

# Letters to the Editor

## The Two Davids: Owen versus Steel

I was not, alas, able to participate in the fringe meeting at last year's autumn conference. I hope, therefore, that you will allow me, as someone on the front line throughout the whole seven Owen–Steel years, to comment on the report of the meeting by James Moore, to whom I am very grateful for his useful text.

There are two overriding considerations that are the crucial context for the separate issues discussed at the meeting, and which influenced each individual question. The first is whether there was a sufficient common ideological base to enable an alliance of the two parties to work together and the second is the different political perceptions and competences of the two leaders.

For the first, my view was that as long as the two parties were aware that each came from a different philosophical base there was enough common ground on current issues to risk an alliance, up to and including the forthcoming general election. To that end I wrote a booklet – *Social Democracy: Barrier or Bridge*<sup>1</sup> – pointing out that social democracy is part of the socialist family of parties whereas the Liberal Party belongs to the libertarian family of parties. The booklet also sought to set out the relative strengths of the two parties

towards assessing the number of seats each party should contest.

In retrospect, the booklet was probably a waste of time as few in the Liberal Party were interested in the intellectual rigour it required and were more interested in embracing the apparent silver bullet of an alliance that would sweep them into the House of Commons. Also, the handful of SDP leaders who read it were outraged at its emphasis on the strength and campaigning resources of the Liberal Party in comparison to those of the untested SDP. My efforts to promote the primacy of Liberalism within the Alliance and to protect it from being sold off by its leader were weakened throughout by the lack of awareness by the party membership of the important ideological difference between the parties. As a consequence, too much influence was conceded to the SDP with the inevitable political fudges required to rescue it in the merger of the parties after the 1987 general election.

The second issue that underlay the Alliance and relationship between the two Davids was the 'unpoliticalness' of David Steel. David Owen could not understand how a leader of a political party, and a politician seeking to exercise power, had so little interest in

policy or in political strategy. Certainly he could make good speeches, not least when they were written by such Liberal stalwarts as Richard Holme, Stuart Mole and Tony Richards, but he had little awareness of the importance of the backing of party membership as political strength. In fact, he didn't even like his party, and did not understand the political importance of loyalty and solidarity, even attacking it publicly on one famous occasion at the 1986 assembly.<sup>2</sup> This caused colleagues regular embarrassment when, having caucused beforehand and agreed the 'line', he would blithely abandon it in a joint meeting with the SDP and decide to support the very different Owen view. He also had the unacceptable way, from time to time, of dealing with difficult or unpleasant decisions by announcing them to the media at 4pm in advance of the parliamentary party's regular Wednesday 6pm meeting where they should legitimately be debated. Colleagues had to swallow hard and accept the fait accompli.

David Owen was completely different, in style as well as politics. He was difficult and I had a number of battles with him, not least in my role as the Liberal Deputy Whip, but he respected those who he

regarded as professional politicians and those who argued with him on sound political grounds. The key difference was that, when one came to an agreement with Owen on a policy or a strategy, he kept to it. This meant that, paradoxically, I had a better political relationship with him than with Steel. It meant that I could get Owen to appear at a Radical Liberal meeting and even get him and Debbie to sing 'Love me Liberals, love me do' as a parody of Elvis' 'Love me tender' at an Assembly glee club.

As for particular points from the report of the fringe meeting, the Liberal Democrats were never 'represented by an asterisk in the opinion polls'. This was a bit of Paddy Ashdown hyperbole. The lowest it ever got was 5 per cent in October 1989.<sup>3</sup> I am surprised that Roger Carroll 'could not recall Owen attacking Steel in private' given how incandescent Owen was at Steel's leak of the Alliance Joint Commission on Defence and Disarmament's proceedings in 1986.

James Moore refers to the 'notorious' defence debate at the 1986 Liberal Assembly. I wrote on this debate at length a year later,<sup>4</sup> and suffice to say here that the reality was nothing like the way it was represented then and now. For instance, James Moore writes that it was 'perceived by the media' as a split on defence whereas in fact, immediately after the vote I

and Bill Rodgers – by far the best practical politician of the Gang of Four – set about minimising any 'split' and briefing the media together. The next morning, switching on the television, there was the Liberal Chief Whip, David Alton, waving a copy of *The Sun* with its huge anti-Alliance headline and adding fuel to the flames. The whole issue was grossly exaggerated and misrepresented. Contrary to the meeting report, it was Simon Hughes who moved the key amendment and who was 'most criticised', not Paddy Ashdown. I summed up the debate and somehow escaped most of the criticism. As for Paddy's 'rebellious leanings on defence', that depended on which year one listened to him!

Finally, the 'dead parrot': more than any other document, this summed up the essential differences between the parties. It was intended to be a joint policy statement but it was entirely drafted by two SDP researchers under the direction of Bob MacLennan. They consulted thoroughly with members of the merger negotiating team but this appeared to have had little effect on the content. James Moore reports that 'Steel was blamed, perhaps unfairly, for chaotic aspects of the negotiations' on it and this is correct insofar as it was a consequence of Steel's inherent lack of interest in policy and particularly in policy detail. He should have realised the importance of the document and taken

much more interest in the text. Remarkably, even after it had been roundly criticised and withdrawn, Steel commented that he still thought it was a good document!<sup>5</sup>

An Alliance maintaining the identity of each party, with a number of agreed key policies, including, for instance, pro-European unity, and promoted as a temporary means of overcoming the iniquities of the first-past-the-post electoral system, could have been an honest means of maximising the third-party vote and motivating a swathe of otherwise non-voters. Alas, it was over-sold, ending with the ideological confusion of the merger, and with the eventual consequence of killing off the SDP and diminishing the identity of the Liberal Party.

Michael Meadowcroft

1. *Social Democracy – Barrier or Bridge*, Liberator Publications 1981
2. See, for instance, David Steel, *Against Goliath: David Steel's Story* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), p. 135, and Des Wilson, *Memoirs of a Minor Public Figure* (Quartet, 2011), pp. 233–35.
3. Roger Mortimore and Andrew Blick (eds.), *Butler's British Political Facts* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 435.
4. 'Eastbourne Revisited', *Radical Quarterly*, Autumn 1987.
5. Wilson, *Memoirs of a Minor Public Figure*, p. 250.