Chapter VI
The Impact of the Split

The split had far reaching consequences for British politics. The formation of the new social Democratic Party had provoked genuine interest and excitement on an unexpected scale in the public which was disillusioned with the recession associated with Margaret Thatcher and disgusted with the internal quarrels in the Labour Party. During the formation of party it was argued that Labour Party had suffered a minor split, before, when Ramsay MacDonald left the Party with a handful of his supporters to join the National Government and also minority parties like Liberal Unionists, Asquithian Liberals, Commonwealth Party, etc. had passed on to oblivion without making any impact on British politics. But, the birth of SDP had taken place in different circumstances. The traditional and class dominated pattern of political behaviour seemed to be breaking down in Britain. A declining post-industrial Britain appeared to be rejecting centralisation and concentration of power and wealth, and demanding devolution. Moreover, the British people are basically opposed to any kind of extremism, be it Left or Right, the mood of the country remains more moderate and tolerant.

Having observed as above, one may examine the growth of the new party and the corresponding decline of the major parties to assess the impact of the split, the promised 'breaking of the mould' in British Politics, or to see if the birth of the party
was a mere flash in the pan. It may be in order to recount the developments that led to the formation of the SDP.\(^1\)

Roy Jenkins was toying with the idea of forming a new party after returning from his assignment as the President of the Commission of the European Community. He had hinted about his plans to form a new party in his famous Dimbley Lecture, in November 1979, which had inspired his followers to form organisations in different parts of the country with a view to forming a new party in future. Indeed, Jenkins wanted to form the new party when the dissatisfied group in the Labour Party were to break away from it. However, Labour leaders like William Rodgers, Shirley Williams and David Owen had not thought in terms of forming a new party until James Callaghan, in the Labour Party Annual Conference in October 1979, proved that he did not have the capacity to fight the aggressive line of the Left. In fact, in 1979, Shirley Williams had commented on Roy Jenkins' plans for launching a new centre party. "A new party shall have no roots, no principles, no philosophy and no values"\(^2\).

But, gradually, following certain developments in the Labour Party leaders like William Rodgers, Shirley Williams, and David Owen began to think on the line that the Labour Party, as a vehicle for democratic socialism, was beyond redemption. In fact, David Marquand described the mood of that time in a succinct manner. He said that the Labour Party had outlived its usefulness and that Social Democrats within it should turn to work out what the purpose of the new model should be. In other

\(^1\) The chronology of the split is listed in Appendix-II

\(^2\) See Ian Bradley, "Birth Pangs to the Party that was nearly not there", *The Times* (London), 3 August 1981.
words, they would leave the Labour Party and start another party which would be “libertarian, decentralised and democratic”\(^3\).

William Rodgers was the first to announce a timeframe about his continued membership of the party. In a speech at Abertillery, in South Wales, on 30 November 1979, he gave the Labour Party a year to save itself and hinted that if the Left in the party won their battle to change the party constitution, he and others would quit the party. In the Birmingham Conference of the Labour Party, in May 1980, while both William Rodgers and Shirley Williams vociferously spoke for the Campaign for Labour Victory (CLV), David Owen told the Conference that Social Democrats should stay on in the Labour Party even if it took 20 years to win their battle. Owen said that he had nothing to do with the CLV if it was used for launching a new party.

David Owen too changed his mind in the Wembly Conference of the Labour Party on 31 May 1980, when he was hooted down by the militant Labour activists, while he was speaking against unilateral disarmament. The prevailing extremist atmosphere in the conference had disappointed him. The intolerant atmosphere spread gradually to the Constituency parties as well. When Allan Lee Williams, a former Labour MP, broke away from the Labour Party to join the SDP after representing Hornchurch, from 1960 to 1979 as Labour candidate in the Parliament. He said: “It is not a question of militant tendency of broad left but even in the good Constituency parties like Hornchurch attitudes are beginning to change which would make the life of a

\(^3\) David Marquand, “Inquest on a movement”, *Encounter*, (London) July 1979, p. 155
moderate MP in the next Parliament virtually unbearable and untenable." He further said that the Labour party was not capable of being a governing party, there was need for doing a lot of rethinking and the SDP was sufficiently flexible enough to enable this thinking to go on.

John Silkin, a Labour MP, in the beginning of June 1980, gave notice to a motion in the Parliamentary Labour Party to commit the party in the next Conference in favour of Britain's withdrawal from the European Economic Community (EEC). Silkin's move made without consulting his shadow cabinet colleagues, prompted David Owen to advise William Rodgers and Shirley Williams to issue a joint statement, on 7 June 1980, to the effect that they would leave the Labour Party if Silkin's proposal was accepted. Notably, this was the first public declaration jointly made by the so-called 'Gang of Three'. The Labour Party Annual Conference in Blackpool, in September 1980, proved to be the turning point. There, David Owen began to canvass for the breakaway movement. The outcome of the Blackpool Conference had pushed Rodgers, Shirley Williams and Owen further down the road of separation. On 14 January 1981, on the eve of Wembly Conference, all the four — Roy Jenkins, David Owen, William Rodgers and Shirley Williams — met together to discuss the formation of the new party. At the Wembly Conference, on 24 January 1981, the Left won the battle over the selection of the party leader. On the outcome of the conference, David Marquand, a Labour MP commented that the Social Democrats, who wished to remain in the Labour Party, could do so at the cost of endless

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4 *The Times* (London), 4 September 1981
compromises, endless erosion of self-respect and endless equivocation. The Left of the Labour Party, led by Anthony Wedgewood Benn had won battle after battle over party policies pushing the party to the extreme. As a result, it seemed that, for Social Democrats, there was no other alternative but to break way from the Labour Party and express their defiance of the duopoly of the two major parties — Labour and the Conservative—and go in search of what Jenkins called ‘fundamental re-alignment’ of British politics.

