone. Later, when the arrangements were left unchanged, Owen expressed his surprise and approval that Steel had been tough enough to try to push Jenkins aside.

The 1983 election result was far from a disaster for the Alliance. Its share of the vote was 25.4 per cent, only 2.2 per cent short of Labour's vote. But with first-past-the-post, the twenty-nine SDP MPs were reduced to six and it was a major blow to morale, especially after the heady excitement of eighteen months earlier. Owen made it immediately clear that he would challenge Jenkins for the leadership and that, although he was prepared to accept a brief delay, the principle of a contest was not negotiable. By the end of the weekend the matter was settled: Jenkins resigned and, following the formalities – there was no credible alternative (Williams and Rodgers had lost their seats) – Owen became leader in time for the new Queen's Speech.

He moved quickly to establish his own authority, style, policy and personal team. This was to be his own show, erasing the relationships of the 'Gang of Four' and the spirit of the Limehouse Declaration. At the SDP Salford Conference three months later, Owen blocked any discussion of merger with the Liberals, at least during the next Parliament, and tried to stop any joint selection of Parliamentary candidates.

Owen's book *Face the Future,* published two years earlier, was eclectic in tone. It was said that he had sent it in draft to almost a hundred individuals and amended it to take account of all their diverse ideas. Now, after Salford and in the three years ahead, he began to turn away from the social democratic, 'conscience and reform', centre-left. Owen's paradoxical 'tough and tender' slogan encapsulated his social market approach, with 'tough' being the dominant mood in keeping with his temperament. Jenkins called Owen's policies 'sub-Thatcherite' and a barely suppressed tension grew between Owen and Jenkins, Williams and Rodgers.

However, Owen was effective in the House of Commons, impressive on television and commanding in the councils of his party. This was a high-quality, sustained performance that did much to build the reputation and name of the SDP. Their members (the 'political virgins') might sometimes feel uneasy but they gave their leader the benefit of the doubt.

Between Owen and Steel, there was at first a tolerable if strained relationship. While Steel continued to push for a closer union, Owen was deeply suspicious of any further coming together between the SDP and the Liberals, hoping that proportional representation would eventually enable the two parties to go their separate ways. In asserting the SDP's identity, Owen was especially determined to preserve an independent defence policy, making no compromise with the Liberal unease about nuclear weapons.

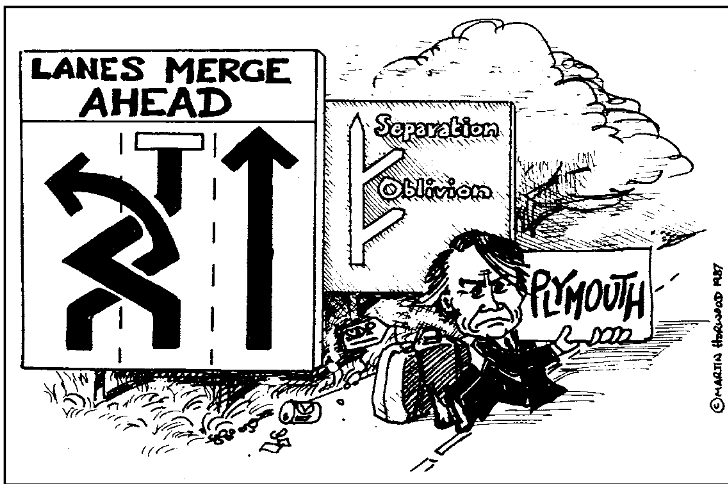
As a result, Owen and Steel agreed to appoint a joint Alliance Commission on defence and disarmament to delay a decision on British nuclear weapons until close to the next election. After eighteen months of discussion, both sides were close to agreement when Owen suddenly rejected the draft report, declaring that Britain should remain 'a nuclear weapon state'. This caused a major breakdown of relationships not only between Owen and Steel, but between Owen and Rodgers (the leading SDP member of the Commission), Jenkins and Williams.

Had Owen advocated merger, an almost unanimous vote of SDP members would have followed. It was also possible that a merged party, Social Democrats and Liberals together, would have elected Owen as leader, despite previous controversies and his authoritarian style.

Owen's behaviour was in character. He was enraged about a newspaper headline, 'Owen's nuclear hopes dashed', implying that Steel had won on defence policy and Owen had been humiliated. Owen could have shrugged it off as a minor hiccup, awaited the final report and negotiated an understanding. Instead he punished his SDP colleagues for reaching an agreement with the Liberals in the Commission, and rejected the report.

Owen's outburst had arisen from an injudicious remark by Steel; and now in turn, in September 1986, the Liberals voted against the two leaders' proposal for European nuclear cooperation partly in response to Owen's rubbishing of the Commission's report. Owen and Steel tried to patch up the row in the following weeks but the Alliance was seriously damaged. Steel's morale suffered from Owen's relentless bullying; and Jenkins, Williams and Rodgers became increasingly cool towards Owen.

