LEADER WITHOUT A PARTY

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT?

By JAMES FLAGAL

There is a certain gloom hanging over Dr. David Owen these days, perhaps it is the depression of a man who has faced one too many political defeats this year. His British Social Democratic Party (SDP) which formed an alliance with the British Liberals in 1982, performed disappointingly at the polls in the June election; and then Liberal leader David Steele's call for a formal merger with the SDP put Owen on opposite sides of his former running mate. Owen refused to accept his causus' decision to take up Steele's offer, and at this past summer's convention he formally broke ties with the Liberal Party and the SDP pro-Liberal faction.

Even with a core of dissident SDP supporters who persist in keeping the party alive, Owen is essentially a leader without an organization, and his prospects for becoming British Prime Minister now seem as bleak as ever. It's not that Owen does not have the talent or even the voter's confidence—far from it. In the last election British voters showed a strong affinity for Owen's leadership style in the pre-election polls; it was the concept of the SDP/Liberal alliance which voters ended up rejecting at the polls.

But now, even with Owen's plans to rebuild the party, he still faces some important choices in the future if he is seriously considering forming a government. Perhaps a British electorate is not ready to accept a third party in power after 60 years of Conservative and Labour governments. Many Conservatives are starting to realize that Margaret Thatcher will not be around forever, and for them Owen may have the right political stances and charisma to win the party leadership and a general election. But while many of Owen's beliefs may seem overtly conservative, a shift over to the Tories would be a complete about-face from his political beginnings with the Labour Party.

Owen, comes from a family that is, as he puts it, "Welsch liberals with a small 'l'—middle class, but anti-Tory. We used to say in my family that nobody ever voted Tory without a stiff drink before and after doing so." Owen grew up in Plymouth and was educated at Cambridge, qualifying as a Doctor of Medicine at St. Thomas' Hospital, London, in 1962. It was in London, Owen says, that "This social squalor which existed in very large parts of the city began to make me feel that political commitment was every bit as important as pumping penicilin into people."

Until 1959, Owen had not been a member of any political party, but he decided to join the Labour Party because he was impressed with leader Hugh Gaestkell, who was trying to change the party's constitution and disassociate Labour from nationalization policies and state socialism. As Owen explains, he entered the party on the right wing of Labour, and in 1962 he ran for a seat in North Devon and was defeated. Owen was victorious, however, in 1962 in his home seat of Plymouth, defeating a Tory and riding in on the coat tails of a huge Labour landslide.

During this time, Owen kept up his medical profession; he continued to carry on doing neurological research while he was MP. Between 1966-67 Owen became a vocal critic of his own party leader and then British Prime Minister Harold Wilson. Owen vehemently opposed Wilson's deflationary and defence policies, and in 1968, in order to silence him, Wilson offered Owen a junior role in the government as Minister of Navy. According to Owen, it was during this posting that he became interested in defence and strategic policy, an interest which has stayed with him ever since.

During the Conservative government of Edward Heath, 1970-74, Owen was appointed Labour's defence critic. But in 1971, a national debate over joining the European Economic Community temporarily divided the Labour Party. In the end Labour rejected the terms of union which the Conservatives put before parliament, but a dissident faction in the Party led by MP Roy Jenkins advocated the deal, and this, according to Owen, marked the beginning of the SDP. After Labour's rejection of the deal in 1977, Owen resigned with Jenkins, and as he says for all intents and purposes his "political career was written off."

Two year later, however, Labour pulled off a surprise victory at the polls, and Prime Minister Wilson appointed Owen as Minister of Health. It was this post which Owen remembers most fondly of his years in government. Owen calls it, "the best job I ever did in my life, thoroughly enjoyable, and far more important in my view than being Foreign Secretary." And under the new Labour leader and Prime Minister James Callaghan, elected in 1977, Owen was appointed Foreign Secretary, a post he held until 1979, when the Labour Party was defeated by the Tories in Margaret Thatcher's first of three successful election campaigns.

Following the 1979 election Owen's desire to leave the Labour Party began to develop. With the parties ideologically polarized—the right represented by Margaret Thatcher and the left by new Labour leader Michael Foot—Owen found it exceedingly difficult to operate in an organization reissuing old, militant, socialist policies. In 1980 he refused to support the Labour shadow cabinet, and in 1981 along with Jenkins, Labour MP's Shirley Williams and William Rodgers—the 'gang of four' as they were called—led 12 Labour MP's in a movement to leave the party and form the SDP. Support among the British electorate for the SDP was exceptionally high, showing that a coalition between the Liberals and the Social Democrats could form a majority government. Immediately after the SDPs inception, talk of an alliance with the Liberals to form a strong centrist party to fill the ideological vacuum had already begun. In 1982, the idea of an alliance became a reality and the Liberals and SDP poised themselves for a 1983 election.

