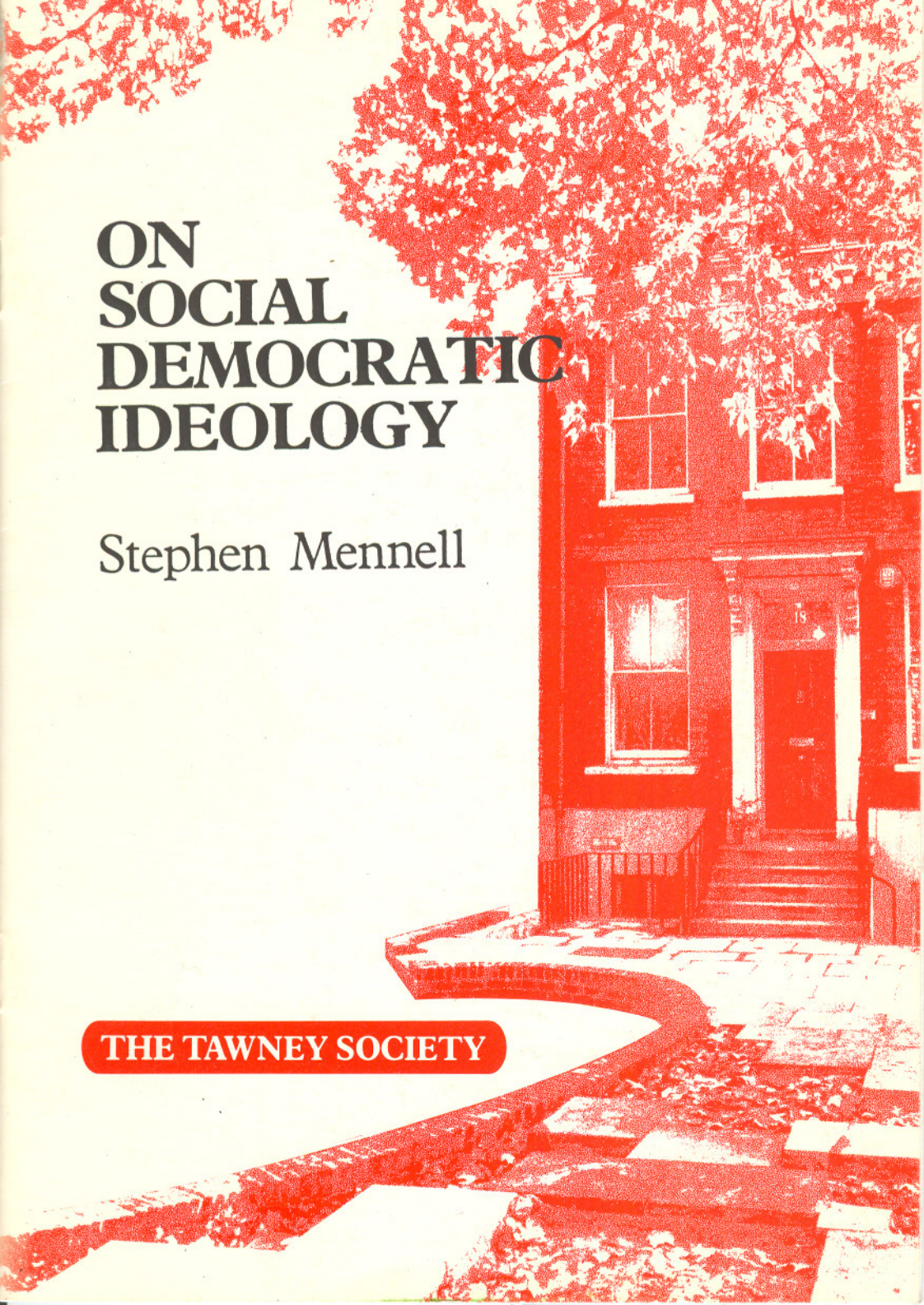


# ON SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC IDEOLOGY

Stephen Mennell

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## ON SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC IDEOLOGY\*

Both Roy Jenkins and David Owen have, in public speeches, pledged the SDP not to seek ‘ideological’ solutions to political problems. Now the word ‘ideology’ has a long and complex history, and some of its uses are certainly pejorative. ‘Ideological’ can for example be used to convey the senses of ‘distorted’ or ‘doctrinaire’ or ‘unrealistic’. So, in expressing a distaste for ‘ideology’, probably neither speaker intended to deny the need for what in more everyday language is often called ‘philosophy’ or ‘principles’. Nevertheless, such loose public statements do risk encouraging the belief that discussion of general political principles is somehow reprehensible – or at the very least dispensable – in a party which prides itself on being practical and realistic. But, on the contrary, in a more general and fundamental sense of the word, every political party needs its ideology, and the more clearly it is thought out the more effective is the party likely to be in government.

