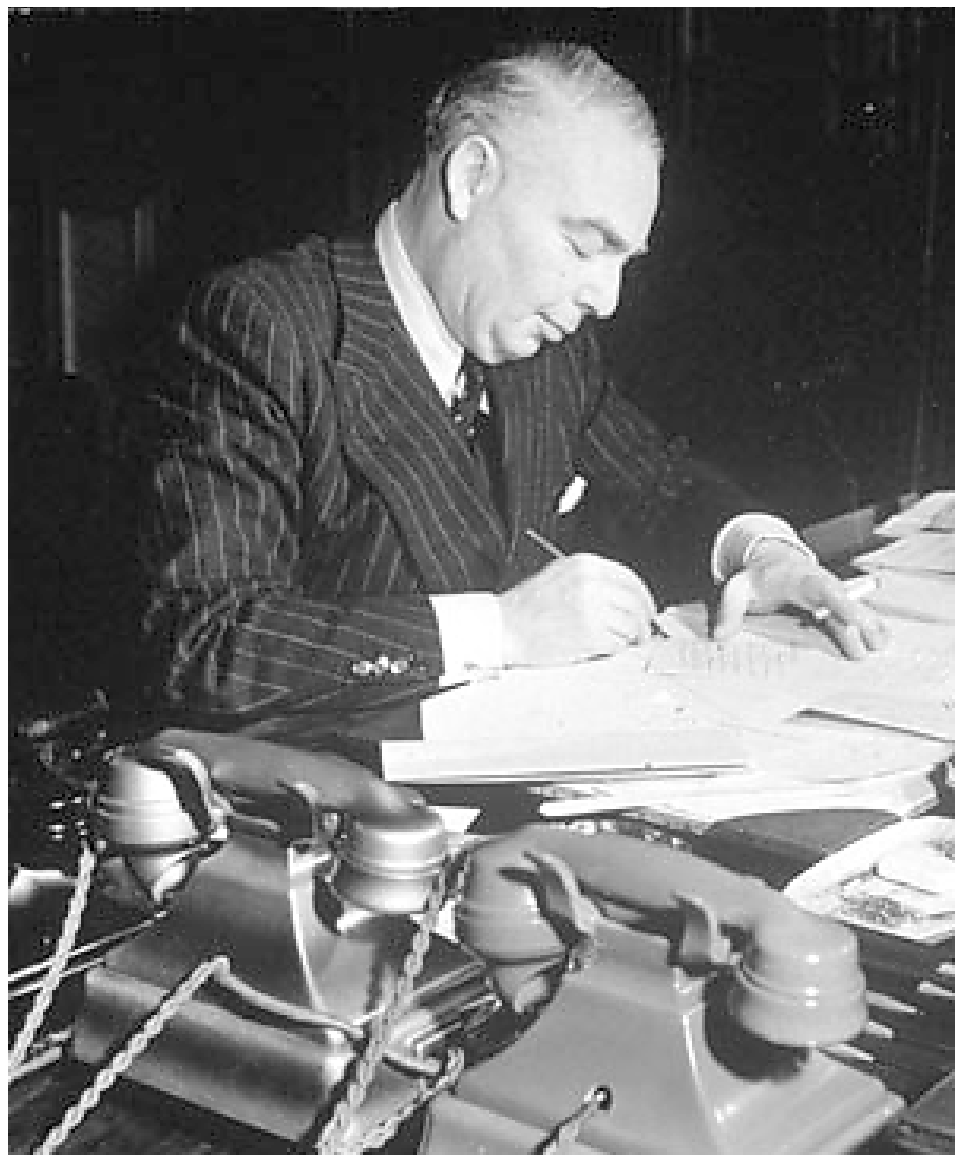


A LIBERAL WITHOUT THE LATER CAREER OF

In the simplistic and sometimes pernicious categorisations which have so often been applied to the political personalities of the 1930s – appeasers and anti-appeasers, a majority of dupes and a minority of the far-sighted, the decade's Guilty Men and its isolated voices in the wilderness – Leslie Hore-Belisha has strong claims to be listed among the virtuous. **David Dutton** tells the story of Hore-Belisha – a Liberal without a home.



WITHOUT A HOME LESLIE HORE-BELISHA

TRUE, HE was a member of the National Government for most of its existence and a Cabinet minister from October 1936 until January 1940. But he was also a vigorous Minister of War, who implemented a succession of much-needed reforms; he became disillusioned before most of his colleagues with what Chamberlain did at Munich; he pushed – albeit belatedly – for a ‘continental commitment’ against the prevailing assumptions of ‘limited liability’; he took part in the Cabinet revolt of 2 September 1939 which forced Chamberlain to issue an ultimatum to Germany without further delay; he enjoyed the distinction of being sacked from the government in January 1940, ‘the last positive achievement of the appeasers’ in the words of one influential account of these times;¹ he lined up with those brave dissidents who defied their whip and voted against Chamberlain at the end of the celebrated Norwegian debate on 8 May 1940, the necessary preliminary to Churchill’s elevation to the premiership; and his name is absent from the cast-list of Cato’s *Guilty Men*, the extraordinarily influential polemic which fixed popular perceptions of the 1930s for decades to come.² In short,

Belisha ticked most of the right boxes.

