

Liberals and the Great War

The First World War tore the Liberal Party apart. **David Dutton** looks at how one Liberal MP lived through the conflict.

One Liberal's war

Richard Durning Holt and Liberal politics 1914–18

Liberalism tore its heart out between 1914 and 1918 in a private agony about true and false Liberals, right and wrong Liberalism.¹ At one level it is difficult to argue with Michael Bentley's verdict. The Liberal Party, which entered the First World War in August 1914 under the leadership of Herbert Asquith with more than eight continuous and distinguished years in government behind it, left the conflict deeply divided and about to be humiliated in the Coupon election of December 1918, held just weeks after the armistice came into force. That election saw the independent party, still headed by Asquith, reduced to less than thirty MPs.

Even so, the precise impact upon the Liberal Party of four years of unprecedentedly intense conflict, the first total war in British experience, remains a matter of considerable academic controversy. Geoffrey Searle has identified three broad explanations of what happened. Some historians have focused on the accidents of history whereby key individuals – usually Lloyd George or Asquith and their followers, according to taste – contributed by their mistakes and misjudgements to their party's decline. Others attach the greatest importance to the processes of social change, begun or accelerated by the war, which created a system of class-based politics in which Liberalism found itself increasingly outflanked by an advancing Labour Party. Finally, there are those who stress the inability of Liberalism as an intellectual creed to cope with the demands of modern warfare.² The last offers the most tantalising line of enquiry. 'It was their principles', asserts Kenneth Morgan, 'which the very fact of total war with the unbridled collectivism and the "jingo" passions which it unleashed, appeared to undermine.'³ In the memorable phrase of Trevor Wilson, the war was like a 'rampant' omnibus which, out of control, mounted the pavement and ran over an unsuspecting pedestrian. The victim was the British Liberal Party.⁴

Few, however, now accept Wilson's analysis without considerable qualifications. The idea that

Liberalism, as a laissez-faire political philosophy, proved to be intellectually defenceless in the face of the necessary wartime encroachments of a collectivist state does scant justice to the way in which Liberalism had already abandoned much of its nineteenth century outlook long before war broke out. It ignores, in fact, the ascendancy which the ideas of the 'New Liberalism' had come to occupy from the 1890s onwards.⁵ For Martin Pugh, therefore, Liberalism faced no insuperable challenges in the social and economic spheres between 1914 and 1918. Only, he argues, in the realms of political and legal issues do such arguments carry any conviction.⁶ George Bernstein goes further, arguing that Liberalism in the constituencies reveals above all the party's flexibility and capacity to adapt. Away from Westminster the typical Liberal could readily accept the emergency measures which the government was obliged to enact.⁷

Part of the problem derives from a tendency to treat Liberalism and the Liberal Party as a single entity, capable of responding consistently and uniformly to the trials of world war. But the party had always been a broad church. Liberals responded to the conflict in a huge range of ways and 'what caused the Liberal Party to divide were the different reactions of its members to the strains of war'.⁸ What follows is an attempt to trace the wartime experience of one backbench Liberal MP for whom the war did indeed create a crisis of values and ideals with which he was unable to cope.

Richard Durning Holt was born in 1868 into one of Liverpool's richest and most respected mercantile families. His father Robert was a cotton broker, leader of the Liberal Party on the Liverpool council and the city's first Lord Mayor in 1892–93. The Holts were prominent Unitarians who made substantial philanthropic contributions to their city.

Richard was educated at Winchester and New College, Oxford. After two unsuccessful attempts to secure election for the West Derby division of Liverpool he was elected to parliament as the Liberal



Richard Durning Holt (1868–1941)

member for the Northumberland constituency of Hexham following a by-election in March 1907. Amidst the vast array of Liberal backbenchers elected in the landslide general election victory of January 1906, Holt made little impact in the House of Commons until shortly before the outbreak of the First World War. Then, in the spring of 1914, he led the opposition of a group of Liberal MPs to Lloyd George's budget of that year, the first £200 million budget in British history.