Ideology in this sense means a set of general principles about which members of the party share a considerable measure of agreement – beliefs about the nature of present society, about the kind of society they want to create, about individuals in relation to society, and about the general values which they hold to be important. Because these beliefs are pitched at a fairly abstract level, they may not appear to have direct practical application, but they enter as high-level propositions into chains of deductive reasoning that have practical policies as their outcome. Even though these chains of reasoning may usually be at best semi-conscious,<sup>1</sup> some measure of agreement on ideological fundamentals has the function of giving a degree of internal consistency to a party’s various policies as it evolves them in opposition and, even more importantly, to its decisions when in government. The alternative is what may be called ‘Wilsonism’: cabinets with no ideology become the slaves of events, of the IMF or whatever, and are tainted with opportunism even in the eyes of supporters.

The extent to which a party’s fundamental doctrines need to be both explicit and self-

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\* I should like to thank David Marquand, David Owen, Richard Gravil and Tony Flower for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> See the classic paper by Philip Converse, ‘The nature of belief-systems in mass publics’, in David Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1964), pp. 206–61.

consistent should not, however, be exaggerated. Most of us would give assent to two or more general values which can in certain practical political circumstances conflict: the classic instance is the often discussed potential conflict between the ideals of liberty and equality,<sup>2</sup> to both of which most Social Democrats would attach great importance. R.H. Tawney, who has been adopted as an ancestor by many Social Democrats, argued that neither ideal could be attained without the other.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, circumstances frequently arise in which there is a loss of something which one wants to call 'liberty' in order to achieve a gain in something one wants to call 'equality', and vice versa. And, more generally, there is certainly plenty of scope for conflict between several equally valued 'ideological' principles, so that while ideology may help to guide policy- and decision-making, it leaves plenty of room for pragmatic judgement.

It is arguable that in British politics today the problem is not too much, but rather too little clear thinking about political ideologies – a consequence in part of the pronounced anti-intellectualism of British public life in comparison with most other western European democracies. The three main older parties all present ideological paradoxes. The Labour movement's current commitment to the principle of free collective bargaining and opposition to any form of Incomes Policy – one of the most central issues in contemporary politics – places it in this respect in the same ideological camp as the right wing of the Conservative Party: both share, in slightly different ways, a faith in economic self-interest, the efficacy of market forces and the principle of devil-take-the-hindmost. (The February 1974 General Election was in many ways a watershed: in terms of the key policies they actually advocated in that election, it can be argued that Heath's Conservatives were to the 'left' of Wilson's Labour Party.<sup>4</sup>) As for Thatcher's Conservative Party, the now clearly dominant wing is essentially Liberal in the classic nineteenth-century sense; the true Tory paternalist,

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, Vintage, 1954), particularly Part II, Book II, chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> R. H. Tawney, *Equality* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1931).

<sup>4</sup> The Labour Party's problem over the last quarter of a century has been ideological senility. If ideologies are like theories, in which particular policies are deduced from general principles and then tested against the facts of the world, too many of Labour's traditional policies have been tested and found wanting, yet that has not fed back into a revision of the general principles. An alternative analogy is of a large tree in old age, with the twigs dying back and protruding bare at the top, only the trunk and main branches living on for a few years amidst creeping decay. The party's organisational *immobilismo* and vulnerability to incursions of fundamentalists finally make it unrealistic to hope for regeneration.