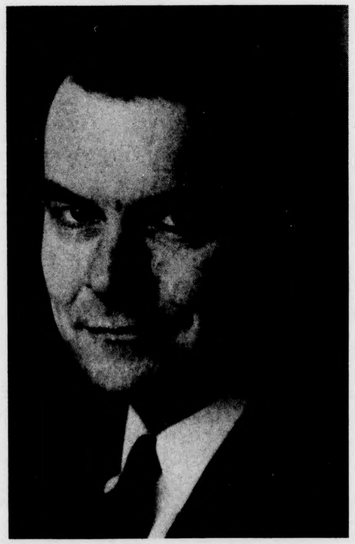
And in 1983, the alliance made an impressive showing at the polls, trailing the Labour Party by just two percentage points. But while the alliance managed to get 25% of the popular vote, the winner-takes-all electoral system left them with only 23 seats in the 650 seat parliament as compared to Labour's 209. As in Canada, the third party in British elections often experiences skewed support across the country, coming in second place in many ridings instead of securing the seat. This perhaps best explains the Liberal's and the SDP's ardent support of electoral reform following the 1983 election. The two parties called on the government to introduce a proportional representation system (this system elects officials according to popular vote, and not who wins in each riding).

From 1983 to the election of 1987 Thatcher's austere economic policies continued to take their toll on British social services. While the economy had grown by a consistent 3% annually since her re-election in 1983, and inflation had decreased from 24% in the 70's to 3.5%, unemployment had skyrocketed from just above 4% in 1979 to 14%. In addition, British hospitals have the longest presurgery waiting lists in Europe and the overcrowded education system must deal with outdated equipment and insufficient staff.

Then again, Social policy was never the forte of Thatcher's programme, and while Neil Kinnock's Labour Party rejected all forms of Thatcherism outright, the SDP/Liberal alliance seemed to offer an important compromise. While they agreed with the economic reforms which Thatcher implemented like privatization, they detested her attitude towards social policy. Even though pre-election predictions ran high that the Alliance would become the deciding factor in a hung parliament, (a situation similar to the provincial NDP's recent role in Ontario, in which either the Conservative or the Labour Party could form a government, but only with the support of the alliance), Thatcher's resiliency at the polls came through again. She retained 375 seats in parliament, losing 43 seats while Labour captured 229 and the SDP/Liberal Alliance actually dropped to 23. The election dealt a devastating blow to the Social Democrats and Liberals and demonstrated that the electorate was not prepared to accept an Alliance for a governing party all of which prompted Steele to call for the merger of the two parties.

Owen deeply opposed the merger for many reasons, one of the most fundamental being that the Liberals were in favour of disarmament. Defense is the area in which Owen defies all categorization according to conventional British politics. While he says he is left because he believes "in the redistribution of resources," and can therefore not be a Conservative, he despises the Labour and Liberal policies to eliminate Britain's nuclear deterrent. As Owen explains, there is no direct link between pacifism and the left, but in Britain these parties profess that the two go hand-in-hand.

Perhaps it is the British electorate's inability to neatly categorize him that has reduced his chances of becoming Prime Minister. But with British politics the way they are after the demise of Thatcherism, the Tories may well take a moderate step to the left and call on the talents of Owen to lead them into the next election. Even if he refuses to accept the offer, as the following interview with *Excalibur*'s **James Flagal** and **Jeff Shinder** reveals Owen's political beliefs can never again be included under the Labour banner.



DR DAVID OWEN

EXCALIBUR: How do you feel about the recent arms deal between the Soviet Union and the United States, and the implications of US decoupling from NATO?

OWEN: I think they can be exaggerated. I personally opposed Helmut Schmidt's speech in the autumn of 1977 on Euro-strategic balance. I have never accepted really that you have to balance nuclear forces in Europe, that the total balance is the important thing. On the other hand, Schmidt was right and was the first person to warn that the SS-20 (new generation of Soviet missiles deployed in the mid-70's, replacing the oldSS-4's and SS-5's) did have a considerable significance for Europe, and therefore I was party in government to the decision to modernize the theatre nuclear forces. The Carter regime in America really wasn't terribly keen on it, but they were ready to go along with it if Europe wanted it. And so we looked for different options.

