

Bodleian Modern Papers Seminar Series
Work in Progress: Archiving the Papers of the Conservative Research Department
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INTRODUCTION

The Conservative Party Archive (or CPA, as we affectionately call it) was established at the Bodleian in 1978 as part of our Modern Political Papers section, where it complements other British political holdings such as those covered in this seminar series.

The Archive preserves the records of the Conservative Party's central and national organisations along with certain regional records, facilitating research and study into all aspects of the Party's history. Our holdings date back to 1867 and the founding of the National Union of Conservative & Unionist Associations on Disraeli's instructions. Our unbroken series of National Union records – including those of the annual Party conference going back to their first meeting in a London pub! – represents the voluntary wing of the Party and its grass-roots membership.

The CPA primarily consists of the records of the 'professional' Party – the Conservative Central Office (and its many departments and committees) since the 1930s.

But The Archive also holds other important series, including the papers of the 1922 Committee, the Whips' Office and the Shadow Cabinet, as well as Party publications and ephemera such as our political poster collection (available at <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/cpa/online-resources/posters-collection>).

[Documents: Alan Howarth memo on the work of the CRD]

One of the most important collections held in the CPA is that of the Conservative Research Department – or the CRD – which was set up by Chamberlain following defeat in the 1929 general election. Its papers are relatively complete back to that date, and it offers extensive insights into the workings of almost all aspects of the Party. The Research Department existed, as Director Alan Howarth writes in this memo, to '*serve the Party as a whole in matters of information, political advice and policy development*'. In practice their work touched on almost all areas of Party work, from briefing MPs to answering questions from the general public, preparing policy documents to managing public opinion polls.

Today's talk is entitled 'Works in Progress', and the CRD provides an appropriate focus as we're in the process of cataloguing over 1,000 boxes of new CRD material. The new materials will double the amount of information currently available on the Research Department and significantly increase the extent of the Archive's catalogued holdings. The catalogues will be made available online as they are finished, and we hope to have the bulk of them up over the course of the spring.

The material covers a variety of subjects and has been divided into a number of main series, including:

- letter books of desk officers/subject specialists;
- parliamentary briefs for ministers/back-bench MPs;
- CRD Directors' files (especially those of Chris Patten 1974-1979 and Alan Howarth 1979-1981);
- Policy groups;

- Minutes of Conservative Parliamentary Committees;
- General election and by-election files

The date range is wide – most of the new material falls within 1950 to 1990, but it extends on either end. It is covered by our standard 30-year closure rule, which means that anything after 1981 is currently closed. Some of the papers that are only now becoming available under the 30-year rule cover the first years of Thatcher's premiership. Many prominent politicians today began their political careers in the CRD, and their papers will be made available over the following decades.

THE SDP

[Documents: 'The Rt. Hon. Roy Jenkins: some writings and quotations on Finance']

To complement Charlotte's presentation on Roy Jenkins' papers, it seems appropriate to focus on the Conservatives' reaction to the launch of the Social Democratic Party, or SDP, on 26th March 1981. By exploring the SDP through the papers of the CRD, I hope to show you the extraordinarily wide scope of the material held in the CRD collection and give you an idea of what sort of research may be possible with it.

It's useful to provide a bit of background to set the tone. It's almost cinematic, in fact. The Conservative Party's position from 1979 to 1981 was not a strong one. Although Thatcher's victory over Heath brought with it the enthusiasm of a new leader, the Party itself was struggling. Unemployment and racial tensions were high, the economy was stagnate at best and cuts continued. Thatcher's approval rating was at rock bottom. Like any movie, it just kept getting worse, and the SDP's launch represented a true threat to Conservative power. The CRD was in charge of keeping a sharp eye on it.

[Documents: Briefing Note No. 24 (8 July 1981): The Social Democrats]

The papers in the CRD contrast the Conservatives' public position on the SDP with their internal approach. The rhetoric they used out in the open was, in fact, totally at odds with the general anxiety within the Party which comes across in these internal papers. This *Briefing Note*, produced in July 1981, displays the 'public face' of the Party and relative calm.

[Documents: Conservative News, December 1981]

The *Conservative News* (the Party newsletter) didn't even mention the SDP until December 1981, long after the CRD and the Party in general had shown internal concern and strategic planning.

The CRD papers are incredibly revealing. They show internal disagreements over how to handle the SDP, and they also demonstrate the enormous amount of detailed monitoring which the CRD carried out – not just collecting copies of speeches and press cuttings relating to the SDP, but investigating electoral reform and writing papers as if they were by the SDP. Although CRD only advised the Cabinet on policy, it was very influential, and its briefs provide thorough detail as well as recommendations.

[Documents: pages 5-6 of memo 'Liberals and Social Democrats: The Scope of the Discussion']

The CRD actively monitored the work and members of opposition parties, and the SDP was no different. It was common for desk officers to compile folders of clippings and speeches as well as to produce policy recommendations and reports. Here, we have a 6-page undated memo (presumed to

be from March 1981) entitled 'Liberals and Social Democrats: The Scope of the Discussion'. Pages 5-6, shown here, discuss the potential impact of the imminent SDP launch. The author's attitude is careful, advising that the Party avoid attacks on the SDP that may '*move the public to sympathy*'.

