

# Liberal Democrat History Group

Newsletter 10    March 1996    £2.50

*The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to promote the discussion and research of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Party and the SDP.*

## Contents

### Special issue: *The Liberal Party and the Great War*

Dr Michael Brock <i>July–August 1914: Achieving the Seemingly Impossible</i>	2
Dr Malcolm Baines <i>The Impact of War</i> Book Review: <i>The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935</i> by Trevor Wilson	3
John Grigg <i>Asquith and Lloyd George: Common Misunderstandings</i>	4
Tony Little <i>'My Own Most Loved'</i> Book Review: <i>H. H. Asquith: Letters to Venetia Stanley</i> edited by Michael & Eleanor Brock	7
Dr Jeremy Smith <i>The Liberals and Ireland 1912–1916</i>	8
Mark Egan <i>Labour, the Liberal Party and the Great War</i>	9
Richard S. Grayson <i>The Liberal Party and Peace-Making: Versailles and the League of Nations</i>	11
Professor Chris Wrigley <i>The First World War and Liberal Values</i>	13

### *The Liberal Party and the Great War*

The last wholly Liberal government of Britain came to an end on 19 May 1915, when, in the face of widespread discontent with the progress of the war, a broad-based coalition government was formed with the Unionist (Conservative) Party. A year and a half later, the Prime Minister, Asquith, resigned after further dissatisfaction with the conduct of the war, being replaced by



'KEEP THE HOME FIRES BURNING'  
SOLO BY OUR OPTIMISTIC PREMIER.

Lloyd George at the head of a primarily Unionist government. The Liberal Party split, and fought the post-war election in 1918 in two opposing camps. Reunification took a further five years, and by the time it came Lloyd George has been ejected from the premiership and the Labour Party had overtaken the Liberals to become the main opposition to the right. Subsequent collapse to minor third-party status was swift.

The Great War is clearly crucial to the story of the decline of the Liberal Party, and it therefore seemed an appropriate focus for this first 'themed' issue of the Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter. I hope you enjoy and are stimulated by the eight articles and book reviews which follow.

We hope to repeat the innovation of a themed issue about once a year; suggestions for future themes are of course most welcome.

*Duncan Brack (Editor)*

# July - August 1914: Achieving the Seemingly Impossible

*British entry into the war offered the first test of Liberal values and of the calibre of Prime Minister Asquith. Dr Michael Brock examines the events surrounding the declaration of war on 4 August 1914.*

---

When Asquith died, the tributes in the House of Commons included one by T.P. O'Connor. Referring to August 1914, 'T.P.' said: 'On his will and ... opinion depended largely ... the tremendous and tragic question of peace or war. In that hour he did not fail.'

The justice of that assessment is undeniable. No British government could have averted the war. The German general staff were convinced that 1914 represented virtually their last chance of achieving a German hegemony. Within a very few years the growth of Russian power would have made that objective unobtainable. There was no possibility of the French conceding German supremacy without a fight. Desperately anxious as the French government was to enlist Britain's aid, it was determined to resist even if that should be withheld. It is almost equally impossible to see how any British government could have avoided being drawn into the war at an early stage. These constraints on the Liberal Cabinet's actions do not make Asquith's conduct of the crisis less impressive or less important. Had he been less sure-footed, Britain would have entered the war too late and as a divided country. In that event, the ensuing disasters would almost certainly have exceeded those which history records. We recoil from the conclusion that the horrors of 1914-18 could have been exceeded, but during the twentieth century we have had to become used to conclusions from which we recoil.

---

*Had Asquith been less sure-footed, Britain would have entered the war too late and as a divided country.*

---

Until the last days of July 1914, most British people had no expectation of aggression from Germany. In December 1913, when the editor of the *Morning Post*, one of the leading Conservative papers, mentioned 'the German danger' to his friend Rudyard Kipling, the response was: 'Does it occur to you that a betrayed Ulster will repeat 1688 in the shape of a direct appeal to Germany?' The Ulster crisis had become an all-absorbing preoccupation in Britain. Conservative spokesmen had long made clear that the Ulster protestants would prefer the Kaiser's rule to that of Dublin. On 27 May 1914 a Conservative MP, giving the toast when a party of German journalists visited London, 'affirmed the unbreakable ties of friendship between [the] two peoples'. In June, when the British fleet visited Kiel during the celebrations for the widening of the Kiel Canal, the *Morning Post* and the *Daily Graphic* (also a Conservative paper) hailed the Kaiser as Britain's friend. On 23 July, when the *Morning Post* reported a rumour that the Austrian government planned to send very severe demands to Serbia, its leader writer commented 'that is hardly a credible forecast'. The Liberals had more general reasons for dismissing the possibility of trouble from Germany; they were preeminently a pacific party. During July Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, told first a Mansion House audience and then the House of Commons that 'relations with Germany' were 'very much better' than they had been 'a few years ago'. On the day of that assurance to the

Commons (and of the *Morning Post's* leader) the Austrian government sparked off the crisis by sending to Belgrade the most formidable demands ever sent within living memory to an independent country.

In the aftermath of that ultimatum, Asquith came under pressure from both sides. On 25 July, John Simon, then Attorney General and a cabinet minister, speaking at Belle Vue, Manchester, said: 'Let us all resolve that ... the part which this country plays shall from beginning to end be the part of a mediator'. Two days later the first leader in *The Times* took the opposite stance and assumed that the British government would stand by the other two entente powers, France and Russia: 'Should there arise ... a desire to test our adhesion to the principles that inform our friendships, and that thereby guarantee the balance of power in Europe, we shall be found ... ready and determined to vindicate them with the whole strength of the Empire'.

Asquith started with the hope that Britain would be able to keep out of the war. 'We are within measurable, or imaginable, distance of a real Armageddon,' he told Venetia Stanley on 24 July; 'happily there seems ... no reason why we should be more than spectators'. The entente with France fell short of an alliance. Sir Edward Grey, the foreign secretary, had exchanged letters with the French Ambassador in November 1912. This exchange bound the two countries to consult together in a crisis, but recorded that 'the disposition ... of the French and British fleets' was 'not based upon an engagement to cooperate in war'.

The 1839 treaty guaranteeing the neutrality of Belgium left open the crucial questions. Now that Germany and Austria-Hungary faced three entente powers, the Belgian ministers were understandably wary of asking to be rescued if attacked. They suspected that their 'rescuers' might be more concerned with their own safety than with that of Belgium. Whether the Belgian Cabinet would overcome these suspicions, and call on the guarantor countries for military aid in case of invasion, depended mainly on the routes through Belgium which the German army might take in an attack on France. In August 1911 Henry Wilson had told Asquith, and some other members of the Committee of Imperial Defence, that the German divisions were likely to confine their flanking movement to the Ardennes, and to remain south and east of the Sambre-Meuse river line. It was generally expected that, if this route were chosen, the Belgian government would offer no more than token resistance and would avoid calling on the guarantor powers. 'I do not say,' the Belgian foreign minister told a British official in September 1911, 'that if the invasion took place in that corner of the kingdom ... we should make our last stand there or that we should die there to the last man'. Early in 1914, what looked like a version of the Schlieffen plan, in which the German advance was restricted in this way, was published in a French military journal. It was said to have been taken from German staff papers mislaid in a railway carriage. A comment on this article by the political director of the Belgian foreign ministry survives. He wrote that, if the German army took this Ardennes route, the best course would be to enter a formal protest, to withdraw the Belgian troops

north of the Meuse, and to stay quiet. It was not appreciated that the German general staff meant to attempt the apparently impossible.

On 29 July the Cabinet reviewed Britain's obligations should continental Europe be engulfed in war. Two days later Grey asked the French and German governments for assurances that they would respect Belgian neutrality. While the French complied, the German government refused to do so. On Sunday 2 August the leaders of the Conservative opposition, Bonar Law and Lansdowne, told Asquith of their view that 'it would be fatal to the honour and security of the United Kingdom to hesitate in supporting France and Russia at the present juncture,' and offered their 'full support' for 'any measures' which the government might consider necessary. Bonar Law's letter did not mention Belgium, but for Asquith it was the key. The Cabinet met twice on that Sunday. At the first meeting, it was decided that the Royal Navy would not allow the German fleet to enter the Channel and bombard the French coast. This decision had less importance than was thought; the German battle fleet was not designed to operate at any considerable distance from its bases. At the second meeting, the Cabinet agreed that a 'substantial violation' of Belgian neutrality would 'compel us to take action'. In replying to the Conservative leaders, Asquith had written: 'it is right, ... before deciding ... what action on our part is necessary, to know what are the circumstances and conditions of any interference with Belgian territory'. Even these cautious decisions brought the resignations of Burns and Morley.