The events of January 1940 represented the abrupt termination of an apparently inexorable political ascent. Isaac Leslie Hore-Belisha was born in 1893, the son of Jacob Isaac Belisha, a businessman of Sephardic Jewish origins. His father died when Leslie was only nine months old and he only assumed his hyphenated name when his widowed mother married Sir Adair Hore in 1912. Educated at Clifton, the Sorbonne and St John’s, Oxford, Hore-Belisha served in the First World War before returning to complete his degree. The first post-war President of the Oxford Union, he moved naturally into a career in politics and was elected to parliament in 1923. Less than a decade later his ministerial career began. He was appointed Parliamentary Secretary at the Board of Trade in November 1931, Financial Secretary to the Treasury in September 1932 and Minister of Transport in June 1934, with a seat in the Cabinet from October 1936. Here, Belisha transformed what was normally a ministerial backwater into a high-profile public office. He introduced driving tests, revised the Highway Code, reduced road traffic accidents and installed the ‘beacon’ pedestrian crossings which still bear

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his name. Promoted to be Secretary of State for War when Neville Chamberlain became Prime Minister in May 1937, Belisha set about reforming the entrenched upper echelons of the army and War Office. During nearly three years in this key post, he enhanced his standing with the public but inevitably trod on many significant and sensitive toes.

Nevertheless, at the time of his removal from the government in January 1940 no less a figure than Churchill, giving Belisha credit for the introduction of peacetime conscription, wrote to express his regret at the course of events. ‘I hope that it will not be long’, concluded the future Prime Minister, ‘before we are colleagues again, and that the temporary setback will prove no serious obstacle to your opportunities of serving the country.’³ Most of the press, which worked the War Minister’s resignation ‘into a big story’, was of a similar mind, confident that Belisha would soon be restored to office.⁴ As the diarist Harold Nicolson recorded: ‘It seems that the country regard him as a second Haldane and a moderniser of the Army. The line is that he has been ousted by an intrigue of the Army Chiefs, and there is a general uproar about being ruled by dictators in brass hats.’⁵

Yet there was no place for Belisha when Churchill formed his own administration just four months later, and he remained on the backbenches for the duration of hostilities, until recalled briefly to the post of Minister of National Insurance in the short-lived caretaker government between May and July 1945. Losing his parliamentary seat of Plymouth Devonport in the Labour landslide later that year, Belisha's ministerial career was now over. He stood unsuccessfully for parliament in Coventry South in the general election of February 1950, before accepting a peerage in the New Year's Honours List of 1954. Aged just sixty-three, he died suddenly in February 1957 while delivering a speech in Rheims as head of a parliamentary delegation on Anglo-French commercial relations. As Keith Robbins has written, the fates had contrived to ensure that Belisha would 'shine brightly', but also 'shine briefly'.⁶

Many of Belisha's private papers, bequeathed to his devoted secretary Hilde Sloan, appear to have been destroyed. Much of what survived, dealing largely with his years in office, was published nearly half a century ago.⁷ A serviceable, if uninspiring, biography appeared in 2006.⁸ There have also been useful studies of his period as Secretary of State for War (1937–40), while his removal from office in May 1940 has been thoroughly explored.⁹ But no detailed examination exists of Belisha's later career and therefore of the failure of a man who, in the early months of the Second World War, was widely regarded, after Churchill, as the most dynamic member of the War Cabinet, to return to high office. The present article seeks to fill this gap in the existing historiography.

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By any objective criteria Belisha had a bad war. His greatest mistake was to fail to attach himself to the winning horse, Winston Churchill. Yet, for a brief period after his resignation in January 1940, it appeared possible that the former War Minister could engineer a major crisis and even bring down Chamberlain's government. It was, suggested the *Daily Mirror*,

'the biggest political sensation since hostilities began'. The government had 'dealt itself a staggering blow. It had relapsed with a thud lower into the morass of its own mediocrity'.¹⁰ Writing in the *Sunday Pictorial*, Hugh Cudlipp argued that Chamberlain had meekly surrendered to an intrigue 'of brass-hats and aristocrats'. But the British public would not stand for it. 'You haven't', predicted Cudlipp, 'heard the last of Hore-Belisha or of his miserable mean dismissal'.¹¹ According to the Tory MP, Victor Cazalet, Chamberlain had succeeded in making him a 'national hero'.¹² Briefly, Belisha himself seemed to sense his opportunity to seize the highest office of government. He was, he confided to Cudlipp, 'in a wonderful position heading straight for the Premiership'.¹³