Early in 1987 the Alliance was successfully re-launched with a united team of spokesmen. But it should have marked the culmination of joint election planning – not, in too many respects, its beginning. Similarly, the joint policy booklet *The Time Has Come* was a natural mid-term document unsuitable for its launch close to the election. As for objectives, it would have been imaginative for Owen to promote the idea of Alliance holding the balance in a hung parliament earlier in the term, but was unsuitable when 633 candidates would soon be fighting to win, as the overwhelming majority of Social Democrats and Liberals believed that the 'hung parliament' formula ceased to have any resonance once the election approached. Owen clung to it, however, and the Alliance message was confused. Owen and Steel were obliged to restore a working relationship, but the shortcomings of dual leadership were profound.



The doctor's not for merging ('Radical Quarterly', 1987)

Owen and Steel had separate election teams and Owen's own circle was distinct from the formal structure of his party.

However, on the eve of the election the SDP believed that they were well-placed for the campaign. Target seats were adequately – in some cases generously – resourced, and Owen worked hard to raise money, with the help of David Sainsbury. In late February the SDP won an important by-election at Greenwich which boosted the confidence of its increasingly professional staff (holding Liberal Truro in March was more predictable). But the 1987 general election was not a success. Social Democrats and Liberals worked well together in the constituencies, but the dual leadership was unrelaxed and clumsy. The Alliance vote fell by 2.8 per cent from 1983, three SDP MPs, including Jenkins, lost their seats and the SDP Parliamentary Party was reduced to five.

Within the SDP there was now overwhelming pressure to merge with the Liberals. Owen hoped to delay a decision and to devise another, perhaps closer, partnership between the SDP and the Liberals. But the SDP's constitution, the text of which Owen had approved several years earlier, made provision for a one-member, one-vote referendum on major issues, and the party's mood was to resolve the matter. Had Owen advocated merger, an almost unanimous vote of SDP members would have followed. It was also possible that a merged party, Social Democrats and Liberals together, would have elected Owen as leader, despite previous controversies and his authoritarian style. But with the odds against him, Owen was determined to preserve a separate party made in his own image, and face the consequences.

Following a campaign, and with Owen strongly opposed to merger, members were divided 60:40 in a ballot for merger. Owen then immediately resigned the SDP leadership, and in a bitter and lengthy dispute, refused to accept the majority decision. Instead he chose to lead the rump membership, claiming the SDP name, despite the clear assumption that the identity of the SDP would be absorbed into a single party.

The Owenites (the 'Continuing SDP') survived for two years, carried on Owen's shoulders. His party fought eight by-elections, but when their candidate finished seventh out of eight candidates in Bootle, behind the Monster Raving Loony Party, Owen knew that his time was up. He disbanded his party and in 1991 published his autobiography, *Time to Declare,* of 800 pages. At the early age of fifty-three he decided to leave politics, knowing that he would almost certainly lose his seat at Plymouth, and with no serious prospect of a further career in the House of Commons.

It was thought that if John Major returned to Downing Street ion the 1992 election, he would appoint Owen as the last Governor-General of Hong Kong. But when Chris Patten was unexpectedly defeated at Bath, Major offered Hong Kong to him, thus closing Owen's avenue of opportunity. Instead, on the recommendation of Douglas Hurd, he became the chief European negotiator in the Peace Conference of Yugoslavia, from 1992–95 (succeeding Lord Carrington). In this capacity he was the co-author of the abortive Vance-Owen plan to end the war by dividing Bosnia into ethnic 'cantons'. These efforts were acknowledged in his appointment as a Companion of Honour (CH); and he told the story in his book *Balkan Odyssey*. In the 1980s he was a member of the Olaf Palme Commission on Disarmament and Security, and throughout his later career he played a prominent role in top-table international institutions and conferences.

Owen became a director of Coats Viyella in 1994 and Executive Chairman of Middlesex Holdings in 1995. He has other business interests.

In 1992 Owen became a peer, making his maiden speech three years later and contributing occasionally to the House of Lords on international and European Union affairs. In 1999 he became Chairman of 'New Europe', committed to opposing Britain's entry to the Eurozone.

Owen married Deborah Schabert of New York in 1968 and three children followed. Debbie Owen's charm, intelligence and loyalty helped to sustain Owen through his vicissitudes; and she became a successful literary agent, with Delia Smith, Jeffrey Archer and Georgette Heyer among her star clients. The Owens created a close-knit family, as if to redress the balance of David Owen's own lonely childhood.

First elected to Parliament in 1962, Bill Rodgers served as a minister in five government departments, and in the Cabinet, as Secretary of State for Transport, between 1976–79. In 1981, along with David Owen, he was a member of the 'Gang of Four' who founded the SDP. He was given a life peerage in 1992, and from 1997–2002 was leader of the Liberal Democrat peers.