By midday on 3 August, it was clear that Asquith's calm, wait-and-see approach had been the right one. As the ministers dispersed after the second of those Sunday Cabinets, an ultimatum demanding passage for the German armies through the whole of Belgium was being delivered in Brussels. This transformed the government's position. Liberals were very doubtful about intervening on the side of France and Russia, but about the need to honour Britain's obligations under the Belgian treaty, and to prevent a small and pacific country from being trampled underfoot, they had no doubt. Grey's plea in the Commons on Monday afternoon for intervention met with overwhelming support. An ultimatum was sent to Berlin

to expire at 11 p.m. (London time) on Tuesday 4 August. That hour represented the first moment at which the British Navy could be in complete readiness. A leading Conservative historian, Lord Blake, concludes: 'Asquith's able management, aided by German folly, had achieved the seemingly impossible – a united Liberal Cabinet convinced that England must fight.'

---

*By midday on 3 August, it was clear that Asquith's calm, wait-and-see approach had been the right one.*

---

Asquith's conduct during the crisis needs little explanation. His ability to wait for the right opportunity, and to prevent cabinet splits, had been proved time and again by July 1914. The clue to the 'German folly' lies in the fact that the last word lay, not with the government, but with the general staff. The Schlieffen plan had been much modified by 1914. Specifically, it had been decided some five years earlier that the great encircling movement must be achieved without any incursion into the Netherlands. This meant that, to open the route through central and northern Belgium, the German army had to seize Liège. It was the difficulty of doing this quickly which had convinced so many observers that the Ardennes route would be used. Surely the general staff would not adopt a strategy which seemed beyond German strength when it was subject to an enormous initial difficulty. It was not known that Moltke and his colleagues had just acquired an overwhelming temptation to embark on this reckless gamble. They had seven new howitzers of 420 mm (16.5 inches) calibre – just enough to batter down the Liège forts. That their strategy entailed political risks even greater than the military ones was of secondary importance to them. Asquith controlled his country's decisions; the Kaiser and his Chancellor had no such control.

*Dr Michael Brock was Warden of Nuffield College, Oxford, 1978–88, and Warden of St George's House, Windsor Castle, 1988–93. Publications include The Great Reform Act (1973); H.H. Asquith: Letters to Venetia Stanley (ed., with E.H. Brock, 1982); 'The Liberal Tradition', in Liberal Party Politics (ed. Vernon Bogdanor, 1983).*

## The Impact of War

*Book Review: The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935 by Trevor Wilson (Collins, London, 1966)*

*Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Baines*

---

Trevor Wilson's book is now best known for setting out the metaphor of the early twentieth century Liberal Party as an ailing man run over by the bus of the First World War. This has provoked considerable debate: over the issue of the man's illness; whether it was fatal or not; and even, more recently, over whether he was ill at all. With such a powerful image, it is not surprising that the bulk of the book looks at the Liberal Party's reaction to the war. The remainder is a very long coda, covering the Liberals' sorry performance in the postwar elections until 1935, when it was finally clear to all that the party was in near-terminal collapse.

The war's impact is seen primarily in ideological terms; in particular Wilson argues that it fitted better with both Conservative and Labour world outlooks than it did with Liberal. For the Tories, the war reinforced their role as the nationalist party *par excellence*,

and confirmed their pre-war anti-German jingoism as justified by events. For Labour, despite its pacifist wing, the war provided an opportunity for the trade unions to become part of the political establishment, and powerfully reinforced impulses towards economic collectivism everywhere. By contrast, the war dealt a serious blow to a whole range of Liberal beliefs. Internationalism, free trade, peace with Ireland, and personal liberties were all put under question. The pressure under which the Asquith government gave way to introduce censorship and the draconian Defence of the Realm Act left many Liberals doubtful that the party was still a fit custodian of their values.

More recent commentators have often labelled Wilson as falling firmly into the Asquithian camp in the perpetual dispute over which of the two great Liberal leaders, Asquith or Lloyd

George, was more to blame for the party's demise. In fact his position is more complicated. Whilst recognising the abilities of both men, he points out that neither were at their best when it came to piloting the Liberal Party through the war years. Asquith is presented as wishing to remain in office at any price, and making a series of debilitating concessions to Unionist opinion throughout the final period of his premiership – though other commentators, notably Roy Jenkins, have seen this as skilful politicking on Asquith's part. Neither does Wilson have any plaudits for Lloyd George. His political manoeuvring is described as hopeless – for example, alienating Bonar Law in 1915 when he favoured McKenna rather than the Tory leader for the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer. Wilson's view is that if Lloyd George had been more politically adept he could have become Prime Minister twelve to eighteen months earlier than he did.

The greatest strength of this book is that it is a joy to read, particularly if the reader already has a firm grasp of the framework of events and personalities. It is a study focused on parliamentary politics and laced with quotations and comments from often minor, but nonetheless idiosyncratic and entertaining, figures involved in the Liberal Party's decline. One particularly good example of this is the meeting at the Reform Club immediately after Asquith's resignation from the premiership on 8 December 1916. Wilson describes how a taxi had drawn up at the club containing Josiah Wedgwood, MacCallum Scott and Winston Churchill. Stemming from different background within the pre-war Liberal Party; all three had gone their separate political ways by 1924.

Another interesting point Wilson makes is that Asquith does not move into opposition to Lloyd George after December 1916 while the war continues. He does not oppose the government on

such potentially Liberal issues as the attempt to introduce conscription to Ireland, or to support the Lansdowne negotiated peace initiative. Similarly Lloyd George acts in March 1917 to prevent a Coalition Liberal being run against an official Liberal at the Aberdeen South byelection. As late as 1918, Wilson considers that Lloyd George could have put his weight behind Liberal reconciliation, as the party was not split into two hostile camps at that point in either Parliament or the country. The war was therefore not something that split the party irrevocably, but rather an event which destroyed long-standing Liberal verities and removed the party's self-confidence that it had a role to play in postwar Britain – only partially restored by free trade in 1923 and *We Can Conquer Unemployment* in 1929. Many Liberals began to see that the inexorable logic of the two-party system most saw as axiomatic led them towards joining either the Labour or the Conservative Parties.

Despite its thirty-year age, Trevor Wilson's book has a number of interesting things to say about the Liberal Party and the war years. Most notably, it focuses on the ideological impact of the Great War, rather than its effect on any weaknesses in the Liberal position which already existed in 1914. In that respect, it is part of the historiography of Liberal decline which blames the war rather than looking for sociological explanation or the politics of the 1920s. In Wilson's view, the party was fatally wounded by the 1918 election, and as such his study is still of value to anyone interested in the story of the party's shift from government to the margins of British politics.

*Malcolm Baines completed his Ph.D thesis on The Survival of the British Liberal Party 1932–59. He is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee.*

## Asquith and Lloyd George: Common Misunderstandings

*The rivalry between Asquith and Lloyd George grew out of the Great War. John Grigg argues that the points of similarity between the two were at least as important as their differences.*

---

H.H. Asquith is often described as the last Liberal Prime Minister, and so is David Lloyd George. Both statements are true, though in different senses. Lloyd George was the last Liberal to be Prime Minister of Britain, as the leader of a coalition. Asquith was the last head of a Liberal government.

It is also repeatedly said that the split between Asquith and Lloyd George at the end of 1916 contributed to, if it did not wholly cause, the destruction of the Liberal Party as one of the alternating parties of government (under our peculiar electoral system), and its relegation to third-party status. This is true as well, though it needs to be explained that the characters of the two men, and their relationship with each other before 1916, have been gravely misunderstood and misrepresented since their time.

Rival historiographical camps have sustained a tedious feud in which the truth has been obscured. It has become normal to expect any book with good things to say of Asquith to rubbish Lloyd George, and vice versa. A recent example of the former is Professor George Cassar's *Asquith as War Leader*, in which the author is fair to Asquith but shows himself incapable of giving any credit at all to Lloyd George. But there are plenty of examples

of the opposite distortion, deriving in part from Lord Beaverbrook's preemptive treatment of the subject.

Asquith partisans have tended to depict their man as noble, 'Roman', patrician, and free from base motives, while they have presented Lloyd George as a crude demagogue and relentless self-seeker. On the other side, Lloyd George's dynamism and modernity have been contrasted with Asquith's caution, lethargy and essential conservatism. Yet the reality of both men is far more interesting, and their points of similarity are at least as important as their differences.

