

# The Liberal Party and the Fall of the Chamberlain Government

*Graham Lippiatt examines the crucial role played by Liberal politicians – including Sinclair and Lloyd George – in the ousting of Neville Chamberlain in May 1940.*

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On the 7 and 8 of May 1940, the House of Commons debated the recent naval and military operations in Norway. Although there was expected to be criticism of the government's handling of events, it was not certain, when the debate began, that the Opposition would try and force a vote. However, by the time the House divided on a technical Motion for the Adjournment on the evening of 8 May, the atmosphere had unexpectedly turned into one of censure.<sup>1</sup> When the result was announced, the government had survived with a majority of 81, but this was in contrast to their nominal majority of 213, and was achieved with 41 supporters of the administration voting with the Opposition and about 60 abstaining.<sup>2</sup> The outcome was the beginning of the end for Neville Chamberlain.

The Chamberlain Government could not sustain itself because it had lost the confidence of both the official Opposition and a significant number of Conservative MPs. But what was the Liberal contribution to the fall of Chamberlain? The answer has three distinct elements. First, the role of the Liberal leader, Sir Archie Sinclair, in opposing the Government's policy of appeasement and his closeness to Winston Churchill; secondly, the part played by future party leader, Clement Davies, in organising an all-party group of MPs dedicated to the idea of forming a National Government; and, third, the contribution of Lloyd George to the Norway debate – a speech Churchill described as Lloyd George's 'last decisive intervention in the House of Commons'.<sup>3</sup>

## *Sir Archie Sinclair*

After the German invasion of Poland, Chamberlain made an attempt to widen the membership of his government. The Prime Minister met Sinclair on 2 September 1939 and offered him a position of Cabinet rank, but not a seat in the War Cabinet.<sup>4</sup> For Liberals, as for Labour, the key issue was the difficulty of joining a government led by the advocates of the policy of appeasement – Chamberlain, Simon and Hoare, the very men and policy the Opposition had been attacking. Chamberlain did bring in Churchill (as First Lord of the Admiralty) and Eden (as Dominions Secretary) from the anti-appeasement wing of the Tory Party, but Sinclair refused the offer to join the administration. He knew Labour would not participate. He also realised that the Liberal Party

would be obliged to accept responsibility for government policy and actions without having access to the real seat of decision-making in the War Cabinet.<sup>5</sup>

Between the outbreak of war and the Norway Debate, Sinclair had maintained close contact with Churchill. They had always been friends. Sinclair had served as Churchill's adjutant during the Great War, after Churchill had left the government and joined the army in the wake of the Dardanelles fiasco. Sinclair's anti-appeasement stand strengthened his affinity with Churchill, but this did not prevent him from continuing to attack the government or gaining popularity with dissident government supporters.<sup>6</sup> Chamberlain seemed almost paranoid about Sinclair and came to regard any criticism of government conduct by him, however legitimate, as unpatriotic. Sinclair's biographer records that at the end of April 1940, MPs were advised in confidence of the intention to withdraw from Norway. In a speech given by Sinclair on 30 April, he warned the government not to 'scuttle away' Norway. Chamberlain called him to 10 Downing Street and subjected him to a near-hysterical tirade about his supposed use of confidential information, revealing that his telephone had been tapped. Sinclair threatened to expose this in the House of Commons, and it needed Churchill to dissuade him.<sup>7</sup> The incident made him more resolved than ever to attack Chamberlain's mistakes and poor judgment in the handling of the war effort.

Sinclair's own contribution to the Norway debate itself was deliberately low-key. He wished to make a contrast with the rhetoric of speakers such as Lloyd George or the Tory rebel Leo Amery, who used the words spoken by Cromwell to the Long Parliament: 'You have sat here too long for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go.'<sup>8</sup> On the first day, Sinclair had intervened intelligently. Referring to Churchill's attempt to defend the government's record, he commented '.... the right hon Gentleman today told us that south of Trondheim and north of Trondheim we had succeeded, by a masterly policy, in evacuation with no losses. Wars,' he added cuttingly 'are not won on masterly evacuations'.<sup>9</sup> Sinclair's biographer described his speech as '.... measured, temperate, .... aimed more at reason than emotion ....'.<sup>10</sup>

## Clement Davies

During the early months of the war, the disquiet in Parliament about the prosecution of the war and the administrative measures being enacted began to intensify. For Liberals in particular, there were unhappy echoes of First World War anxieties about the impact on civil liberties of the Defence of the Realm Act. There was evidence of government incompetence and Ministers not being up to the job.<sup>11</sup> It was, however, difficult for MPs to give expression to their concerns on the floor of the House, at the risk of giving comfort to the enemy, so a number of informal groups were established to discuss these issues outside the public arena.<sup>12</sup> One of the most prominent was an all-party action group under the chairmanship of Clement Davies, with the pro-Churchill Conservative MP Robert Boothby as one of its secretaries.<sup>13</sup>