Disraelian, ‘one-nation’ tradition (which, as David Marquand<sup>5</sup> has pointed out has some points in common with the Social Democratic tradition – although in my view that should not be exaggerated) is at least for the present very much in a subordinate position. Finally, the British Liberal Party (unlike most of its European sister parties) has in effect been evolving since early in the twentieth century away from the true intellectual tradition of liberalism towards a species of social democracy, though an underlying individualism still often shows through to distinguish it from the social democratic tradition well established on the continent.<sup>6</sup>

Faced with this apparent ideological mêlée, it has been tempting for the SDP to pretend that it does not have any ‘ideological’ principles and does not need them. The intellectual conservatism of both the Tory and Labour parties – seen in their attempts to present ideologies rooted in the structure of society as it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively as eternal verities from which can be deduced answers to the problems of Britain in the late twentieth century – is particularly unalluring. Certainly the SDP needs an openness of mind and a willingness to draw on a mixture of ideas; the more complex structure of society today requires more complex answers. But it is, in my opinion, dangerous to attempt to amputate the SDP from its roots in the long tradition of democratic socialist or social democratic thought.<sup>7</sup> The dangers are two-fold, and were already incipient in late 1981 and into the summer of 1982, when the SDP seemed to lose its sense of direction, and to be seeking too much to be all things to all men. The first danger is that separate policies may be just that – an ill-assorted ragbag of discrete proposals with little in the way of connecting threads to link them into a consistent whole. The second danger is that, as a result, members’ morale and motivation may sag; for it is also a function of ideology that it serves as an emotional focus and sign-post for adherents, who are only too happy to march as, foot-soldiers if they are confident that their leaders know where they are going.

Fortunately, I believe these dangers have been recognised in the nick of time. One of the first signs was the publication of the Tawney Society’s fourth pamphlet, *The Middle of*

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<sup>5</sup> David Marquand, *Russet-Coated Captains: The Challenge of Social Democracy* (London: SDP, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix I: A friendly dispute with David Marquand, p. 13 below.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Labour people know that if we have a history behind us we are more likely to have a future before us.’ –

*the Night*,<sup>8</sup> which was explicitly an attempt to examine the first eight of the SDP's policy 'Green Papers' in the light of certain fundamental principles. I am less sure that some of the fundamental principles it lists are the ones which I would myself have chosen.

Pride of place is given to 'the fundamental *liberal* [my emphasis] principle: that, in any contest between the rights of the individual and the interests of some larger collective body, individual rights are paramount.'<sup>9</sup> Expressed in as crude and unqualified a way as that, the proposition is of course absurd, and one imagines that the authors do not really mean what they say. They go on to point to a 'most important corollary: a liberal and democratic society is based on the individual's right to choose for oneself'.

Now to say that one is opposed to the principle of freedom of choice is like coming out in favour of sin. Of course, when that is the only consideration, we are all in favour of freedom of individual choice. But it very frequently is not the only consideration, and one of the commonest issues in politics is the case of conflict between individual choice and social welfare. Democratic decisions are very often a matter of weighing collective and individual interests against each other a balancing which goes sometimes one way, sometimes the other. But if we were to make the individual interest always the primary consideration in so bald a way as the authors of *The Middle of the Night* say, the SDP would for example logically find itself opposed to legislation on town planning and conservation, and adopting other stances typical of extreme right-wing liberalism.

Of course, the authors do not mean exactly what the text says. They go on to acknowledge what has often been said before, that freedom of individual choice is socially fair only if, among other things, consumers have something like equal resources: 'we believe that choice for all demands redistribution of income and wealth'.<sup>10</sup> They could also, I think, have added the proviso that free choice in the market may also be assumed to promote collective social welfare only if the prices of goods (in the broadest sense) among which they

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Michael Young, *The SDP's Roots in History*, Tawney Paper No. 6 (London: Tawney Society, 1982), p.2.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Young and Peter Hall, eds., *The Middle of the Night*, Tawney Pamphlet 4 (London: Tawney Society, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

choose reflect the underlying social costs of production. The Pigovian distinction between private and social net costs is one which has entered deeply but largely unnoticed into social democratic thinking in this country in recent decades, and it is one which the SDP should acknowledge and make explicit – as Wayland Kennet has begun to do with his call for a ‘new type of cost–benefit analysis’ as an essential part of an SDP environment policy.<sup>11</sup> For social cost–benefit analysis and the theoretical welfare economics from which it stemmed constitute one branch of economic theory that deals expressly with people as they really are enmeshed in social and economic interdependencies.