Of course they were different in a number of obvious ways. One was English (of Yorkshire extraction), the other Welsh. One was a classical scholar, a prize product of Balliol College, Oxford; the other had little Latin and no Greek, and never went to a university. Asquith enjoyed London dinner parties and weekends spent in large country houses. He married (as his second wife) an upper-class woman, and another became his close confidante. Lloyd George steered clear of high society, and resisted the aristocratic embrace, literally and metaphorically. Both his wife and his mistress were middle-class. Asquith had (like Gladstone) a certain contempt for businessmen, and a strong distaste for the

press. Lloyd George was quite at home with both, and made good use of them. These are a few major respects in which the two men differed, and one could add to the list.

But now consider what they had in common. Both were essentially self-made men, and both came from Nonconformist backgrounds. Asquith's father was a small employer in the Yorkshire wool trade. He was brought up as a Congregationalist, and his childhood was spent at Morley, near Leeds. But when he was twelve his maternal uncle paid for him to live in London as a day boy at the City of London School. From there he won a classical scholarship to Balliol. Lloyd George's upbringing was in North Wales, where his maternal uncle and guardian (his father having died when he was an infant) was also a small employer – the master cobbler in the village of Llanystumdwy, near Criccieth – as well as being a minister in the small Baptist sect known as the Disciples of Christ. In this sect Lloyd George was raised, but he nevertheless went to a village school run by the established church. He left school before he was 12, and at 14 passed the Law Society's preliminary examination, on his way to becoming an attorney.

Clearly Asquith was the better educated of the two, but Lloyd George was less disadvantaged in mental training than might appear. He was well taught at school, and at home was given every encouragement to read. His father, a schoolmaster, had bequeathed a small library of books, which included major works of history and literature. Thanks to this Lloyd George certainly read far more in his early years than (for instance) the apparently far more privileged Winston Churchill.

The fact that he and Asquith both came from Nonconformist homes is obviously important, but it is even more so that they both reacted strongly against the restrictiveness of their upbringing. Neither was a natural puritan, and both had a powerful urge to escape from the limitations of their early environment. The boredom that Lloyd George admitted to feeling during his childhood at Llanystumdwy was matched by the boredom felt by Asquith when, as a schoolboy, he lodged with a doctor's family in Liverpool Road, Islington. Lloyd George remained for the whole of his life ostensibly Nonconformist, and was genuinely attached to two aspects of the chapel worship he knew, Welsh hymns and sermons. Asquith gradually drifted away from Nonconformity into a vague Anglicanism, and in any case was never regarded by Nonconformists as their supreme political champion, as Lloyd George was. But the two men were alike in abandoning Nonconformist orthodoxy, both in belief and practice. They became essentially free-thinkers, and equally free from sexual inhibition. Lloyd George, however, though by no means a total abstainer, remained a far more moderate drinker than Asquith.

Both were lawyers, a professional group never anything like as dominant in British politics as in America. Asquith as a barrister, and Lloyd George as a solicitor, belonged to different branches of the profession; but since in Wales a solicitor could appear in court to plead for his client the difference was to that extent less marked in their case. The political careers of both men were boosted by lucky forensic breaks. Asquith's appearance as junior counsel before the Parnell Commission of Enquiry in 1889 brought him to wide public notice, and the previous year Lloyd George's star performance in the Llanfrothen Burial Case had made him a household name in Wales. Asquith was already an MP, having been elected in 1886 at the age of 33. Lloyd George joined him in Parliament in 1890, at the even earlier age of 27.

The fact that one followed the other as Prime Minister

produced the phenomenon of a lawyer in the top political job for a continuous period of 14 years, an experience unknown since the younger Pitt. Since Lloyd George's fall in 1922 the only other lawyers to reach the premiership have been Clement Attlee (whose career as a barrister was very brief, comprising only four court appearances) and Margaret Thatcher (who practised, on and off, for five years as a barrister specialising in tax.)

Though not natural puritans, Asquith and Lloyd George were certainly natural rulers, sharing an exalted self-confidence and unlimited ambition. On policy there were some differences, though more of emphasis and specific judgment than of principle. For example, Asquith's support for the Boer War, and Lloyd George's opposition to it, are too often taken to indicate that the former was an Imperialist, the latter a Little Englander. In fact, Lloyd George believed in the British Empire no less firmly than Asquith – if anything more so, because he had visited Canada as a young man, and had been inspired by what he saw. He opposed the Boer War not because it was Imperial, but because he judged it to be a grave mistake, not least from the point of view of enlightened British Imperialism. Asquith judged the matter differently, though there was nothing of the jingo in his outlook.

On social policy, both were exponents of the New Liberalism, departing from the Gladstonian doctrine that the state should concern itself as little as possible with improving 'the condition of the people'. Old age pensions were announced by Asquith in his last budget, and then put through by Lloyd George when he succeeded as Chancellor of the Exchequer. In the Cabinet discussions on Lloyd George's epoch-making 1909 budget Asquith gave him solid support, as Lloyd George readily acknowledged, though in the ensuing controversy the Chancellor's colourful rhetoric was not always to his leader's taste. The idea that the two men were divided on the substance of social reform is largely illusory.

---

*Though not natural puritans, Asquith and Lloyd George were certainly natural rulers, sharing an exalted self-confidence and unlimited ambition.*

---

Another false contrast is between Asquith's supposed caution and Lloyd George's boldness. In reality both men were adventurers and, on occasion, gamblers. The words 'wait and see' used by Asquith in a Parliamentary answer in 1910 have stuck to him as evidence of a temporising and vacillating character. But, as Roy Jenkins cogently explains, in the circumstances they were used 'in no apologetic and hesitant way, but rather as a threat'. Though it can reasonably be argued that Lloyd George was the more dynamic of the two, there were many occasions when Asquith took masterful initiatives, including the coal dispute in 1912, the crisis leading to the declaration of war in 1914, and the formation of the first wartime coalition in 1915.

Beyond question Asquith was more suited to leadership in peacetime than in wartime, and this became increasingly apparent. As he said himself, he was not good at carrying 'the fiery cross'; his style of speaking was impressive rather than stirring. He also found it harder than Lloyd George to adapt himself to the demands of a war that was without precedent in British, or indeed world, history. But nobody should imagine that Britain's war leadership was transformed from fumbling incompetence to smooth efficiency when Lloyd George took over from Asquith. There were improvements, certainly, among which some were vital. But there

was also a debit side; Asquith, at any rate until his powers began to wane, was a better administrator than Lloyd George.

Together the two men achieved great things and, despite their differences of temperament and cast of mind, they normally got on well, unless and until mischief was made between them. During the eight years that they were next-door neighbours in Downing Street they met regularly, when Parliament was sitting, to discuss the day's business. Each recognised in the other qualities that he did not himself possess.

Unfortunately mischief often was made, particularly by Asquith's wife, Margot, and by one or two of his colleagues who detested or feared Lloyd George, notably Reginald McKenna, Lewis Harcourt and Walter Runciman. These people were forever planting in Asquith's mind the idea that Lloyd George was intriguing with journalists and other politicians with a view to taking his place. Of course Lloyd George was by no means incapable of complaining about his leader, but usually he did so in a momentary fit of impatience, not as part of any deliberate plan. In any case he was not the only member of the Asquith Cabinet to exploit contacts in the press, and those who accused him to Asquith were among the worst offenders. (A somewhat analogous situation existed later in the century when another Welsh Chancellor of the Exchequer, Roy Jenkins, was seen as a threat to another Yorkshire-born Prime Minister, Harold Wilson).

During the latter part of 1916 there was a growing consensus that Asquith was no longer equal to his task. His loss of vigour and grip was manifest. Many of his warmest admirers felt that he should, at the very least, devolve some of the practical work of war direction. It was also widely felt that Lloyd George should assume the effective day-to-day running of the war, and this feeling was shared by Lloyd George himself. Sadly it was not shared by Asquith, who continued to behave as though he had an almost divine right to the premiership (an attitude shown by some others who have occupied the post for a long time).

---

*Both were great Liberals and formidable leaders, with far more in common than most people, even now, are prepared to admit. Both had outstanding records of achievement, and much of their best work was done in partnership.*

---

Contrary to the mythology retrospectively fostered by both camps, there was no disagreement on war aims or the handling of peace initiatives. The notion that Asquith was for a compromise peace while Lloyd George was determined to fight through to victory is entirely without foundation. On this issue they were at one. Lloyd George was, indeed, hawkish about the prosecution of the war, but so too was Asquith – who shared the view that any compromise the Germans would agree to while still occupying Belgium and a substantial area of France would be the equivalent of a victory for them, or at any rate an armed truce very much in their favour. As he put it to the War Committee, 'to the Allies a draw was much the same as defeat'.