Soon after the Wembly Conference, on 27 January 1981 the ‘Gang of Four’ made the famous Limehouse declaration. Two months after, in March 1981 the Social Democratic party was launched. 12 MPs in the Commons and 9 Peers resigned from the Labour Party on 12 March, a Parliamentary Committee consisting of 12 MPs, with David Owen as the chairman was formed. Later on, the number of MPs increased to 29 making the SDP the second largest Opposition party in the Commons, relegating the Liberal party to a 3rd position.

Some of the observers of the contemporary Labour history trace the birth of the split to the early seventies, “the referendum on EEC was the first step to the realignment which is now called the alliance, stated Paul Rose”. A more significant point to be recognised was the steady decline of support for the two parties which totally monopolised the electorate since 1951. The revolution in education, the declining

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proportion of manual workers and general dislike of class based politics had thrown up a new factor in the equation. Here was a segment of socially mobile people, no longer wedded by birth to being little Tories or Labour supporters. Their values did not accord with the rigid collectivism of the trade unions nor were they attracted to a society in which giant corporations frequently wielded more power than many a nation state. The giant public bureaucracies were no longer the panacea. Technology had advanced to produce a generation as familiar with microprocessors as with sociology and impatient of restrictive practices on the one hand and unimaginative management and investment on the other.

However, the advent of SDP brought in the political arena and harnessed enthusiasm of vast number of men and women previously uncommitted to the old politics and a combination of radicals and reformers coming to grips with the realities of an industrial technological society that posed as yet another unanswered problem. The vast multi-national corporations and massed trade union battalion had no great appeal for the average member of the SDP. They tried to respond positively with themes of participation, decentralisation and democratisation of the larger institutions, either public or private. There was no ideological commitment to public or private ownership for its own sake and outright opposition to playing politics with the industries. The SDP combined in itself the Labour dissidents, progressive conservatives, and undaunted Liberals combined with something far more exciting.

Other factors which contributed to the birth of the SDP were the disillusionment with a Conservative Party, that had strayed from one Nation concept of Disraeli, the disintegrating factionalism of a Labour Party whose diminishing activities made it vulnerable for take-over by groups which opposed the very concept of parliamentary politics. The changed political structure was a happy combination with the antics of Tony Benn and Geoffrey Howe, without which the SDP’s road would have been much harder. Later on, they were fortunate too in the four attractive personalities of the ‘Gang of Four’ who have shown confidence of capturing and handling power, and the Liberal leader David Steel who could stand above narrow party advantage and see what Jo Grimond had worked for during many barren years-a realignment of British Politics.

The ideas had been developing slowly for the whole of the decade that started with the European clash. At the time of launching, the opinion was that the SDP had tremendous chance of success in then existing conditions. Given a tense world, where President Reagan’s Nationalistic America faced a militarily strong but economically weak Russia, there was going to be a plenty of scope for a pragmatic lobby within Western Alliance a role which neither Mrs. Thatcher’s rabid anti-communism and Mr. Foots endemic anti-Americanism would permit either of them to play finally. A Centre party, precisely because of its commitment to the Western Alliance would not be in doubt, could radically re-examine Britain’s military and nuclear strategy, a step

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8 Ibid.
which the Conservatives are unwilling to take and which the Labour Party could not do without arousing suspicions of a retreat into neutralism. It would seek to change institutions to maximise consent and minimise coercion of government.

On the other hand, the Labour Left said that the SDP was a still-born Baby. One of the leading spokesman of the Left said that SDP’s ideas added up to a mild version of conservatism with the added ingredients of the demand for proportional representation. Eric Heffer, Member of Parliament belonging to labour left, said that SDP was a media creation. It had no real roots among the people, but for a period it would be nuisance to Labour until it was thoroughly seen through for what it was, a party designed to halt Labour’s progress towards a just democratic socialist party. Neil Kinnock, belonging to the Labour Left and the Chairman of the Labour Party said, “The sideways shuffles of those who – in mockery of history and poverty of purpose – like to call themselves Social Democrats offer no means of progress”. He further added that they neither pacify Labour’s enemies nor inspire Labour’s friends. And when the shuffles finally take themselves off to stale centrist pastures in board rooms, only the coalition mongers and factionalist will watch them with interest.

A comparison was made between the split of 1931 and that of 1981 as many in the Labour Party thought that it was not a “split” implying as that did, that it somehow

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10 The Times 13 June 1981
11 In an interview to me Mr. Heffer confirmed this observation.
went down the middle of party, rather it was a small splinter group. David Marquand wrote in his biography of Ramsay MacDonald, “A politician who breaks with his party and Westminster can be received back into the fold without much difficulty, the unforgivable sin is to fight against it at the hoisting.” Ramsay MacDonald broke away in the name of putting the nation before the party exactly 50 years ago. Now, the Social Democrats like Shirley Williams were talking of putting politics for people.