Historians have disputed the significance of the so-called 'Holt Cave'. It was once suggested that the actions of Holt and his colleagues represented a significant body of opposition to the general progressive direction of government policy, including Lloyd George's land campaign. Holt led a deputation of between forty and fifty MPs which met Asquith on 15 June. The Prime Minister's failure to satisfy the rebels resulted in a letter to *The Times* on 18 June, which Asquith found 'a very able document'.⁹ The fact that the Cave's efforts ended with the government withdrawing some of its proposals and agreeing to halve the proposed increase in income tax 'clearly defined the limits of [the Liberal] Par-

ty's tolerance for social and economic change'. Possibly, indeed, 'the budget debacle of 1914 marked the end of the New Liberalism'.¹⁰

Recent research, however, has stressed the fluid composition of the Holt Cave, whose numbers fluctuated during the brief weeks of its existence between fifteen and sixty members. According to Ian Packer, it was 'by no means a straightforward expression of anti-progressive sentiments' but rather 'a disparate group of MPs whose membership and grievances varied enormously'.¹¹ Furthermore, Packer has shown that the government's concessions had more to do with procedural difficulties of its own creation than with pressure applied by Holt and his supporters. So the Cave may have been less significant for the long-term evolution of the Liberal Party than was once thought. That said, Holt's own words are difficult to ignore. The Cave, he said, was 'a combined remonstrance by business men and some survivors of the Cobden-Bright school of thought against the ill-considered and socialistic tendencies of the Government finance'. The government had 'certainly travelled a long way from the old Liberal principle of "retrenchment" and I

deeply regret it'.¹² Holt himself, and presumably at least some of those who acted with him at this time, represented a continuing strand of laissez-faire Liberalism which was out of sympathy with much that the government had done in the years since 1906. His problems would be greatly exacerbated by the coming of European war.

That said, Holt, along with the vast majority of the Parliamentary Liberal Party, had little difficulty in accepting the British declaration of war. The crucial factor was Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality which enabled the government to present British participation as a moral issue rather than a question of *realpolitik*. Before the Belgian issue arose, it was another matter. As Holt wrote on 2 August: 'it is impossible to believe that a Liberal government can be guilty of the crime of dragging us into this conflict in which we are in no way interested'.¹³ A week later his mood had changed dramatically:

I had thought we might and should have kept out of the war but when Germany decided on an unprovoked attack upon Belgium, whose neutrality Germany equally with ourselves had guaranteed, it seemed impossible for us to stand by.¹⁴

In reality the public justification of Britain's involvement was almost the mirror image of the motivation which had actually guided the key figures of Asquith's cabinet. It was a remarkably successful example of the government's skills of policy presentation.

For the time being Holt acted as a loyal and largely unquestioning supporter of the war effort, encouraging voluntary enlistment and turning his family home in Liverpool into a temporary hospital. By 1915, however, his attitude began to change. Holt's diary contains increasingly regular and disillusioned references to the country's mounting casualty lists. But the real turning point came with the formation of a coalition government in May. 'Liberal opinion is dissatisfied', noted Holt, 'and many Liberal members including [myself] are vexed and suspicious'.¹⁵ His belief grew that 'it is the result of a dirty intrigue' and he commented on serious 'anxiety as to future

policy'.¹⁶ By June he was associated with a small group of Liberal MPs led by Sir Charles Nicholson which included Leif Jones, Russell Rea and Sir Thomas Whittaker, whose aim was to give the government 'a Liberal pull whenever possible'.¹⁷ Reginald McKenna's autumn budget was also a cause for concern since it 'impose[d] customs duties without corresponding excise. A curious suggestion from a Free Trade Ch. of Exchequer against which I voted steadily'.¹⁸ By the end of the year the campaign for military conscription was becoming irresistible. For purist Liberals such as Holt the year's developments were of a kind – compulsion was the direct result of coalition and graphically illustrated the dire consequence which inevitably followed from the prostitution of Liberal principles. He denied unreservedly the state's right to oblige a man to bear arms against his will.

At the beginning of 1916 an important Rubicon was crossed when the government introduced the first military service bill. Holt was prominent among the bill's opponents and looked for a lead from Sir John Simon who now resigned as Home Secretary over this issue. 'There are all the elements of a first rate Liberal Party,' insisted Holt, 'and for months we have only wanted a leader.'¹⁹ By February Simon had become chairman of a small group of those MPs who opposed conscription, a group that was interesting in the way in which it showed the distinction between radical Liberals and Labour members beginning to blur. Holt found himself a committee member alongside J. H. Thomas, soon to become General Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen, and a future Labour cabinet minister. Yet Simon never emerged as the effective leader of true Liberalism in the way that Holt had hoped. The majority of anti-conscriptionists were to the left of Simon in general political terms and had not hitherto been his natural allies. He regarded some of his new supporters as 'cranks'.²⁰