Chamberlain himself was sufficiently concerned, and aware of the ability of his media-conscious ex-minister to stir up trouble in the press, that he took the trouble to record his own thirteen-page account of the events surrounding Belisha's resignation.¹⁴ This was to counter a version of those events presented by the former War Minister to Lord Camrose of the *Daily Telegraph*. This, Chamberlain noted, contained 'only a few statements which are directly at variance with the truth, but by suppression, by alteration of the setting and by direction of emphasis, the whole picture is completely distorted and gives an entirely false impression'.¹⁵ In the meantime there appeared in successive issues of the journal *Truth*, certainly with Chamberlain's knowledge and possibly also his connivance, a vitriolic attack on Belisha's integrity. These blatantly anti-Semitic articles, widely distributed within the Westminster village, accused the former minister of financial irregularities in relation to a number of companies 'with which he was connected before he became Financial Secretary, all of which speedily came to grief with the loss of shareholders' money'.¹⁶ They amounted, in the words of a post-war enquiry, to 'a deliberate attempt to kill Belisha once and for all as a political force'.¹⁷

Belisha was quick to do the rounds of the leading proprietors

and editors of the London press, many of whom were only too ready to vent the frustration to which the inactivity of the Phoney War had naturally given rise. The issue dominated the headlines for several days and reporters besieged Belisha's Wimbledon home during the weekend following his resignation. His opportunity would arise in the Commons resignation speech traditionally accorded to departing ministers. Not for the last time, however, Belisha discovered that opposition during wartime is a hazardous undertaking. Criticism that was too pointed and vocal inevitably ran the risk of being seen as disloyal and unpatriotic. Furthermore, he certainly desired to return to government at the earliest opportunity and would no doubt have recognised that the dominant Conservative Party remained firmly under Chamberlain's control. Recalling recent departures from the National Government, Lieutenant-General Henry Pownall, Director of Military Operations at the War Office, noted that Anthony Eden and Samuel Hoare had got back into office by "'going gracefully" when they had to go. H-B may think it best to follow their example'.¹⁸ None the less, strengthened by the support of the popular press (though Harold Nicolson sensed less of a 'pro-Belisha than an anti-Chamberlain outburst'),¹⁹ Belisha still seemed keen to make the most of his chance when discussing the details of his resignation speech with Hugh Cudlipp as late as 13 January.²⁰

In the event, however, he drew back from a frontal attack on Chamberlain and his government. As he later reflected, 'one must not do that sort of thing in time of war'.²¹ By the Monday before his Commons speech, Belisha was 'less sure about the wisdom of fighting' and, when the crunch came, in front of a packed House which was 'in a combative mood', he 'climbed meekly down'.²² Pownall, one of his severest War Office critics, felt that he had made a speech 'full of innuendoes to those few who could discern them', but the general feeling was one of disappointment that an opportunity had been missed.²³ It was 'an innocuous speech about

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nothing'.²⁴ Belisha's supporters, 'while admiring the dignified manner of his speech ... regretted that he was impelled, no doubt by the circumstances of the time, to mystify his friends and add fuel to the fire of his enemies'.²⁵ Cecil King, the proprietor of the *Daily Mirror*, took up Pownall's comparison with Duff Cooper and Anthony Eden. Like them, Belisha would not fight, but expected to be recalled to the Cabinet for being good and causing no trouble.²⁶ Relieved that the threat to his own position had been lifted, Chamberlain concluded that the whole affair had been a flop, much to the disappointment of those MPs who had flocked to the House in the hope of witnessing a sensation.²⁷

The question now was what line Belisha would take on the backbenches. Though the Chamberlain premiership had only four months to run, there were in reality few signs in the winter of 1940 that the Prime Minister's days were numbered. A poll taken in the third week of January showed that 56 per cent of respondents still approved of his leadership. As late as April the figure had not fallen. Only 30 per cent of those questioned in December 1939 had said that they would prefer to see Churchill in 10 Downing Street. None the less, Belisha, still in receipt of the government whip, soon emerged as one of the administration's leading critics. Writing in the *News of the World* in mid-February, he asked whether the allies should aid the Finns in their forlorn struggle against the Soviet Union and, a month later, criticised the government in the House of Commons for its inaction and called for military intervention in Scandinavia. By this stage he was clearly counting on a change of regime, without which his criticisms would inevitably thwart his own ambitions for a political renaissance. No opponent of the Government, he told W. P. Crozier, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, 'will get anything in the way of reward from the Whips'.²⁸

Even so, by the time that Churchill succeeded Chamberlain in May, Belisha had good reason to doubt whether he would be among the favoured in the

According to Beaverbrook, Belisha was in a dilemma. 'He cannot make up his mind whether to smash his way into the Government by attacking it or whether to wheedle his way in by praising it.'

resulting ministerial reshuffle. Cecil King recorded a change in Churchill's attitude towards the fallen minister:

When I saw [Churchill] in May or June [1939], he spoke of Belisha without affection, but said he was one of the best men Chamberlain had. But on this occasion his whole attitude was quite different ... He thought the work of the War Office would go forward more smoothly and expeditiously under Stanley [Belisha's successor].²⁹

Belisha himself had come to share the view of his former military adviser, Basil Liddell-Hart, that Churchill had never forgiven him for his role in the so-called Sandys affair in the summer of 1938.³⁰

