

Good evening everyone and thank you for giving me the opportunity to tell you about the SDP.

I'm Tim O'Rourke and I am currently the Chair of the North West Region of the Social Democratic Party. I have a few of my North West Colleagues here with me including Graham Hall who was the previous Chair and a few others; who are active members within our section.

I'll start with a word of warning.

I didn't get this Chairman's job, for being a good orator, or being very politically savvy with an in-depth knowledge of everything there is to know about the SDP. In fact, other than a passing interest I have not, in the past, been very politically active. Yes, I was once a member of the Labour Party and did a bit to help them locally but it was short lived and I never went to any conferences.

So if you want to hear a really good SDP speech I would suggest you look up our leader William Clouston's speech to our Manchester Conference in October last year. You'll also find other speeches there by Joanna Williams, Peter Whittle and none other than John Cleese whom it was my great pleasure to meet. John Cleese was a great supporter of the original SDP Liberal Alliance.

However in the last 4 years (which is perhaps not a coincidence of my retiring) I spent more time thinking about politics and what I do and don't believe in and stumbled across the current form of the SDP and realised, having read their New Declaration [booklet here] that I really believed in most if not all of their policies.

A bit of background (and as a means to fill my allotted time) I'll say where I came from geographically and politically. My Dad was brought up in a deprived area of Liverpool to parents of Irish descent (you'd never guess that with a name like O'Rourke I know). He left school at 15 and learnt to be an electrician.

Dad was in the desert in Egypt in the War after which he joined the Merchant Navy on the Queen Mary alongside my grandfather. He then started working as an for English Electric doing electrical design for a host of power stations that were being built after the war.

Perhaps not coincidentally, that is what I started doing as an electrical engineering graduate in 1977 working for GEC. I worked on Power Station projects for about half of my career, the rest was working on Rail projects as a project manager (primarily one in South Africa) and then for the last 20 years working for Sellafield in the Nuclear Sector. So I have worked in, and seen industry from, both the private sector and the (quasi) public sector. I say “quasi as Sellafield’s “Privatisation” was a failed experiment that I can go into later perhaps.

I was brought up in Crosby, Merseyside with 5 siblings. Dad had always voted Labour but he was attracted to the original SDP in the 1980s and actually helped Shirley Williams win the Crosby seat. I was 24 at the time and working in Hong Kong and was delighted to see Crosby on the telly there when they covered the SDPs first by-election win.

The SDP was formed in March 1981 following the January Limehouse Declaration which was made by the Gang of Four, big heavyweight politicians; Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Shirley Williams and Bill Rogers who had grown fed up of the Labour Party. Michael Foot had just taken over and the Gang of 4 were disenchanted by the Labour Party’s lurch to the far left; The Labour Party wanted block voting which would give the Unions tremendous political power, to disarm the Nuclear Deterrent and, interestingly, leave the EEC (the fore runner to the EU).

Although initially pro EEC - in 1989 the SDP conference voted against a ‘United States of Europe’ so it was becoming more euro sceptic even back then.

Quick spoiler - the SDP supports Brexit and the outcome of the Referendum in 2016.

So the Gang of Four formed the SDP, with Roy Jenkins as leader followed later by David (now Lord) Owen who is still active in the House of Lords as an independent.

In order to improve their chance of getting more MPs in the First Past the Post system, in 1981 the SDP formed an alliance with the Liberal party. 1983 they won 25% of the overall vote but that only translated into 23 MPs of which 6 were SDP.

In 1987 David Steel (leader of the Liberals) proposed a full merger with the SDP rather than an Alliance. David Owen did not agree and he carried on with the SDP independently from what then became known in 1989 as the Social and Liberal Democratic party which then understandably became shortened to “The Liberal Democrats” that we know and loathe today. In 1990 the SDP was largely disbanded by Owen however pockets of it continued.

It was from these ashes that in 2018 today's SDP has risen under the very capable leadership of William Clouston. The Party issued a paper, which is a bit like a manifesto, called The New Declaration, in some ways mirroring the Limehouse Declaration of nearly 40 years earlier.

I found out about the party from a guy called Ben Cobley who wrote a very good book called The Tribe (probably my first exposure to what would now be referred to as Woke and victim Ideology). Ben tweeted something about the SDP and I looked it up and was immediately hooked by it.

The fact my dad had originally been involved back in 1981 may have had some small part in my decision but it was largely a rational rather than an emotive decision.

I had voted Labour all my life but have become fed up with the direction they are going in, their abandonment of the working class and their inability to stand up for common sense on the gender issues. Similarly for the Lib Dems and the Greens.

So I became more and more involved in the party taking an increasingly active role, helping with leafletting in Leeds (where we now have our first two Councillors) helping in the organisation of the SDP Conference in Manchester and organising the campaign for the recent Stretford and Urmston by election. When Graham decided to stand down earlier this year I put myself forward for election as Chairman.

SURVEY

So having told you details about my path to the SDP and some of the history I'd now like to share a little bit about the make up of the North West members by giving you some of the results of a survey which Graham carries out every 6 months or so.

