

A Strategy For Dealing With The Alliance

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After Bermondsey And Darlington

(To be read in conjunction with my longer Crosbytime paper.)

Ever since the split in the Labour Party produced the Social Democratic Party, and subsequently the Alliance, the Conservative Party has oscillated between euphoria and panic. Following each Alliance success, they fear that the Conservative Party might be about to suffer the fate of the Liberal Party after 1922, possibly telescoped, as most processes are nowadays. Following each major set-back, the Alliance tends to be written off, until it pops up again like a bad penny, and renewed panic ensues. We need a broader perspective in which to operate, if we are not to be confined to a short-term reactive tactical manoeuvring. In such a fraught mood, we are not best placed to evolve a strategy for dealing with the new phenomenon.

When the Labour Party split first occurred, most Conservatives welcomed the development, as a weakening of Labour's leftward drive. A few hoped that the new party might absorb enough of the best of the old to create a new two-party system of patriotic liberal-minded people. Some shared the hope of the Social Democrats that we might somehow re-create the Butskellite 'fifties and 'sixties, forgetting that it was precisely these decades which had inexorably created the 'seventies and 'eighties. There is no going back to Butskellism. But if we do not dispel illusions on the score, the SDP can build temporary support on this basis.

The SDP was bound ineluctably to make its main inroads into the Conservative vote for the following reasons.

1) With few exceptions (eg, West Central Scotland, South Wales and some mining areas) the archetypal Labour voter is motivated more by a sense of identity with Labour than by support for their specific ideas. He "is" Labour.

He expects a Labour Government to do something for him. But he may disagree on welfare policy, regarding unemployed as mainly scroungers, or on penal policy, because he favours capital and corporal punishment, long sentences, etc, immigration and "multi-racialism", from which he is the greatest sufferer, taxation policy, defence, nationalisation, education. He dislikes Communists and anti-patriots, and mistrusts what pass as intellectuals on the Left. If angry enough with Labour he will abstain. But he would switch his vote to another party only under very strong compulsion, and then he would be more likely to break away entirely and choose the party closest to the package of ideas, sentiments and aspirations outlined. On many social and economic issues, the SD Alliance is further away from him than the Conservatives are, they perpetrate some aspects of Labour he likes least, eg, immigrationism and melanophilia, and permissivism.

This limits the scope for an SD or Alliance breakthrough in traditional Labour areas. Exceptions to this rule are more likely to stem from a few Labour candidates' conduct than from their unpopular views. It was not Tatchell's politics which turned voters against him, but his personality, all highlighted by the circumstances of the election, the Mellish counter-attack, and by-election atmosphere.

Had he not been opposed by Foot and Mellish and forced into a by-election, he would probably have won Bermondsey without excessive difficulty. Conversely, had we fielded a reasonably impressive candidate at Bermondsey, we should have stood as good a chance of gaining the anti-tatchell vote as the Alliance Liberal.

It is worth noting that in Darlington, where Tory and Labour voters are equally divided, the Social Democrat was able to take two votes from Tories for every one he took from Labour, compared with 1979, but a higher proportion (at least two to one) if one compares it with the voting patterns we might have expected in early 1983.

The Liberals had long since discovered that the protest vote was easier to cull from Tory voters than Labour, particularly when Tories are in office.

The SCP and subsequently the Alliance were formed at mid-term, during an inflationary recession, when the protest vote could be expected to be at its highest. Given the consideration that between 1955 and February 1974, the total share of the vote going outside the two major parties has risen from 2.5% to 25%, and could have been expected to rise further, in the course of an inflationary recession, and that by-elections tend to enhance the "outsider vote", the figure of 40% of people who might at one time or another vote for the Alliance is not remarkably high.

The Alliance has enjoyed fair wind from two directions. First, the fact that many people over and above the 25% who took their vote away from one or other of the major parties (and some of those who abstained, because they had faith in neither) there are many more who vote reluctantly for the one or the other out of conviction that the other side would wreak untold havoc, hence it is better to stay in the frying pan. The Alliance was able to promise a way out of this dilemma: an anti-Labour alternative and an anti-Tory alternative in one.

Secondly, the caricature of the Government in general and the Prime Minister in particular as hard-hearted extremists, monetarists, divisive, confrontationists, has been most effective precisely because it originated inside the Conservative circles who are continually spewing out the poison. Do I need to name names? One Conservative who briefs correspondents against Mrs Thatcher's "extremism", "monetarism" etc, does more harm than twenty Foots, Healys and Kinnocks.

We need an active policy on this, because we cannot afford to let matters take their course. Until you can silence and overcome the enemy within the gates, it is made all the harder for you to deal with Labour and the Alliance.

A staple of the Alliance's appeal is wishful thinking, playing on the desire to return to what too easily comes to seem in retrospect as the golden age of the 'fifties and 'sixties, when Keynes and Butskell were king and socialists appeared to be moderate in all things. Is it possible to return, by an effort of will, as Jenkins et al would have us believe? There is an understandable temptation on the part of many Tories to fudge the answer, partly because a clear-cut answer implies the grim prospect of hard political battles for many years to come, partly because any criticism of Butskellite illusions is almost much criticism of us as of them.

True, we are in the process of breaking away from Butskellism. But our renunciation is still incomplete, not always whole-hearted and not accepted by all sections of the party.

This is actually the root of the weakness, exploited by the Alliance. They offer a return to the Golden Age, without, of course, asking what brought it to an end, rather like the man falling from the top of a high building who, passing a friend at a window, called out that he felt alright so far. This is tempting, human nature being what it is. People will hanker after the fleshpots of Egypt, unless it is brought home to them constantly that return is irrevocably ruled out.