The fight against conscription was a forlorn one and Holt was disappointed when the government carried its bill by 403 votes to 105 in the House of Com-

mons even though 'the opponents made out a case'.²¹ More significantly for Holt, his stand over compulsion began the process which would eventually sever his relationship with his seat at Hexham. The chairman of the constituency Liberal Association fired the first shot across the MP's bows. Should opposition to the Military Service Bill be carried to such extremes as to cause a general election, he warned, 'the Liberal Party in the Hexham Division would not only suffer defeat but disaster'. Opinion amongst the general public was not in line with Holt and the most important thing was to give the Prime Minister 'all possible support'.²²

Holt hoped that a weekend spent in Hexham in late February had 'allayed the anxiety which my independence in Parliament had caused'.²³ But he was over-optimistic. When the government sought to widen conscription, Holt moved the rejection of their bill. By the summer of 1916 he was giving serious thought to the idea of a negotiated peace, and he provided financial backing when a new weekly journal, *Common Sense*, whose thinking was close to that of the Union of Democratic Control, was launched in October. A correspondent warned of mounting dissatisfaction in the constituency which, he said, had begun with Holt's opposition to the 1914 budget.²⁴ But with increasing intensity Holt came to feel that the war was being used to justify unacceptable measures of encroachment by the state. 'All the old principles of the Liberal Party have been virtually abandoned by its leaders', he complained, 'even Free Trade ... The betrayal has been cruel. War seems to arouse so many bad passions that Liberalism cannot live in its atmosphere.'²⁵ One area of particular concern to him was the merchant navy. To Walter Runciman, the President of the Board of Trade, he complained that 'the mercantile marine will step by step become controlled entirely by the Government ... whereas, as you know, I regard with intense dislike the interference with the freedom of individuals'.²⁶

Holt shed no tears when the first coalition government fell in December. In his view this development freed true

Liberals from the contaminating constraints of association with an alien political philosophy. He was now completely disillusioned with Lloyd George – 'L.G. has behaved scandalously and the section of the Liberals he takes with him are certainly not men conspicuous for their character'.²⁷ The new Prime Minister's views seemed to have turned full circle from pre-war days when he had been a standard-bearer of Radical Liberalism: 'Think of "Limehouse" and the [People's] Budget'.²⁸ Holt now looked to Asquith, the deposed Liberal premier, to fill the role he had assigned to Simon a year earlier. Once again, he would be largely disappointed. That disappointment moved him towards association with some strange bedfellows.

In 1917, with prospects of outright military victory against Germany and her allies apparently receding, war weariness became a characteristic feature of a much wider section of political opinion than hitherto. Holt bitterly resented Lloyd George's determined pursuit of the 'knockout blow' as both unrealistic and unacceptable in terms of the losses which its unlikely achievement would entail. But the reluctance of Asquith to come out as the leader of a principled party of opposition left him increasingly frustrated. Holt's reaction to the debate on the government's suppression of foreign editions of the *Nation* in April was typical: 'a division was staved off by the loquacity of those who are afraid of breaking the Govt. and having to face a general election'.²⁹ Not surprisingly, Holt was very enthusiastic about the publication in the *Daily Telegraph* at the end of the year of the famous letter from the former Unionist Foreign Secretary, the Marquess of Lansdowne, advocating a negotiated peace. He was among those who signed an address of thanks to Lansdowne in recognition of his contribution to the cause of peace. In a bizarre piece of speculation the journalist F.W. Hirst drew up the details of a possible alternative government. The Unionist Lansdowne as Prime Minister would be flanked by Holt at the Exchequer and socialists Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden at the Home Office and Ministry of Labour respectively.³⁰

Holt was particularly attracted by

Lansdowne's declaration that Britain should have no long-term aim to deprive Germany of 'her place among the great commercial communities of the world'. He set out his position in a letter to his local constituency newspaper: 'Those who, like myself, have been and are convinced Free Traders and humble followers of Cobden, Bright and Gladstone accept this proposition as one necessary to our own material prosperity. Germany's prosperity and indeed the prosperity of any country adds to instead of detracting from ours.' There was no reason, he argued, why an attempt should not be made, as Lansdowne suggested, to bring peace to the world and free it from its rapidly increasing burden of misery. But this meant abandoning the 'knock-out blow' policy of 'the Prime Minister and his present entourage'.³¹

