

Dated 10/8/73

CONSERVATIVE REACTION TO SDP

1. We continue to need information: lessons from Warrington (the SDP appeared to be short on policy but effective in publicity and organisation: we can learn for Croydon): study of opinion polls, local by-elections, nature of membership, (the evidence from Barclaycard that the average subscription paid is £16, which suggests a very AB membership, attendance at meetings, publicity stunts, defection of political or social activists, and fundraising.
2. We must avoid giving the SDP-Liberal alliance the opportunity of winning a by-election in a safe Conservative seat until we are sure we can hold such seats (cf holding the Liberal tide at Hove in late 1973).
3. We have successfully avoided panicking and building up support for the SDP by ill-timed and ill-expressed attacks - as shown by the SDP's opinion poll decline prior to Warrington. As a result of Warrington and certain significant local by-election successes, they are now very much in business. So we must now seek to expose the contradictions inside the SDP and with the Liberals which exist, or may be presumed to exist, on such matters as borrowing, taxation, devaluation, incomes policy, union law reform, public schools, rates, nuclear energy, the EEC, law and order, immigration and defence. We should also vigorously expose not only SDP MPs' Socialist past but also the responsibility of ex-Labour SDP councillors (eg. in Islington) for rate increases and general mismanagement. (The recent Briefing Note on the SDP, certain speeches in Warrington and the Politics Today of 10th August starts this process).
4. We should continue to concentrate on the threat of the Left which now virtually dominates the Labour Party. The local elections and Warrington show that the Labour Party is not declining, and that it cannot be ignored. By defecting, the SDP MPs have made the triumph of the Left in terms of policy, organisation and perhaps even personnel more likely and we should say so. Mr. Benn's campaign for the deputy leadership, reselection conflicts, the product of measures taken by newly elected Left Wing Labour councils, especially the GLC, will all fuel our attack. The more the contest appears to be between the Conservatives and Labour parties the less likely it is that significant numbers of Conservative voters will defect to something untried, whose political credentials are in any way dubious. We should of course be aware of the electorate's dislike of political slanging matches but we should justify our attack on Labour by the argument that, if Labour were able to take over the country as they took over the GLC and elsewhere it would be

too late.

5. We should pay special attention to the efficiency and liveliness of our organisation in all parts of the country where it is important for us to hold seats: that includes not only the Southern areas, where the Liberals will be a main threat, but also the North West, Yorkshire and the Midlands where the SD's, if they are wise, will attempt to steal our votes. Our holding of Sutton /Cheam and Orpington in the GLC this year and arguably our moral victory at Richmond show the value of having a lively local organisation. All Conservative held constituencies should produce regular focus-type leaflets like those which the Liberals (and hence, possibly the SDP) do so well.

6. In particular we should monitor and take care to prevent the disaffection and potential defection of young, professional public relations conscious Conservative activists who may already be discontented with Government policies and whose defection to the SD's would greatly strengthen them and weaken us. Two particular conclusions also follow:

- a) we should, by effective deployment of resources, try to prevent the SD's from securing significant victories in local by-elections. It will not be possible to do this in all, and where the seat is already hopeless for us it will not be worth it. But it would be damaging if the SD's are able to inflict Liberal style reverses on us in local by-elections or even if they take Labour seats by annihilating and absorbing our vote where it is significant. (We should soon be in a position to analyse, on the basis of local by-elections since May, what the overall effect is of SDP intervention).
- b) we should carefully monitor the in-roads of the SD's among student bodies and especially Conservative students, as student party workers have helped us greatly in winning certain Parliamentary seats. This means attention to Freshers' Fairs this autumn, and co-operation by Ministers with the FCS in arranging speakers.

7. In our study of target voters we are taking into account for each group the danger of it defecting to the SD's and the likelihood of its support being regained in the event of Labour threatening to win the next election (council tenants are a key group here, in view of Labour's hostility and SDP lukewarmness to council house sales.)

8. We should now review the impact of our policies in all areas, since most of our Manifesto pledges have been carried into legislation and

are now coming into effect. Where there have been successes, we should continue to ensure that the party and the country are made aware of them through speeches, PPBs, and party literature. Where there have been failures or disappointments we should urgently review what is required and propose remedial measures. One example is local government finance on which the SD's may already be moving. Other examples may be coping with unemployment (the Jenkins plan, cf. to the proposals in the PM's Commons speech), trade union law, enterprise zones and small business opportunities, short hold tenure and tightening up on law and order (the latter especially important in view of the recent disturbances). The SD's are quite likely to take up positions on a number of these issues that may appear to be more acceptable to our supporters than what we have hitherto achieved.

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