Which brings me to what I believe is the basic weakness in *The Middle of the Night*. Its authors fail adequately to recognise a key element in the social democratic tradition. The term social democratic originated more than a century ago in contradistinction to the individualism of liberal democracy. Social democracy is a collectivist rather than an individualist tradition (which is not to jump to an equally crude opposite view that the interests of a collective body must always be paramount, over the rights of individuals – it is always a matter of balance, trade-off and judgement in particular cases). What that means is that social democrats do not see individuals as the separate ‘atoms’ of society: the ‘freedom of the individual’ is a philosophical myth, because there are always many interdependent individuals, whose interdependence in society always to a greater or lesser extent limits the ‘freedom’ of each of them. Social democrats have always recognised that the exercise of choice by one person or group may constrain or foreclose the choices available to others. Let me give one everyday example. There are in the city of Exeter six local authority high schools, including just one for boys only and one for girls only. It was recently proposed that the two single-sex schools be amalgamated, and there was vociferous protest from supporters of the girls school that this scheme would eliminate parents’ choice of single-sex education. Very true, and other things being equal Social Democrats would no doubt prefer to maintain the choice. But in fact there was little evidence that the number of parents choosing single-sex education was sufficient to fill the two schools, and in the meantime parents who had opted for coeducation at any of the other four schools were finding their children directed,

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<sup>11</sup> Wayland Kennet, ‘Starting with a clean slate’, *The Social Democrat*, 14 January 1983. Curiously enough, even C. A. R. Crosland in *The Future of Socialism* (London: Cape, 1956) makes only two fleeting references to the development of theoretical welfare economics stemming from the early work of A.C. Pigou. Both references (pp. 87 and 499) connect it with ‘the doctrine of planning’, which is the twelfth and last in his list of the component ideas of the British socialist tradition. In my opinion it is of much wider relevance to public policy.

against their choice, to one or other of the single-sex schools. Certainly freedom of choice is to be valued, but the social costs of providing choice have to be considered, and in the end various considerations have to be weighed in the exercise of political – that is, collective – judgement. Such a view is inevitable once one moves away from the (classical) liberal notion of ‘society’ standing over as something apart from its component atoms, separate ‘individuals’ each independently exercising a monad-like judgement unaffected by others’.

The authors of *The Middle of the Night* do speak of social interdependence, but in a limited context. They write of their ‘recognition of global interdependence as the governing principle in our international economic relations’. But the principle has implications which are far from limited to international economic relations. It is certainly true that the chains of human interdependence have constantly grown longer, so that they spread right across the world, with the result that the vagaries of Middle Eastern politics or the whims of fascist dictators in Buenos Aires have direct and major effects on the lives of ordinary people in Britain. But it is also true that increasingly tangled social interdependencies have unavoidable implications for domestic politics too. For the interweaving of the actions of many individuals and groups with varying power resources through the web of social interdependence sets in motion many kinds of compelling social currents which are neither planned nor intended by any single individual or group. On the contrary they acquire a momentum of their own which escapes collective control and which shapes, more than it is shaped by, the choices of individuals. Take for example the history of private car ownership: the first owners of cars could have neither intended nor foreseen that in due course the car would have such profound effects on urban planning, the location of houses and shops, the provision of public transport and much else. But as more and more people acquired cars, these unplanned consequences came about, and increasingly forced those who could afford it to acquire cars themselves since they could no longer move about easily by public transport, visit increasingly far-flung friends, or even reach new shopping centres located on by-passes or green-field sites. Again, the choices made by some individuals inevitably shape the subsequent choices available to others.

I wish to propose that Social Democrats recognise as one of their fundamental principles the aim of taming the wild social forces which interdependent people inevitably generate in society, and as far as possible to harness these by-products of social

interdependence for the common good. There is still much merit in Comte's old slogan *savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour pouvoir*, so long as that problematic last word is translated as 'to enable'<sup>12</sup> or 'to make possible' rather than as 'to control' or 'to have power'. (To speak of 'democratic control' is acceptable.) The slogan by no means points to a few simple solutions for the problems of social life; it certainly does not mean that we should have an undiluted faith in such cure-alls as public ownership or market forces.<sup>13</sup> It serves instead to make us conscious of the ever-renewed agenda of problems behind which lag our social understanding and capacity for foresight. And without foresight, an *effective* morality in politics is not possible.