This means that we must point out not that Butskellism cannot work, that we had supported it for the sake of consensus, that the nation has paid dearly for this, and that we are not in the business of buying votes by fostering illusions. It also means that we need a fairly clear-cut explanation of our alternative philosophy, not "monetarist", but based on real resource-economics. The further the distance ourselves are from Butskellism, the harder it will be for the Alliance to present itself as an alternative more "moderate" to the conservative Party. We must emphasise the difference between the clear-cut realistic approach and the fuzzy, to show that we are hard headed, not pondering to indulgence in illusion.

The desire to shirk a choice between the slippery slope and a freer more rational economy seems to be rooted in human nature, particularly late twentieth-century British human nature after long conditioning. So long as people are given even a ghost of an excuse to believe that there is a middle way which saves them from having to make hard choices, human nature will ensure that they plump for it.

This is the nettle which we must grasp in our political presentation. If we cannot grasp nettles firmly, why should we expect the British public to do so? Conversely, if we show that we can, they will be encouraged to do so. Only when we have eliminated belief in and hankerings after Butskellism, shall we have destroyed an important foothold of the Alliance. So long as it remains, we are in danger.

Insofar as Butskellism is laid to rest, with a stake through its heart and a clove of garlic in its mouth, we shall be in a correspondingly stronger position to face the voters inescapably with the choice between Labour as it is and Conservatives as we are becoming. There are two concomitants.

First, that we must oblige the Social Democrats to clarify where they stand on all issues. Secondly, we must make them understand that we need their active support, not just occasional votes, in order to do better. For the Alliance to make their policies manifest it either entails their tacitly admitting that they have retained at least one cloven hoof, or alternatively attacking their erstwhile comrades on matters of substance as well as on trivia like electoral arrangements, and for being too party-minded, "extreme" "bickering".

Inasmuch as the SD and their Liberal partners find themselves obliged to argue over Labour policy, going back years, they will find it correspondingly harder to maintain credibility for their "above party-bickering" act and their pose of "nice people don't really need to worry about policy, that is extreme and doctrinaire."

In other words, it is precisely by going for Labour, and obliging the Alliance to stake their position clearly on matters in dispute between us and Labour, that we make it hardest for them to stand aloof while hoping to cash in automatically on the anti-Labour indeed "anti-party" vote. Incidentally, by doing so, we also deepen rifts inside the Alliance, both between Social Democrats and Liberals (eg, over defence policy and nationalisation) and between various sections of the SD's, who differ substantially over what ballast of their Labour period they wish to jettison. By attacking Labour over substantive issues, we make it harder for the "moderates" (is not the expression "moderate socialist" a contradiction in terms) to drift along in the wake of the Left without fighting back yet maintaining their aura of moderation, which is precisely what kept Darlington out of our grasp. If we press on substantive issues, we have all the more chance to set Labour fighting among themselves again.

Insofar as we can take the fight to Labour, while at the same time showing that we mean business in our policies, the lost or threatened anti-Labour vote will come back to us, together with the new voters deserting Labour for us on positive grounds.

But winning the political argument against the Socialists and the other Socialists is not enough. We need new ideas. The idea of participation was purloined by the Socialists during the 'sixties. We must resurrect the politically legitimate part of it under another name, eg, "involvement". The argument will run: Government is now so massive, with all its vested interests, added to by the unions, that a few ministers pulling the levers of power can no longer shift it. The public must be involved both in facing up to strikes, in "the community", in backing defence policy. "Involvement" will be the key-note.

I know that in Darlington, our candidate, through no fault of his own, was forced onto the defensive at the outset, and was placed in the position of fighting to maintain his share of the anti-Labour vote. But, since the wisdom of hindsight is better than no wisdom at all, it is worth asking whether a more activist attack from the outset, divesting O'Brien of his moderate disguise, forcing him to clarify his position would not have tipped the scale. It would have needed only the sense of a few hundred votes going away from O'Brien to the Conservative. To send thousands of waverers between Alliance and Conservative the same way, to the man best fitted to fight Labour. Cook would not have known which way to turn.

This is not crying over spilt milk. For there will be other Darlington, indeed there will be Darlington again in due course.

In the recent German elections, considerable impact was made by an appeal to SDP voters on the part of Count Von Krokow, formerly Helmut Schmidt's advisor and speech-writer, to vote for the CDU at the general elections earlier this year, in order to save the SDP itself, ie, from the swing to the Left. His appeal evoked echoes.

By the same token, I think we have a right to say to voters; "This is not the Labour party you knew. By voting for it as it is now, you are in effect saying that you give it carte blanche to go as far Left as it wishes. If, on the other hand, you vote Thatcher this time, you are telling it to do real soul-searching. Otherwise Kinnock will be your next "moderate" leader, and Benn's policies will have triumphed whether Benn comes to the top personally or not."

A few years ago, people like Haseler and Eden were in essence Labour Party Thatcherites. They were rather disappointed that our Party did not go out to win over large numbers of Labour people upset by the swing to the Left. They pointed out quite correctly that the ex-Labourites could bring great gifts to the Conservative Party (eg, Julian Lewis). But nothing happened, so they reluctantly joined the SDP, where they form a dissident minority.

Should we not consider trying to win over a phalanx of the "hard-liners" into our party, as "Thatcherite Labourites" and "Thatcherite Social Democrats for the duration"? Let us make it easier for Labour voters to desert Labour next time, by making them feel that they are doing it for Labour's good. When we are seen to have Labour on the run, the Alliance will lose much of its appeal.

End.