

MINUTES OF LIBERAL-SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC SEMINAR
HELD ON TUESDAY 3RD MARCH 1981 AT CENTRAL OFFICE

(a summary of the main points for further action forms Appendix A to these minutes)

1. Present

Mr Alan Howarth (in the Chair), Mr Tony Garner, Sir Harry Boyne, Miss Joan Varley, Mr Norman Strauss, Mr Peter Uttley, Mr Donald Stringer, Mr John Lacy, Mr Tony Greenland, Mr David Boddy, Mrs Margaret Daly, Mr Peter Lilley, Mr Andrew Varney, Mr David Smith, Miss Angela Hooper, Mr David Mitchell, Mr George Cardona, Mr John Hanvey, Miss Ann Bulloch, Mr Chris Mockler, Mr David Nicholson, Mr Peter Shipley and Mr Keith Britto.

2. Who are the Social Democrats?

It was felt that at present there is no clear pattern of regional support for the Social Democrats and that it is highly unlikely they will attempt to mount a co-ordinated campaign in the local government elections. It is probable that a number of individuals will stand as Social Democrats in these elections but there will not be a co-ordinated campaign - we will need to monitor both what such people say during the campaign and their electoral impact.

The scale of any future defections to the SDP will depend upon what happens in the Labour Party - if the moderates get a reversal of Wembley decisions there may not be a second wave of Labour M.P.'s moving over.

If the SDP are going to become a viable political force they will need to build up grass-roots support and organisation particularly in the twelve constituencies of the defectors.

We will need to monitor how successful they are in this exercise. The possible impact of redistribution on these twelve constituencies will need to be examined. As a Party we will need to monitor the re-selection process in Labour constituency associations and how the SDP members vote in the House.

It was felt likely that the SDP know of a number of further likely defectors to them, both in Parliament and local councils, but that they would use such defectors in order to maintain momentum and press and TV interest.

On the question of a Liberal-Social Democratic alliance, the key problem was likely to be the difficulty of getting existing Liberal candidates to stand down, but that such problems could be overcome perhaps with the Liberals withdrawing in seats held by Labour candidates in May 1979 and the Social Democrats not standing in seats which the Liberals came second to Conservative Party candidates in May 1979. We need to monitor carefully both nationally and in individual constituencies (e.g. Liverpool) any progress towards an alliance between the two parties.

Looking at the possible reaction of the unions to the emergence of an embryonic SDP Party it was felt that they are likely in the short term to continue to fight within the Labour Party to keep communists and left wing extremists out. Frank Chapell would probably like to take his union over to support the SDP but he has probably been stopped by his Executive. We will need to look at this question again in detail after the 1981 Labour Conference.

The links (if any) between pressure groups and the SDP are not at present clear - there is undoubtedly a degree of sympathy for them and this is something we will need to monitor. A possibility exists that the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) will become, in effect, the SDP's research department - as such it could be used to channel finance (e.g. Rowntree money) to them. We need to look in detail at sources of PSI funds.

The question of the SDP and links with the European Parliament and Europe in general was considered together with the possible impact they might have in the universities. It was agreed that both areas need to be monitored carefully.

We need as an organisation to carefully structure the information flow from our regions (perhaps on a weekly or monthly basis) with regard to the Social Democrats. It was felt that some detailed guidance to what sort of information we need in this area should be provided to the Regional Offices.

3. Proportional Representation

The link between pressure for PR and the development of a Social Democratic Party was pointed out. The sympathy of several of main heavyweight papers to PR was noted - the importance of the Times and their support of PR and Fred Emery's links with Shirley Williams was considered important.

It was agreed that we needed to bring together what information is available with regard to public attitudes to the political system and PR. In addition, that we should review our arguments and background briefing on PR. It was also agreed that we should analyse in detail the various types of PR in light of any possible advantages to the Conservative Party.

4. Public Opinion and the Social Democrats

Although support for the Social Democrats is spread over all sections of the electorate, more younger than older electors and more middle class than working class electors tended to say they would support the hypothetical new party.

It was felt that we need to continue to carefully monitor the structure of support both nationally and regionally for the new party.

5. The significance of the Social Democrats

At present the SDP have no detailed policies - they have aspirations but no policies. However the danger of these aspirations providing a good 'image' for them that will attract support from both Labour and us was clear. David Owen wants to go back to the failed economic

policies of Harold Wilson - we need to ask ourselves to what extent from any public debate over policies with the SDP, do we want to open up again questions of incomes policies and Trade Union reform.

6. Issues in the Period Leading up to the next Election

As a Party we are seen as divisive and uncompromising - if we only attack the policies of the other party in the period leading up to the next Election, we will lose. We must develop the public case for our own policies - we must lead the debate.

We should be attempting to identify what are the key issues for both the Election and, if possible, for the period leading up to the Election. It was felt that we badly needed an overall strategy for communication in the period leading up to the next Election and that in addition to this we need to develop a co-ordinated day to day approach to meeting the threat of the SDP and the Liberals. The theme for this day to day communications strategy could be that the SDP is the Socialists under a different banner.

7. Conclusions

The SDP will face huge problems in setting up a grass-roots organisation and in developing a presence in local government. We need to be careful not to exaggerate their importance. The difficulties that the SDP are likely to face both in selecting a leader and in forming an alliance with the Liberals should not be understated.

9. Briefing for Constituencies

The twelve constituencies with SDP members need briefing on both the Parliamentary record of their members and general aspects of the SDP.

Action: DN

10. Issues

We need to look at what issues may be important in the period leading up to the Election.

Action: KB, DN

11. Strengths and Weaknesses of SDP

We need to produce a paper analysing in detail the strengths and weaknesses of the SDP - the paper should look in detail at the 'image' they are attempting to develop. It should consider why the idea of a Centre Party is attractive to the electorate.

Action: KB, DN, DB

12. Proportional Representation

We need to look at the various possible forms of PR and attempt to assess which would be best for us.

Action: KB

13. Proportional Representation

We need to update and review anti-PR case and produce internal review paper.

Action: DN, AC, KB, PU

14. Proportional Representation

The CBF need a simple and up to date brief on PR.

Action: DN, AC, KB

15. The SDP Strategy

We need to attempt to produce what we feel the SDP strategy could be both in general and with regard to communication .

Action: DN, AC, KB, DB

Appendix A: Main Points for Further Action

1. Monitoring

We need a regular system of monitoring the SDP via the Party the reports will need to be in standard form and produced regularly (monthly?). They should cover:

- (a) What is happening in the 12 seats with SDP M.P.'s.
- (b) Activities of the SDP throughout the regions
- (c) SDP in local government, defections to them of L.G. councillors.
- (d) SDP in Universities
- (e) SDP and Academics
- (f) SDP and Pressure Groups
- (g) SDP and Media
- (h) SDP in Conservative seats and possible defections to them.

Action: DN, PS, KB

2. Liberal-SDP Alliance

Progress needs to be carefully monitored.

Action: PS, DN

3. Tactical Voting

We need a review of research in this area and any possible implication for the current political situation.

Action: KB

4. Opinion Research

Monitoring of support for SDP among main groups in the electorate both nationally and regionally is required.

Action: KB

5. Voting of 12 SDP Members

We need to monitor the voting record of the 12 SDP M.P.'s.

Action: DN

6. Redistribution

We need to attempt to assess the likely effects of redistribution and the SDP.

Action: KB

7. Finance

We need to attempt to isolate sources of funds for the SDP. Links between SDP and PSI need to be analysed.

Action: AH, DN

8. Briefing for CBF

CBF need briefing on SDP.

Action: DN