In many ways our understanding of the operation of social forces is much less than our understanding of natural forces, and our control over them correspondingly less. But both are growing. Shortly after his election to Parliament, Keir Hardie made a speech demanding that the Government do something about the problem of unemployment. He was jeered at by Conservative and Liberal members, not so much because they perhaps did not greatly care about the lot of the unemployed, but because they regarded Hardie's demand as equivalent to asking the Government to do something about the weather. It is a measure of the extent to which the present government is a throwback to an earlier age that Sir Geoffrey Howe and Mrs Thatcher are once more speaking of unemployment as if it were an act of God. In the meantime we have learned that there is a great deal that governments can do about unemployment and many other economic matters. Perhaps we do not have the confidence bred in the 1950s and 1960s by an oversimplified version of Keynesian economics. Certainly the interdependencies within the British economy are themselves more complicated in this age of stagflation. Nevertheless, Social Democrats reject the (literally) hopeless economics of the Thatcher government, and believe that the country's economic present and future not only should be, but inevitably is to a very large extent in the hands of governments and their policies.

Perhaps the most obvious instance of a compelling social process, set up by the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. David Owen, 'The Enabling Society', in Wayland Young (ed.), *The Rebirth of Britain* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982), pp. 235–64.

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix II: On nationalisation and privatisation, p. 16 below.

interweaving actions of many interdependent groups of people but neither planned nor controlled by any of them, is wage inflation. Economists still argue about technical details of its causation. But broadly speaking it is the product of competition between many different groups in the labour market, who frequently bear in mind traditional differentials and other conceptions of fairness, coupled with the monopoly power of many public and private businesses to raise prices in product markets, the whole process producing results which are widely considered unfair. The SDP/Liberal Alliance's commitment to a new and longer-term set of institutions within which to discuss and to affect wages, prices, the prospects of the economy, and government spending ('Incomes Policy' is too simple a term) stems from its recognition that only by such means can the compelling process be broken in order that *several* economic objectives (full employment, stable prices, higher investment, better social benefits) be attained simultaneously. It also stems from a recognition that the majority of people desperately want to find ways of escaping from the vicious circle, and of subjecting the process to democratic discussion and collective control. Collective discussion itself could facilitate better control, for the impetus and dynamic of the whole process stems from numerous groups trying to do the best they can for themselves in a situation in which they are highly uncertain of the plans and intentions of numerous other participants in the process who have similar objectives. This uncertainty helps to ensure that various groups prevent each other from attaining their goals: and democratic discussion can, if properly organised (as in the French system of *planification*) help to reduce the level of uncertainty about others' responses. There is also a moral dimension to the issue:<sup>14</sup> in a situation where it is so uncertain what will be the consequences of a particular group's actions in the bargaining process, it impossible for them to meet the moral requirement of taking responsibility' for the consequences of their actions. For example, in helping to set very high levels of expectation for wage settlements in the 1970s, the NUM seems not to have had the foresight that its actions would help to establish the disgracefully low pay of health service workers in the next decade.

It must be made clear, however, that when Social Democrats speak of democratic control, they by no means always mean state control. The equation of democratic control with

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<sup>14</sup> See Michael Young, *Inflation, Unemployment and the Remoralisation of Society*, Tawney Pamphlet 2 (London: Tawney Society, 1982).

