

C.P.S.

Prime Minister

S.D.P.

1. Herewith a copy of the Report of the Centre for Policy Studies Group on the S.D.P.; whose Chairman was Max Beloff.
2. I have written to thank Max.

2nd August 1982

IAN GOW

THE CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

REPORT OF THE STUDY GROUP ON THE SDP

- 1 This paper is the collective work of a group of Conservatives. We have not sought to make a complete historical or analytical study of the SDP but to identify certain aspects of its role and behaviour which may help the Conservative Party in fighting off the threat which the Group believes that it presents to the Party's electoral fortunes. The election to the leadership of Mr Roy Jenkins which took place after the last meeting of the Group emphasises the threat since it both strengthens the working of the Alliance with the Liberals and makes it possible for the SDP itself to project an image more likely to attract wavering Conservatives than dissident Socialists. Even if, as seems likely, the Presidency of the Party goes to Mrs Shirley Williams, this victory for the more "radical" elements will not make a serious difference to this prospect. Mrs Williams showed in the Crosby by-election that she is prepared to play down her own views in pursuit of electoral advantage.
  
- 2 Any conclusions about the role of the SDP have still to be provisional both because the shaping of its own policies is incomplete and will not receive a final form before the autumn, and because its fortunes depend upon developments in other parties which cannot now be foreseen. It does not seem likely that any significant number of active Conservatives would be tempted to join the SDP, whatever the development of SDP policy between now and the next election; the danger on that side is among less committed voters who have in the past expressed their discontent with Conservative governments by voting Liberal. There was some support in the Group for the view that if Mr Foot fails in his attempt to check the growing domination of the Left in the constituency parties, there might be a further secession from the Labour Party, which might however choose to remain distinct from the SDP and fight under the guise of the "Parliamentary Labour Party" or some such title. Others felt that to entertain the possibility of this happening on a large scale was to overlook the extent to which the Labour Party is, and remains, dependent on the Trade Unions.



In any event, the shedding of further MPs by the Labour Party does not present an important threat to the Conservatives since it is not victories in Labour-held seats of the Mitcham and Morden variety that the Conservative Party will be looking for, but rather to holding its own seats and making gains as a result of redistribution. A House of Commons majority of around the current size would suffice for the second term of office of the present administration.

- 3 In so far as policy preferences can be derived from the statements of the SDP's leaders, MPs and other leading figures, they reflect basically the attitudes of Labour supporters for whom the increasingly Left-wing orientation of the Labour Party and the likelihood that this will continue has proved too much to swallow. In Parliamentary terms while their performance with few exceptions has been unimpressive and absenteeism high, two things stand out from their record in divisions - first, on all matters of domestic policy - except industrial relations - and this exception is only partial - their propensity has been to vote with the Labour Opposition rather than in the Government lobby. At least as much change in policy would be required from the Conservative Party as from the Labour Party to make them contemplate a coalition with the former rather than the latter in a hung Parliament. Second, there is a high correlation of SDP and Liberal voting. This in part reflects the fact that the Liberal Party under Steel has moved further in a collectivist direction. The frictions in the Alliance which became apparent in the carve-up of constituencies may reflect the anxieties of more traditionalist and individualist Liberals; it is a point which Conservatives should in some constituencies be able to exploit. On the other hand, in matters of defence and foreign policy, the SDP has been less open than the Liberals to colonisation by CND and similar elements.

The SDP is a party committed to economic and industrial growth and to continued membership of the EEC as well as of NATO. Despite its apparent commitment to devolution to the regions, it is still conventional in its approach to government. The Liberals, on the other hand, are both affected by ecological arguments (which mean zero growth) and suspicious of all large scale organisations,



governmental, industrial or financial. Their radical elements attach much importance to community-style politics which is very remote from Roy Jenkin's elitism.

4 The fact that the SDP is a "socialist" not a "Centre" party which must be in the forefront of the Conservative counter-attack is true despite its overwhelmingly middle-class composition. The middle-class membership of the SDP would seem to be largely drawn from the upper reaches of public sector employment in teaching, the NHS or in central and local government. It claims to be seeking consensus solutions to national problems and to be above the old "adversarial" politics. The ability to fix an annual subscription of £11 and the reliance on individual recruitment and voluntary activity suggests a middle-class style of politics, appealing largely to individuals without previous political commitment or experience seeing in this new activity another form of good works. Such statistics as are available seem to show that as with other voluntary bodies, there is a relatively high level of individuals who do not maintain their commitment. Thus to keep at the present level the SDP would require at least 10,000 new members each year. Since even with its high subscription and the ability to rely on voluntary work, the Party's income is well below what would be needed to fight a national campaign covering half the constituencies, one may expect a renewed drive for membership to figure largely in its priorities. The failure to advance during spring and the early summer has been put down to the "Falklands factor"; by the autumn one should be able to see whether this is indeed the case.

