

In August there was the defection of eight prominent Tory ex-students, including three recent ex-chairmen of the Federation of Conservative Students from the period of co-operation with the left.

With rather rabid Thatcherites now in control of the FCS, the large minority of Tory students who voted for one of the defectors, Anna Soubry, for the post of chairman (sic) last year — she only lost by 119 votes to 128 — will be tempted to follow them. The defecting wets had planned to make a bigger splash at the beginning of this academic year, but their plans were leaked, and they had to go early.

The Tory right accuses them of never having really been Tories at all, and they will accept, when pressed, that they were 'not perfectly at home' with the core of conservatism despite their seniority in the party. That does not mean that others will not follow them. *Daily Telegraph* leaders (they had one headed 'Steady the Buffs' after Norman St. John Stevas's warning of the dangers of the SDP) are not likely to stem the flow.

The SDP's student organiser, ex-Young Communist John Mumford (it is two years since he left the YCL) will be trying to capitalise on this and his own success last May in being elected as full-time student union official at the London School of Economics on an SDP ticket.

Mumford estimates that there are 1,200 SDP students at the moment, and hopes for 2,500 by Christmas, after a publicity campaign including a speaking tour by SDP leaders.

But he won't necessarily accept the leaders' line. He expects the students to act as a left within the party, moving closer to the community politics wing of the Liberals and aiming to work in a similar way in localities, as well as in colleges.

Relations between the SDP students and the left alliance, a grouping of Labour, Liberal, Communist and non-aligned students, are so far rather cautious, on both sides, but it is likely that many SDP activists — including ex-Tories — will want to contest next summer's elections for sabbatical posts as Left Alliance candidates, though some of those who have come in with no political background may be keener to stand alone.

Outside the student world, the next batch of Labour defectors is planned for this autumn, and, as well as a number of MPs, is expected to include even more councillors. The reselection process in those areas where elections are due next May will concentrate the minds of a lot of Labour councillors over the next few weeks.

Those elections will probably produce the

next major publicity boost. All councillors in the London boroughs are up for re-election, as well as a third in the boroughs in the metropolitan counties, a third in some non-metropolitan districts, and all seats in the Scottish regional councils.

Already the SDP has reached agreements locally with the Liberals in Birmingham (where all seats are being contested because of redrawing of boundaries) and Sheffield to share the seats 50-50, to the fury of the community activists in the Association of Liberal Councillors who believe the two parties should plough their own furrows.

The prospect of an SDP/Liberal majority on Birmingham city council must be making SDP publicists' mouths water, though what they would actually do with it remains an open question. Grand conclusions would be drawn, based on Birmingham's position at the border of the Labour north and the Tory south. It is often argued that the Midlands is where the last election was won and lost.

After that the crystal ball fades, though there is no doubt the SDP will be looking for further coups to maintain momentum.

This almost American concern with 'the big mo' is perhaps partly a matter of style. But it is not just style. For the SDP the 1983/84 general election will be, to use an inappropriately vulgar phrase, shit or bust.

It is a party which is not yet dug in to political life. So far its now 60,000 membership — growing, but perhaps not quite as fast as expected — shows little sign of engaging in continuous political activity directed towards the public at large in the localities. It is involved in policy formation and thrashing out a constitution (though some of that will be quite interesting, for example various proposals to keep a minimum number of seats for women on leading bodies).

That may change, though there are undoubtedly many in the party who do not see what one might call 'micro-political' activity as important, thinking that pulling the levers at the 'macro' level will do.

For such a party, each election is crucial; and its first general election, if it does not bring great success, could herald a serious crisis.

SDP

The Social Democrats have managed to maintain their momentum since their remarkably successful launch in March, and their hopes of continuing to do so, at least until next summer, look secure.

Roy Jenkins did so well at Warrington that even Labour leaders have to be alert to avoid referring to Doug Hoyle's election as a 'defeat'. The SDP's rating in the opinion polls has not so far faded, as it seemed at one time that it might. There have been and will be downs as well as ups, but the August Gallup poll showed support of 19% compared with 12% in July — partly no doubt the effect of Warrington.