It is a very great pity that Asquith did not stand aside voluntarily at the end of 1916, offering to serve under another Prime Minister for the sake of national unity. The realistic alternatives were Lloyd George and the Conservative leader, Bonar Law. Law was not prepared to form a government without Asquith, and anyway regarded Lloyd George as the best man for

the job. Asquith refused to serve under any other leader. So Lloyd George formed a coalition with Conservative and Labour support, but with only about half of his own party backing him. The Asquithians became a loyal and patriotic opposition, but an opposition nonetheless.

The evidence suggests that Lloyd George would have genuinely preferred Asquith to remain as Prime Minister, with himself as chairman of a new War Committee. Probably this would not have worked, and Asquith may well have been right to reject the proposal in the end. Whoever was running the war needed to be leader in name as well as in fact. But Asquith could have served under Lloyd George – say, as Lord Chancellor – and his presence in the government would have been a major asset. In somewhat comparable circumstances in the next war, Neville Chamberlain agreed to serve under Winston Churchill, with immense benefit to the country and, incidentally, the Conservative Party. Apart from the national loss caused by Asquith's attitude in December 1916, the Liberal Party was divided by it. Thus began the process whereby the Liberals lost their position as one of the two dominant parties in the state.

Asquith's resentment of the move by Lloyd George, Law and Edward Carson to force a change in the system of war direction was neither reasonable nor – in view of an episode earlier in his own career – morally consistent. In 1905 he, Edward Grey and R.B. Haldane had entered into a similar compact to force the leader of their party, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, to become a more or less ornamental Prime Minister in the Liberal government soon to come to power. The plan was that the three would refuse to take office under him unless he agreed to go to the House of Lords, leaving Asquith the effective head of the government as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons. In the event the plan came to nothing; Campbell-Bannerman, appointed Prime Minister, did not go to the Lords, and Asquith, offered the Treasury, promptly accepted it without consulting his colleagues.

The stand taken by Lloyd George, Law and Carson in 1916 was open and widely publicised. It was not, like the compact just described, a hole-and-corner affair. Moreover the trio demanding a change in the system of war direction did so because they believed, justifiably, that the nation's survival was at stake. When Asquith refused to meet the demand, Lloyd George resigned. Any moral difference between the two 'plots' seems very much in Lloyd George's favour.

Yet he is by no means blameless for failure to heal the Liberal rift at the end of the war. He should have pressed Asquith to join the British delegation to the peace conference, and should have gone out of his way to reconcile the separated brethren. Instead, he pursued the will-o'-the-wisp of a centre party involving his Coalition Liberals and moderate Conservatives. All in all, he and Asquith between them put the Liberal Party out of serious business for the indefinite future.

Both, however, were great Liberals and formidable leaders, with far more in common than most people, even now, are prepared to admit. Both had outstanding records of achievement, and much of their best work was done in partnership.

*John Grigg is an author and journalist. His publications include the much-acclaimed *The Young Lloyd George* (1973), *Lloyd George: The People's Champion 1902–11* (1978) and *Lloyd George: From Peace to War 1912–16* (1985). His history of *The Times*, vol. 6, 1966–81, is now available in paperback.*

# 'My Own Most Loved'

Book Review: H. H. Asquith: *Letters to Venetia Stanley* edited by Michael & Eleanor Brock (Oxford, 1982)  
Reviewed by **Tony Little**

---

As Britain entered the First World War, Asquith had been Prime Minister for six years. A quick-brained lawyer, whose easy grasp of administrative affairs gave an impression of laziness, Asquith had led one of the most successful governments of the twentieth century. As a Liberal Imperialist, in 1906 he had helped broadened the party's appeal against that wily campaigner Joe Chamberlain. In office, he had presided over a programme of social reform which had allowed the party to escape some of the dead ends to which Gladstonianism had seemed to condemn Liberals. His Cabinet contained, almost harmoniously, some of the most charismatic characters seen in British politics, including Lloyd George and Churchill. And yet in 1914 his was a government in trouble, deep in that quagmire of British ambition, a solution to the Irish Question. At an election in 1914 the Liberals would almost certainly have lost.

As a form of relaxation, the 60 year old premier liked to write letters, and enjoyed the companionship of young clever and attractive women. Venetia Stanley was the daughter of Lord Stanley of Alderney, and originally came into his life as a friend of his daughter Violet. When their correspondence began in earnest in 1912, she was 25 years old. Effectively, the correspondence ended when, in 1915, she announced her intention to marry Edwin Montagu, a 36 year-old member of Asquith's government.

To Asquith, Venetia initially represented a frivolous distraction and relaxation from the toils of politics and from the strains of his wife Margot, well known for her sharp tongue, strong advice but limited political nous. If it had remained that way, the letters would have had little historical value. However, it is quite clear that Asquith became infatuated with Venetia. More importantly, he used her as a sounding board for political ideas and used the letters as a way of keeping her up to date with his latest thoughts. It is hard to get a full measure of her commitment to the relationship, as her letters to Asquith are not available. Almost certainly, it was not a physical relationship, but her fondness for men of power shows not only in her marriage to Montagu but her later affair with Lord Beaverbrook. (Anyone wishing to follow on the story of Venetia and Edwin Montagu should consider reading Naomi Levine's *Politics, Religion and Love* (New York University Press 1991).)

## 'A Very Treacherous Return'

The letters cover Asquith's career from the Curragh incident through the entry into war until the Dardanelles. Unfortunately, Venetia's engagement to Montagu cut short the flow of letters just as the war reached the crisis that resulted in the first coalition. Indeed, Roy Jenkins has suggested that Asquith's emotional reaction to the loss of Venetia may have led him to play the crisis badly, setting up the strains that led to Asquith's downfall at the hands of Lloyd George. These letters throw light on government thinking as the country entered the war and as it encountered the unexpected difficulties which prolonged the war beyond the expectations of most of its participants. They show the frustrations of government when effective control was in the hands of the military in France, but do not substantiate the picture sometimes

painted of Asquith as a man losing his grip as a minister. They are an important source for these early months of the war and as such have been used in Roy Jenkins' *Asquith and Beaverbrook's Politicians and the War*, though in neither case is the full flavour given, as in the selection made by the Brocks.

It is unusual for historians to complain about their sources and yet these letters have been treated with some disdain (cf Daphne Bennett's *Margot*). Asquith wrote some of them from the cabinet room and he entrusted war secrets to a complete outsider in letters sent through the ordinary post. Yet I suspect the complaints mostly arise from the wet lovey-dovey outpourings in which Asquith's letters are drenched. It is well worth persevering, however, while recognising that even great administrators have human weaknesses.

The Brocks have made a superb job of the editing. The book comes with full background explanatory text, which is nevertheless unobtrusive, and appendices giving potted biographies of the main characters and places. The degree and method of selection is given and a list provided of the full extent of the correspondence. The final years of the last truly Liberal government are portrayed with a vivid insight into the vanished Edwardian political culture, still with the confidence of a mighty empire but also unfortunately with all its snobberies, and even anti-semitism.

*Tony Little is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee and a regular book reviewer for the Newsletter.*

## Research in Progress

This column aims to assist the progress of research projects currently being undertaken, at graduate, postgraduate or similar level. If you think you can help any of the individuals listed below with their thesis - or if you know anyone who can - please get in touch with them to pass on details of sources, contacts, or any other helpful information.

**The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922-88.** Book and articles; of particular interest is the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the Liberal Party. Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Millway Close, Oxford OX2 8BJ.

**The grass roots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945-64;** the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. Ph.D thesis. Mark Egan, University College, Oxford OX1 4BH.

*If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to Duncan Brack at the address on the back page.*

# The Liberals and Ireland 1912-16

*Liberal ministers had to deal with more than the Great War during the period 1914–18. Dr Jeremy Smith examines the Liberal record on the Irish Question during this critical period.*

---

On Friday 9 February 1996 a 500lb bomb exploded in Canary Wharf, ending an eighteen-month IRA ceasefire. Writing three days later the Sinn Fein president, Gerry Adams, declared that the resumption of violence was the 'total responsibility' of the British government who 'had been guilty of criminal neglect' (*The Guardian*, 12 February 1996, p.14). At one level these were simply the words of a politician apportioning blame. Yet they carried a deeper resonance. For by linking physical force Republicanism firmly to British procrastination, Adams was positioning himself inside a long-established tradition of Irish Nationalist legitimisation (the acknowledged corollaries to this legitimisation being that a British government would only take notice of violence, and when it did take notice it was inclined to over-react). Within this paradigm most of the 'great' episodes in Irish dissent can only be understood in terms of an exasperation born of vacillation in Westminster, whether it was the Catholic Emancipatory movements of the 1820s, Fenian activity of the 1860s, the Land Wars of the late 1870s and 1880s, the development of the Irish Volunteer movement or, more recently, the emergence of the IRA. No event demonstrates the force of this Nationalist hypothesis more clearly than the Dublin Rising of 1916.