In the case of Roy Jenkins, CRD was keeping tabs as early as 1968. It was only natural, perhaps, given his work as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Home Secretary; a briefing note written shortly before the SDP's launch noted:

'After all, although it is possible to attack some of the details of Roy Jenkins' Chancellorship, in terms of financial orthodoxy and economic stability he was arguably the best Chancellor since say 1957.'

[Documents: Dossiers on Owen, Williams and Jenkins]

Jenkins wasn't the only one on whom the Party kept tabs, and the CRD papers include general dossiers for Shirley Williams and David Owen, as well as an updated version on Jenkins, which were made available as the SDP neared launch.

[Documents: Keith Britto memo: 'Some preliminary thoughts on proportional representation in the context of the possible emergence of a "Centre Party"']

If keeping tabs on the opposition was normal practice, the level of concern with which they tracked the SDP was not. Although opinion polling had been around for decades, it was really in its early days for the Party. The CRD had an expert in Keith Britto, who pioneered the use of psephology in the department. Britto pulled together poll and survey results to produce what must have been chilling predictions for Conservative Party leaders: a potential 142 seats to a Liberal-Social Democrat alliance, putting the alliance '*in the position of determining who governed the country as their support would be required by both the Conservative and Labour parties*'.

In a further report, Britto surmised that one price such an alliance would demand was the introduction of proportional representation, and he proposed that under a changed electoral system the Social Democrats would benefit greatly. The very fact that the Party was considering this outcome demonstrated their concern that the SDP, perhaps in an alliance, would succeed.

[Documents: Memo from Christopher Mockler to Alan Howarth (14 April 1981): 'The Social Democrats']

Chris Mockler, CRD desk officer, expressed grave concern to CRD Director Alan Howarth in April:

'I have no wish to be alarmist, but if the basic message set out in the 'The New Statesman' is correct and if the Labour Party manages to hold the line against the left wing, which is on the cards, the Conservatives electoral position could become extremely precarious.'

[Documents: Minutes of the first meeting of the Social Democrats Monitoring Group (5 June 1981), chaired by Alan Howarth, Director of CRD]

Faced with the potential for enormous electoral losses, the CRD soon began to develop both defensive and offensive strategies for the Party. Although they were keen not to 'move the public to sympathy', they also needed to discredit the SDP. The CRD formed a Social Democrat Monitoring Group in the beginning of April, and they held their first formal meeting in June. The Group's minutes and notes are included in CRD collection, and they showcase the Group's work to outline areas of concern and action

[Documents: Exchange of memos between David Nicholson and Chris Mockler, 1-2 July 1981]

Not all members of the CRD agreed on the best approach. An exchange of memos between David Nicholson, desk officer for SDP monitoring, and Chris Mockler, 1-2 July 1981, concerned Conservative Party attitudes to the SDP and the likelihood of the SDP replacing Labour as the main Opposition party: Nicholson wrote of many Party member's friendship with and sympathy for certain aspects of the SDP, but stated:

'We must take a hard professional line towards the SDP. I agree with you that that we should not involve personal attacks, (although poking a little gentle fun at Roy Jenkins' past is all in the game). Nor should it involve calling Jenkins and his colleagues red-blooded Socialists, because nobody will seriously believe it.'

Mockler indignantly replied:

'Of course we should take a professional line towards the SDP and nothing in my memorandum to you indicated otherwise. Your personal feelings of goodwill towards the SDP are neither here nor there!'

Yet Mockler goes on to cite Baldwin's conciliatory attitude towards Labour in the late 1920s as one of the reasons the 1931 coalition survived, implying that the Conservatives' attitude toward the SDP should perhaps take the same approach.

[Documents: 'The Social Democrats - an outline of the policies of the new Party and the views of its leaders as they had been made known by June 1981' (26 June 1981)]

The CRD continued to monitor the SDP, and one of their primary prerogatives was to provide information for members of the Party on SDP policy. Here, a CRD brief entitled 'The Social Democrats - an outline of the policies of the new Party and the views of its leaders as they had been made known by June 1981' looks in detail at the policies expounded by the leaders of the SDP and Liberals, especially Roy Jenkins, and the differences between them.

[Documents: Memo drafted by CRD as if by the SDP – 'Outline of possible Social Democrat Strategy and tactics']

The extent to which the department dove into SDP policy was such that one CRD staff member produced a policy memo of possible SDP strategy drafted as if by the SDP – an exercise in 'getting into the enemy's mind'.