Davies had been elected as Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire in 1929 but defended his seat in 1931 and 1935 as a Liberal National without a Tory opponent. He resigned from the Liberal Nationals in November 1939 and sat as an Independent before rejoining the Liberal Party in 1942.<sup>14</sup> This history proved valuable in establishing Davies' credibility with dissident Tories, and the existence of bodies such as his had a significant influence in mobilising Conservative MPs to abstain or vote against the government in May 1940.<sup>15</sup> Davies' other purpose was to act as a sounding board for opinion in favour of the creation of an all-party coalition government under some great national figure such as Lloyd George or Churchill<sup>16</sup> and he probably felt that freeing himself of party attachment at this time strengthened his position in arguing for a National Government. Boothby later wrote that Davies played a crucial part in the events of May 1940, and that it was Davies' committee that took the decision to vote against the Chamberlain government. 'As a result', he wrote, [Davies] 'was one of the architects – some may say the principal architect – of the Government which first saved us from destruction and then led us to victory.'<sup>17</sup>

## Lloyd George

On the afternoon of 8 May, Chamberlain replied to the Opposition attack, which had been led by Herbert Morrison but he chose to interpret the debate in party political terms. He called upon his 'friends' to support him, the usual code for the whips to enforce party loyalty. In so doing, he misjudged the mood of the House catastrophically. Britain had suffered military defeat in Norway and it was acknowledged on all sides that a genuine national crisis was being played out. This was not the time for the whips.<sup>18</sup> There followed some urgent moves to persuade Lloyd George to speak and, given the dramatic impact of his intervention, there is understandable dispute among politicians about who should get the credit for convincing

him to participate. Morrison noted in his memoirs that he sent a number of messages to Lloyd George through his daughter, Lady Megan, urging him to commit himself to speaking or simply attending the debate. On a note of triumph Morrison records: '... In the end we got Lloyd George going'.<sup>19</sup> Dingle Foot, the MP for Dundee, recalled that he was sitting next to Lady Megan as Chamberlain was making his ill-judged appeal to his Parliamentary friends and said to her, 'Your father must speak now'. He added, honestly, that she did not need telling, and dashed out of the Chamber up to Lloyd George's room.<sup>20</sup> A few minutes later the former Liberal Prime Minister entered the arena and rose to speak.

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However, at least two other Liberal MPs have a claim to have prevailed upon Lloyd George to act. Francis Boyd, political editor of the Guardian during the 1950s, wrote that 'it was Clement Davies who, on the second day, persuaded Lloyd George to speak'.<sup>21</sup> This account is supported by Boothby's comment that Lloyd George was uncertain about whether to speak and '... it was Clem who went to his room and convinced him it was his duty to come down to the Chamber...'.<sup>22</sup> Another Liberal, the then Chief Whip, Sir Percy Harris, MP for Bethnal Green SW, also claims a central role. In his autobiography he describes how he went to find Lloyd George to report the details of Chamberlain's call to his 'friends'. Harris indicates that Lloyd George was at first reluctant to intervene but hearing about the character of Chamberlain's speech, changed his mind.<sup>23</sup> By the end of this parade of supplicants, Lloyd George's office must have resembled the Marx Brothers' state room in 'A Night at the Opera'. If only to escape the crush, the old man came down to the Chamber to speak. He denounced the government's handling of the war effort. He savaged the incompetence with which negotiations with Russia had been handled. In reply to Chamberlain's call to his 'friends' he announced, 'Hitler does not hold himself answerable to the Whips or the Patronage Secretary .... I was not here when the Rt Hon Gentleman .... said: "I have my friends". It is not a question of who are the Prime Minister's friends. .... The Prime Minister must remember that he has met this formidable foe of ours in peace and in war. He has always been worsted .... He has appealed for sacrifice .... I say solemnly that the Prime Minister should give an example of sacrifice, because there

is nothing which can contribute more to victory in this war than that he should sacrifice the seals of office.’<sup>24</sup> While aiming his arrows at Chamberlain, Lloyd George was careful not to injure Churchill, saying, ‘I do not think that the First Lord was entirely responsible for all the things which happened in Norway’.<sup>25</sup> Churchill rose to take responsibility ‘for everything which has been done at the Admiralty’, prompting the reply from Lloyd George that Churchill ‘must not allow himself to be converted into an air-raid shelter to keep the splinters from hitting his colleagues’.<sup>26</sup> Lady Alexandra Metcalfe, the daughter of Lord Curzon, who was watching the debate from the Gallery recorded seeing ‘Winston, like a fat baby swinging his legs on the front bench, trying not to laugh .... Stony faces on each side of him.’<sup>27</sup>