At all events, as the crisis of May 1940 gathered momentum, Belisha seemed ready to attach himself to the cause of the veteran Conservative backbencher Leo Amery, rather than to that of Winston Churchill. Amery's Commons speech on 7 May in which he roundly criticised Chamberlain, quoting the famous words of Oliver Cromwell – 'In the name of God, go!' – had badly, perhaps fatally, damaged the Prime Minister, but he was scarcely in line for the succession himself. None the less, on 9 May Belisha approached Amery and said that he and Max Beaverbrook were agreed that what was now needed was a clean sweep of the Conservative old guard and that Amery should be Prime Minister 'as the man who had turned out the Government and also as best qualified all round'.³¹ But Amery was too shrewd not to see through Belisha's motives. 'The trouble is that he no doubt started it in the hope that it might bring him back again as a reward for helping. And', Amery concluded, 'I don't think he is wanted back, at any rate yet'.³² By the following day Belisha was even speculating that his prospects would be better if Lloyd George emerged as the new Prime Minister, but he was 'not so confident of his chances if Churchill has the job'.³³ A Lloyd George premiership was, however, even less likely than an Amery one. When, therefore, it

was Churchill who was invited to form a new government, it was hardly surprising that there was no place for Belisha within it.

Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister occupies a seminal position in Britain's history. In the threatening summer and autumn of 1940 the new premier came to epitomise the national will to survive and, ultimately, to prevail over the Nazi menace. As a result, it is easily forgotten that his position at the head of the administration was never fully secure until he was able to take some credit for a change in Britain's military fortunes. Granted the nation's precarious survival through 1940 and the further setbacks which resulted from the entry of Japan into the war at the end of 1941 and the subsequent rapid collapse of Britain's Far-Eastern position, Churchill had to wait for Montgomery's victory at El Alamein in the autumn of 1942 before he could feel total confidence in his domestic political position. During the first two years of his premiership, therefore, there were repeated, if sometimes subterranean, grumblings about his performance as war leader and speculation about his possible replacement as Prime Minister. In this embryonic opposition grouping Belisha, through speeches in parliament and a weekly column in the *News of the World*, came to occupy a significant position.

For most of 1940, however, his attitude towards the new administration was broadly supportive. Understandably, he was rather bitter to be 'doing nothing' when 'one feels that one really could help'. Moreover, the Cabinet was, he claimed, a 'one man affair', no doubt a reflection of his own desire to be part of it.³⁴ But he generally held back from criticising the Prime Minister himself, disappointing Lord Winterton by his failure to oppose the holding of secret sessions of the House of Commons.³⁵ According to Beaverbrook, Belisha was in a dilemma. 'He cannot make up his mind whether to smash his way into the Government by attacking it or whether to wheedle his way in by praising it'.³⁶ Belisha probably still hoped that Churchill would recall him when a suitable opportunity arose. The final

resignation of Neville Chamberlain in the autumn of 1940 might, he speculated, be such an occasion. But when cancer forced Chamberlain's withdrawal, Belisha was not among the beneficiaries of the resulting reshuffle. His speech in parliament in early September in support of the destroyers-for-bases deal therefore turned out to be one of his last unequivocally pro-Churchill declarations. By mid-October he was complaining bitterly, albeit in private, about the government's inability to win the war and of Churchill's foolishness in accepting the leadership of the Conservative Party in succession to Chamberlain. 'I have a feeling', noted the journalist and former diplomat Robert Bruce Lockhart, 'all he wants is a job in government'.³⁷ By early November the Tory MP, Beverley Baxter, was reporting a dinner at the Savoy hosted by Belisha whose purpose was 'to inflame opposition against the Prime Minister', while a week later another Conservative MP sensed that Belisha and other displaced malcontents were now 'gathering courage and sniping at their successors'.³⁸

The year 1941 offered plenty of opportunities to criticise the government and to suggest that the British war effort lacked sufficient energy. Belisha found himself involved with a motley group of parliamentary dissidents which included the future Liberal leader, Clement Davies, and the socialists Aneurin Bevan and Emanuel Shinwell. Much of Belisha's criticism was directed at Churchill himself. He regarded 'the PM as a danger. He says he has no judgement and visualises a position when some calamity will arise as the result of his change of strategy'.³⁹ The British people had been impressed by their leader's oratory, but 'the country would soon wake up and realise that speeches were not victories, and that we were drugged with Winston's oratory'.⁴⁰ There is even a suggestion that Belisha, together with the Labour MP Richard Stokes, made a trip to Templemore in Ireland to investigate the details of Brendan Bracken's birth in the hope of confirming the widely circulating rumour that Churchill was his father. 'Anything they picked up in Templemore would be taken