[Documents: Strategy paper by Party Chairman Lord Thorneycroft, prepared in conjunction with CRD (15 June 1981)]

The CRD files contain material from a variety of sources, and June also saw this strategy report from the Party Chairman, Lord Thorneycroft, prepared in conjunction with CRD, on the strategy for the next general election. Dated 15 June 1981, the report came at a time when the Conservatives' popularity was at its lowest (as Lord Thorneycroft puts it, 'out of fourteen issues ranging from defence and strikes to education and pensions, in only one, namely law and order, did more of the electorate approve of the Government's record than disapprove'). June was just prior to the Warrington by-election, the first at which the SDP put up a candidate, and the report expresses concerns.

[Documents: Preliminary Report on the Warrington By-Election]

The Warrington and Croydon by-elections provided the first real test for the SDP, especially with interest in Shirley Williams' possible candidacy, and the Conservatives approached them carefully. David Nicholson, desk officer for SDP monitoring, produced a memo on the election; its final paragraph provides an interesting insight into 'What CRD are doing'. Most interesting is number two.

'(1) Arranging for Roy Jenkins to be monitored closely so that we are well aware of Social Democrat policy and possible contradictions in it.

(2) Arranging to plant various embarrassing questions to Jenkins either via his meetings or via letters in the local papers.

(3) Forwarding to Geoff Lawlor dossiers on Jenkins and other Social Democrat leaders and Jenkins quotes (already done)'

[Documents: Memo from David Nicholson, with report 'Conservative Reaction to SDP' attached (10 August 1981)]

The SDP's success at Warrington and other local elections made them a force to be reckoned with, and David Nicholson advised in his follow-up memo:

'They are now very much in business. So we must now seek to expose the contradictions inside the SDP...'

[Documents: 'Conservative Strategy and Approach' by David Nicholson]

Party members from different corners also expressed concern. Keith Britto, opinion poll specialist, wrote to CRD Director Alan Howarth to note that polls over the late summer and early autumn showed the SDP only half a percentage point behind the Conservatives. Michael Ancram noted the similarities between the SDP and the rise of the SNP in Scotland in the 1970s. After an early lack of public concern, David Nicholson explored options for internal education and PR in an effort to minimise defections, prevent alienation within the Party and consider political pacts with the SDP. He noted with his usual concern:

'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...'

[Documents: Memo from Margaret Daly to Roger Boaden re. SDP support from business, 18 November 1981]

The SDP was attracting areas of the electorate the Conservatives could not afford to lose, and it appeared that their appeal was strong. Margaret Daly wrote to Roger Boaden, charged with monitoring SDP finance issues, of the defection of Labour MP Tom McNally at a meeting for businessman; her source described the event as

'like a beautiful woman entering a room and seducing all the men present'.

A concerned CRD reported defections on a regular basis, up to 13 members of varying levels in the month of October.

[Documents: 'The SDP/LIB Alliance and the Conservative Party: The Way Ahead', circulated at meeting of the Monitoring Group (09 December 1981)]

By December 1981, the Conservatives had reason to believe that the SDP was a real threat. In a paper presented to the SDP Monitoring group, the CRD wrote:

The Alliance 'is more clearly poised to "break the mould" of British politics than any Third party at any time since 1924. In no period since then has a third party made such an impact in parliamentary and local by-elections simultaneously and no third party has achieved such a sustained lead in the opinion polls since opinion polling began just before the War. This new phenomenon may well end by burying the old Labour Party, but the electoral and poll evidence suggests that it threatens also to sweep the Conservative Party into a small minority position, worse than anything we have had to endure for over one hundred years.'

[Documents: Report from David Nicholson to members of the SDP Monitoring Group dated (16 December 1981)]

Others were not so sure. David Nicholson, so often the desk officer to raise the SDP alarm, wrote shortly after:

'Can we suggest the past few months as the "crest of the wave" for the Alliance and show from now on a decline in their electoral performance?'

He stated that the SDP's decline was 'inevitable', though it needed strategic handling. As you can see from his annotations – especially a great red question mark next to 'inevitable' – however, Director Alan Howarth was less inclined to believe so.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately the 30-year closure rule leaves us there in December 1981, the cliff hanger moment for the Party and indeed for British politics. The material doesn't end there; the Conservatives continued to monitor the SDP, which gained power – but so did the Conservatives, as the Falklands War gave way to Thatcher's roaring successes. In other words, stay tuned over the next few years as we release the papers showing the startling comeback.

I hope that what I've given you this evening is a snapshot into the papers of the Conservative Research Department, a vital part of the Party's day to day work, which give unique insight into the way the Party formed its opinions and built its strategy on the SDP – from basic briefs to private memos to recommendations for action. They touch on the work of Party members from the Chairman to area agents, MPs to local councillors. These newly catalogued CRD series – many of which have never been used by academics – provide an opportunity for delving into the detailed history of the Party's work – not just on the SDP, but on almost every area of Party work.

If you're interested in using the papers or keeping up to date with the work of the CPA itself, please do visit our website (www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/cpa) or blog (<http://conservativepartyarchive.blogspot.com>) or get in touch by emailing us at conservative.archives@bodleian.ox.ac.uk. Thanks very much.