Then too, unemployment was 2,500,000 and rising. Until monetarism revived, Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden were conceived as the victims of pre-Keynesian naivete. Ivor Thomas wrote to Ramsay, “The wolves will be snarling, you will be abused, misrepresented, and misunderstood,” and so he was. Beatrice Webb called the defectors ‘the rotten stuff at the top of the tree’. Clement Attlee writing six years later, remembered, “In fact, there was no split, but only the shedding of a few leaves from the top of the tree, with a few parasitic appendages, the trunk and the main branches weathered the storm”. Even Ramsay confided to his new Ministers that “we are like marooned sailors on a dreary island”, Ramsay became a by-word for deceit and treachery.

The Left reminded the SDP of what Roy Jenkins wrote in his response to Labour’s 1970 General Election defeat, “A social Democratic Party without deep roots in the

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14 The Times 28 March 1981
15 Ibid
working class movement will quickly fade into an unrepresentative intellectual sect\textsuperscript{16}. Aneurin Bevan advised Jenny Lee when she was deciding whether to remain with the ILP,

"you will be pure alright but, remember, pure at the cost of potency. You will not influence the course of British politics as much as hairbreadth. Why don't you get into nunnery and be done with it. Lock yourself up in a cell from the world and its weakness. I tell you it is the Labour Party or nothing. I know all its faults, all its dangers. But it is the party that we have taught millions of working people to look to and regard as their own. We can't undo what we have done. And I am by no means convinced that something cannot yet be done."\textsuperscript{17}

Michael Foot said when the next general election came the voters will go for Conservative Parties as being much more important than "the irrelevancy as it will prove to be of the Social Democrats"\textsuperscript{18}. Thus, the initial enthusiasm about the SDP was ignored by the Labour Party. Even the Conservative party's reaction to the advent of SDP was very unenthusiastic as Mrs. Thatcher said, "In a confrontation with the 'politics of power' the soft-centre has always melted away"\textsuperscript{19}.

The Social Democrats had other ideas in mind. As we will subsequently see, their progress in the bye-elections, the growth of the organisation and their policies as opposed to those of the major political parties and their successful electoral strategy in alliance with the Liberals had dispelled the initial doubts about its durability. The policies of the SDP have been discussed in the foregoing chapters. The political roots of SDP were established in the days of Gaitskell-Crossland egalitarianism, when the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Roy Jenkins \textit{What Matters Now}, (London, 1972), p. 52
\item \textsuperscript{17} \textit{ibid}, p.55
\item \textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Times}, 28 March 1981
\item \textsuperscript{19} \textit{The Times}, 24 March 1981
\end{itemize}
aim was society, achieved not by further redistribution but by growth, planning and social engineering\textsuperscript{20}. Paul Rose emphatically said that SDP was not as some would have it 'the middle class on the march, but the classless on the march against artificial and outmoded divisions that hinder society's development\textsuperscript{21}. There was a determination to break down class barriers.

As a society where classicists and miners are given way to skilled engineers and computer programmers, the SDP combined traditional political strands with innovation in combination and partnership with liberalism. New and Old combined to shake the foundation of a two-party system that had governed Britain for too long. In any event, the SDP, a mere refuge for animals escaping from their current political cages, it represented a new positive philosophy capable of uniting reformers and radicals who would overlap with their Liberal counterparts and perhaps coalesce after fulfilling the promise of Proportional Representation. As the Labour, based on the unions, replaced the liberals as the party of reform, so the SDP was replacing a large segment of the traditional Labour vote and in alliance with radical liberal tradition, attracting a whole new constituency by its very newness.

Most of the initial policies of the SDP were derived from Gaitskellism and the policies of the First Wilson government, a planned economy, social egalitarianism, Pro-Common Market, decentralisation and industrial democracy\textsuperscript{22}. As the success of the
SDP mostly depended on constitutional changes, they were committed to the constitutional reforms. Shirley Williams, while emphasising on the priority of constitutional reforms said: “Without reforms in the constitution, the SDP would be merely a ragbag of failed politicians, linked with the Liberals”23.

As a first step to the constitutional reform, the SDP had to fight for Parliamentary Democracy against the extreme Left. The Social Democrats viewed that over the centuries, in response to the various social and industrial revolutions the patterns of recruitment to Parliament had changed. Parliament itself still retained many features of an old order, privileged oligarchic and semi-democratic order24. For example, the composition of the House of Lords, according to the SDP, was undemocratic and needed to be reformed until it was substituted by an elected chamber. Similarly, SDP wanted to democratise the House of Commons through the introduction of proportional representation. Parliament was not democratic enough because it too often helped the people representing minority to form the government and bring a sort of society they approve of without the reference to the people25.