The Liberal ministry under Asquith, in power when the Rising occurred, has long been regarded as the epitome of such prevarication and apathy, enshrined in Asquith's oft-quoted phrase, 'wait and see'. Indeed, well before the Dublin Rising the Liberal government was thought hesitant and irresolute in its Irish policy – its introduction of the Home Rule Bill in April 1912, for example, being seen as the consequence of dependence upon Irish Nationalist votes in the Commons rather than any ideological commitment. During the Bill's progress, Asquith, and his witty if inattentive Chief Secretary Augustine Birrell, singly failed to confront the build-up of resistance to it or to uphold law and order in Ireland, allowing the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and later the Irish Volunteers to mobilise unchecked and the traffic in arms to escalate. An arms ban was finally introduced in December 1913, several years too late and without the political will behind it to prevent the Larne and Howth gun-running episodes in 1914. Unionist leaders Sir Edward Carson and James Craig, and Bonar Law, leader of the Conservative Party, all escaped prosecution despite their openly seditious speeches, a further show of political weakness that had rarely been extended to Irish Nationalist rhetoricians.

But, more seriously, Asquith fatally delayed his compromise plan to settle the differences between Nationalists and Unionists until the very last moment, early in 1914 – a moment of acute polarisation, with both sides highly organised, apparently well armed and thus ill-disposed to negotiate a settlement. 'As was so often and so tragically the case with British policy in Ireland, on each occasion too little was offered too late.' (P.Jalland, *The Liberals and Ireland*, London, 1980, pp 261–2).

Such prevarication and obtuseness were continued into the war. On the outbreak of hostilities the leader of the Nationalists, John Redmond, offered the Irish Volunteers to the British war

effort and requested a unified Irish Brigade, as had been granted to the Ulstermen; both were repudiated. This pointless effrontery to Redmond was compounded during the Cabinet reshuffle of 1915, when Sir Edward Carson was made Attorney-General. Yet more disastrously, the Home Rule Bill that the Nationalists had won constitutionally for Ireland was suspended for the duration of the war, a postponement that allowed physical force elements in Ireland to gain influence and eventually seize the initiative from the constitutional parties. By failing to provide any obvious recompense for the Nationalist party's loyalty to the British war effort, government prevarication provided a golden opportunity for more extreme Nationalists and Republicans, which they took in 1916. While Ireland unravelled into discord, Asquith appeared powerless and indifferent, watching passively from the cabinet table, and more concerned with writing sweet ditties to his love Venetia Stanley.

Yet to characterise the Liberal ministry as indifferent is to misunderstand its predicament and strategy. At one level Asquith would have argued that his approach was one of common sense where no viable alternative existed, and on a political question that had become, by 1910, structurally resistant to an easy, or indeed any, compromise, with Nationalists committed to all-Ireland Home Rule and Ulstermen determined to maintain nine, or at the very least six, counties of Ulster within the United Kingdom. Asquith's line was, therefore, one of damage-limitation and non-interference aimed at preventing a far more explosive situation, if not actual civil war – which he successfully achieved between 1912 and 1916 (indeed, before 1919).

---

*To characterise the Liberal ministry as indifferent is to misunderstand its predicament and strategy*

---

Yet at another level the apparent Liberal indifference had a more positive impulse behind it. Asquith realised early on that some form of temporary partition or special treatment would be needed to bring round the Ulstermen to the granting of Home Rule for the rest of Ireland. The difficulty lay in selling this to both sides. Allowing a sense of looming disaster and emergency to grow would encourage Nationalists into granting some concessions from their Bill, as was achieved by February 1914, whilst scaring Ulster into lowering its expectations; a not unreasonable scheme in light of recent research revealing strains and weaknesses within the UVF and plans for a Ulster provisional government. Thus behind Asquith's 'wait and see' there lurked a subtle attempt to manoeuvre both Irish parties into settlement. Before the success or failure of this approach could be tested, the outbreak of war deflected attention on to European affairs. But failure should not automatically be assumed. Facing the Ulstermen with the reality of implementing their rickety provisional government could well have been just the type of denouement necessary to push Carson and Craig to a settlement. (For insights on this see A. Jackson, 'Unionist Myths', *Past and Present*, 1992.)



Nor can we feasibly claim indifference for the period leading up to the Dublin Rising. Perhaps the most overlooked and undervalued fact is that Home Rule was actually put on the statute book by Asquith in September 1914, against the bitter opposition of Unionists and at some considerable political risk to his own position. The goal of O'Connell, Butt and Parnell had been won; constitutional nationalism had been vindicated. And far from laying the groundwork for the Rising, its suspension was followed by some 150–200,000 Irishmen signing up to fight in France (remember that only 1,500 Volunteers took part in the Rising). This underlines the point that before 1916, and perhaps for some time afterwards in many regions, Redmond and constitutional Nationalism remained in control of Ireland.

The charge of neglect ultimately rests upon the outbreak of the Rising in 1916. Yet in two significant respects such a claim appears groundless. Firstly, because the rising took everyone by complete surprise. Despite vague intelligence snippets, both the military and political arms of British rule in Ireland were unanimous in perceiving no serious threat to civil order. This was reinforced by Sir Roger Casement's earlier arrest off the Kerry coast and failure to land arms for the Volunteers, without which a 'practical' rebellion was impossible, just two days before Eoin MacNeill, president of the Volunteers, called off the movement's Easter manoeuvres. Thus, when Pearse and friends marched into the GPO on Easter Monday they did so to the astonishment not just of the British, but of many leaders of the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Sinn Fein, including the likes of MacNeill, Hobson and Griffith. And yet with hindsight it is difficult to imagine how the government might have obviated the very slim possibility of rebellion without slipping into coercive measures that could easily have generated the very thing they sought to destroy. In light of this the eventual scale of the Rising, so small in numerical, geographical and military terms, was surely testament not to Liberal indifference but to the relative success of a passive, non-confrontational Liberal policy.

Secondly, the galvanisation of Irish popular opinion against British rule was less the product of the Rising than of the way in which the British authorities regained control – in particular, the imposition of martial law, evidence of atrocities that gained popular

infamy, such as the Sheehy-Skeffington incident, and the manner of the subsequent executions of the rebel leaders. In other words, what roused Irish opinion towards more extremist Nationalist forces, and Sinn Fein from 1917 onwards, was a shift in policy and approach *away* from Asquith's more low-key and non-interventionist line. Interestingly, many commentators have long speculated that a more liberal reaction to the events of 1916, playing down their importance, resisting executions and restoring normalcy as quickly as possible, would have successfully alienated (if not belittled) the extreme Nationalists and Republicans, undermined what popular sympathy existed for physical force solutions and reinforced the position of the Irish Nationalists and their commitment to the constitutional path.

---

*At fault was not the failure of Liberal policy but its abandonment during the Rising itself*

---

At fault, then, was not the failure of Liberal policy but its abandonment during the Rising itself, when arguably the situation most obviously required just such a liberal approach. In its place policy was handed over to the military authorities under the command of General Maxwell, who believed the restoration of order came by unleashing a robust coercive regime. This was perhaps an inevitable shift in policy given the circumstances. But it also reflected wider political developments: the growing strength of Unionist forces within the Cabinet since their entry in 1915, and the mounting controversy over the issue of conscription. Given this drift, the Rising marked a formal shift to an approach towards which policy had been sliding since 1915. It would finally reach there in June 1916, when Lansdowne and Long obstructed Lloyd George's attempts to introduce Home Rule immediately, thereby arguably frustrating the last hope of a peaceful resolution of the Irish problem, and leading directly to the strife and civil war of 1919–22.

*Dr Jeremy Smith is Lecturer in Modern History at University of Wales, Lampeter, having previously taught at London Guildhall, LSE and Exeter. His book The Taming of Democracy: A Study of the Conservative Party 1880–1931 is due for publication in July 1996.*

## **Labour, the Liberal Party and the Great War**

*The Great War laid many of the foundations for Labour's supplanting of the Liberals in the subsequent decade.*

*Mark Egan describes the relationship between the two parties during the war.*

---

Looking back at the spectacular collapse of the Liberal Party during the 1920s – from being perhaps the dominant party in Britain's two-party system to its relegation to the margins of that system – it is surprising that the relationship between the Labour and Liberal Parties was relatively calm during the First World War. Some Labour activists opposed Britain's entry into the war; many opposed the government's handling of the conflict. However, after 1915 the Labour movement was for the first time represented in the Cabinet, and the Labour leadership neither opposed Britain's involvement in the war nor employed the internationalist socialist perspective on the conflict and its aftermath which some activists urged upon it. The harmony between the Liberal and Labour

Parties during the Great War was a sign of Labour's youth, and its continuing dependence upon its older, larger progressive partner. Nevertheless, the seeds of Labour's post-war growth were sown during the war, especially after 1917, and that growth stifles the Liberal Party to this day.

