

- 73 A committee on national expenditure was appointed in August 1921 under the chairmanship of Sir Eric Geddes. Its reports (the so-called Geddes Axe) recommended swingeing cuts in government spending.
- 74 Full result: Katharine, Duchess of Atholl (Unionist) 9,235; P. A. Molteno (Liberal) 9,085.
- 75 *Manchester Guardian*, 24 Jul. 1924; Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 574.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 577.
- 77 Holt MSS, 920 DUR 1/10, diary 13 Dec. 1924.
- 78 Molteno to James Molteno, 27 May 1926, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 581.
- 79 *Ibid.*, p. 581.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 594.
- 81 Molteno to James Molteno 1929, cited in *ibid.*, p. 599. Speaking in Manchester on 1 Mar. 1929, Lloyd George had declared that a Liberal government could ‘reduce the terrible figures of the workless in the course of a single year to normal proportions’. Shortly afterwards, a party pamphlet entitled ‘We Can Conquer Unemployment’ proposed a massive programme of public works to soak up the unemployed.
- 82 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 592–3.
- 83 Molteno to G. S. Barbour, 1929, cited in *ibid.*, p. 599.
- 84 *Ibid.*, pp. 602–3; P. Sloman, *The Liberal Party and the Economy, 1929–1964* (Oxford, 2015), p. 63.
- 85 Molteno to James Molteno, 7 Oct. 1931, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 605.
- 86 Molteno to James Molteno, 16 Mar. 1932, cited in *ibid.*, p. 607.
- 87 F. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation* (London, 2008), *passim*.
- 88 R. Grayson, *Liberals, International Relations and Appeasement: The Liberal Party, 1919–1939* (London, 2001) provides an authoritative account of the party’s debates on foreign policy in the inter-war era.
- 89 Molteno to Lord Meston, Sep. 1936, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 627.
- 90 *The Times*, 4 May 1937.
- 91 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 582.
- 92 Scottish Record Office, Lothian MSS, GD40/17/367, Findlay to Lothian, 4 May 1938; Hirst, *Man of Principle*, pp. 628–9.

Reports

The Two Davids: Owen versus Steel

Fringe meeting, Liberal Democrat autumn conference, 17 September 2021, with Sir Graham Watson and Roger Carroll. Chair: Christine Jardine MP.
Report by **James Moore**

ONE OF THE signs of getting old is when events that seem to be part of recent memory become part of the historical record. 1987 was my first election as a Young Liberal activist and the first of many political

disappointments. The Alliance came third again and won just twenty-two seats. For many, the election was defined by the difficult relationship between David Steel and David Owen – two men who apparently went fishing together and wore

the same ties, but seemingly couldn’t agree on defence policy or who they might work with in a coalition government.

After the 1987 election, the split between the two men became all too obvious. Steel was accused of trying to ‘bounce’ the Alliance into a new merged party. Owen was accused of ignoring the wishes of his own SDP members. Within two years, the merged Democrats (we weren’t allowed to call it a ‘party’ or use the term Liberal) were represented by an asterisk in the opinion polls and were fighting David Owen’s ‘continuing SDP’ in parliamentary by-elections.

Was this all inevitable? A meeting of the Liberal

Report: The 1992 general election

Democrat History group asked the people that were there at the top table. Sir Graham Watson (Steel's former Head of Office) and Roger Carroll (Owen's former SDP Communications Director) debated the difficult relationship. Even after all these years, interpretations differed.

For Watson, it wasn't so much Steel versus Owen as Owen versus Steel. Steel had enjoyed a warm relationship with former SDP leader Roy Jenkins, but Owen proved a much more difficult political partner. Steel was the hands-off leader, apparently little interested in detail and policy. Owen was the micro-manager who demanded to check every press release and every public statement. When the leaders went off in separate battle buses after the 1987 manifesto launch, the Alliance's fate was already sealed. The Alliance was already failing, and the campaign was a car crash.

Carroll remembered a rather different story. Focusing on an alleged feud between the two Davids was, for Carroll, 'a wild exaggeration'. It certainly didn't compare with other famous political feuds such as that between Winston Churchill and Rab Butler or even, in more recent times, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair. Rather than being a failure, Carroll viewed the Alliance as a 'huge success' in terms of the support it attracted and only the electoral system prevented this success being represented in larger

numbers of MPs. He could not recall Owen ever attacking Steel in private and put any differences down to more philosophical and policy divisions on a small number of issues.

