

DTEO 6/10/81

CONSERVATIVE STRATEGY TO THE SDP

General Public Relations Approach.

1. We can no longer pretend to ignore the SDP. It is a present and growing factor in every seat and poses a deadly threat to us electorally in two ways: it threatens to capture "safe" Conservative held seats, or to ensure that we have to devote resources to defending those seats which might be concentrated on marginals seats; secondly, it threatens to take enough votes from us in our marginal seats to let Labour in there.

So our Party must be "educated" about the SDP, through leaflets and easily digestible briefing material. Since the SDP lacks major personalities in Parliament, the forum of battle will not be the House of Commons: it will be the media, and to an even greater extent local newspapers, local radio, other constituency media and, most of all, the doorstep. Their strongest attack is being mounted where our Party is politically weakest - at the grass roots.

2. The effect of the Labour Conference is to maintain, or perhaps restore, the Labour Party as a credible electoral alternative (ie. so long as the Healeys and Hattersleys are there the Labour faithful will go on voting Labour) - but the policies remain as extreme and dangerous as ever. We must continue to concentrate our attack on the Labour menace, reminding people of how they were written off in 1960 and again in the early '70s, only to bounce back and produce the governments of 1964 and 1974. The lesson of 1974 is doubly valid, as it was the Conservatives defecting to the Liberals that let in Labour. All the evidence from the SDPs image and policy indicates that its main appeal is to discontented Conservative voters (a middle of the road member of the Bow Group commented on the SDP Discussion Papers that there was very little there that could not appear as a Bow Group Research Paper). We should therefore exploit all electoral evidence that the SDP takes votes from the Conservatives while failing to challenge Labour in its strongholds. The most likely source of such evidence will be local by-elections and the local elections next May.

3. We must exploit all we can the potential conflicts between local Liberals and local SDP, and the fear of the Liberals that they will lose their identity in a Party whose philosophy and record is very different from that of the Liberal Party. We should consider what media would be best employed in furthering this end.

4. SDP Record and Policy.

We must do all we can to expose and publicise the unattractive records and policy proposals that emanate from the SDP. Knocking a record is not so difficult

both via the SDP members participation in disastrous Labour governments, and via the particular contributions of Jenkins (as Home Secretary), Williams (Grunwick, independent schools) and Owen (diplomacy with Andrew Young). I fear it is less appealing to the electorate as they will say "that's all old hat - what we are worried about is three million unemployed and the rest". We need opinion research to test this view, also to test vulnerability of the SDP on their existing embarrassing policy proposals: reflation, devaluation, wealth tax, threat to independent schools, ambiguity over defence (reference to the Liberal Assembly), sale of council houses and mortgage interest. How far do we go on claiming that the SDP have no policy (their series of conferences have largely been driven from the headlines by the murder of Sadat, Heath's speech and the trivial stories of their Anabasis by Rail)?

5. We should create some light between our position on the EEC (which should approximate to a more "Gaullist" position) and that of the SDP, which we should represent as ultra-federalist and totally opposed to the opinions of the British people.

6. We should leave open a line of retreat for ourselves on such constitutional issues as House of Lords Reform and Proportional Representation.

Implications for our Organisation.

7. Although Impact-'80s is designed to remedy a long standing organisational weakness of the Conservative Party, there is no doubt that a campaign to politicise and increase the public relations consciousness of the Party grass roots is the best way to equip them against the SDP. This should go alongside the bringing of our organisation in seats which have not known a close contest for years, (like Crosby) to a more efficient point. Important aspects of this would be the equipping of such associations to produce, without unnecessary central intervention or surveillance, regular leaflets like those which the Liberals produce so well (here Croydon may have some valuable lessons for us). Another aspect is the need to continue to gather information from associations about SDP activities and techniques, and the defection of activists from our Party and Labour.

8. We should also monitor the atmosphere in certain important pressure groups and parts of our Party organisation, like the FCS and YCs and student bodies in general, the various social service and environmental pressure groups and industrial lobbies like the local and national chambers of commerce, in order to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent politically demaging defections to the SDP of individuals or organisations which may carry much weight.

Implications for our Policy.

9. A number of people, not all of them "dry" Conservatives, are criticising the Government for its failure to carry out radical policies such as in controlling public spending, especially in the local government area, ~~and~~ in trade union reform, and in the performance of the nationalised industries (eg. Jo Grimond). We need to remedy this deficiency with speed.

10. We need to persuade industrial and commercial pressure groups who carry so much weight with our supporters and whose defection would be enormously damaging, that we are taking the necessary steps to bring about industrial recovery which may not be dramatic but which must be apparent before long.

11. In our policies and their implementation and presentation, we must reassure, to the minimum extent possible, dissidents in the Conservative Party. We should not attack them in such a way as would bring about their continued and vigorous voicing of dissent, and in their giving teeth to it through votes in Parliament. In this way we would strengthen the idea that the Conservative Party, like the other major Parties is a coalition, and a tolerant coalition at that and thus minimise defections to the SDP at a lower level.

Preparation for possible Conservative SDP Pacts.

12. In the event of the Conservatives being able to take over control of such bodies as the GLC with SDP/Liberal support, we should consider urgently what terms we would be prepared to accept. We should also consider what our attitude would be to suggestions of electoral pacts between Conservative and SDP candidates in the May 1982 elections and monitor where such suggestions are being made.

Help Beyond our Control

13. It is likely that in the run-up to the next Election, without being organised by us (and indeed to some Conservatives' horror), that Mr. Powell may endorse our economic and even possibly our EEC policies, and warn the country against the danger of the SDP. On the assumption that Mr. Powell (along with Mr. Heath) is the only person or force outside the present Government with positive influence over Conservative voters, we should consider what our reaction should be, how we may benefit from such assistance and, in particular, how our Northern Ireland policy should avoid disrupting such assistance.