Arthur Henderson entered the Cabinet in May 1915 when Asquith formed an all-party coalition to prosecute the First World War; he was later to serve as the representative of labour in Lloyd George's coalition. Although Henderson was the first Labour MP to reach Cabinet level, the appointment was not controversial. The Liberal Party had operated an unofficial electoral pact with the Labour Party since 1903, a pact which ensured that in areas of

Liberal weakness, especially in Lancashire and London, Labour candidates would fight solely against Tories, their election buttressing the Liberal government's majority. This arrangement was especially important after 1910. There had been rumours that Ramsay Macdonald would be invited into the government then, and a formal offer of a Cabinet seat was made to Macdonald in 1914.

The Liberal strategy for dealing with the Labour Party at this time involved an attempt to integrate it into the political system as part of an anti-Conservative coalition led by the Liberals. Henderson's appointment to the Cabinet was necessary to ensure that the Labour movement was represented in the government's wartime decision-making mechanism, and confirmed the Labour Party's role as a minor party subservient to the Liberals. The Liberal Party was keen to ensure that the Labour leadership remained satisfied with this role. The only certain beneficiaries from a split between those two parties would have been the Conservatives. Consequently, prior to the outbreak of the war, the payment of MPs was introduced, and the Osborne judgement, outlawing the trade unions' political levy, was overturned. During the war, Asquith fought to retain Henderson within the government when the latter threatened to resign over the introduction of conscription, and Lloyd George expanded Labour representation in his government.

---

*The seeds of Labour's post-war growth were sown during the war, especially after 1917, and that growth stifles the Liberal Party to this day.*

---

Although friendly relations between the two parties helped strengthen the Labour Party in Parliament and hastened some policy reforms beneficial to trade unionism, many Labour activists were unhappy over their party's subservience to Liberalism. The Labour Party was split between the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the trades councils, with the former tending to be more concerned with ideological debates and opposed to the Liberals than the latter. This split, however, was easily containable because of the amorphous nature of the party. Macdonald resigned the party leadership because of his pacifist opposition to the war. He continued to play an active role in the ILP and led the faction of the party which consistently opposed the conscription, repression and censorship policies of the wartime government. It was from this quarter that active opposition to the Liberals came at a national level. ILP activists vehemently denounced much of the policy implemented by Henderson and supported by the more bellicose trade unions. That the Labour Party did not split irrevocably is a testimony to the delicate party management of Henderson, and the fact that the ILP was one of the few outlets of opposition to the government.

Debate within the Labour Party over the means and the ends of the war was intense during the 1914–18 period and led to the end of this period of Liberal/Labour cooperation. Henderson had already been unhappy with the drift of government policy on conscription and the suppression of certain labour journals when the matter of Labour representation at a conference of international socialists in Stockholm was raised in 1917. The idea of members of the British government hobnobbing with Bolsheviks and Germans was too much for Lloyd George's Cabinet to accept, and after the infamous doormat incident, when

Henderson was forced to wait outside the Cabinet Room while his fate was discussed, he resigned.

This issue united the Labour Party once more, and the party took a more critical stance of the government from then on. The Labour leadership threw itself into the task of freeing the party from its dependence on the Liberals. With the Liberal Party split over its attitude to Lloyd George's coalition, and the independent section of it offering no positive alternative to government policy, the Labour Party concentrated on enunciating its post-war aims both in foreign and domestic policy. In a manner similar to its activity during the Second World War, it formulated and publicised its election platform well before the 1918 contest was called. More importantly, Henderson tackled the organisational deficiencies of the Labour Party. The scattering of ILP branches and trades councils across the country was swiftly replaced by a more extensive network of Labour Party branches, each with individual membership and geared towards fighting the impending Parliamentary election. The uneasy relationship between socialism and trade unionism which characterised the Labour Party prior to 1918 was reformed and embodied in the 1918 constitution, which allowed the leadership to take a firmer grip on a more disciplined organisation.

At this time, no such efforts were made to strengthen Liberal organisation. Indeed, three factors served to weaken it. Whereas the Labour Party could rely on the aid of trade union labour employed domestically, the Liberal Party had no such standing organisation and many of its activists were at the front. Secondly, the Women's Liberal organisations were severely weakened by the Liberal Party's continuing ambivalence on the issue of universal adult suffrage. Finally, Liberal associations had often proved unwilling to adopt working men as candidates for Parliamentary seats, primarily because they could contribute no finance towards their election costs. This again tended to deter some potential candidates, activists and electors from supporting the Liberal cause.

Although for all but the final year of the First World War, the Labour Party lent support to the Liberals in government and in many constituencies, the war years were crucial in undermining Liberal strength and permitting Labour's rise towards power. As the Liberal leadership was discredited by splits and scandal, Henderson and his colleagues earned the Labour movement a respectability in government which was much required as Bolshevism rose to power in Russia. As Liberal associations crumbled, the Labour Party deliberately developed and streamlined its organisation. And as the Liberal government became tarnished with the illiberalism of censorship and conscription, and failed to develop a vision of the post-war world, Labour set out its support for a League of Nations and the reorganisation of industry. After the war, Liberals found that the old rallying cry of 'peace, reform, retrenchment' was devalued by changes in Ireland, in the electoral system and especially in industry, where wide-scale government control during the war had enhanced the credibility of Labour's nationalisation aims. In 1918 Labour stood for the first time on a wide-ranging platform entirely separate from the Liberals. Its success then, and in subsequent elections, reflected the failure of the Liberal attempt to integrate the Labour Party into their conception of the political system, that failure being the result of the war.

*Mark Egan is a Ph.D student at Oxford University, and a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee.*

# The Liberal Party and Peace-making: Versailles and the League of Nations

*Liberalism's final test stemming from the Great War was its attitude towards peace. Richard S. Grayson finds the party's record wanting.*

This article examines how Liberals responded to the challenges of making peace with defeated enemies in 1918–19, and the implications this had for the party afterwards. As is widely known, issues of whether to fight in 1914, and even more, how to fight later in the war, had been deeply divisive issues for Liberals.<sup>1</sup> The Liberal Party broadly supported the entry into the war, but not all had agreed. There had been resignations from the Cabinet, and many Liberals were instrumental in the formation of the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), most notably Charles Trevelyan.<sup>2</sup> The UDC criticised the whole nature of pre-war diplomacy, and looked towards a new world order in which parliaments would democratically control foreign policies, and in which diplomacy would not be conducted secretly. However, as the war went badly, liberalism faced even more strains; by 1916, it was deeply divided over the question of conscription. When Lloyd George replaced Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916, a bitter rivalry between the two began. It was to last until the 1920s.

It was clear by the end of the war that foreign policy was an issue that threatened the cohesiveness of the Liberal Party. How would it rise to the challenges of making a lasting peace? The overwhelming impression given by Liberal Party politicians is that they failed to establish any aims which were distinctly Liberal. Two of its leading figures, however, did at least try: David Lloyd George,<sup>3</sup> and Winston Churchill.<sup>4</sup>

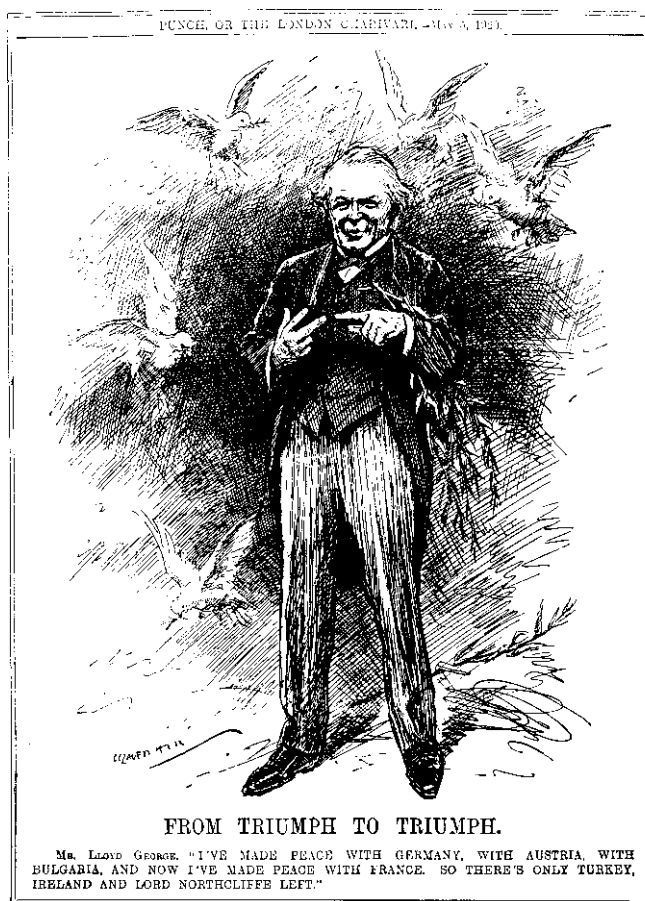
The first did not try for very long. Lloyd George put his views forward at a meeting of Liberals MPs in 10 Downing Street on 12 November 1918. He pledged that there would be no revenge peace, using the harsh settlement that Germany had imposed on France in 1871<sup>5</sup> as a warning. However, only a few weeks later, such sentiments were swept aside in the fervour of the 1918 general election campaign. Lloyd George's coalition allies, the Conservatives, had sensed what people wanted, calling for a settlement which would punish Germany in general, and the Kaiser personally. Lloyd George's slogans soon included 'Punish the Kaiser', and 'Make Germany