There were mixed reactions to Churchill’s reply to the debate for the government. Dingle Foot called his speech ‘the least impressive of his career.’<sup>28</sup> However, he must have had something of an eye to the future. The Tory MP Sir Henry ‘Chips’ Channon noted in his diary, ‘he amused and dazzled everyone with his virtuosity’, but, Channon queried, ‘... How much of the fire was real, how much ersatz, we shall never know’.<sup>29</sup>

## Aftermath

The passion and intensity of feeling in the House following the announcement of the Norway vote are vividly described in Harold Nicolson’s diary.<sup>30</sup> The Labour MP Josiah Wedgwood led the Opposition in the singing of Rule Britannia but this was soon drowned out by cries of ‘Go, go, go, go’ (echoing Amery’s quotation of Cromwell) directed at Chamberlain as he walked, pale and angry, from the Chamber. The Prime Minister did not resign immediately after the debate. He still had considerable support among Conservatives and National Liberals, many of whom detested Churchill and his young Tory acolytes.<sup>31</sup>

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There followed two days of deliberation and negotiation, during which Chamberlain first sought to bring Labour and the Liberals into the government. If they had been unwilling to serve under him before, they would not sup with him now with a ten foot spoon. The real question was who was to replace Chamberlain? The only realistic prospects were Churchill or Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary. Sinclair and Davies continued to play their part in working towards a Churchill premiership. Boothby wrote to Churchill that he had spoken to Davies who reported ‘that Attlee and Greenwood are unable to distinguish between the PM and Halifax and are not prepared to serve under

the latter’.<sup>32</sup>

In the early hours of 10 May 1940, the Germans launched their invasion of Holland and Belgium. The phoney war was over. There could be no darker underlining of the feeling that Chamberlain’s time had passed and a new leader was needed. Chamberlain resigned later that day and the King called on Churchill to form a government. Ironically, in the light of the Liberal role in bringing about Chamberlain’s downfall, there was no place in Churchill’s War Cabinet for Sinclair, whereas Chamberlain was invited to stay on as Leader of the House and Lord President of the Council.<sup>33</sup> Churchill needed those Tories who detested him for usurping Chamberlain, united behind him, more than he needed to reward his Liberal friends who helped him dispose of the Man of Munich.

*Graham Lippiatt works for the Home Office and is a former Liberal councillor. He is currently undertaking research on the Liberal Party 1945–1956 at Birkbeck College, London under the supervision of Professor Ben Pimlott. He is presently working on a chapter of his thesis devoted to the Radical Reform Group, founded by Desmond Banks and Peter Grafton – see Research in Progress column, page 9.*

## Notes

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2. AJP Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 575.
3. Lord Boothby, *My Yesterday, Your Tomorrow* (London, 1962), p. 254.
4. K. Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London, 1946), p. 421.
5. G. J. De Groot, *Liberal Crusader* (London, 1993), p. 151.
6. Harold Nicolson, *Diaries & Letters 1939–1945* (London, 1967), p. 50.
7. De Groot, *op cit*, p. 152.
8. *Hansard*, 7 May 1940.
9. Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill, Volume VI: Finest Hour, 1939–1941* (London, 1983), p. 291.
10. De Groot, *op cit*, p. 153.
11. Foot, *op cit*, pp. 169–175.
12. N. Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers* (Oxford, 1971), p. 222.
13. Boothby, *op cit*, pp. 253–254.
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15. Thompson, *op cit*, p. 223.
16. Francis Boyd, *Dictionary of National Biography, 1961–1970 edition*.
17. Boothby, *op cit*, p. 253.
18. Foot, *op cit*, p. 180.
19. Herbert Morrison, *An Autobiography* (London, 1960), p. 172.
20. Foot, *op cit*, pp. 180–181.
21. Boyd, *op cit*.
22. Boothby, *op cit*, p. 254.
23. Sir Percy Harris, *Forty Years in and out of Parliament* (London, 1946), pp. 149–150.
24. Mervyn Jones, *A Radical Life, The Biography of Megan Lloyd George* (London, 1991), p. 139.
25. Gilbert, *op cit*, pp. 293–294.
26. *Hansard*, 8 May 1940.
27. A. Roberts, *Eminent Churchillians* (London, 1994), p. 139.
28. Foot, *op cit*, p. 182.
29. R. Rhodes James (ed), *Chips, The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (London, 1967), p. 246.
30. Nicolson, *op cit*, p. 79.
31. Roberts, *op cit*, pp. 137–138.
32. Gilbert, *op cit*, p. 303.
33. Feiling, *op cit*, p. 443.