state regulation so often made by the Labour Party in recent decades is a symptom of intellectual laziness on its part, and a distortion of the main thrust of the early socialist and social democratic tradition. The authors of *The Middle of the Night* are right when they say they are ‘in favour of democratic socialism but ... socialism without the state, or at least as much of the state as we have had in the past’.<sup>15</sup> The state must obviously retain a major role in economic management; its leading part in the establishment of an effective forum for the development of a measure of consensus on wages, prices and economic prospects is unavoidable. But Social Democrats (like Liberals, and like a now largely submerged element in the socialist tradition) are convinced decentralisers of power and control. This is reflected not just by Green Paper 3, *Decentralising the State* (London: SDP, 1982) with its proposals for regional government, for sweeping away an existing tier of local government, and for community councils, but in other Green Papers’ plans for Industrial Democracy, for trade union reform, for the promotion of co-operatives and co-partnership. Yet it is too simple to say merely that we are decentralisers. We are also firm supporters of the EEC, UNO and other international bodies: we look forward to the development of several forms of supranational democratic decision-making. There is of course no contradiction here between our decentralism and our supranationalism. The common thread lies in our analysis of actual patterns of social interdependence and the associated balances of power found within them. For whenever people are interdependent they necessarily have power (often very unequal power) over each other. What Social Democrats have to do is to seek the appropriate level for each type of democratic decision-making and control. The relations between governments and multi-nationals, for example, and certainly the reform of world trade, increasingly necessitate decisions at the level of supranational blocs like the EEC. But, as Green Paper 3 convincingly shows, power over many trivial and local matters is at present concentrated in Whitehall, ludicrously distant from the people actually concerned. Seeking the appropriate level for democratic control, whether above or below the level of the state, involves looking at power as it is actually exercised; we must avoid the Labour Party’s intellectually lazy Cowboys-and-Indians conception of power. We must be willing, unlike the Labour Party, to see and to redress abuses of power on all sides – by trade unions, for example, as well as by employers. But since we also recognise the unplanned and unintended nature of many of the social processes we seek to bring under democratic control, we shall avoid the emotional

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<sup>15</sup> *The Middle of the Night*, p. 7.

vituperation of the ‘capitalist plot’ variety so often characteristic of the cruder forms of socialist thought. *Both* sides of industry, for instance, find themselves wanting to escape from the conflicts into which they are often unintentionally rocked but unable without outside help to find ways out or to recognise the longer term common interests which they share.

The SDP has sometimes seemed to be a Mary Poppins party, some of whose more naïve members hoped that by splitting the difference between the two monopoly parties, we could somehow eliminate conflict and disagreement from British politics. Of course that is impossible. Issues only become ‘political’ when people disagree about them. Politics is about resolving the conflicts of opinion and interest which arise in society. But note that I said *resolving*. Too often the British political system has in recent decades served to widen conflicts, not to resolve them or use them creatively. We cannot change the motivation of individuals in the short term – which is why individualism is such a bankrupt political idea – but we can reshape the context within which people act out their interdependencies in society. The Social Democratic aim must be to reshape social and political institutions<sup>16</sup> in ways that enable people not just to resolve conflicts but also to rediscover their common interests and objectives. The authors of *The Middle of the Night* are quite right that changes in the structure of British society have robbed the old-style collectivism – *one out, all out* – of its wide appeal. They are, however, saying something much more important when they observe that the members of the new *political* class they see the SDP as representing ‘look beyond their own interests to those of, society as a whole’, and when they suggest that ‘the base for the SDP must lie in a richer and more diverse set of interests which does not rule out a coherent set of beliefs’. If, as they advocate, the SDP succeeds in forging an alliance between this new middle class and the steadily growing underclass, the ethic required will not be a new individualism diluted by altruism. It will be a new collectivist ethic, identifying with a collectivity broader than a single economic class or even a single nation, and accepting collective responsibility for rectifying misfortunes which beset countless people through no individual fault of their own, nor necessarily through the intentions of any other individuals.

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<sup>16</sup> Since it was misunderstood in an earlier draft, I should point out that I am here using the term ‘institution’ in its broad sociological sense; I do not mean bureaucracies, which too often have a built-in tendency to perpetuate their own existence and objectives.

## Conclusion

An important aspect of politics is the attribution of blame. Because Social Democrats recognise the largely unplanned and unintended origins of many social and political problems, and because unlike the two dominant older parties they are not closely identified with one or other vested interest in the *status quo*, they often seem to lack the normal politician's zest for attributing blame. In consequence they have sometimes been portrayed as passionless, detached and cold-blooded technocrats, wanting to impose technically sound but unexciting solutions. Nothing could be further from the truth. Britain, like many other countries, has suffered already rather too much from technocratic domination. As Jürgen Habermas has so convincingly argued, technical knowledge or 'technique' can itself become an ideology which serves to stifle the more fully democratic discussion of more broadly human ends.<sup>17</sup> Certainly it is true that the SDP has proposed such technically sophisticated ideas as the Layard inflation tax, and the technical and detached analysis of the workings of economy and society is essential if we are to choose effective means for the attainment of our ends. But 'technique' should be a means of clarifying rather than foreclosing discussion of means and ends. We can all, for instance, think of cases local and national where the sums of accountants have been used to foreclose rather than clarify discussion. They often determine decisions with important social consequences, even though the basis of accountancy conventions is often arbitrary and economically illiterate, and certainly do not take account of wider social costs and benefits or of the sort of society people would choose if given the opportunity to do so through more truly rational democratic discussion.<sup>18</sup>

