Introduction

Forty years ago the so-called 'Gang of Four' (Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams) appeared in the East End of London to unveil the 'Limehouse Declaration' announcing that they were establishing what was to become the Social Democratic Party (SDP). It was a dramatic, if hastily convened, launch of a new political party, the most prominent realignment in British politics since the formation of the National Government in 1931. It remains the most significant schism in British party politics since the end of the Second World War. Threatening to 'break the mould' of British politics it came to include a total of 28 defecting Labour MPs and one Conservative. The dramatic nature of these events was reflected in its initial opinion poll position, but despite gaining 25.4 per cent of the vote in the 1983 General Election (just 2.2 per cent less than Labour) it obtained 250 fewer seats. The SDP's prominence was over, a fact confirmed by the 1987 General Election result. The following year most of the Party merged with the Liberals to form the Liberal Democrats and the remaining SDP has rumbled on in one form or another ever since.

Party factions in the broader context

Within a broader historical context, the SDP episode is but one of many examples of the factional British party system, whereby internalised divisions within parties are often more destructive and destabilising than those between them. First Past the Post means that two rival parties compete for power. Historically this was the Liberals and Conservatives from the mid-19th century, with the former being replaced by Labour by 1945. This pattern applied across Britain (though Northern Ireland always had a separate party system) until the rise of the SNP in the last three General Elections in Scotland. Labour and the Conservatives were essentially coalitions within themselves, containing different political viewpoints within their 'broad church'. Three factors create factions and may combined to produce formal splits. The first of these is doctrine - Labour Party splits have historically been between more moderate (or Revisionist) members who seek to pragmatically compromise with social and economic change to bring about electoral victory, and the more doctrinaire members on the left of the Party. The Conservatives have contained those committed to a free market and those who accept a larger role for the state in social and economic matters. These fundamental issues

of political economy have on occasions split the parties internally. The second factor is policy issues which have arisen from time to time which have divided the parties, most recently as we will discuss, over Brexit. Finally, the presence of prominent personalities who have divided the parties from within - one thinks of Joseph Chamberlain at the end of the Nineteenth and start of the Twentieth centuries, who split both the Liberals (over Home Rule for Ireland) and the Conservatives (over tariff reform).

While the SDP's breakaway was the culmination of the gradual fragmentation of the Labour Party, they are not the only party susceptible to such disruptive events. Yet Labour does have multiple examples of such factional fratricide that have manifested over the course of its history as those on different wings of the Party have struggled for Labour's soul. In addition to the SDP spilt of 1981, this has resulted in several other high-profile historical incidents of intra-party factionalism, including the calamitous split in government in 1931; the 'Gaitskellites' versus the 'Bevanites' in the 1950s; the purging of the left during the 1980s; New Labour versus Old Labour tensions under Blair's leadership; and, more recently, the toxic fall-out between the pro- and anti-Corbyn factions since 2015. One of the reasons why the Labour Party has been prone to such deep internal divisions is perhaps the tendency to form internal party groupings with their own structures and objectives to promote their own view of what the Party should stand for. Such groups in recent times have included Progress (which promoted the cause of New Labour) and Momentum (the Corbynite wing) which included pushing conference resolutions and fighting internal elections.

In some respects therefore, the question could legitimately be asked as to how and why Labour has managed to maintain a coherent structure and identity for the bulk of its political existence. Some have suggested that it is ultimately the realities of the first past the post electoral system that has bound the majority of the Party together at times of divisive crisis, with potential splinter groups fully aware of the difficulties faced by smaller parties within such an electoral process. Yet it remains the case that in the aftermath of the troubled Corbyn era and Starmer's recent succession, the ongoing battle for the party's soul and direction shows little sign of abating, and continues to hamper Labour's political progress.