By December Holt was involved in moves to organise an effective parliamentary opposition – 'intelligent, patriotic and active' – despite Asquith's reluctance to lead it. In doing so, he was well aware that his actions might have fatal consequences for his position at Hexham. 'We are on the verge of starting a regular Liberal opposition in Parliament', he informed his constituency party chairman, 'in which I shall take part. You, in the constituencies, will have to decide whether you will support that opposition or a Conservative with dabs of Socialism Government.' Holt's problem, however, was that the majority of local Liberals were still ready to give Lloyd George and his government the benefit of the doubt and he readily agreed that, should it be the wish of the Hexham Association to choose another candidate for the next election, he would be 'ready to make the change as easy as possible for you and for my successor'.³² Deprived of the opportunity to explain himself to a public meeting of his constituents, Holt set out his views in a letter to a local newspaper. It was to no avail, as his constituency chairman made clear:

Some of us have been doing our very best to improve the relationships between yourself and your constituents and were hopeful that the political situation would change in such a way

as to help us in that direction. I fear that the publication of your letter will act as a serious set-back to those efforts. I do not think that at the present time we could count on one-third of the usual body of workers in the constituency and, of those, few would be enthusiasts.³³

By the end of January 1918 he had agreed with the officers of the Hexham Liberal Party that he would seek a new constituency at the next election, although no formal announcement was made until later in the year: 'we are all agreed that it is worse than useless from everybody's point of view that I should stand if defeat is certain'.³⁴

Holt derived momentary encouragement from Lloyd George's famous speech to the Trades Union Congress on 5 January, in which the Prime Minister seemed to go a considerable way towards accepting the goal of a peace without victors or vanquished as advocated by the American President, Woodrow Wilson. 'It appears to me that he has accepted the opinions and policy which I have advocated for months and years past.'³⁵ In general, however, he continued to find himself at odds with the government's conduct of the war. Indeed, his severance from Hexham served if anything to embolden his opposition. On 13 February he moved a resolution in the Commons condemning the terms of an allied statement issued by the Supreme War Council at Versailles a week earlier and calling upon the government to keep open the possibility of negotiations for a diplomatic settlement. He questioned whether a military solution was really the only option and drew attention to Lloyd George's inconsistency in now advocating once more the military destruction of Germany when only a month earlier he had seemed ready to envisage a more conciliatory conclusion to the war.³⁶ A fortnight later he accused Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour of deliberately misinterpreting the peace feelers emanating from the Central Powers.³⁷ In the pages of *Common Sense* Holt called for a coalition of all those who rejected the decimation of Germany as a policy objective, and an important meeting of Lansdowne's

supporters was held at the Essex Hall in February. But in the atmosphere of the time it was only too easy, if unfair, for extreme nationalists such as the newspaper magnate, Lord Northcliffe, to dub Holt and those who thought like him as 'pro-German'.

Holt's other great problem at this time was that he and those who thought like him lacked the leadership of a nationally respected figure. He was now keen to 'organise the overthrow of the present government. Nothing good for the country can result from government by a gang of incompetent scoundrels – or even competent ones'.³⁸ Asquith remained the obvious standard bearer of independent Liberalism and Holt believed 'he ought to be pushed into it. L.G. is a public danger and A[squith], tho' he has many faults, is far preferable particularly if he can be kept in good company'.³⁹ Holt made a personal appeal to the former premier to take the lead, especially in opposition to any further extension of conscription which would inevitably have a damaging impact upon the domestic economy.⁴⁰ 'L.G. is ruining the country and, whether we can stop him or not, do let us try.'⁴¹ But Asquith held back, partly out of a patriotic wish to see the war reach a successful conclusion and partly because he realised that he was not well placed to resume the premiership himself should Lloyd George fall from grace.

Holt formally resigned from his Hexham seat in July and in late October, with help from the Whip's Office, which was still under Asquithian control and anxious at this stage to minimise party divisions, was selected as Liberal candidate for the Lancashire constituency of Eccles. The election when it came was held in circumstances which could not have been envisaged in the spring and early summer of 1918 when Germany came as near as at any time since 1914 to a military breakthrough on the Western Front. With stunning rapidity the tide was turned and by the autumn the war machine of the Central Powers was in a state of collapse. This meant that the election was held in the euphoric atmosphere created by sudden and unexpected victory. Holt began his cam-

paign optimistically enough. 'Our present position is that [the members of the Coalition] are not trustworthy people and their election a very dirty trick and this argument seems popular.'⁴² Rapidly, however, his mood changed and by polling day he was anticipating defeat at the hands of his Conservative opponent. But the result, both in Eccles itself and nationally, was far worse than Holt had anticipated:

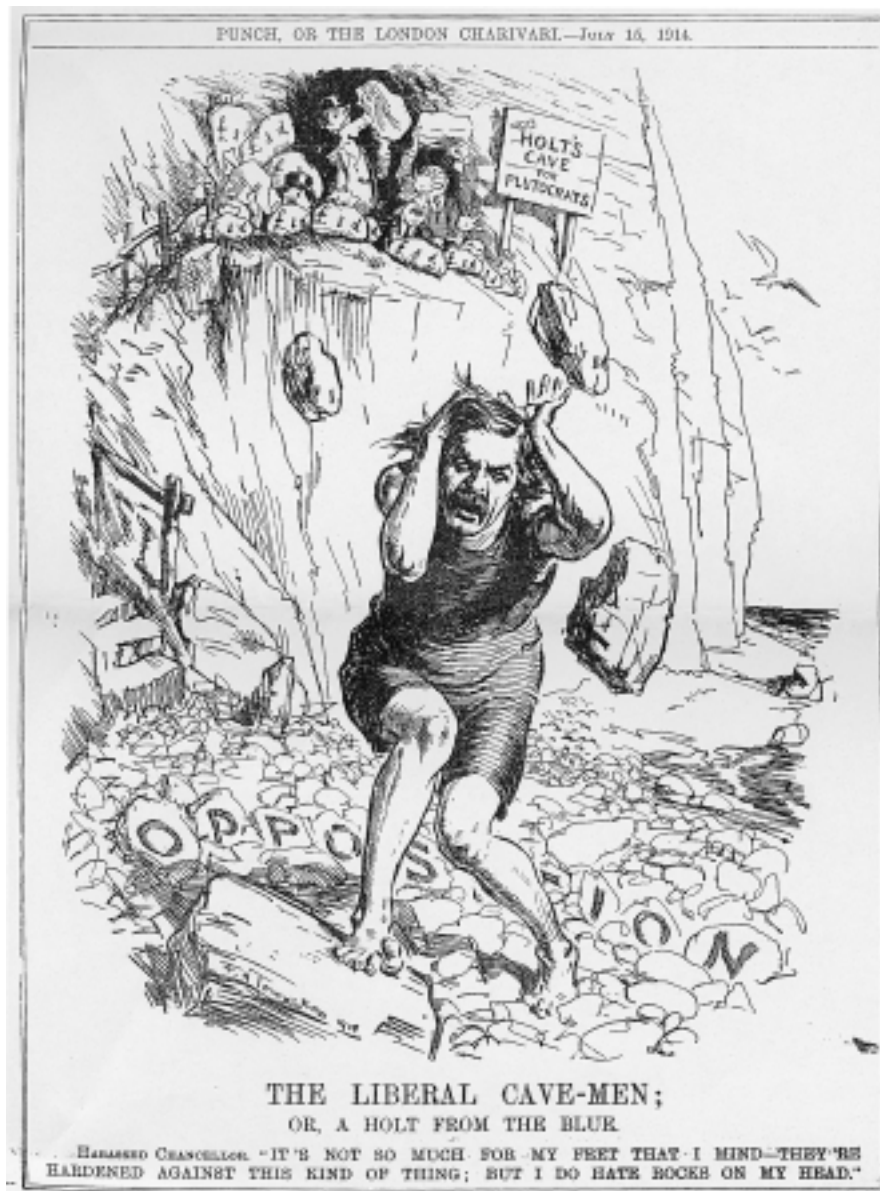
What an event the election is! Practically everybody who can be reckoned a staunch Liberal wiped out and not one left who can be relied upon to make a proper exposition of Liberal principles if called upon to do so. It is really comical – but it is a tragedy too.⁴³

In Eccles Holt trailed his Tory opponent by more than 12,000 votes. He had no answer to the tide of militant nationalism which dominated the first months of the peace. Interestingly, his disillusionment with Asquith was now so great that he welcomed the latter's defeat at East Fife. 'There is a better chance of restoring things without him than with him.'⁴⁴

Though there came to be an intensely personal element in Holt's detestation of Lloyd George, it is difficult not to conclude that his wartime problems were at heart ideological. He had managed to support Britain's entry into the European conflict and he remained convinced throughout the conflict that certain basic war aims, such as the restoration of Belgian neutrality, needed to be secured. But he was not prepared to wage war in the name of liberal democracy if the means of doing so involved the destruction of those very values which Britain had set out to defend. He would have endorsed the words of W.L. Williams, MP for Carmarthen, who warned the House of Commons in July 1915 that:

it would be tragedy worse than war if, in order to win the War, England ceased to be the beacon of freedom and liberty which she has been in the past.⁴⁵

Holt's Liberalism was deeply entrenched in the values of the nineteenth century. Upon him at least the tenets of the New Liberalism had made little if any impact.