5 The lack of a full-scale grass-roots organisation emphasises the role of central fund-raising and explains the organisation set up to collect larger sums from wealthy individuals and companies. So far success has not been notable and what large donations the SDP may expect seem more likely to come from individuals than from companies. In so far as business interests have been accessible to the SDP appeal, it has been because of the belief that the SDP might be a bulwark against Bennite socialism. It is therefore important for Conservatives to stress both the essentially socialist philosophy of the SDP and the fact that votes for it are likely to be drawn mainly from the non-socialist pool and so result in the



loss of Conservative seats to Labour candidates. "A pound for Jenkins is a vote for Benn" might be a useful slogan in the City.

- 6 The above analysis is based upon the fact that under the British electoral system, which will in any event govern the next election, the total voting support available to a party is only relevant in relation to its geographical distribution, and that support for all parties is at present increasingly distributed very unevenly between the regions. We did not have much evidence beyond our own impressions and the very imperfect evidence of by-elections and local government elections through which to establish the regional distribution of SDP support. We believe that Conservative Central Office might usefully devote resources to pin-pointing the areas of SDP strength.

We believe that the SDP is weak both in Scotland and in Northern England and probably in Wales (though this may be clearer after the by-election in Gower). If this is correct, it would mean that the SDP presents little or no threat to Labour since even if a few Labour voters follow their former MPs on Tyneside or Teeside, Labour majorities there are large enough to retain the seats. On the contrary, it is in London suburbia and in the rich Tory pastures of the Home Counties and Southern England that the SDP's best hopes lie. Even where such seats are allotted to Liberals the added impetus given by the Alliance might make the difference between failure and success; Croydon North-West was a more sinister result than Hillhead or Crosby, where neither incumbent, each elected on a wave of media ballyhoo, is likely to survive redistribution.

- 7 It may be that even where SDP candidates fight seats which conform to the profile of those most winnable by the Alliance, the absence of organisation on the ground may prove a major weakness. While the Liberals follow the normal pattern of constituency organisation, the SDP have chosen to husband their resources by organising in areas of six or seven constituencies so that they can channel support to those in which they have a candidate. But under the pressures of a general election this may be difficult to put into practice, particularly if the Prime Minister chooses to go to the country when darkness comes early and the weather is bad. The SDP's poor results in the local



government elections as compared with the Liberals would seem to fortify the conclusion that election results are still won on the doorstep. For this reason it is important that the concentration of Party activity against the SDP should not lead us to overlook the Liberal challenge. On present showing the Liberals are more likely than the SDP to be the stronger wing of the Alliance in the next Parliament. Important also from the point of view of a correct strategy for dealing with the SDP threat is the fact that much of the SDP programme so far as it has by now appeared would seem to run counter to the opinions of its supporters. Survey data from the by-elections suggests that many SDP voters do not know what the party stands for and that what it does stand for is not what they would support.

8 In so far as the campaign from the centre is of importance, and given the personal appeal exercised by three of the SDP leaders and Steel, the ground must be laid by an analysis of SDP policies as they emerge and a sustained attempt to show their inadequacy to deal with central problems of the economy, public expenditure and the weight of bureaucracy. (The leaders of the SDP do not seem to regard the problem of the over-mighty State as a serious one). The attempt to divert attention from the economy to "social issues" must be shown to be an evasion of the real issue; while Jenkins' role as the father of the permissive society and Williams' hostility to giving priority to high educational standards can be shown to run counter to the present widespread public concern with law and order and the pursuit of greater efficiency through the maximum encouragement of individual excellence.

9 The reason is that the Liberals, given their organisation, will be better at translating general Alliance support into votes and seats actually won, or a tally of votes drawn from Conservatives which might give seats to Labour. It is not possible in dealing with Liberals to use the anti-socialist argument that can be used against SDP candidates, so that the main fight may prove to be in those seats allotted to the Liberals to fight.



- 10 The Conservative Party will not be much assisted in fighting the SDP by the media; the Guardian and Observer with their particular kind of middle-class readership are likely to support the SDP in an election and the Sunday Times is so anti-Conservative that its effect may well be the same. This enhances the importance of television and allotment of time for election broadcasts. It is important that Conservatives should insist that the Alliance should be treated as a single party for this purpose; how it divides the time allotted would be a matter for itself and may, one would hope, lead to the same kind of internal bickering as the allocation of constituencies.
- 11 Whatever the language used by the SDP leadership, it is unlikely that they seriously believe that the Alliance can win the next election or even be the largest single party. What they hope for is a hung Parliament in which they would offer their support to one or other of the larger parties only in return for the immediate passage of a Bill for electoral reform. Whatever may be the arguments for a change in the electoral system, a bargain of this kind should continue to be rejected in advance by the Conservative Party as it has been by Labour. A Parliament concentrating on electoral changes with the prospect of another election quite soon would scarcely provide the atmosphere for a continuance of economic recovery. What would be more likely in a hung Parliament would be some kind of coalition on the Left along the lines reflected by the distribution of votes in the lobbies in the present Parliament. Our own electoral propaganda must therefore make as much of the socialist antecedents and commitments of the SDP as it possibly can. It is important to point out that the leaders of the SDP are now making out that they are opposed to policies which when they were in government they fully supported.

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This Report is the work of a study group under the chairmanship of Lord Beloff. If the Report is found useful it is hoped that the Group will meet again in the autumn of 1982 to consider the policies that the SDP will presumably by then have adopted at its annual Conference and any other development in its fortunes or in those of the Alliance.