Pay'.<sup>6</sup> He later complained that he had never used the popular slogan 'Hang the Kaiser',<sup>7</sup> but he had come very close. At the Paris Peace Conference (the results of which were embodied in the Treaty of Versailles), Britain and France enforced harsh penalties on Germany – penalties which many, most notably J.M. Keynes in his *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, argued could not be afforded by Germany, and would eventually lead to another conflict. To be fair to Lloyd George, he had supported plans to postpone the fixing of Germany's exact reparations liabilities, in the belief that in more settled times, more generous terms could be given to the Germans.<sup>8</sup> However, when he returned to Britain

to justify Versailles, he was still using the language of punishment. Despite telling the House of Commons in April 1919, 'We want a peace which will be just, but not vindictive', he added: 'We want a stern peace, because the occasion demands it. The crime demands it.' Later, in July, he commented: 'The terms are in many respects terrible terms to impose upon a country. Terrible were the deeds which it requires.'<sup>9</sup> Understandably then, Lloyd George's pandering to domestic political pressures demanding revenge has been severely criticised by some historians.<sup>10</sup>

Winston Churchill advocated magnanimity for longer. He too feared the effects of an 1871-style settlement; writing to a constituent, in November 1918, over calls to make Germany pay for the full cost of the war, he argued: '... that it was physically impossible for them [Germany] to pay, and that a Treaty drawn up on that

basis would be found afterwards to be valueless ...'<sup>11</sup> However, his aim was to build up Germany as a bastion with which to safeguard Europe against the Bolshevik hordes; in March 1920, he described his ideal policy as 'Peace with the German people, war on the Bolshevik tyranny.'<sup>12</sup> His growing fear of socialism in all of its forms meant that by the 1920s he was allied more closely with Conservatives than with progressive Liberals. Churchill was no nucleus around whom those calling for a new Liberal world order could form into a meaningful force.



But did the Liberal Party outside the coalition have any criticism to offer? One might expect that the Asquith Liberals would have had something to say about the punishments inflicted on Germany, but this was not so. Asquith, of course, had failed to hold his seat in the 1918 election, and his supporters were led temporarily in the House of Commons by Donald Maclean. He had no criticism of Lloyd George to make; in the final Commons debate on Versailles he praised Lloyd George, supported reparations, and supported a trial of the Kaiser. His only adverse comment was to say that he wished the exact level of reparations had already been fixed.<sup>13</sup> As even Lloyd George recognised, though, this was only likely to lead to sanctions being imposed on Germany which were harsher than they would be if the final amount was set in calmer times ahead.

So where did the Liberal visionaries group together? One might have imagined that they would find a home in the growing League of Nations Union (LNU), a cross-party pressure group which promoted the League. This was not the case for all Liberals; L.T. Hobhouse likened the League to the Holy Alliance, the group of autocratic powers which, following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, sought to stop challenges to the (illiberal) established order. In general, though, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the LNU was indeed known for containing prominent Liberals. But there were three reasons why Liberal promotion of the League had little impact on the Liberal Party. Firstly, few Liberals, as with members of other political parties, had any concrete ideas on what the League could do; those who did, such as Gilbert Murray, were widely seen as eccentric, and unrepresentative of the Liberal Party in general.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, the League was essentially a matter of consensus: most in British politics supported the idea (for very different reasons), yet few had a clear idea of exactly how it could maintain peace, and Liberals did not stand out in their advocacy of it. In fact, it was a Conservative, Robert Cecil, who was seen as its leading advocate in Britain. This was understandable considering his close involvement in writing the first draft of what became the League's Covenant.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, many Liberals had already been drawn towards the Labour Party. Their involvement in the Union of Democratic Control during the war had provided a half-way house, and by the end of the war, they found themselves more in sympathy with Ramsay MacDonald's general outlook than with Lloyd George's. As members of the UDC, they were in a position to argue for democratic control of foreign policy, disarmament, and the promotion of arbitration of disputes through the League.

So what did liberalism and the Liberal Party contribute to peace-making? As regards the Paris Peace Conference, the answer is very little. A new departure was needed, and following Versailles, Lloyd George realised that the huge reparations bill imposed on Germany posed grave threats to European security. His record in the years 1920–22 has received more credit from historians. He immediately set about trying to reduce the terms. This was gradually achieved (though not by him), first in 1924 with the Dawes Plan, then with the 1929 Young Plan, and reparations were finally abolished in the early 1930s. However, Prime Minister Lloyd George did not advocate any notably 'Liberal' foreign policy; as with support for the League, reducing the burden on Germany was widely held to be a 'good thing'. Liberalism had not proved bankrupt; via the Union of Democratic Control, it was temporarily alive and well in the Labour Party. But for the present, the Liberal Party had proved useless for those with a new vision of international affairs.

*Richard S. Grayson recently gained his doctorate from Oxford University, due to be published as Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe: British Foreign Policy 1924–29. He has also written on British policy towards the Channel Tunnel and the government's response to the fights between Mods and Rockers in 1964. He teaches undergraduates in Oxford.*

- 1 See Trevor Wilson's book, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party*, reviewed elsewhere in this issue.
- 2 See M. Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War (1971)*; A.J.P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers (1957)*.
- 3 *The Liberal Prime Minister of a Conservative-dominated coalition, 1916–22.*
- 4 *Minister of Munitions 1917–19; Secretary of State for War & Air 1919–21; Secretary of State for Colonies 1921–22.*
- 5 *This included the forcible annexation by Germany of Alsace–Lorraine.*
- 6 Wilson, pp. 144–6.
- 7 David Lloyd George, *The Truth About the Peace Treaties, Volume I (1938)*, p. 177.
- 8 Michael L. Dockrill & J. Douglas Goold, *Peace without Promise: Britain and the Peace Conferences, 1919–23 (1981)*, pp. 52–3. Lloyd George, pp. 511–13.
- 9 Hansard, 114 H.C. Deb. 55, col. 2950: 16 April 1919. Hansard, 117 H.C. Deb. 55, col. 1213: 3 July 1919.
- 10 Most notably in, A. Lentin, *Guilt at Versailles: Lloyd George and the Pre-history of Appeasement (1985)*.
- 11 M. Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Vol. IV: World in Torment, 1917–1922 (1975)*, p. 169.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 384.
- 13 Hansard, 118 H.C. Deb. 55, cols. 952–5: 21 July 1919.
- 14 Michael Bentley, *The Liberal Mind, 1919–1929 (1977)*, pp. 170–1.
- 15 F.S. Northedge, *The League of Nations: Its Life and Times, 1920–46 (1986)*, pp. 27–45.

## **Why I Am A Liberal Democrat**

*collected and edited by Duncan Brack*

*In 1885, a journalist called Andrew Reid published a collection of pieces by leading figures in the Liberal Party – including Gladstone, Chamberlain and Rosebery – on the theme of 'why I am a Liberal'.*

*111 years later, Liberal Democrat Publications produces its successor volume: 124 contributions from leading Liberal Democrats, including Paddy Ashdown, Roy Jenkins, John Alderson, Ralf Dahrendorf, Tony Greaves, Sir Ludovic Kennedy, Sir Russell Johnston, Robert Maclean, Julia Neuberger, Emma Nicholson, Barry Norman, Sir Peter Parker, Earl Russell, Nancy Seear, and many more.*

*Why I Am A Liberal Democrat is available now from Liberal Democrat Publications, 8 Fordington Green, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 1GB (01305 264646) for £6.95 plus 20% p&ep.*

# The First World War and Liberal Values

*Was the Liberal Party fatally wounded by the war because liberalism proved incapable of coping with the strains of a major modern conflict? Professor Chris Wrigley questions the accepted view.*

---

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the Liberal Party was seriously, even fatally, damaged during the First World War because it clung to outdated ideas which were inappropriate for a nation engaged in waging a modern war. Or so it seems. Teaching university students on a special subject entitled 'The Great War and its Aftermath' in recent years, I have been surprised at how outraged they have been if I have questioned this aspect of Liberal difficulties during the First World War.