As a character sketch written in the early 1930s put it, 'he seems to hold that the golden age is not before us but behind us and that it was at its most roseate between 1850 and 1890'.⁴⁶ Even in the darkest days of military danger Holt remained keen to remind the country of the underlying importance of traditional Liberal virtues:

Our great danger in the future would come not from an enemy who, whatever happened, would have been terribly punished and weakened, but from oppressive taxation at home and from Government control, which, like a bad drug habit, grew upon the people who indulged in it. We could only cut the danger by making the greatest possible use of the means of production, and we could only reach our maximum of industrial efficiency

under the stimulus of free trade and open competition.⁴⁷

Of course, Holt's experience was that of an individual. But it is instructive to note the fortunes of those with whom the war brought him into contact and co-operation. The range of Holt's associates suggested a certain intellectual confusion on his part. His temporary alliance with Lansdowne could be taken no further even though he shared with the Unionist peer a reactionary dislike of most of the changes occasioned by the war. The Conservative Party of the inter-war years with its ongoing flirtation with protective tariffs offered no attraction to a Free Trade Liberal of Holt's stamp. Yet he could probably have accommodated himself easily enough among a later generation of Conservatives. Some of his pronouncements

display a positively Thatcherite tone:

The habit of looking to the State for help instead of trusting to its own hard work and ability saps the vitality of any industry and produces inefficiency. Exposure to competition is the best security that an industry will be thoroughly efficient.⁴⁸

Lansdowne, whose call for a negotiated peace Holt regarded as a rare and unexpected voice of sanity, found himself largely ostracised among his Conservative colleagues. Never again did he hold office in government or party.

Of more significance were Holt's associates on the radical left. He clearly felt some misgivings about some of the company which the war obliged him to keep. 'Our fellow guests (and indeed our hosts) if not pro-German are too anti-English for my taste',⁴⁹ he noted in February 1917 after a dinner with Leonard Courtney, former Liberal MP and Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons, at which he was joined by C. P. Trevelyan, F. W. Hirst and Labour's Ramsay MacDonald. But such figures shared Holt's doubts about the way in which the British war effort was being conducted and matched his commitment to free trade, freedom of conscience, freedom of the press and the voluntary principle of recruitment.

Many of Holt's wartime collaborators experienced like him serious disagreements with their constituency parties. Some such as E. T. John, Josiah Wedgwood, R. L. Outhwaite and Charles Trevelyan reacted to this situation by severing their existing party links and fighting the election as independents or supporters of the Independent Labour Party. Others, including Sydney Arnold, Edward Hemmerde, Joseph King and R. C. Lambert, stayed with Liberalism during the disaster of 1918 but sooner or later transferred their allegiance to the Labour Party.⁵⁰ Such men came to see in Labour's moderate socialism the vehicle for those radical aspirations which had once attracted them to Liberalism. Such a path offered no temptations for Holt. In the last year of the war he wrote contemptuously of Liberals who were 'drifting to the Labour Party, bitten with the idea of state interference'.⁵¹ He was after all the same man who had once criti-

cised his aunt and uncle, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, for their 'great idea of spending money so as to please the working classes. Not to my idea a very high-minded type of political opinion'.⁵²

Holt therefore served out the remainder of his career within the Liberal ranks. He sought re-election to parliament on no less than five further occasions between 1922 and 1929, all without success. But the decade after the end of the Great War saw Holt bewildered and disheartened, especially once Lloyd George had been restored to the party's hierarchy. He was encumbered by pre-war doctrines which seemed to have less and less relevance to the problems of the post-war world. He never reconciled himself to Lloyd George's leadership, nor after 1926 to the sort of interventionist Liberalism which the Welshman espoused. But he determined to fight his corner, however unprofitably, from within.

In practice, he remained a Liberal only because there was nowhere else to go. As Holt himself put it in 1926: 'difficult and even hopeless as the position is, there is no place for some of us except in a Liberal Party. The Tories and the Labour are equally impossible'.⁵³ Pressed to stand again for parliament in 1931, Holt chose instead to concentrate on his business career, becoming chairman of Elder Dempster Shipping Lines and of Martin's Bank. But he remained faithful to those Gladstonian principles of reduced government expenditure and low taxation in which he had always believed. He died in Liverpool on 22 March 1941.

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