

A canny Scot

Liz Thomson talks to 'Boy David' Steel on the eve of the publication, from Weidenfeld, of his book *Against Goliath*

Among our current crop of Parliamentarians, there's probably none more popular than David Steel, for whom even the archest of Tories have been known to express kind words. He's the sort from whom you would most certainly buy a second-hand car — and indeed, old cars are something of a passion for the Rt Hon Member for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale, known more concisely as the Borders.

When he stood down after 12 years as Liberal leader, leaving the newly christened Social and Liberal Democrats to choose between Paddy Ashdown and Alan Beith, there were many who mourned his passing — perhaps reflected in the lacklustre poll performance of the SLD, though the dashing of so many Alliance hopes amid the squabbling and petulance of some of its members must also be a factor. But Steel remains optimistic and, in keeping with a desire for consensus and cooperation, unwilling to hog the credit for past triumphs or to pass the buck for recent misfortunes.

"The local elections in May were reasonably successful given that our ratings were not as high as they were. Obviously, the European elections were disappointing. To some extent, that was because people thought they could have a bit of a fling. But I'm confident that in the longer run it will all come right. We've been through troughs like this before. Two months before the 1979 Election our rating was around five per cent and everyone was writing us off."

In 1983, despite the Government's famous Falklands Factor, Steel's Liberals and David Owen's SDP won 25 per cent of the vote, two per cent more than Labour. "I'd have liked a merger to have taken place then," says Steel. "Maybe that was a missed opportunity." Merger, when it finally came after the less successful '87 Election, was a sad and bloody affair with much in-fighting over name and issues. It left Owen the sulking leader of a breakaway centre party.

Steel believes that Owen made a mistake in campaigning against a merger but that, even having done so, had he accepted the democratic decision with good grace he would have been welcomed back to the fold. Indeed, he points out that a sacrifice of personal in favour of common goals might even have enhanced his standing.

What Steel's book, *Against Goliath*, shows is that "David's views were always very different from those of Roy Jenkins and myself. I think he had a simplistic view of the SDP, which was not shared by the other members of the Gang of Four — that they could somehow come straight through on their own and form a government party, brushing the Liberals aside. That was his view and it's more or less remained his view." Machiavellian or arrogant are not adjectives he ascribes to the Doctor. "Naive. Mistaken. A lot of people don't understand that. I hope the book will show how the Alliance developed. I've tried to write as forthrightly as I can, so people can see that there wasn't a sudden disagreement."

Contrary to the famous *Spitting Image* portrayal of the two Davids, Steel comes across as strong-minded and decisive. A canny Scot who took the initiative or seized the moment. A true Liberal who, from his earliest days in student politics,



David Steel: fascinating revelations

spoke up for "the emergence of a social democratic party" and a realignment of political thinking — a vision shared with Jo Grimond, an early mentor. It was he who, acting as match-maker, sat Steel next to a young law student named Judy MacGregor, at a private dinner. The couple were married in 1962, as Steel began his first parliamentary campaign in Pentlands, Edinburgh. Three years later, David Steel entered the House as MP for the Borders. At 26, he was the youngest Member — the *Daily Express* christened him "Boy David."

"I'd been to the House of Commons only once before," Steel remembers, "and it was very awe-inspiring and rather frightening . . . Just finding your way around physically is difficult." Responsibility came early — "the advantage of being in a minority party" — and within two years his Abortion Bill had received the Royal Assent. "That helped — but after two or three years I became used to the parliamentary processes, comfortable with parliamentary procedure."

Adjusting to the politician's lifestyle was not something Steel found too difficult. "We decided to make our family base in Scotland. I feel sorry for those who attempt to conduct a family life in London — that can cause tremendous havoc. Parliamentary demands change from day to day and you may make arrangements to attend your child's birthday party and then find you can't get there. But if you're here during the week and your family are miles away at home they know you're a part-timer and adjust to that. There aren't the same crushing disappointments." He feels strongly that the House sits "at all the wrong times", nights and school holidays, so making it even more difficult for women.

"Children of politicians have a very rough time — other people's more than ours. Mentioning no names, but there are Cabinet colleagues who have gone through a lot of stress because of the effect on the lives of their children.