Again for context – the SDP membership nationally is around 2000 and the North West is an active region of that and we have about 200 members. Of that about 20 or so are active or very active

Active members help out with campaigning, delivering leaflets, standing in local and by elections and most importantly getting together in pubs like this to discuss the SDP, and politics in general, and of course to socialise with a few drinks into the bargain. Many people just choose to support the party by being a paying member (£2 a month) without getting involved in the activities, which is fine and all helps .

The North West cover an area that extends from East Manchester (Glossop) over to Merseyside and Chester . South down to Sandbatch and North right up to Carlisle in Cumbria, although we are mainly centred in Liverpool and Manchester.

We had 63 people respond to the survey which is a pretty good response rate.

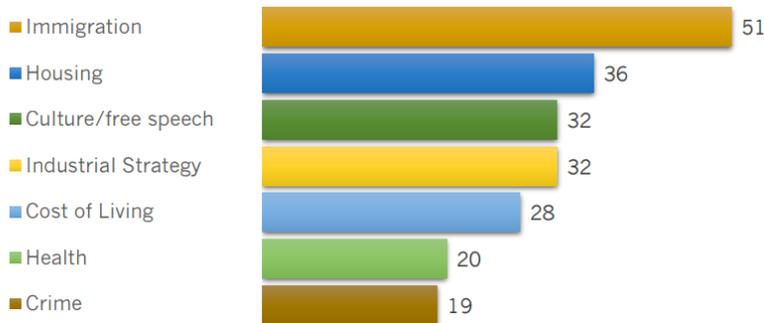
What the survey does show is that we are a broad church that have policies that appeal to the Left and Right although I am increasingly unsure what divides the so called Left and Right these days.

1. About half of the respondents had joined in the last year, which backs up a claim we make that we are one of the fastest growing parties (Looking at data on our membership backs this up)
2. About 40% have previously been a member of the Labour party and about 20% Conservative. Another 40% have never been in a political party.
3. 60% of respondents voted for Conservatives in the 2019 GE – About 10% each either didn't vote or spoilt their ballot and 10% voted Labour. Interesting considering 40% had previously declared affiliation to Labour.

4. There were quite a lot of other questions but we also asked what were the main issues the party should prioritise (with more than one answer allowed).

Immigration 51, Housing 36, Culture and Free speech 32

Industrial strategy 32, cost of living 28, Health 20 Crime 19



Below this was Education (13), Transport (9), Women and Gender issues (9), environment (6) and Foreign affairs (4)

Europe

I have touched on the Referendum and Brexit so to clarify, the SDP do believe that having asked the population what they wanted to do, we believe in carrying out the wishes of the public. As a party the SDP is also against much of the over reach of Europe.

There are many things we do not like about the way the EU has morphed into an almost federal state. It has become a Supra national body with jurisdiction over a number of areas which the SDP believe are the responsibility of a sovereign state ruled by people that we can get rid off at the polling station if we don't like what they are doing.

POLICIES

So what makes the SDP different from the other parties and how would we describe ourselves. There are a lot of details of our policies on the sdp.org.uk website and it would take all evening to go into each of them but I will touch on a few.

(<https://sdp.org.uk/new-declaration/>)

Economy

In many ways we are to the left of Labour on economic issues. We believe in having what are effectively monopolies and national infrastructure under the control of the state.

So we believe in public ownership of the main utilities, **Water** (that privatisation went well didn't it. I'm looking at you Thames Water); **Power Generation and distribution**; and **Rail**.

Other countries have state owned utilities and they run efficiently, just because they are not in private ownership does not mean they can't be run efficiently.

Combined with this left leaning economic policy we also believe in what some may regard as right leaning philosophies. We believe very strongly in pride in our Country, in the importance of the family unit, in the belief that the sovereign state is the ultimate authority for this country

There was a great quote in The Times the other day by Juliet Samuel it read:

“In short, many of the problems faced by our military are the same as those in our energy sector, our medical supply chains and our tech industry. We have lost the capacity to make what we need affordably. But as the pandemic, the gas crisis and the Ukraine war have revealed, we can no longer trust others to make it all for us.”

This sums up a lot of what the SDP's attitude is to the deindustrialisation of the UK. It matters where something is made and under what conditions they are made and cost is not the only criteria to be looked at.

Social Market Economy

The SDP believe that pro-public sector and pro-market policy can beneficially coexist. This is the SDP's distinct Social Market position.

The public and private sectors are complementary parts of our society and should not be regarded as opponents. We believe that open, competitive, free markets are the best and most efficient system for providing general goods and services. We believe that free markets make a vital contribution to a successful economy through investment, by creating employment and by raising living standards.

Gender

The SDP have taken a very clear stance on Gender issues. We are totally against biological males competing in biological Females' sport as, apart from anything else, it simply is not fair and in some cases not safe. There was a reason we have male and female categories in most sports and that is because of the massive physical advantages that men have in their development during puberty.