Many Social Democrats may indeed be the products of 'the white heat of the technological revolution'. But they are not 'desiccated calculating machines'. They are in my experience almost to a man and a woman children of the Enlightenment. They are committed rationalists, with a possibly touching faith in the power of free and equal democratic discussion if it is not too severely distorted by vested interest. Democracy is not just a matter of voting – certainly not of block votes, elective dictatorships or of what Tocqueville called the tyranny of the majority. It is also a matter of *listening* and of rational argument. Britain sometimes seems almost to have forgotten this – witness the near-totalitarian implications of

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<sup>17</sup> J. Habermas, 'Wissenschaft und Technik als Ideologie', translated in *Towards a Rational Society* (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp. 81–122.

<sup>18</sup> The controversy over fares on public transport in London is a case in point.

journalists reaching for their headline-shortening clichés of ‘row’ and ‘split’ whenever a party takes a vote after no matter how cool and rational a debate. The SDP will have to overcome its apparent fear of how the press will treat any vigorous discussion of political fundamentals, for unless it gains a clear grasp of the issues raised here (and many other issues which I have not even touched on), it can scarcely hope to give a clear lead in the more informed democratic debate which the country so clearly needs.

## Appendix I: A friendly dispute with David Marquand

David Marquand (in a letter) makes the following criticism, which is interesting enough to quote at length:

I don't think you have got the intellectual ancestry of British Social Democracy right. You imply that it is part of a wider social democratic camp, which also includes continental social democracy. There is obviously some truth in this, but I think it is over-simplified. Continental social democracy, it seems to me, is essentially 'revisionist', in the sense that it was born out of a reaction against classical Marxism. I don't think this is true of British social democracy. As, I think, Ralph Miliband once put it rather nastily, the British social democratic tradition was never really 'revisionist' because it had never been 'visionist' in the first place. The only continental-style revisionist I can think of is John Strachey, who had of course been a fellow traveller in the Thirties and a down-the-line orthodox Marxist. Crosland used to call himself a 'revisionist', but he certainly wasn't one in the continental sense of the term. He was really a very insular British Fabian, bringing orthodox Fabianism up to date.

All this, it seems to me, is of more than mere antiquarian importance. Unlike continental social democracy, which developed in reaction against classical Marxism, British social democracy is the child, not only of a very *sui generis* British tradition of democratic socialism, but also of an equally *sui generis* tradition of 'Social Liberalism', which had no real continental equivalent. This uniquely British 'Social Liberalism', it seems to me, was already going strong before the First World War. It provided the inspiration for the actual policies of the 1906 Liberal Government; and it is the reason why the present-day British Liberal Party is much closer to social democracy than are any of the continental liberal parties. What all this boils down to, it seems to me, is that present-day British social democracy and present-day British Liberalism are both best understood as descendents of a common, broad-based, 'social liberal' tradition, which has no real counterpart on the other side of the Channel, and which, in this country; covered the anti-

Conservative spectrum all the way from the pre-1914 Liberal Party to the pre-1914 ILP. This is why I would maintain that the Alliance is not, as some on both sides see it, a mere marriage of political convenience, imposed on its members by the electoral system, but the logical expression of an authentic British political tradition, going back to the beginning of this century.

There is obviously much truth in what David Marquand says. It is commonly recognised that Fabianism's roots were more in liberalism than in socialism, and that many of the trade unions which formed the Labour Party remained for quite a long time basically 'social liberal' rather than explicitly socialist in political orientation.