"I feel very sorry for them. People shouldn't go into public life unless they're aware of the downside as well." He also cautions against the kind of rampant ambition that can lead to the sacrifice of

life for a career. "Look at all the people who've set their hearts on the Conservative leadership. I can't help feeling there's something slightly odd about a human being who decides that such a thing is so important that he gears his whole life toward attaining it."

Still, he believes that most MPs of all parties "genuinely want to be of service", while only a small minority seek positions of power "for vainglorious reasons". There are many, as yet unknown, doing good work for their own constituents and for the Parliamentary process.

Though Mrs Thatcher likes to write him off as "just a television personality", it was Steel who, building on the legacy of Grimond and the hapless Jeremy Thorpe, led the Liberals to their greatest moment. In 1974, his refusal to support Thorpe's plan for a pact brought down Heath's government while, three years later, he negotiated the Lib-Lab Pact, so allowing James Callaghan to soldier on, though to ultimate defeat. Even this power-sharing was not welcomed by all the Liberals — definition almost all "strong individuals who sometimes find it difficult to work together as a team". It was Steel who, meeting with Roy Jenkins in Europe as the latter was pondering his post-Presidency future, helped smooth the way for "an organization founded mainly on a massive exodus from the Labour Party but linking up in alliance [with the Liberals] to 'break the mould' of British politics."

And for a few heady years, that lofty aim seemed tantalizingly close. Part of the fascination of *Against Goliath* — the giant being the two-party system — is seeing how all the players interacted. How, even in 1981, Dr Owen objected to the presence of Jenkins and Shirley Williams at the Llandudno Liberal Assembly. How, in January 1987, Bill Rodgers and his family sat at the opposite end of a table from the Owen family: none of them spoke.

There are, too, plenty of welcome vignettes of national and international

political life: stories of "working funerals", notably in Russia, where the Prime Minister once chastised the Liberal leader for wearing a red tie — a gesture he thought appropriate in the circumstances; of a helicopter trip with the PM and Neil Kinnock, where the Leaderene refused the offer of linen earmuffs, worried about her camera-ready coiffure. "That's her, you see, go deaf for Britain," Kinnock yelled above the din. More serious stories, too, about Steel in Africa and the Middle East, where he was the first leader to meet formally with Arafat, and in America, where he seemed to prefer Hart to Dukakis.

Steel relishes the variety. "The secret is to try and get the right blend between devotion to the day-to-day concerns of individuals — what has been rather rudely called glorified social work, which I very much enjoy — and national and international contacts which provide a flow of ideas . . . This summer, I'm giving lectures in Spain, France and Sri Lanka. I'm not less busy now but I can pick what I want to do. The routine is less rigid. I'm enjoying parliamentary life and I get a lot of work done."

He concedes that "liberal" has become a dirty word of late. "It's being derided from South Africa to the United States . . . The word has been misused," Steel points out, emphasizing its real connotations: "extolling the extreme worth of the individual, protecting the life of the individual in society — a very important part of politics."

As to some future realignment of our political system, Steel is hopeful. "The search for consensus or compromise — a dirty word — is alien to the British way of operating. And yet among our partners in the European Community, most of them have some sort of cooperative government. And if you say 'cooperative government' that sounds good . . . The push for PR should take place in the European Parliament, the Scottish Assembly and local government."

He believes that, as even those who find themselves better off have to start paying more for health care, education and other public services, support for the Conservatives will fall away, perhaps giving Labour enough seats to tie with the Tories in 1991-2. "Then, even with no upsurge in public support, we'll be able to use our leverage effectively." Working with Labour, or the Conservatives under a new leader, would not be impossible. "We have to be independent and neutral."

"At the moment the task is to retrench and reform the way in which the Party itself is working. We've got a very good constitution. What we haven't got is a recapturing of the public imagination . . . The fact that the Owenite SDP has more or less disappeared should mean that our Party will take off again . . . In my view, we just need the right by-election in the right place at the right time," he says, expressing the view that the Doctor will end up an independent.

"Luck," concludes David Steel, gathering his papers and heading off for a round of radio interviews, "has a large part to play in politics."

Against Goliath by David Steel is published by Weidenfeld on 8 September price £14.95.