Historically, there have been major splits in the Conservative Party, such as in 1846 (over the Corn Laws) and 1906 (over tariff reform) but it had generally been much better at keeping its internal divisions out of the public glare. This may be because of the overwhelming importance of what Jim Bulpitt termed 'statecraft' - managing the party and winning elections. For much of the Twentieth Century it resisted any ideological tendencies (which often cause splits), although during the 1980s there were noted, if generally controlled, tensions between the 'wets' and the 'dries'. Yet it is undoubtedly since the disruptive and reluctant departure from Downing Street of the polarising figure of Margaret Thatcher in 1990 that its own factional issues have been more difficult to suppress. The issue of European integration has been pivotal to such intra-party traumas, with the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and its aftermath utterly destabilising John Major's administration for much of its duration.

During this period between 1990-97, Conservative parliamentary rebellion become more frequent, Major publicly described several of his more rebellious and Eurosceptic Cabinet ministers as 'bastards', while he also temporarily withdrew the whip from a number of his MPs for voting against the party line on Maastricht. UKIP was also formed in 1993, largely from disenchanted Conservatives, and such prolonged and tumultuous divisions were a notable factor in Major's disastrous general election defeat of 1997, which re-enforced the recurring observation that the electorate dislikes divided parties. During the era of New Labour hegemony between 1997 and 2010, a brooding and reflective Conservative Party experienced a further evolution of its factional disputes, this time between the so-called 'mods' and 'rockers'. The 'mods' was an allusion to the party modernisers and social liberals who accepted the need to embrace much of the Blairite agenda, accepting that the Conservative Party needed to reform and change in line with Twenty-first Century values if it was ever to return to power. Represented by chastened former Thatcherite Cabinet ministers such as Michael Portillo, alongside younger emerging figures such as David Cameron and Theresa May, this factional element gradually moved the Party towards a more electable status by 2010. Yet they were resisted by the 'rockers', who wished to defend what they saw as the Thatcherite legacy of free-market economics, social conservatism and Euroscepticism. This group didn't recognise the need to depart from previously successful Conservative policy positions, notably those which had worked well during the 1980s. Such views were held by some leadership figures, prominent journalists, Peers such as Lord Tebbit and several MPs

with the Cornerstone Group being established in 2005 to promote their cause. The sustained struggle between such divergent and competing party factions was arguably a key factor as to why the Conservatives spent their longest ever period in national opposition (thirteen years) from 1997 onwards, although William Hague - who had the unenviable task of leading the Party after the 1997 defeat - perhaps deserves credit for holding the Conservatives together given the ideological conflicts which erupted after the election.

Factional politics in the era of Brexit

Events since approximately 2010, associated with the build-up to the 2016 Brexit referendum and its aftermath, have appeared to take factional politics to an even more heightened and disruptive level. The referendum itself was a consequence of David Cameron's attempts to manage his own internal factions, most notably the significant Eurosceptic grouping, which had continued to expand in influence since the 1990s. This became initially evident at an early phase of Cameron's premiership when 81 Conservative MPs supported such a referendum proposal in a 2011 parliamentary vote. Although Cameron subsequently made his referendum pledge in 2013, factional impatience continued, and in 2014 two of his backbench MPs defected to UKIP, a growing political force which was visibly eroding the Conservative popular vote. This became apparent when it topped the poll at the 2014 European elections, and then achieved over 12 per cent of the vote in the 2015 general election.

'Europe' had always been a divisive issue in British politics precisely because both major parties contained pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics. Indeed, historically it was Labour which was the more sceptical party - being very divided over initial membership, having several high-profile Cabinet members who campaigned for withdrawal in the 1975 referendum and openly pledging to leave without even a further referendum if they won the 1983 election. However, from the late 1980s the Labour Party became more favourably disposed to European integration, partly because Thatcher became more hostile and also because the EU (as it became) pledged to a social policy dimension. By the mid-1990s the Labour Party was strongly pro-European, although there were divisions over whether or not to join the single currency. By the time of the 2016 referendum it was easier for Labour to present a united

front, despite being led by someone who was always associated with the sceptics and having several MPs who supported Leave, including Gisela Stuart who chaired the official Leave campaign. Brexit was unlikely to lead to a split in the Labour Party, but it did lead to a splintering off of its MPs - some to the newly established Change UK (although their opposition to Corbyn was arguably a stronger factor than their stance on Brexit) and some who decided not to seek re-election or who stood as independents knowing they would not win.