That Liberal values could be a likely cause of serious political ailment was asserted by earlier prognostics. Tory assessments had been dire from at least the Gladstonian high noon of 1868–74. Objections to aspects of policy which could be deemed dangerous to holders of property had been made regularly and, perhaps, had encouraged many Whigs to depart. Such assessments became even more strident from Gladstone's commitment to Home Rule and the subsequent split away of the Liberal Unionists.

History writing is always in danger from hindsight. This is very much the case with the Liberal Party in the first quarter of the twentieth century. George Dangerfield provided in 1935 a vivid account, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, in which he pointed to the extra-parliamentary agitations of the Ulster Unionists (encouraged by the Conservative leaders), the numerous and bitter strikes and the activities of the militant suffragettes of the years 1910–14 as undermining the Liberal Party. He rightly saw these as being against Gladstonian beliefs in resolving difficulties through parliamentary government or rational discussion (including arbitration). However, the life of British political parties would not have been long in the past 200 years if periodic strike waves aimed primarily at economic objectives were deemed to have the political power to destroy political parties. Similarly, various aspects of Irish politics in the nineteenth century had lacked constitutional 'sweetness and light,' yet, sometimes with difficulty, the British political system had adjusted to meet such challenges to it. Although three such areas of notable conflict may have been unusual at one time, the strength of the strike wave that Dangerfield wrote about stemmed from an upturn in the economy, and the pre-1914 period as a whole was one of prosperity for many people except the unskilled or those not in work (including for reasons of age or health). The political system was certainly not under challenge in anything like the way it was in Russia, Germany, Austria, Hungary and elsewhere in 1917–20, where there were serious economic problems and seriously discredited political systems.

---

*History writing is always in danger from hindsight. This is very much the case with the Liberal Party in the first quarter of the twentieth century.*

---

Similarly, with the war, Liberal values (freedom versus organisation, little state control rather than substantial state intervention in the economy, voluntary recruitment rather than conscription and so on) are often listed as clear-cut causes of Liberal decline, along with other matters which caused the Liberals serious

problems. I should not wish to argue that the First World War, any more than the lesser wars of the Gladstonian period, was a favourable circumstance for Liberal policies and values. Wars, and this war in particular, *while it was in progress*, have been more favourable to the Conservatives; much of their vocabulary – patriotic and hierarchical – fitting in with the needs for a nation at war. Yet there is no need to exaggerate the political problems stemming from these beliefs alone. Research in recent years has suggested that state organisation of industry was spreading out steadily under Asquith, as it was in the early part of the war in other belligerent nations, and that the extensions of the Lloyd George coalition (from December 1916) were on substantial earlier foundations. I think that the Lloyd George–Milner–Curzon–Carson–Bonar Law–Henderson regime did represent a significant and even substantial change towards the 'thorough' and even Cromwellian system to which some on the Right aspired. But recognising this does not require one to minimise what had gone before (though allowing for failures in such policy areas as shipping and agriculture), let alone ascribing it as a major reason for the decline of the Liberal Party. After all, lessons of agricultural policy, stockpiling non-perishable imports and much else, were not learnt by 1939, and the Conservative Party survived its 1945 defeat. Similarly, the Conservatives and Lloyd George may well have been angered at the slowness of Asquith to accept the need for conscription, yet at the time many felt Asquith had held most of the nation together and not caused serious social division by bringing it in before the need was widely acceptable. Indeed, the Labour movement was vigorous in its expressions of opposition until the end. The arrangements for conscientious objectors proved to be scandalously bad for many, yet the mere fact that there were arrangements was more than in many other belligerent countries.

---

*If the Conservatives had never again resumed office on their own after the First World War, historians with hindsight would have pointed to many value problems to explain this.*

---

Perhaps for the Liberal Party part of the problem was ministers often appearing not to be fully in control of policy. Asquith too often appeared to be pushed, and pushed hard, into taking tough decisions for the war effort. Others, such as Runciman, appeared to be too tender to vested interests (something not unknown to Conservative politicians). Another part of the problem was the need for clear success. The Liberals were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The quick war to be over by Christmas proved to be anything but. Across Europe, the governments of the early part of the Great War were undermined by the failure to produce success. With hindsight, Asquith needed not Kitchener in August 1914, but Kitchener plus Conservatives and Labour in his government. This was shown again in 1940. Moreover, when a new coalition was formed in December 1916, Asquith and his senior colleagues should have been a part of it, even if for Asquith it meant a lesser but senior post.

If the Conservatives had never again resumed office on their own after the First World War, historians with hindsight would have pointed to many value problems to explain this. Tariff reform would be highlighted as a disaster, with historians pointing to the immense hostility among the urban working class to tariffs as a prime generator of government funds in the Kaiser's Germany. One can also point to the lack of public support for tariffs and preference for free trade not only in 1906 but also in the 1923 general election. Similarly, Ulster and the unconstitutional (even treasonable) actions of Bonar Law and other leading Conservatives would also appear on any such list explaining a Conservative collapse, as would the use of the House of Lords veto in 1906-11. If Asquith after 1914 is often seen as a problem for the Liberals, then the leadership of Balfour (1902-11) and Bonar Law (from 1911) would not look good in an explanation of a Conservative collapse from power, had it occurred.

I should not wish to argue that there were no problems for the Liberals connected with their values and beliefs. But I should wish to argue that this is an area which should be questioned. After all, until 1918, Labour's values were very similar to those of the Liberals. They were as vigorously for free trade, Snowden was Gladstonian in his finances (though Labour for a period had more radical financial policies) and the Labour movement influenced Asquith over conscription, given the vehemence of its opposition to it. If the Liberal Party had leadership problems with Asquith and Lloyd George, Labour did not look too good with the departure of MacDonald in 1914 and the less than charismatic leadership of Adamson and Clynes in 1917-22. Labour did develop new policies during the war. However, the Liberals were to make the public aware of the liveliness of Liberal ideas during the 1920s with a range of well-publicised new policies.

It would take another essay to examine what did go wrong for the Liberals as a party of government in the early twentieth century. That such explanations need to be complex is suggested by the length and vigour of the debates among historians. However, that there was something intrinsically damaging to the

Liberal Party in their beliefs and values is not a truth that should be accepted without question. Those who make comparisons with parts of continental Europe might ponder the alternative pattern (Democrats and Republicans) in the United States.

*Chris Wrigley, Professor of Modern British History at Nottingham University, is not a member of the Liberal Democrats but is much interested in Liberal Party history. His books include David Lloyd George and the Labour Movement (1976); Lloyd George and the Challenge of Labour (1990); Arthur Henderson (1990); Lloyd George (1992); and the two Penguin selections of A.J.P. Taylor's essays (1995 and 1996).*

*A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting*

## **The European Inheritance**

*with*  
**Dr Alan Butt Philip**  
**Lord McNally**  
**Michael Steed**

**Chair: Graham Watson MEP**

*Unity in Europe was a central theme for the Liberal Party since Gladstone's day, and was an important factor behind the SDP's breakaway from the Labour Party. Yet continental liberal parties have not always proved so enthusiastic. Our three speakers examine the historical record.*

**20:45 – 22:15 Friday 15 March**

**Directors IV Suite, Royal Moat House International  
Hotel, Nottingham**

## **Membership Services**

*The History Group is pleased to make the following listings available to its members.*

**Mediawatch:** a bibliography of major articles on the Liberal Democrats appearing in the broadsheet papers, major magazines and academic journals 1988 - May 1995. A new addition includes articles of historical interest appearing in the major Liberal Democrat journals.

**Thesiswatch:** all higher degree theses listed in the Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research under the titles 'Liberal Party' or 'liberalism' (none yet under SDP or Liberal Democrats!)

Any History Group member is entitled to receive a copy of either of these free of charge; send an A4 SSAE to Duncan Brack at the address below.

*Membership of the Liberal Democrat History Group costs £5.00 (£3.00 unwaged rate); cheques should be made payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group' and sent to Patrick Mitchell, 6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA.*

*Contributions to the Newsletter - letters, articles, and book reviews - are invited. Please type them and if possible enclose a computer file on 3.5 inch disc. The deadline for the next issue is **30 April**; contributions should be sent to Duncan Brack at the address below.*

*Printed and published by Liberal Democrat History Group, c/o Flat 9, 6 Hopton Road, Streatham, London SW16 2EQ.*

*March 1996.*