

PRIME MINISTER

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The Conservative Approach to the Liberals and SDP

Not surprisingly, the press majored on your attack on the Liberals and SDP - mainly, I think, because they had been led to expect this by briefing beforehand and by the Chairman's own speech the day before. Your own speech went for the Alliance in a fairly controlled way by pointing out that their history and voting record showed that given half a chance they would always put Labour in power. But it was hyped up by the press because of the Chairman's much more outspoken attack the day before. The end result was that we both gained and lost. We gained in that we put round the Alliance the tag of "Labour in exile". We lost a little by allowing the Alliance to attack us, accusing us of being rattled.

In fact, as the polls which were taken before Central Council show, the Alliance are presenting a real threat and we need a strategy for them. But our strategy is still not coherent. The only stage we have got to now is that we need to go for the Alliance in some way but I do not believe we have yet thought this out properly.

My own views, learning some of the lessons of Central Council are as follows:-

1. Our primary aim should be to stop potential Tory voters voting Alliance.
2. To argue simply that a vote for the Alliance lets in Labour is not good enough and is not sustainable during an election campaign - because in 1983, vast numbers voted Alliance and we got a huge Tory majority.
3. But we could frighten voters by telling them (as you did in your speech) that if ever the Alliance held the balance, they would put Labour in.

THE ALLIANCE AS ADVERSARY

The onward march of the SDP/Liberal Alliance since its election re-launch at the Barbican in January and its convincing victories at Greenwich and Truro is now clearly reflected in the opinion polls. It poses considerable problems not just for Labour, which sees its more detachable voters slipping away to the Alliance, but for the Conservative Government, which now faces the formidable problem of fighting on two fronts.

The Conservative Central Council meeting in Torquay at the weekend reflected Tory disquiet at the prospect. In the 1983 election Alliance candidates ran second to Conservative candidates in 263 constituencies, while they were runners-up in only 49 held by Labour.

It was understandable, then, that Mrs Thatcher and her ministers should have concentrated their fire — and Mr Tebbit his venom — on the Alliance and sought to demonstrate the similarity between the programmes and approach of the Alliance and Labour parties. This week the Conservatives plan to dwell on the Lib-Lab pact, signed 10 years ago to-day, which enabled the crumbling Callaghan government to remain in power.

But the Tories are on the horns of a dilemma. It could prove a tactical mistake for them to attack the Alliance at all.

Certainly, it would be galling for Mrs Thatcher and her ministers to have beaten off the old Labour enemy, only to see Mr Kinnock slip into power by a ladder held up to the back window of Number Ten by Mr Steel and Dr Owen. This would be the likely outcome of any further Alliance revival. For the more

votes gained by the Alliance, the smaller the proportion of votes required by the Labour Party to win a majority.

For the time being, the Alliance parties appear to be attracting votes from an increasingly demoralized Labour Party. But this is not the advantage to the Tories it might seem. So long as votes are simply transferred directly from Labour to the Alliance parties, cries from the Conservative Party about the Alliance letting Labour in by the back door will carry little conviction. If a vote for the Alliance puts Labour in, the innocent bystander asks, what happened in Greenwich? Surely a vote for the Alliance put the Alliance in.

While the Conservatives may be overjoyed to see Labour's vote reduced, they cannot afford to let it fall too far. It was, after all, the split in the anti-Conservative vote between Labour and the Alliance in 1983 that gave Mrs Thatcher such a huge majority. If Labour's decline becomes too rapid, then the Alliance begins to look a far more credible political force.

In that event, it begins to attract the votes of those who had previously assumed that a vote for the Alliance was wasted. The result could be a depletion of Conservative votes as, for example, those who would like to see the Conservatives win but who have misgivings about a Tory landslide, cast their votes for the Alliance.

It is always easiest for a party of the centre, or a party perceived to be so, to start a bandwagon rolling. The efforts of Mr Tebbit and his colleagues this weekend to brand the SDP and Liberals parties of the Left, the "Labour

Party in exile", reflect their concern to stop it before it starts.

The wisdom of such tactics, however, must be questionable. The Alliance thrives on publicity. Simply getting noticed is one of its biggest problems. The Conservatives may, therefore, be doing their new opponents a great service by their all-out assault on the Alliance. The argument that full frontal attack has done for the Labour Party and should be tried again is hard to sustain. Labour is being sunk, not by what Mr Tebbit and his team have said about it, but by its own mistakes.

Similar misgivings could be voiced about the Government's planned campaign against the ancient Lib-Lab pact. Millions of voters at the next election were barely into their teens when Mr James Callaghan was last Prime Minister. They know not of the Lib-Lab pact, neither are they likely to care.

Above all, perhaps, it is questionable how many people vote for the Alliance parties because of their policies at all. If the Conservative Party thinks it wise to mount a high-profile attack on the Alliance, it should perhaps focus on the muddle and inconsistencies in their programme and pronouncements — on defence, on nuclear power, on mortgage tax relief and on the costing of their borrowing and spending plans.

The chief advantage of the Alliance as the next election approaches is that it is perceived as something new in an age when advertisers have taught us to believe that new necessarily means better. The Tories do not need to take us back 10 years to demonstrate that it does not.