

They were treated as celebrities. Their views were given disproportionate respect. They never had to buy a drink at the bar. They were huge fish in the smallest of ponds, and it all went to their heads.

Those who, like myself, saw this from the inside hoped that at least David Steel, who as a youthful MP had come to Westminster with genuine idealism and no little courage, would pull them together into some effective force, but Steel's idealism had itself been eroded by too many years as a party manipulator, first as chief whip then leader.

He, too, had lost all concern for the actual issues, seen most dramatically in the famous 'Dead Parrot' policy document that nearly derailed the merger with the Social Democrats, published with devastating repercussions because he had not bothered to even read it.

He loved playing the leader, meeting and greeting new ambassadors, carrying a wreath at the Cenotaph, making the leaders' speech at conference where he dined nightly with the media's great and good but otherwise hid away in his hotel room, keeping well away from ordinary party members.

By the time I became president, he had lost any real connection with the party workers. In London, his office became known as the 'bunker'. This non-relationship with the members was the real reason he could not become leader of the newly formed Liberal Democrats in 1988. Steel's one remaining strength was his belief in the creation of a larger political force by merger with the Social Democratic Party. The formation of the Lib Dems was, above all, his achievement and a considerable one.

But as Liberal leader he hated confrontation; that's why he didn't want to hear about the nocturnal behaviour of some of those round that table because, devoid of any need to actually 'campaign' for worthwhile causes (heavens, they hated the word 'campaign') they had plenty of time for extra-mural activities. And herein lies part of the answer to the question: 'Why was Smith not questioned about the rumours beginning to emerge from his political fortress of Rochdale, rumours that at the time were publicly referred to in Private Eye?'

Apart from the fact no one would have had the courage to confront the Rochdale bully, a significant number of the wider parliamentary party had a guilty secret of one sort or another. They had no desire for questions to be raised about what MPs did in their ample spare time.

Smith was protected as much by the culture within the parliamentary party as Savile was by the culture within the BBC.

Oh, I remember them all.

There was the MP who virtually sustained the whisky industry on his own. If you lit a match too close to his breath you could have made Guy Fawkes Night look like a



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Looming large: Smith was protected as by the culture within the parliamentary as Savile was by the culture within the BBC, says Wilson

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