Nevertheless, the argument seems to me to rest on a certain sleight of hand. The term 'social democratic' was scarcely used much in Britain until very recent years; Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation was Marxist and continentally influenced, and with its demise the term largely died out. The Gaitskellite ginger group of the early 1960s, which historians will see as a precursor of the SDP, was, for example, called the Campaign for Democratic Socialism. At any rate, when the SDP was formed in 1981, it was widely commented that the title 'Social Democratic' was essentially a European term, and many of us in early speeches even before the official launch of the party explicitly acknowledged this, advancing the German, Austrian and Scandinavian Social Democratic parties as models for the new party clearly superior in every way to the Labour Party we were leaving.<sup>19</sup> That their roots lie in Marxist revisionism seems to me to be a largely academic point; in practice the German and Austrian parties have perhaps moved even a little too far away from those roots – as Bill Rodgers for one has said, it is to be hoped that an SDP government would actually be somewhat to the 'left' of the SPD. The continental parties have however retained a collectivist rather than (classical) liberal cast of mind.

Though all this is a matter for friendly intellectual debate, the difference in emphasis between myself and David Marquand does perhaps point to an ideological issue evident in the SDP since its inception, crudely referred to in the press as the difference between

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<sup>19</sup> See W. E. Paterson and A. H. Thomas (eds), *Social Democratic Parties in Europe* (London: Croom Helm, 1977).

‘Jenkinsites’ and ‘Owenites’, or between advocates of a ‘Centre Party’ and those whose main objective is to destroy and replace the Labour Party. It is an issue worth exploring at leisure, but it must be remembered that compared with the yawning ideological chasms in the Labour and Conservative Parties, differences within the SDP, or even within the Alliance as a whole, are trivial and of relatively little relevance to practical policies.

## Appendix II: On nationalisation and privatisation

The SDP's present policy of regarding as undesirable all shifts in the frontier between the public and private sectors, whether by Tory 'privatisation' or Labour renationalisation, is a paradigmatic example of its 'anti-ideological' stance. It is of course quite right in its belief that Morrisonian nationalisation has failed to achieve what was once hoped of it – increased industrial democracy, responsiveness to social needs, the abolition of abuses of economic power, and so on; and it is right to be sceptical of the old-fashioned socialist belief that any and every form of public ownership is in some way morally superior to all forms of private ownership. The SDP is right too to emphasise that the spirit of enterprise is not something to be despised, and deserves rather to be encouraged.

All the same, I think it is inadequate simply to pretend that the location of the public/private frontier in a mixed economy is totally unimportant, and I believe the SDP needs to start thinking much more 'ideologically' about this. The discussion in Green Paper 2, *Partnership for Prosperity* (London: SDP, 1982) is quite inadequate, conflating as it does nationalised industries which have a monopoly position with those which have social responsibilities, and opposing both to industries operating in a 'competitive' environment. Richard Grivil has usefully made the connection between the public/private frontier and the question of industrial democracy, and I agree with him when he writes (in a letter):

'we need a strategy for the mixed economy based upon a reasoned assessment of where, ideally, the frontier ought to be. In my view, our commitment to equality is meaningless unless we understand equality in terms of both wealth and power, and unless we intend to reduce concentrations of either. I believe it to be wrong in principle that the possession of wealth – however acquired should entitle one to exploit for personal gain either the labour of the less fortunate, or the community's natural resources, beyond a certain (or rather uncertain) point. It may be that that point rises in proportion to the degree of industrial democracy and profit-sharing (or co-ownership) that privately owned companies introduce. It may also be that, with such provisions, private capital may have a legitimate place in national industries.

Where small companies are involved, I believe the party must

discriminate in favour of co-operation. It is hard to see how this principle can work in large enterprises (though Solidarnosc wanted LOT to be run by its employees). I don't [see] managerial efficiency as the main criterion for national enterprises. Responsiveness to the needs of employees and of users ought to be the aim, with 'efficiency' merely as the criterion for choosing between methods of achieving this aim.'

Stephen Mennell is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Exeter and was SDP candidate for Exeter at the 1983 General Election.

This paper was written in late 1982 in response to the Tawney Pamphlet "The Middle of the Night"\* and along with W.G. Runciman's "Where is the Right of the Left?\*", is a contribution to the growing discussion of basic social democratic thought.

Mennell seeks to root social democratic ideology in the original moral and social concerns of the socialist and radical traditions.

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