We lost the election of May 1979 (the Conservatives led by Thatcher defeated the Labour government), but there's no doubt that Britain under a Labour government would have endorsed the December '79 decision (the two-track decision to deploy Pershing 2's and Tomahawk cruise missiles in Europe). I thought that the zero option which Reagan put on the table in 1982 was non-negotiable, we thought that's why it was put on the table. But I always did say that a wise Soviet Union would jump at it, that it was actually for them a very good offer, and it took Gorbachev to do it.

I think the fundamental thing though is that the Americans cannot continue as the world's watchdog. The fundamental part of the American deficit is an imbalance of responsibilities, that we are asking them to defend Japan, to defend Western Europe. They have got to come back, and we who are the rich, relatively speaking, have got to start paying a bigger slice of our own defence budget. But I don't let Canada get off the hook either, I mean I think that you have not contributed your share to the overall defence of the Western democracies, and I think that you must start contributing more of your share.

EXCALIBUR: Many analysts such as Gwyn Dyer feel that with Gorbachev in power, the Soviet Union will be more willing to discuss conventional force reductions in Europe. Do you see that as a distinct possibility, and what other doors has Gorbachev opened to the West?

OWEN: Nobody quite knows what Gorbachev is. He has certainly decided to look internally at the Soviet Union, and he is going to give the highest priority to the economy. I am not sure what Gorbachev is up to fundamentally, perhaps he isn't in terms of his global perspecitives. All we know is that he is a communist, has been and will remain, and therefore we should not suddenly assume that some of the things he is saying is music to our ears, and that we are now dealing with a liberal in the Kremlin. We are not, we're dealing with a man who is putting to rights what he sees as the deficiencies that are contributing to the weakness of the Soviet Union. And the thesis which I present is that the United States and the Soviet Union are declining in power, both declining because of their extended military commitments in large part, particularly United States.

Gorbachev is a propagandist of a very sophisticated kind. He will therefore undoubtedly go on making seemingly very attractive disarmament and arms control offers. We've got to look at these very carefully before we fall for them. We shouldn't dismiss them as propaganda, we should simply be cautious in our relationship with him.

I think he will make an offer on troop withdrawals. It may well be that that will be a sufficient offer to fill the gap of American troop withdrawals without us (other Western democracies) having to contribute. But if we are serious in terms of the Soviet Union on the mutual balance force reductions, they've got to think we're going to fill the gap with the US going out, otherwise they won't offer us anything serious. And I think that is one of the things that the INF deal has shown, that the West has got to be prepared to stick to it guns, to be confident enough to reject a lot of the Soviet propaganda. And the defeat of the peace movement in the 1980's was one of the most significant victories for the Western democracies, and the fact of the matter is that they were taken to the cleaners, though they wouldn't like to admit it. All their predictions about NATO's negotiating position have been systematically proven to be wrong. They've always said that the Soviets would never make a deal and the fact is that they are wrong.

EXCALIBUR: So what steps should Europe take now to enhance their security?

OWEN: Well firstly . . . the most important relationship in Europe is the Franco-German relationship which is immensely important starting with economic policies all the way to defence which should be encouraged at every stage. And Britain must not be in any way jealous of this Franco-German relationship. It is the cement of the European unity, the basis of the Western European defence, and we must encourage it.

We can add to it, however, a very significant extra dimension which is an Anglo-French nuclear cooperation, and the need for that now is massive. We also must always encourage France to play a more active role, to come into the central front and change the integrated command structure of NATO to accomodate the French. And I can see that as an extremely important devlopment to happen in the next few years. I doubt that we'll have a French saceur (supreme allied commander) which is something discussed. I personally have no objections to that, the problem about it is that if the crunch comes, we will need American troops in Europe in substantial numbers. It is hard to see that commitment being given credibility without a supreme allied commander who is an American. My judgement is that you don't need a supreme allied commander who is an active commander. I would like to change the command structure so the saceur operates as an executive command only in times of tension, and that the French are given the command of the central front which is the crucial area, which might induce France to commit their troops up front. Britain can fill up the northern flank and specialize there, that's our area.

EXCALIBUR: In an Atlantic magazine cover article, Mike Kennedy discussed how Americans should look at British history and realize that they are in decline. How can the US best handle this decline, and are they travelling the same road that Britain did in the early 20th century?

OWEN: The UK decline and the American decline is not of the same proportion. The UK empire was an extraordinary phenomenon, because so much of it was overseas. The American strength (its economic strength) relies on its own indigenous massive continental self-sufficiency, so it's a very different empire. The British empire was built on its overseas territories, the American economy was built on its own domestic economy, so the American position is going to remain a very dominant force. It's decline therefore is a partial one.