The SDP proclaimed its commitment to creating in Britain a modern and open society, encompassing political, social, economic and intellectual planes. The SDP did not consider that Britain was a modern and open society at least not in comparison with other industrial nations. Ideas like liberty, tolerance and civility were restricted to

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23 The Times, 29 March 1981.
the upper reaches of the British society. In other words, the British, even in 1980, was Liberal (albeit secretive) society at the top but not a particularly democratic or modern one. In the words of David Owen: "It is the profound belief of us all that the present state of affairs have to change and somehow we have to produce a new political culture for our country, one which gives stability to our economy, and industry upon which, over 10-15 years period, we can hope to revive our fortunes".

After a few reverses in the bye-elections and the opinion polls the political pundits began to forecast political doom for the SDP and minimised the impact it was going to make. William Rodgers came out with a very emphatic answer to these comments and said that the SDP had brought the re-alignment of British politics by making its mark in the British political arena. He wrote an article in *The Times* arguing the case of SDP: "18 months ago SDP exploded a bomb under the complacency of the old political parties. As the smoke continued to drift, it was difficult to see more than the outline of future".

The SDP was not conceived in the sonorous phrases of the Dimbley Lecture, nor brought forth in an emotional spasm following a Party conference at Wembley. It was the end product of a process of political disillusionment that had lasted for almost a generation. The alienation of voters from the old political parties had been well established. The people said, according to Rodgers, "We have been waiting for you".

26 *The Times*, 9 October 1981
Mrs. Thatcher's performance was bad. As for the Labour Party, the row about the militants in the NEC have in their different ways obscured the reality. Left have gained the control. William Rodgers admitted that the SDP also might have made mistake. But, he said: "Our devotion to virtues of the mixed economy was no substitute for hard comment on real problems in steel, coal, or the motor industry. Moreover, we have said far too little about social welfare issues - housing, schools, health and pensions - close to every day family life. But, meanwhile, it was reasonable to ask that any appraisal of the immediate events should rest on political trends that stretch back for at least two decades.

The growth of the SDP organisation was an indication of its growing impact in the party politics of Britain. The initial recruitment of the SDP was very rapid. By the end of 1981 the SDP had 60,000 adherents more evenly spread, by age, class and region. The idea of the SDP strategists and managers was to have a minimum of 100 members in each Parliamentary constituency.

The situation that developed in the remainder of the Labour Party after the split helped the SDP to recruit members, where it needed to do so, among the Labour councillors and trade unionists. The traditionalists in the Labour Party were sufficiently alarmed after the split and had opened a fight to reverse those decisions they had not worked to prevent. The balance in the Labour Party was precarious when the 'Solidarity Campaign' launched by 150 MPs took up the fight to reverse the

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27 William Rodgers, "Don't write off SDP", The Times, 1 November, 1982.
Wembly formula by restoring half of its votes in leadership selection to the MPs. The Annual conference of the Labour Party at Brighton in October 1981 provided the ‘Solidarity Campaign’ the last chance to reverse the trend. But, it turned out to be a draw. However, 7 MPs had defected to the SDP, although 20 were expected to join if Anthony Wedgewood Benn had won the contest for the deputy leadership.

Thus, SDP started recruiting from the Labour dissidents and Progressive conservatives. Gradually, members were attracted from all sections. Paul Rose, the secretary of SDP in the Borough of Brent said that class, colour, race and religion were no barrier to the membership of SDP. He further described the panel of municipal candidates in Borough of Brent numbering 37 including six Asians, six Irish and three West Indian, had covered the spectrum of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Free Thinkers. Thus, the rise of SDP in its first year of existence had been phenomenal. At the beginning of 1982, it had 80,000 paying members with 29 MPs in the house of Commons and 14 Peers in the House of Lords.

The basic unit of the Party organisation to which the members will automatically belong was the Area Party. It had declared, unlike the other Parties, it would organise itself in areas rather than constituencies, shire countries, Metropolitan districts and

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid
30 Philip M. Williams, “The Rise and Possibilities of Britain’s Social Democrats”, Dissent (London), Winter 1982, p. 72
London Boroughs\textsuperscript{32}. This reflected the practical concern to enable members to promote the purpose of the party not only in the existing parliamentary constituency but in local governments as well. The area party will be directly represented in regional organisation of the party and each will be entitled to elect a representative to party’s highest decision making body, the Council for Social Democracy.

The party organisation of the SDP reflected the philosophy of the leaders as to the kind of democracy they wanted to have. The vice-chairman of the SDP policy committee and the chairman of the SDP policy group of government, David Marquand said that since its founding, the SDP has been committed to decentralisation in government and industry\textsuperscript{33}. The radical decentralist elements in the party jostled uneasily against more conservative elements which were still imbued with the statism of 1950s and 60s. For decentralists, progress came from bottom up, for a statist it came from the top down. The statist would think that the central government was the best judge of social need and therefore, best arbiter of standards, and for decentralist the localities and the regions could judge their own needs better than the central government could possibly do and give a higher priority to variety and experiment, than to uniformity and tidiness.