Yet for the Conservatives Brexit was a much more divisive issue. The Party had historically been the more pro-European of the main two - with Edward Heath leading Britain into the EEC in 1973, and there were still some veteran pro-Europeans left on the Conservative benches such as Ken Clarke. The majority of Conservative MPs advocated Remain in 2016, albeit having previously expressed their reservations about European integration - such as David Cameron and George Osborne who were prominent in the Remain campaign, as well as Theresa May, who backed Remain albeit less prominently. Others - most notably Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, as well as a vocal group of backbench MPs supported Leave. Following the referendum there were further splits between those wanting a 'hard' or 'soft' Brexit with persistent criticism of May. The Europsceptics formed the European Research Group (ERG) which sought to push for what they regarded as a 'true' Brexit - outside of the single market and customs union. Others on the pro-European side were also unconvinced by May's handling of Brexit and left the Party altogether to create Change UK. The downfall of May and election of Johnson led to a more unified position within the Conservatives as the Remainers/soft Brexiteers were marginalised. All Conservative candidates at the 2019 General Election had to pledge to vote for the withdrawal agreement which Johnson had inherited and renegotiated. In short, therefore, the Brexit issue - which had posed a serious challenge to the existing two-party system - had been absorbed into it. The Conservatives had become a Eurosceptic party and Labour a more pro-European party by the time of the election. The failure of the Labour Party - and that of the Liberal Democrats who outflanked Labour as a pro-European party - has since led Starmer to distance his party from pro-Europeanism in an attempt to win back the 'Red Wall' seats in the North and Midlands of England, although this is also going to make it more difficult to win back support from the SNP in Scotland.

Conclusion: The Future of Party Politics in Britain

The 2019 General Election results would suggest that the two-party system in England and Wales at least is in generally good health. Smaller parties, including those which had been created as a result of schism such as Change UK - were defeated heavily. Starmer has taken firm control of the Labour Party, with the apparent marginalisation of the hard left and Corbyn personally. The large electoral majority obtained by the Conservatives ought to allow Johnson to pass his legislation easily - as was seen in the parliamentary majorities secured for the repeatedly defeated withdrawal agreement and trade deal secured at the end of 2020. However, his new-found majority has created new coalitions within the Conservative Party, such as those MPs representing former 'red wall' seats demanding more investment in the North and the Midlands (linked to the Northern Research Group), who see investment and economic recovery of their constituencies as essential to holding on to them. This development poses a potentially serious challenge to a party which has been committed to a free-market economy for several decades. Another emerging faction has been those calling into question what they regard as unequal and restrictive measures designed to stop Covid-19, namely the Covid Recovery Group (formed late 2020). Hence, although a formal Conservative split is not on the cards, the politics of internal party factions continues.

Word count: 2268 words

SDP General Election performance (in alliance with Liberal Party)

Year	Candidates	% of national vote	Number of MPs	Number of votes (millions)
1983 General Election	636	25.4	23	7.8

1987 General Election	633	22.6	22	7.3

SDP alone

Year	Candidates	% of national vote	Number of MPs	Number of votes (millions)
1983 General Election	311	11.6	6	3.5
1987 General Election	306	9.7	5	3.1

- Original SDP disbanded in 1990.

UKIP General Election performance

Year	Candidates	% of national vote	Number of MPs	Number of votes (millions)
1997 General Election	193	0.3	0	0.1
2001 General Election	428	1.5	0	0.4
2005 General Election	496	2.2	0	0.6
2010 General Election	558	3.1	0	0.9
2015 General Election	624	12.6	1	3.9
2017 General Election	378	1.8	0	0.6
2019 General Election	44	0.1	0	0.02