A wise American government would say that we are spending too much money on defence, we are over-committed worldwide. It is time that we wind our commitments down, but the manner in which we wind them down is of crucial significance. If we do it in panic, it will precipitate major changes. The biggest change and the most worrying one in Western Europe is that a sudden withdrawal of American troops would precipitate a lack of confidence in the Western alliance in the Federal Republic of Germany, and it could well be used as the handle for those in the SDP (Germany's Social Democratic Party) who argue for a neutralist, non-aligned Western Germany as being the key to bringing about reunification for Germany.

The only country that can stop that is France. France is the fundamental country, and to a second extent the United States, and then Britain. These three countries hold the key now to the security of Europe. We should encourage the Franco-German relationship. If France is ready to offer an extension of its commitment to Germany, and to commit forward, that will tie Germany irrevocably into the Western democracies. British and American diplomacy ought to be linked to making that possible to happen, and buttressing wherever it can do so. And that is, in my view, the fundamental question.

And this comes back to a lot of the reason why I'm not prepared to put my political future into a merged party with the Liberals. I am worried about the trends which are facing us in the 1990's, I am in that sense rather French in my view. We need to be prepared to hold a nuclear deterrent which is European in origin, and a French and British nuclear force can be linked with certain agreements. I'm in favour of the Americans committing to the defence of Europe as long as is humanly possible, but I don't feel myself totally confident that that will stay in its present state. I notice the pressures that are growing in your country (like the pressure for Canada to withdraw from NATO) and I see the trends of isolationism always present in the US. I think that Europe must be aware of these trends.

I dislike monopolies in all their forms. I want choice and I want competition, and within that competition I also want to redistribute the wealth that's created.

Now, my belief however is that if Western Europe plays a more significant role in the world, foots the defence bills, and is more self confident and self sufficient, that actually will keep the Atlantic alliance continuing, because it will be a partnership of equals.

EXCALIBUR: In Canada, if a political party wins the centre of the elctorate, it wins the election. But with the SDP/Liberal Alliance's poor showing in the last British election, it seems the centre is diminishing. Is this really the case?

OWEN: The centre in British politics has really been represented by 3/4 of the Labour Party and 3/4 of the Conservative Party. The Labour Party brought in the welfare state after the war, but that was in effect no way near as radical a departure from the coalition consensus that had been built during the Second World War. It was a continuation of that same consensus, and although Churchill huffed and puffed about it between 1951-55, he lived with it. The consensus lasted really quite substantially until Callaghan went out (the Labour Prime Minister in 1979) and Thatcher came in. Now in a sense what happened was as the economic decline of Europe took place, purists—the ideological motivated, the people who had a simple solution, the Thatcher analysts—triumphed.

The important thing, however, is that Mrs. Thatcher is not just right wing, and this is where I start to differ from a lot of people. Actually I have a lot more ties to the Thatcher radicals than anybody else, some call me Thatcher in trousers. But I don't like a lot of things. Her attitude on education and social policy I deeply deplore in many respects. However, this is not an archetypal Tory. She has tried to break the postwar settlement, and the corporatism, and the status quo, and rightly so in my view. So the interesting thing that I have developed in the SDP is a genuinely radical force, building on some of the radicalism of the Thatcher analysis, which I share, that we have become much too complacent, that we are not competitive, and everything was this bureaucratic morass. I wanted to retain quite a lot, therefore, of the Thatcher years into the 1990's and beyond, because I think the reversing of the decline is never going to be done. The reason I am fighting to keep SDP is because I do not think a return to the postwar settlement is right.

EXCALIBUR: How do you feel about Thatcher's drive to privatize existing state-owned companies?

OWEN: I think that she's right, and I believe that privatization in theory is a good one. The problem with her is that she's privatized in order to move public monopolies into private ones, so it's not been privatization as a form of competition policy. Now I see privatization as being a policy to break up big public monopolies, and to create private competitive markets. I think the tragedy of the privatization movement is that it has not contributed nearly as much as it could have done to make us more competitive. We have these big private monopolies like British Telecom and British Gas which are not successful and very difficult to regulate. I am arguing very strongly for a very tough competition policy within that privatization, competing companies. So in that respect we are more radical than the Conservatives.

I dislike monopolies in all its forms, I want choice and I want competition, an within that competition I also want to redistribute the wealth that's created. I also want to defend Britain in a serious way, and since we are a nuclear-weapons state, I would remain a nuclear-weapons state while the Soviet Union has nuclear arsenals.