Fabian Centralism dominated the British Left for last 70 years and decentralism, which echoed Robert Owen, J.S. Mill and William Morris, was, at the same time, looking forward to 21\textsuperscript{st} century. The SDP thought that the British state was one of

\textsuperscript{32} The Times, 13 April 1981
the most centralised in the democratic world. They envisaged necessary changes in
the structure. Britain did not have the constitutionally independent power center
outside the capital, like that of lander governments in West Germany or of State
governments in USA. Regionalism of the sort which flourished for some time in Italy
and which was now vigorously prompted by Mitterand government in France was
lacking as well. Local governments of Britain were hamstrung by their dependence on
central government for grants which is 60 per cent of their revenue, their competence
have been whittled away by national administrations. The SDP considered all this as
an affront to the fundamental axiom of pluralist democracy. Power should be diffused,
decisions be taken at local levels, and series of elected assemblies should be set up. To
buttress the system, the regional assemblies should be represented in a reformed and
strengthened second chamber. Marquand suggested that if the SDP was to offer a
radical challenge to the statism of the two parties, it would have to do something like
this. If it shrank from doing so, its decentralist professions would be just in paper.

The SDP seemed to have accepted the challenge of statism. In the decision making,
the Social Democrats wanted to ensure: through the regional organisations of the
SDP, that the policies prepared by the party are responsive to the views and wishes of
the people throughout the country; regional conferences and the right of regions to
promote policies of particular importance to themselves would aid the process; the
regional organisation would help to co-ordinate local party activity and would have
responsibility of endorsing the list of would-be candidates for election to parliament.

33 The Times, 6 July 1982
The regions would also be directly represented by members elected to serve in the council for Social Democracy which would be the parliament of the party. The underlying principle that ran through the draft constitution was that the membership of the party at large should decide crucial issues. Members should be involved in decisions at all levels of the party structure from Area and Regional Committees to the Council for Social Democracy\textsuperscript{34}.

\textbf{Bye-election performances}

On the eve of the formation of the party the public enthusiasm was so much that a Gallop poll survey reposed by ITN said that if there was general election now, the Social Democrats would capture 36 per cent of national votes, Conservatives 22.5 per cent and Labour 20 per cent\textsuperscript{35}.

The Social Democrats entered Britain's political arena with a bang on 16 July 1981 with an unexpectedly narrow defeat in the Warrington bye-election, turning a traditional Labour stronghold into a seat quite shaky for the Labour Party\textsuperscript{36}. Optimists hoped that SDP candidate, Roy Jenkins, might poll 30 to 35 per cent votes. A MORI poll usually the least favourable to the SDP, found that Jenkins would take 29 per cent of 1979 voters and 50 per cent of the 1979 non-voters\textsuperscript{37}. The results took everyone by surprise. The Labour candidate E D H Hoyle who won the seat got

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{The Times}, 23 September 1981.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{The Times}, 18 March 1981.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{The Times} 17 July 1981.
14,280 votes, Jenkins got 12,521 and S J Sorell from Conservative party got 2,102 votes\(^{38}\). The 42 per cent votes of Jenkins included the 46,000 Labour votes and 60,000 Conservative votes which the SDP snatched from these parties.

Jenkins won a clear moral victory in greatly reducing a formerly overwhelming Labour majority, and set the political actors on the British stage on rethinking about themselves. The first bye-election results drove home the consistent message of the opinion polls that the new party, even though a new party and organisationally weaker, posed a major threat to the electoral hegemony of both the parties, namely the Labour Party and the Conservative party. On the other hand, it signalled the steady decline of Labour’s popularity as the result was worst showing since 1931. On 16 July David Wood said that at last Britain had a new party to satisfy its craving for ‘consensus politics\(^{39}\). In a brave performance in Warrington, Jenkins made all other candidates look like dwarfs. He looked and sounded a moderate statesman for a moderate constituency. He lost and an undistinguished and curmudgeously left-wing candidate won. In a day when the electors showed disenchantment with both the parties some cataclysmic shift of Labour and Conservative votes were expected.

Apparently, the underlying argument was that the two parties had failed the Nation since the war and now that as they were moving towards far right and left leaving the unoccupied the central ground of British Politics where all men and women of good

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\(^{38}\) *The Times* 18 July 1981

\(^{39}\) *The Times*, 20 July 1981
will and common sense were to be found between political Puritanism of Thatcher and the Left-wing extremism of the Labour. In fact, an editorial had blamed Hoyle’s defeat at the General election of 1979 on the “torrent of extremism views which some Labour members had been unable to stomach”\(^{40}\). If both parties, it was cautioned, insisted on swinging to extremes, then the Alliance might indeed grab enough seats to hold the balance of power and try to force on any government the electoral reforms that would make balance of power government permanent. But, David Wood suggested that Warrington was merely a footnote to British Political history. The mould had not yet broken.

Mr. Douglas Hoyle, Labour MP who won the election described the SDP in the post-Warrington euphoria as the media-created party that had been sold like soap-flakes. He quoted his colleague Cyril Smith who opined that a pact with the SDP would be suicidal to the Liberal Party\(^{41}\). David Steel, the leader of the Liberal Party, the Alliance partner of the SDP, said Warrington had cemented the prospective alliance, more effectively than their all joint committee meetings, statements resolutions and debates could probably do\(^{42}\). The Labour had lurched to the Left and the Tories were providing the most socially divisive government for half a century. Together they offered that which they could not possibly and credibly offer separately—the real prospect of a reforming government.

