

ROBERT HICKS

HICKS NOT DRAWN ON SDP

MR. ROBERT HICKS, Conservative MP for Bodmin, was fulfilling constituency engagements last night and was said to be not available to comment on fresh speculation that he is to join the SDP.

It was exactly a year ago that the 43-year-old MP raised a political hornet's nest by suggesting that up to Tory MPs might be attracted by a new centre party.

But since then Mr. Hicks has consistently said it was his hope and preference to remain in the Tory ranks and fight from within for the kind of policies which first attracted him to the Party.

Liberals and Social Democrats in Devon and Cornwall are coming under pressure from party headquarters to conclude swiftly an Alliance "share-out" of Parliamentary seats in the region.

The two sides will get together in Plymouth tonight for their third session of talks.

It was agreed at the last meeting that the Liberals should contest nine and the Social Democrats six, of the existing Parliamentary constituencies.

At tonight's session the Liberals will be fighting hard to keep a toe-hold in Plymouth, in the Sutton constituency. The SDP wants to fight all three Plymouth seats.

9

Tory MP in talks with SDP 'convert'

by Vivien Hepworth
our Political Correspondent

BODMIN MP Robert Hicks is, I understand again seriously pondering whether to quit the Conservative Party and joining the SDP.

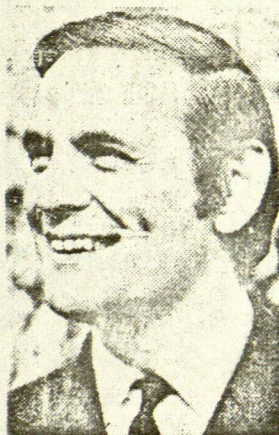
Mr Hicks and a small group of other disenchanted Conservatives have, I gather, held discreet talks with ex-Conservative Christopher Brocklebank-Fowler, who defected to the SDP not long after its formation.

It is possible that the prospect of a reflationary budget on March 9 could still hold the group inside the Conservative party, but there is also speculation that they could make the jump fairly soon.

They are all "wets," critics of Mrs Thatcher's monetarist strategy, believing that what the economy needs is cautious reflation around the £5 to £6 billion mark.

Chancellor Sir Geoffrey Howe is not expected to reflate the economy by more than £3 billion in his budget, sources currently indicate.

Should the MPs decide to go to the SDP, it would be a massive coup for the new party which has so far attracted only Tory MP — Mr Brocklebank-Fowler — into its Parliamentary ranks.



Mr Robert Hicks

9