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Right: Hore-Belisha at different points in his career; bottom, with a 'Belisha beacon'

down and used in evidence for the unmasking of both rascals.⁴¹

Churchill's attitude towards his critics was somewhat equivocal. On the one hand he viewed such figures with private contempt. 'An Opposition is being formed out of the left-outs', he told his son Randolph. 'LG, Hore-Belisha, Shinwell, Winterton, and some small fry, mostly National Liberals. They do their best to abuse us whenever the news gives them an opportunity, but there is not the slightest sign that the House as a whole, nor still less the country will swerve from their purpose'.⁴² When, in May, in a debate on assistance to Greece, Belisha called for the creation of a single Ministry of Defence and said that the British army was in need of 'more mobility and more armour', the Prime Minister retorted by reminding Belisha that some of the responsibility for present deficiencies must logically rest with his own tenure of the War Office between 1937 and 1940.⁴³ But, at the same time, at least while any question marks remained over his own position, Churchill appears to have considered the possibility of silencing Belisha's criticisms by bringing him into the government. 'Winston is inclined to defeat opposition by means of favour rather than by fear'.⁴⁴ For his part, Belisha 'gladly pulls his punches if he thinks there is any chance of getting back, even to the Ministry of Pensions'.⁴⁵

The fall of Crete in June gave Belisha further scope for criticism, but again Churchill tried to turn the tables on his opponent by suggesting that Belisha had left the War Office in 'a lamentable condition'. At the end of the parliamentary debate the Prime Minister took his critic into the Commons smoking room and delivered a headmasterly rebuke. 'If you fight me I shall fight you back. And remember this. You are using a 4.5 inch howitzer, and I am using a 12 inch gun'.⁴⁶ Though Churchill survived these parliamentary encounters without damage, Belisha still argued that the government's position was 'visibly weakening' and that events would soon bring about a 'complete reconstruction' in which he might well emerge as Churchill's successor.⁴⁷ 'Drunk

with power', the Prime Minister was becoming a dictator and leading the country to disaster.⁴⁸

Grotesquely inaccurate though Belisha's assessment may now appear, the entry of Japan into the war in December and the subsequent series of military disasters in the Far East gave some contemporary credence to his predictions. At the same time, however, with the Soviet Union and the United States now allies, the tide of Britain's war effort was bound to turn. A military combination now existed against which Hitler could not hope to prevail. Meanwhile, Churchill skilfully removed one potential threat by taking Sir Stafford Cripps, widely seen as the only realistic alternative premier, into his government. Still Belisha argued that 'if things are not changed, we are going the right way as far as we can to lose the war'.⁴⁹ The fall of Tobruk in June 1942 led to a censure debate during which Belisha made a 'brilliant, eloquent and damning attack on the Government'.⁵⁰ But John Wardlaw-Milne, who moved the censure motion, destroyed its effect by suggesting that the Duke of Gloucester should be made Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, a proposition that reduced the Commons to laughter. Even so, Belisha was among twenty-five MPs who went into the opposition lobby at the end of the debate.

Belisha believed that, without a change in personnel, further disasters lay ahead, probably the fall of Egypt.⁵¹ In fact, of course, Egypt did not fall. On 23 October Montgomery launched his decisive offensive at El Alamein. By early November Rommel's army was in full retreat. Within days Churchill allowed the church bells to be rung for the first time since the beginning of hostilities. 'This is not the end,' he pronounced. 'It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps the end of the beginning'.⁵² The Prime Minister might have added that it was the end for Leslie Hore-Belisha. Perceptive observers recognised this, even if Belisha himself did not. 'The critics of the "Higher direction of the war"', noted Hugh Dalton, 'the Shinwells and the Belishas and the rest – will all

have sunk well out of sight and mind today.⁵³

With the Prime Minister's position unassailable, Belisha's aim now reverted to securing a recall to the existing government. 'He had not made any considerable speech of any kind' for nine months, noted the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* in March 1943. 'He didn't intend to make any attacking speech for the time being unless there was some event ... so that he was morally compelled to take up a position and criticise the Government.' Astonishingly, Belisha 'didn't know what influences were keeping him out' of the administration.⁵⁴ Ready now to distance himself from the likes of Davies, Shinwell and Bevan, he determined to follow the path of ingratiation. A speech in support of the government in October 1944 prompted the Communist Willie Gallacher to offer ironic congratulations 'on the assiduous way in which the Rt Hon. Member is working his passage home.'⁵⁵ Speaking on the Town and Country Planning Bill he had, according to the young Tory MP, Peter Thorneycroft, 'out Conservated the Conservatives' in his efforts to please the party.⁵⁶ Churchill, of course, professed the virtues of magnanimity in victory. This, or perhaps more probably the need to show that the caretaker government, which he formed in May 1945 on the departure of Labour and the Liberals from the wartime coalition, was not purely Conservative in composition, prompted him to offer Belisha the post of Minister of National Insurance. His known skills as a publicist might convince the electorate of the Conservatives' commitment to schemes of social insurance.⁵⁷ But, with only two months in office and a general election to fight, there was no time for Belisha to build upon this partial restoration to front-line politics.

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Hore-Belisha's career also illustrates the importance of party in modern British politics and the difficulties lying in the path of any individual politician, however talented, who fails to enlist its support. Nor was Belisha simply

one of the many Liberals of the inter-war years whose prospects were thwarted by the decline of the political organisation which represented and championed their beliefs. He was among that band of Liberals who seized their opportunity in the extraordinary circumstances of 1931 and renewed their prospects of ministerial advancement by joining the Liberal National group headed by Sir John Simon. But even among this band of Liberal schismatics, Belisha's place was never orthodox, comfortable or secure.