\(^{40}\) The Times, 15 July 1981
\(^{41}\) The Times, 15 September 1981
\(^{42}\) The Times, 18 July 1981
The narrowing down of the Labour majority created apprehension among the Labour ranks in regard to the growth of SDP at the cost of their own support base. Roy Hattersly reflected the patent anxiety of in the Parliamentary Labour Party at the success of the SDP in Warrington bye-election when he remarked, “The main responsibility for the rise of the SDP lies in the Labour Party not Fleet Street.” Hattersly added, “The Social Democratic Party’s future is in our hands, we can accept Warrington as a warning, and turn the SDP’s success into no more than an overnight sensation, or we can ignore the signs of our own supporters’ growing apprehension and make the SDP a permanent force in British politics.” He further said “I know that many of my colleagues will want to pull the blankets over their heads and hope that when they wake up the SDP will have gone away. But he warned that they were doing the Labour Party a cruel disservice by pretending that all was well when the future of the party was in danger. The bad thing was the advocacy of continuous revolution by a tiny but vocal section of the party espoused the policies inconsistent with Parliamentary democracy and the continued onslaught against the party Constitution by people who are trying to concentrate power in the hands of an unrepresentative clique.

Soon after Warrington, the SDP scored victories in several local council bye-elections in safe Labour seats – many of them in depressed North of England where it had been said to be weak. On 1 October 1981 in the Council elections SDP won in Sussex,

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3 The Times, 24 July 1981.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid
Gloustershire and lost to Labour in the Licestershire\textsuperscript{46}. The second bye-election was held in 22 October 1981. The SDP had supported the Alliance candidate William Pitt in Croydon. The Mori poll gave 1.5 per cent lead to William Pitt over his Conservative rival, but he got nearly 10 per cent majority over the Conservative rival, with the Labour pushed to the third position. The tally was; William Pitt got 13,800, Conservative John Butterfield got 10,546, and Boden Stanley of the Labour Party got 8,967. So the swing was 24.2 per cent from Conservative to Alliance and 21.8 per cent from Labour to Alliance\textsuperscript{47}.

The Croydon result was simply amazing for the Alliance. The next day of the election results were declared, David Steel said, "we are unstoppable, neither of the main parties would be able to say from now that a vote for the Alliance would favour one of the others"\textsuperscript{48}. They had both suffered, almost equally. The Alliance had taken votes from both sides. Pitt said 'we have struck a deep chord in the hearts of ordinary people; we have split the two party system wide open. At Crosby we must widen the breach'\textsuperscript{49}. The Alliance said the momentum was unstoppable. It was not going to halt until it formed an Alliance Government. Shirley Williams said that after Pitt’s Victory the combined campaign was no longer the thin protest of an impotent third party. It was a fundamental challenge to a two-party system and to the merits of the old parties. Among Labour voters extremism was marked. One voter said to Shirley "I

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[46] Andrew Stephen, “What does the 'Gang of Four' do now”? \textit{The Times}, 4 October 1981.
\item[47] \textit{The Times}, 23 October 1981.
\item[48] \textit{Ibid}.
\item[49] \textit{Ibid}.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
voted to the Labour today but is a very disturbed party, isn’t it?\textsuperscript{50} The decline of the main parties was evident in the fact that William Pitt’s votes share quadrupled from 10 per cent in May 1979 to 40 per cent in October 1981.

Eric Heffer had scornfully remarked during the election in Croydon, that the new party was a dustbin for the reactionary right wing Labour party renegades which had moved from being a credit card party to a party of sly, devious parasites\textsuperscript{51}. The Conservative leader Leon Britain had remarked that it was the time to stop being bemused by the glamour, glitter and the personalities of the SDP which was seeking to lead bemused voters up a well-trodden cul-de-sac\textsuperscript{52}.

But, the second bye-election was to bring more accolades for the Alliance and disappointments for the other parties. The bye-election for Crosby was scheduled on November 1981. The opinion poll taken before the Crosby election gave the SDP candidate Shirley Williams 40 per cent of the votes, Conservative 34 per cent and Labour 25 per cent. In 1979, the Conservatives had got a majority of 19,272 in Crosby\textsuperscript{53}. But, the results surpassed all expectations. Shirley Williams won with 49 per cent Conservatives got 40 per cent and Labour a meagre 10 per cent.

\textsuperscript{50} The Times, 23 October 1981.
\textsuperscript{51} The Times, 13 October 1981.
\textsuperscript{52} The Times, 23 October 1981.
\textsuperscript{53} The Times, 8 October 1981.
In 1982, in the bye-election Beaconsfield, the Alliance candidate lost by 13,000 votes in May, and the Labour candidate, A. C. Blair came third with only 3,886 votes. In this election the SDP could declare themselves as the alternative party to the government. The Labour had a very severe setback in this election. As Peter Shore said, "The internal disputes have been damaging the party for last two years and will continue to do so for some time." Michael Foot, the Labour Party leader said in an interview on BBC radio "We are naturally very disappointed about it, it was a very heavy defeat." 

The last important bye-election was held in Hillhead which was the Conservative party stronghold. Roy Jenkins was initially discouraged to fight that seat. But Jenkins thought withdrawal would mean weakness and he had to get into Commons to lead the Liberal-SDP Alliance. Jenkins contested the seat and won with a comfortable margin. Jenkins said that the result could alter the whole map of British politics. Through these victories the new resurgent SDP-Alliance had proved that it could beat any of the established parties anywhere. Thus, in a year of its formation, the SDP got itself firmly established in the British electoral scene, demonstrating its potential to open up a new phase in British politics.