There did seem to be some consensus on the question of whether the two leaders had the same vision of the Alliance. Owen, in particular, saw his party as part of a modern European social democratic tradition and quite different to the older Liberalism of David Steel. While he recognised there were many points of convergence, they were not qualitatively identical. This fundamental difference became very important after the 1987 election.

Inevitably, the notorious 1986 Liberal Assembly, where Liberal Party members were perceived by the media to have ripped up Alliance defence policy, was an important point of tension. However, it is important to recognise that Steel was as angry about this as senior members of the SDP. The person most criticised for his role in this incident was Paddy Ashdown, who did not make himself popular in the Parliamentary Liberal Party for his rebellious leanings on defence.

The question of the impact of TV's *Spitting Image* on public perceptions of the two leaders was also remarked upon. The fact that a promotional company produced squeaky dog chews featuring Steel's puppet in Owen's top pocket demonstrates just how pervasive this image became (and,

yes, I still have mine). Carroll made the point that Owen was much angrier about this than Steel, precisely because he felt it would make him unpopular amongst Liberal members and make the everyday operation of the Alliance more difficult.

Not very much was said on the details of the merger period, although one can't wonder if Steel's decisiveness in pushing for merger so quickly after the election was shaped by the perception that Owen was perceived by the public as the dominant partner in the Alliance. Perhaps he also misread Owen, believing Owen's ambition to return to government would overcome his commitment to the SDP.

Other differences became evident in later years. Owen's more critical approach to the EU began during the early days of the 'continuing' SDP and was a reflection of his Atlanticism. He was later to endorse the Labour Party at general elections, perhaps believing it could indeed become the European social democratic party he had always wanted. Carroll speculated about whether they ever spoke again as they crossed paths within the walls of the House of Lords. Sadly, one doubts if even the Liberal Democrat History Group will ever get them to share the same platform again.

Almost thirty-five years on from 1987, it is difficult to look back to this period of our political youth with anything other than sadness. Both men were

giants on the political stage, with many admirable personal qualities combined with a sometimes-violent determination to succeed. Both had substantial political success in their earlier lives and, although very different personalities, were widely admired across the political spectrum. The rush to merger effectively ended the careers of both. Steel was blamed, perhaps unfairly, for chaotic aspects of the negotiations and the infamous 'Dead Parrot' policy statement that was set aside almost as soon as it had been published. Owen's attempt to revive the SDP was never likely to be successful within a first-past-the-post electoral system. His excellent book on hubris, published some years later, seemed almost an exercise self-diagnosis. He could never fully re-embrace Labour, perhaps knowing many of its members would never re-embrace him. Ironically, it was the man both blamed for the 1986 Liberal Assembly fiasco, Paddy Ashdown, who would eventually pick up the pieces and lead the remnants of the Alliance to a partial revival. Yet, somehow, for that Young Liberal of 1987, things would never be quite the same again.

Dr James Moore is a lecturer in modern history at the University of Leicester. He is a former Liberal Democrat councillor and parliamentary candidate and a member of the executive of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

Reviews

Life applied to a political theory

Adam Gopnik, *A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism* (Riverrun, 2020)

Review by **Malcolm Baines**

ADAM GOPNIK IS a well-known staff writer at the *New Yorker* and his book *A Thousand Small Sanities* reflects that. It's an entertaining and very readable response to the move by US politics to the extremes after 2016, couched as an attempt to persuade his teenage daughter that liberalism is the best credo for her to follow, rather than constitutional conservatism, right-wing populism or socialism. As such, it's not really a work of history but more a polemic, with many literary and philosophical references to liberalism but not so many historical ones.

Gopnik begins by demonstrating that the liberal tradition extends beyond eighteenth-century enlightenment philosophy to a commitment to reform and liberty. There is a fascinating discussion of the relationship between J. S. Mill and Harriet Taylor that is a salutary reminder of the often-overlooked importance of the latter – the author of *On the Subjugation of Women* – to Liberal thought. Gopnik uses the story of their relationship

to show how the concepts of 'humanity', 'tolerance', and 'self-realisation' are also crucial to an understanding of liberalism. Also significantly, his polemic contains responses to the criticisms of this ideology that the alternative creeds put forward and this is what makes it a good primer for anyone seeking to understand global liberalism and what it stands for in the twenty-first century. However, it is therefore rather sketchy on British liberalism, its history and identity.

One of Gopnik's arguments is that liberalism engages with