First elected to parliament in 1923 for the Devonport division of Plymouth, Belisha established a reputation as a radical, interventionist Liberal with a keen interest in social policy. Despite the party's rapid decline in urban Britain over the following decade, Liberalism held on in Devonport, championing causes such as better houses for working-class families and deriving benefit in this port constituency from the party's continuing commitment to free trade.⁵⁸ Motives varied, but the majority of those who defected in 1931 were from the party's right wing – former adherents of Asquith in the long-running intra-party feud which had poisoned Liberal politics ever since 1916.⁵⁹ Belisha, on the other hand, was regarded as a follower of Lloyd George; but he lost faith in the latter's apparent readiness to sustain the minority Labour government of 1929–31 in office. More particularly, Belisha's defection in 1931 was motivated, at least in part, by that government's decision to reduce the size of the Royal Navy. He had built his majority up to more than 4,000 votes at the general election of 1929, but it still made sense to keep an eye firmly on the interests of the electorate in a constituency where the naval dockyard was a major employer.⁶⁰ Even so, Belisha was a reluctant and cautious defector, initially refusing to follow Simon when the latter resigned the Liberal whip in June 1931. The two men viewed one another with scarcely concealed distrust and their relationship was one of ongoing tension within the new Liberal National party. Indeed, one of the group's MPs blamed Belisha for much of the press campaign directed



against Simon, conducted 'with a view to his own advancement to Cabinet'.⁶¹

In all probability Belisha felt no compelling loyalty to party nor indeed to Liberalism itself. He saw politics as a way of getting things done while furthering his own interests and ambitions. Reviewing his career many years later, the one-time Liberal chief whip, Percy Harris, recorded:

His handicap as a politician is that he has no fixed political creed. He started as an ardent Radical, then became a leading figure in the Liberal National group, practically its founder, left them and became an independent and is now a Conservative.⁶²

Shortly before his migration to the Liberal National camp, Belisha seems to have contemplated joining the so-called New Party, the ideologically confused grouping which helped transport Oswald Mosley from mainstream politics to overt fascism.⁶³ By early 1932, he was already discussing with Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain the possible fusion of the Liberal National group with the Conservative Party.⁶⁴ While, in his public pronouncements, he insisted that the Liberal Nationals represented a viable and important new force in British politics, in private he expressed doubts as to whether the party had any future.⁶⁵ He even seems to have approached the chairman of the Kingston Conservative Association some time after the Munich Agreement with a view to his adoption as Tory candidate at the next election. The chairman,

consulted the big shots of his committee and found that they were rigidly opposed to Belisha's candidature. The fact that Belisha was willing to abandon his present party label did not surprise or please them. They looked upon Belisha as a person willing to give up any principles for much less than 30 pieces of silver!⁶⁶

None the less, it was as a Liberal National that his ministerial career had prospered. Though grossly outnumbered

by Conservatives in the House of Commons, it was the Liberal Nationals who gave the governments of Ramsay MacDonald, Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain some credible claim to their 'National' identity. As a result, Belisha enjoyed preferment which might not otherwise have come his way, rising steadily up the ministerial ladder, before becoming Secretary of State for War in May 1937. But, particularly after his appointment to junior office at the Treasury, where Neville Chamberlain was Chancellor, Belisha was regarded as a Chamberlain man. Thereafter his career prospered only so long as he continued to enjoy the latter's favour. As Minister of War he was able to survive a succession of crises, occasioned by his controversial changes in the senior personnel at the War Office at the end of 1937, the Sandys affair in June 1938, and a concerted attempt by a group of junior ministers to remove him from office that December, largely because of the by then Prime Minister Chamberlain's backing.⁶⁷ Once that support was removed, however, as was clearly the case in January 1940, Belisha's position was always going to be vulnerable, especially granted his somewhat detached position within the Liberal National party.

The former War Minister confided that it was now his intention to devise a policy to appeal to all Liberals. 'He believed that the prevailing sentiment of the country was liberal and he could appeal to it. He hoped to advocate an advanced social policy.'⁶⁸ But the Liberal National party continued to back the National Government, a fact that made Belisha's ongoing criticisms of Chamberlain's administration increasingly problematic. In this situation Simon sought and secured Belisha's removal as chairman of the Liberal National parliamentary group in March 1940. Some Liberal National MPs were unhappy at this treatment of one of the few political heavyweights in their ranks, but they had 'no time to prepare or rally his defence'.⁶⁹ According to Henry Morris-Jones, MP for Denbigh, Belisha,

is a big man politically, a reformer full of zeal and

character and like many a reformer has antagonised powerful interests. His chief weakness is the lack of a party to back him. But the 33 Lib Nat MPs, if united and determined, could reinstate him before long in high office ... Had we a strong leader we could do much but Simon is a clever piece of jelly and has no backbone.⁷⁰