In an opinion poll conducted to see the popularity of the parties after the advent of the Alliance as a third force, the following positions of respective parties were found.

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56 BBC Radio interview 2 June 1982
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mori Polls</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Lib</th>
<th>Alliance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November 1981</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 April 1982</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 April 1982</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 May 1982</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows the electoral support in this periods.

Although the bye-election results and the opinion polls were looking promising for the Alliance as it was preparing for the Annual General Election in 1983, they were no indication of what was going to come. Let us look at the bye-election which were used to guess the outcome of the following General Election. Orpington (1962) repeated nationally would have left the Conservatives with one seat only, in 1964 they got 304, Dudley (1968) repeated nationally would have left Labour with 56 seats, in 1970 Labour got 287, Ripon (1973) repeated nationally would have put the Liberals well ahead of the Conservatives, but the Conservative got 287 and Liberals 14, Crosby repeated nationally would return the Alliance with 500 seats, but they got only 6 seats. It was hoped that once Falkland issue was settled, the old force in British politics would reassert themselves as Labour Party was falling apart, and the Conservatives were presiding over the millions of unemployed and a static economy.

57 *The Times* 12 January 1982
However, the series of bye-election defeats had demoralised the Labour Party, which was driven back into the third place as in Hillhead, Crosby, Croydon North West. In an inquest held by the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party was attended by candidates and agents from the bye-election campaigns in Crosby, Glasgow, Hillhead, Beaconsfield, Mitcham and Morden. Michael Foot said that the common thread of analysis was that Labour had failed to make an impact because of the strong animosity expressed on the doorsteps, towards Wedgewood Benn, that voters thought that Benn and his allies were too extreme and that because of the party’s left-right division people did not know who spoke for Labour - Foot or Benn. At the end of the session, Foot replied that there was little he could do to diminish the public impression of a divided party.\[59\]

The General Elections were held on 8 June 1983. The results set at rest speculations about the viability of the Alliance and the SDP in particular, and proved that the Alliance was already entrenched as a National Party. That Alliance received as much popular votes as the Labour Party, its total 7,776,065 compared to the Labour’s 8,460,860 votes, just a little over 6 lakh of votes of the Alliance, although the number of seats the Alliance got were not proportional. Out of 650 seats declared the following was the tally of the seats.\[60\]:

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58 The Times, 29 May 1982.
59 The Times, 7 July 1982.
60 ibid
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Gains</th>
<th>Losses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Labour's total number of seats 209, was their smallest in the Parliament since 1935. The Social Democrats along with the liberals had indeed done Labour a great harm, taking a quarter of the national vote, to let Conservative in, on minority of votes in score of seats. On the other hand, it was the strongest showing by a centre party since 1923, but the rewards of the Alliance in the seats was as disproportionate as ever. Roy Jenkins rightly remarked that "It was a total distortion of the desire of the voters". The spread of votes was 3:2:2 corresponding to Conservative: Labour: Alliance but, the ratio of the seats was 17:9:1. Under the PR system it would have given to the Tories roughly 285 seats, Labour 180, and the Alliance 160 resulting in a hung Parliament and scramble to form a coalition.

The results proved disastrous for the Labour as never before, in the two party dominance of British politics a second party so low. The Conservative popularity was also on the decline. The Conservatives got 48 per cent in 1951, 46 per cent in 1970

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61 Ibid.
44 per cent in 1979 and 42 per cent in 1983. Similarly, the Labour got just 28 per cent in 1983 compared to 37 per cent in 1979.

Why did it happen? Denis Healey said that the Labour renegades in the SDP had harmed democracy, the Tories were winning because the Alliance parties split the votes of the only party which could form an Opposition. Neil Kinnock said “The roots of the defeat which were pinned down by some of elements of our party in 2 of 3 years after 1980 made victory difficult to be achieved.” The Labour Party’s singing of old class tunes and the swing to the Left was disapproved by the electorate, as it was shown in the defeat of their stalwart Anthony Wedgewood Benn. As defiant as ever, Benn said, “The Labour Party was formed outside the Parliament, and it has worked, we have to protect people whether in government or in opposition, in Parliament or outside it and that I pledge myself to do and I hope no body up and down the country should shed tears for me.”

In a post-election analysis the defeat of the Labour Party was attributed to its extraordinary urge for self-destruction which gripped the party over past 4 years. Labour had been driven by ideological splits for the most of the post-war period. But, since 1979, these have led to split in the party. Pressures for constitutional changes to make Labour government conform closer to what party activists want, had been building up through out the 1970s. At 1980 Annual Conference, two crucial changes were agreed

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62 The Times, 10 June 1983.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
which became the focus for great bitterness. Labour Party was too extreme and too divided. Michael Foot’s indecision was cruelly exposed in the election itself on policy towards polaris and practice of purges. Foot came across as a man who did not know his own mind. The split in the anti-Conservative made the scale of triumph possible.

