

Editorial - What kind of alternative?

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Two complaints are ceaselessly made about British parliamentary democracy. One is that there is little or nothing to choose between the two major parties. The other is that their constant alternation in power creates a frustrating and senseless lack of consistency: each party when it returns to power undoes the work of its predecessors and changes direction.

Whatever you think about these two allegations, it should be clear that they cannot *both* be true. Or at least, the more truth there is in one, the less there must be in the other. So far the new Social Democratic Party has capitalized on both sources of discontent. On the one hand, it is something new and fresh, unsullied by the stale, dreary saneness of "the old parties". (Yes, they have fallen, entirely unconsciously, into quoting the late Sir Oswald.) On the other hand, it will avoid demoralizing changes of policy characteristic of the Labour-Tory see-saw.

If the Social Democrats really offer an end to repeated "changes of direction", this means one of three things. They hope to stay permanently in power, they hope to stay permanently out of power, or their policies will be indistinguishable from their major rival. None of these three is endearing. Perhaps it will be said that they can avoid these options by proportional representation. But proportional representation is like devolution or industrial democracy. A lot of people think it's marvellous until a specific, concrete scheme is produced. Then, nearly everyone is against it.

Most comical of all is the Social Democrats' claim to offer "an alternative". The truth is that the Social Democrats have been formed precisely because there is a bit more of an alternative than a few or at least the appearance of . such an alternative. The abyss between Labour and Conservative has expanded alarmingly from microscopic to miniscule. Vertiginous terror of "a genuine

alternative" is what propels mindless moderates into the soggy centre. "A genuine alternative" *is* the capture of one or both of the major parties by "dangerous extremists". These phrases have the same factual content. One has an added "Ah!" and the other an "Ugh!".

Naturally, we may not *like* the two options available from Labour and Tory. But what is the Social Democratic offer? Both Owen and Jenkins have made strong statements in support of continued freedom for private education. That is welcome. But it is not part of SDP policy, which has yet to be formulated. How will it go down with the heroine of Grunwick, the person who, as Minister of Education, throttled any discussion (during the "great debate") of the voucher system, and who is most likely to be the SDP's first leader?

Three planks of the Social Democratic platform are already plain. "Public investment in a mixed economy." Fanatical devotion to the European Common Market. And a compulsory "Incomes policy". (Remember those?) The first of these accurately describes the policies of Thatcher and Foot alike. The second is unpopular, and will become more so. The third has ranged from ineffectual to disastrous on every occasion it has been employed during the past six thousand years.

At any rate, that is what the SDP stands for. Will it be appetizing enough to stop millions voting Thatcher to keep out Foot, or voting Foot to keep out Thatcher?

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