Over the next two years the Liberal National group itself threatened to splinter into opposing factions, with a number of its MPs clearly believing that the time had come to reassert its influence within the government and end what was thought to be the too quiescent attitude adopted under Simon's leadership. When, following the no-confidence vote of January 1942, two MPs – Morris-Jones and Edgar Granville, the Member for Eye in Suffolk – decided to sever their remaining links with the Liberal National group, they found themselves, somewhat to their surprise, joined by Belisha himself.⁷¹ In later years, the three men went their separate ways. Morris-Jones soon regretted his actions and sought and secured readmission into the Liberal National fold. Granville rejoined the mainstream Liberal Party in April 1945 and narrowly retained his parliamentary seat in both the 1945 and 1950 general elections. Defeated in 1951, he quickly joined the Labour Party early the following year. By contrast, this was the end of Belisha's association with any branch of the Liberal movement.

'The nation had everything to gain at this moment by patriotic out-spokenness', Belisha insisted to his constituents.⁷² Nonetheless, it was difficult to see how, as an independent MP, his career could now prosper. For a while there were rumours of moves to create a new centre party, supporting the socialist Stafford Cripps for the premiership.⁷³ But the threat to Churchill's position had passed by the end of 1942 and Belisha was left to consider more realistic options. Brendan Bracken had already advised him that he would ultimately have to decide which of the two main parties to join. 'He thought the Tory party

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would be more congenial to me as one could be more independent in that party than in the Socialist.⁷⁴ Henry 'Chips' Channon, convinced that 'Leslie's talents are too great to be thrown away as a free lance in Opposition', also urged the Tory option, a course which Belisha claimed, somewhat disingenuously, never to have considered.⁷⁵ But the real problem, was whether the Conservatives as a whole would welcome him into their midst, especially granted his recent record of parliamentary opposition. Belisha knew only too well how ruthless the Conservative machine could be. It was:

even stronger than the Nazi party machine. It may have a different aim, but it is similarly callous and ruthless. It suppressed anyone who did not toe the line. He realised that they did not regard him as 'one of them'.⁷⁶

By the end of 1944 Cecil King sensed that Belisha was finally 'moving into the Tory fold', but still had 'no sense of direction'.⁷⁷ He hoped that the Conservative and Liberal National parties in Devonport would combine and that he would be able to stand at the forthcoming general election as a 'National Conservative' candidate.⁷⁸ In the event, moves to amalgamate the Conservative and Liberal National parties at constituency level were delayed until 1947 and it was as a 'National' (albeit unopposed by Conservatives and Liberal Nationals alike) that Belisha fought and lost his seat. Michael Foot, his Labour opponent, sensing the shift in the public mood against the Conservatives, announced that he would contest the election 'on the assumption that Mr Hore-Belisha is a Tory', a proposition which was not easy to deny, granted that Belisha appeared on several Conservative platforms in neighbouring constituencies during the election campaign.⁷⁹

Only after the election was over did Belisha actually join the Conservatives, insisting now that the modern party was fully 'liberalised' and had become a proper vehicle for the aspirations of those who had once placed their faith in the Liberal Party.⁸⁰ But whereas

By the end of 1944 Cecil King sensed that Belisha was finally 'moving into the Tory fold', but still had 'no sense of direction'.

Tory headquarters made strenuous efforts to secure the early return, via by-elections, of several former ministers defeated at the general election, Belisha could expect few comparable favours. A guest at the wedding of Churchill's daughter Mary in February 1947, Belisha recorded Churchill's disappointment at his failure to return to parliament. 'It is a great nuisance', said the old man, 'that the right people did not die to make suitable by-election vacancies.'⁸¹ But Churchill's well-oiled small talk at this family occasion may not have reflected his true feelings. As late as October 1950, by which time Belisha had made his one, unsuccessful, bid to secure re-election to the Commons as a Conservative, Anthony Eden expressed his distaste for this 'nasty fellow'. 'We don't want him back in politics. He doesn't know what it is to go straight.'⁸² As a result, the limit of Belisha's electoral reincarnation as a Conservative was to be returned, unopposed, for the Pall Mall ward of the Westminster Council in March 1947, a position he retained until his death.

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Eden's words bring into focus the final element of explanation for Belisha's political extinction after January 1940 – his inability to cultivate a significant body of political support. Indeed, it was the combination of political rootlessness and personal unpopularity which ultimately proved fatal to Belisha's career. The hostility of most of his contemporaries more than outweighed the transient support he enjoyed in public opinion and the press. When, in a Commons speech in 1943, he referred casually to 'his Honourable friend', one Labour backbencher interjected, 'You have not got an Honourable friend in this House'.⁸³ For this, latent anti-Semitism, more common, particularly in Tory circles, in those pre-Holocaust days than it is now comfortable to acknowledge, was at least in part responsible. This was the case even among those who admitted such prejudice with reluctance. 'He has a way of antagonising people', noted John Colville, 'very often just when he

is trying to be at his best and most efficient. In him one sees very clearly those characteristics which inevitably, but inexplicably, make Jews unpopular.'⁸⁴