On the other hand, the resoluteness of Margaret Thatcher and the victory of the Falkland’s War was visible right through the campaign; the ‘spirit of Falkland’s, although not introduced overtly by the Prime Minister, came cropping up like a card, with reference to Britain being strong and respected again.

The impact of the split also depended upon the capability of the Labour Party to recover from the heaviest ever blow. Even its natural base of the working class was eroding. Traditionally the Labour Party stood mainly for and had been led by the skilled working class who this time gave the Labour 32 per cent as against 49 per cent in 1974 and 41 per cent in 1979.66 “At the moment, in electoral terms the Labour is hardly a national party”, said Prof. Bernard Crick; “and between 1979 and 1983 the Labour Party ceased to think as it could govern anything”.67 Holding the party together became an end in itself, and it did not hold together.

The Labour Party used to be a party of ideas and ideals of national conscience and public persuasion of policies and social change. Conservatives were supposed to be

65 The Times, 11 June 1983.
the party of responsible and experienced government. The Labour needed to recover its grasp on simply persuasive ideas and principles that could imply policies without always needing to spell them out in advance of events and opportunities. This was being recognised by the Labour MPs, as Robin Cook, who managed Neil Kinnock’s leadership campaign, wrote in the *Guardian*, “Too many on the Left have suffered from the naïve delusion that it is more important to obtain a commitment to policy from the Labour Party than to build up support for that policy in the electorate”68. And looking at the crowded and often quite unrelated components of the Manifesto he remarked that Marx would have seen it as “parody of all the faults to be expected in the reformist party”69. Professor Crick suggested that the labour should follow the ‘Public philosophy’ of Walter Lippmann who said that small steps can have high rise. A serious Socialist would not merely have sense of time; but, work out a theory of stages in terms of specific and actual society. The man who reconciled to changing circumstances was called not an opportunist, but a Statesman.

With the taking over the leadership of the Labour Party by Neil Kinnock as leader and Roy Hattersly as the Deputy Leader it was believed that the youthful leader and the experienced Hattersly offered a ‘dream ticket’ to the electorate. But, subsequent months have not seen the translation of the dream into the reality. The defence policy of the Labour Party, withdrawal from Europe, and their unilateralist posture, were not popular with the electorate. In the just concluded local elections, the Labour Party

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have fared poorly which does not speak good of their prospects in the forthcoming general elections. However, Neil Kinnock’s advice to his party men in the face of a defeat was worth noting as much as it becomes a moral booster. Kinnock while delivering the John Mackintosh’s Memorial lecture on “Democratic Socialism” he quoted R.H. Tawney’s advice in 1931 that Labour Party’s rethinking in defeat must be as follows.

“... related to the practical needs and moral traditions of plain men and women as history has fixed them. It must emphasise primarily what is longer in their outlook not prints of which it differs with them. It must not dogmatise and browbeat but agree and persuade. Its spokesmen must produce the impression of responsibility and consistency which working class organisations expect in the conduct of their own affairs and which the public demands from a prospective government. It is too late for the Labour Party at this time of the day to conceal socialism even if that were the wish, what it requires is to create the conviction that it can make a good job of it”

However, the results of 1983 general election put SDP on the political map of Britain and opened up a debate on the bias of the electoral system against the minorities parties. In an analysis of share of votes it was calculated that in terms of percentage of votes the Alliance would have got 34.9% per cent, Conservatives 33.9% per cent, Labour 25.9% per cent but the number of seats would have been, The Alliance 142, Conservative 295 and Labour 183. Even during the campaign the Chairman of the Electoral reform Society George Teily said it would have been a hung Parliament. The Alliance finished second in 313 seats, compared with Tory’s 180 and Labour 132. Again percentage-wise the Alliance got 26 per cent of national votes, Labour 28.2 percent and conservative 43.5 per cent. Alliance did well everywhere, but very

69 Ibid
70 New Statesman, (London), 7 October 1983.
well nowhere and it was first-past-the post which doomed it to disappointment. Therefore, the Alliance could form the government only in the event of the constitutional reforms. As such the official position of both the major parties are opposed to electoral reform. But Austin Mitchell, one of the leading left said, “We are now ceasing to exist in the large areas of the country, particularly the South, because of the current system. Labour is in danger of being relegated because the pattern of voting is not fairly reflected in the number of seats won. The first-past-the-post system was okay in the days of yore, as both the parties had the sound social bases in the class system, but politics has broadened since then, Labour’s job now is to widen out appeal to the electorate and the only way to do was through Proportional Representation”\(^{72}\).

There are two important pressure groups, the Electoral Reform Society which wants to introduce the single transferable vote (STV) and Campaign for Electoral Reform which wants Proportional Representation (PR). In any case the nature of British politics certainly would change if the electoral reforms are carried out. Nevertheless, SDP’s impact should not be viewed only in terms of replacing, the Labour party and restoring fundamentally the two-party system as it occurred when the Labour replaced the Liberals in 1920s; but it might transform British politics into a multi-party coalition system.

\(^{71}\) The Economist, (London), 21 February 1981
\(^{72}\) The Times 10 June 1983.
One should be careful while making any prediction about British politics. British political life has long been so solidly set that few really imagined it could change. Suddenly, it has become as fluid as it was, briefly, 60-odd years ago.