Trans rights are human rights. True. But so are women's rights. Women have fought over the decades to have rights that protect them and they should be defended.

It is absolutely true that not all men are predators however opening up women-only spaces like changing rooms, women's refuges, prisons and toilets to biological males not only makes many women uncomfortable, it also opens the door to bad actors who would seek to access these spaces.

In recent years we have seen all the big parties, tip toe around this issue (especially Labour) for the sake of causing a small minority of people offence or uncomfortableness. The SDP are tolerant of those with Gender dysphoria however not to the extent of having their rights trump those of half the population.

Housing

The aim of housing policy is to make available a decent, affordable home for every citizen but no recent government has come close to securing this. Instead, the deliberate destruction of state housebuilding capacity together with mass immigration has created a perfect storm which denies millions a viable route to start a family and unfairly dashes young peoples' dreams of a home of their own. We believe in urgently reversing this trend by reinvigorating state housebuilding.

Immigration

Immigration – we need to differentiate between people fleeing to this country to escape persecution and oppression (who are welcome), from those who are economic migrants who want to come here because of our welfare system. You can not have a free welfare system and open borders. The SDP have set a net immigration target of 50,000 per year in the interests of integration and social cohesion, it should be skills based, needs based, legal and subject to democratic control. Limiting numbers will also help with social integration.

Democracy

First and foremost, the SDP are democrats. The scale and vehemence of the reaction against the result of the 2016 EU referendum by Britain's cultural and political elites was striking. The evident disdain by the Westminster class for, among others, many elderly and low income voters revealed that the powerful only tolerate democracy when their view prevails.

Conservatives conserve very little – and the huge surge in “Identity politics” has burgeoned under the conservatives' watch

Labour has abandoned the nation's working men and women.

The two party system means wild swings from expansion to austerity with no ability to do long term planning.

The SDP believes in PR as a means by which every vote by the populace counts, despite some of its shortcomings.

Tolerance Diversity

We reject the current obsession with grievance and identity politics.

Every departure from ethnic, class, gender proportions is not prima facie evidence of discrimination.

We still believe in the Martin Luther King principle of colour blindness.

I have a very diverse group of friends at my karate club. They are men, women, white, black, European, Chinese, Straight, Gay, Atheist, Christian, Muslim, those who have English as a first language and many who haven't; and the thing I like about this is not that we go around talking about and celebrating our diversity but that we feel no need to even mention it !

Nation and world

We are unionist, patriotic, and internationalist. We support NATO, WTO and the UN. We are against imposition of our values on other countries by military intervention.

We have pride in our Country – we, like many nations, have done things which when judged by present standards are poor, but we have done many good things which we should be proud of and feel free to celebrate. If you are British, actually no, if you are English, it is now frowned upon to celebrate achievements and contributions we have made to the world.

Zero emissions

Where and how things are made are important. Getting the cheapest from wherever is not sustainable. If we buy everything from China, it doesn't matter how Green we think we are, we are subcontracting our emissions to another part of the world and to countries that do not treat their workers or the environment with anything like the respect and safeguarding they should have. The SDP is all for green initiatives that improve the environment and will encourage these but the headlong pursuit of net zero in a short timescale is not practicable or achievable.

We do not believe the ideal of net zero has not been fully thought through in the UK. If we reduce all emissions in the UK then it is of virtually no use if China does nothing. China=28%: US=15%: UK<1% Action by a small contributor will do nothing except impoverish that nation.

There's an expression I think is appropriate which is that it's like have a pissing section in a swimming pool.

And finally The Family

We believe a stable and secure family life – with support from the extended family and the community – to be the foundation of society and critical to raising responsible citizens. It is in the home where we first learn the virtues of obligation, compassion and concern for others which transcend self-interest. And yet successive governments have been powerless in resisting an epidemic of family breakdown which has caused widespread suffering and has harmed the life-chances of millions of children.

TO CONCLUDE

So there are some that say it's almost impossible to change the current political system. The system is stacked against us and people feel that voting for the SDP is possibly a wasted opportunity to eject the current party (whoever is in power) and replace it with one that may not be quite as bad. The least worst option. How do you change that? – well the Referendum proved that when people realise that every vote counts they become engaged.

There are arguments for and against PR but it does seem wrong that if you are in a constituency that is largely Labour or Conservative then your vote really doesn't count. There are many thousands of people who do not have representation for their views because of this system.

So why become involved in the SDP ?

Being part of something that is trying to change the system and which represents what many ordinary people think; and sharing this with like minded people is, for me, a reward in itself.

If we try and fail, it is better than not trying at all and has the added benefit that we really could win through if we can connect with the overall populace which we believe share our values.

At least you are trying to change things, which I believe is an honourable pursuit.

We are aiming, and are on target, to get 100 SDP Candidates to stand at the next General Election. This would also allow us to get a Party Political Broadcast.

The SDP aims to provide a political home to all Social Democrats who seek a stronger and more capable state along with greater individual responsibility, trust and social solidarity.

It would be great if you joined us.

Thank you