It is now generally agreed that a breakdown of personal relations was at the heart of the process that led to his removal from the War Office. For some time before January 1940 he was scarcely on speaking terms with Lord Gort, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army. 'You couldn't expect two such utterly different people' to get on, reflected Pownall. But Pownall's own sympathies were unequivocal. The contrast was between Gort, 'a great gentleman', and Belisha, 'an obscure, shallow-brained charlatan, political Jewboy'.⁸⁵ Belisha had grown 'bumptious and cocky with office, and became just an impossible person with whom to work'.⁸⁶ There was something in the War Minister's character that alienated the top brass of the army. His informal style and personal self-indulgence did not appeal to battle-hardened generals, while his impatience with red tape and tradition was bound to irritate those with a vested interest in the status quo. According to one observer, he arrived at the front in November 1939 'arrayed like a Bond Street bum-boy, even wearing spats'.⁸⁷

But his personal failings had been apparent throughout his career. On his appointment as Financial Secretary to the Treasury in 1932, the journalist Collin Brooks noted that he was 'able and energetic', but also 'greatly disliked in the City as a pushing Jew'.⁸⁸ Neville Chamberlain accepted him as a junior minister 'with reluctance' and it was some time before 'I could get over the rather unpleasant impression I had of his personality'.⁸⁹ Anthony Eden later admitted that he was 'never at ... ease with him', while his former Cabinet colleague, Lord Hailsham, found him 'a vulgar unreliable man with a passion for self-advertisement'.⁹⁰ His friend and adviser, Liddell Hart, heard that as War Minister Belisha was 'hated in the cabinet'.⁹¹ Another 'friend' found him 'amusing, scintillating and even inspiring, but I did not like him and I did not trust him, though I felt sorry for

him'.⁹² Chamberlain's assessment at the time of Belisha's resignation was both balanced and perceptive. Hostility to him arose:

partly from his impatience and eagerness, partly from a self-centeredness which makes him careless of other people's feelings and partly from the impression he creates that he is more concerned with publicity and his own personal ambitions than he is with the public interest. I believe this to be fundamentally unjust. He has much more idealism and loyalty in him than he is credited with but that doesn't alter the fact that his ways, his assertiveness, his want of consideration for the other man's point of view, create a bad impression and make him a 'mauvais coucheur'.⁹³

Two character traits merit particular emphasis. The first was his remarkably modern appreciation of the value of publicity – the good story for the press, the 'photo-opportunity', even the 'soundbite' – and the unfortunate effect this had in his own day in creating the conviction that his only real interest was his self-advancement. 'Not since Horatio Bottomley had anyone been quite so transparently on the make.'⁹⁴ Contemporaries noted with distaste the fact that he took his own photographer with him when visiting army barracks. Similarly, he would get out of his official car at Horse Guards and proceed to Downing Street on foot only when confident that the press would capture his arrival. 'Too childish for words', concluded Gort.⁹⁵ Those he befriended often concluded that they were being used, giving him what Liddell Hart called 'his reputation for sucking other people's brains and then leaving them high and dry'.⁹⁶ It was the same tendency sensed by Henry Morris-Jones when he resigned from the Liberal National Party:

Leslie with his clever Jewish mind yesterday did some rapid calculations. Knew we were resigning at a good time on a good issue; decided to immediately jump on to our wagon

Belisha lacked both the self-knowledge and the ability to sense and react to the mood of others which might have made him a more successful politician.

and to become the conductor of it!⁹⁷

Equally damaging was Belisha's almost total inability to appreciate the effect which his character and manner had on others – and his surprise and distress when he realised he was disliked.⁹⁸ In part this was a function of 'his desire to believe what he wishes to believe'.⁹⁹ 'I had the feeling', noted Chamberlain shortly before the crisis of January 1940, 'that he did not and could not see where he had gone wrong.'¹⁰⁰ It was evident, confirmed Liddell Hart, that he did not realise how General Ironside, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, had turned against him and was siding with his enemies.¹⁰¹ Belisha lacked both the self-knowledge and the ability to sense and react to the mood of others which might have made him a more successful politician.

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'My position is good, I have my public, and if trouble comes and there is a use for me, I shall be there. I shall be stronger, I think, than I was before.'¹⁰² So judged Hore-Belisha six weeks after his resignation from the War Office. The remark was characteristic of the miscalculations and misjudgements which marked his later career. Trouble did come, but Churchill survived it, and, having set himself up as one of the war premier's leading critics, Belisha was never likely to recover his earlier prominence. Even had an unforeseen military catastrophe forced Churchill from power, Belisha was not well placed to profit from such a situation. His lack of both a solid party base and a strong personal following would always have told against him. So Leslie Hore-Belisha joined the long list of 'future Prime Ministers' who never made the grade. The man who aspired to be a second Disraeli and who kept a bust of the Victorian statesman prominently displayed in his library to remind him of his ambition is consigned to the footnotes of history. He is remembered, if at all, by a now ageing generation who learnt their highway code with the help of the eponymous flashing orange beacons to which this

supremely publicity-conscious politician at least succeeded in permanently attaching his name.

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