

Women Liberals

Alan Mumford analyses the influence of five leading women in the Liberal Party in the early twentieth century.

Five Liberal women

IN THE EARLY weeks of September 1905 three leading Liberals, Grey, Haldane and Asquith met near a Scottish fishing village, Relugas, which gave its name to a compact between the three. They agreed that they would only serve under Campbell Bannerman as prime minister if he took up that position from the House of Lords.

When Balfour resigned and Campbell Bannerman was invited to form a government, complex discussions, largely led by Asquith, ensued. Charlotte Campbell Bannerman, his wife, ambitious for her husband, had previously influenced him to reject the idea of becoming Speaker, and instead to stand for the leadership of the Liberal Party. In his final discussion with Asquith on 6 December 1905, Campbell Bannerman said that he wished her (Charlotte) 'to be the final arbiter'.¹ She told him that he should stand firm and refuse to go the Lords. Campbell Bannerman accepted this view: The Regulas compact collapsed.

Men then generally saw wives of politicians as of low intelligence and minimal political sense: they were useful for social entertaining. The five women discussed here represent change in the overt influence of women in politics and specially in the Liberal Party in the twentieth century. Charlotte provided a benchmark: did the wives and mistress of two prime ministers have influence? The two daughters developed independent political careers and public recognition – but how significant were they?

Margot Asquith

Margot could scarcely have been more different from Charlotte except in their devotion to their husbands. She dazzled in dress and conversation. In July 1892 Margot Tennant joined in her brother's campaign to be elected as an MP. Asquith spoke in support of him. Margot commented on one speech 'Although a thin speech it was magnificently delivered.'² This was the

first of many occasions in which she praised his speeches – though never again suggesting they were thin in content. Not initially in love with Asquith, she came to adore him after their marriage in 1894. Gladstone, in a characteristically portentous letter said that 'you have a great and noble work to perform. It is a work beyond human strength.'³ Asquith's political friends foresaw, correctly, that as a political hostess, her vivid conversational engagement with people could lead to political problems. Some argued subsequently that the hectic and extravagant social life into which Margot took Asquith was disadvantageous to him.

The Asquiths were emotionally constipated (except in Asquith's letters to women) whereas Margot was orally incontinent. Margot was not concerned about Asquith's women friends until he became entranced by Venetia Stanley. There was no one in her circle who captured in detail her conversation, in which she favoured indiscretion and truthfulness (as she saw it). Margot was not the female equivalent of the view that a gentleman never gives offence unintentionally. She wrote, 'how I wish I had discretion with less candour'.⁴ She was always noisily adherent to Asquith's political views but was indiscrete in her views on other people. She is usually described as witty, though contemporary records of this are not available. Her biographer is so distrustful of the witticisms attributed to Margot that she includes none of them in her biography.⁵

One of those witticisms is frequently quoted as the essence of Lloyd George: '... he can't see a belt without hitting below it.'⁶ The first problem about this is that the *Oxford Dictionary* implies that Violet Bonham Carter identified Lloyd George as the target. In fact, she explicitly avoided saying this. She actually reported Margot as saying about 'one of my [Violet's] Father's colleagues who shall be nameless: "he can't see a belt without hitting below it".'⁷ A second issue is that Violet was speaking 'from

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my remembered store',⁸ not her diary or other source. Margot did write in 1933, 'I do not think it was Mr Lloyd George's intention to hit below the belt, – he never perceived a belt': a more subtle characterisation.⁹ A final addition to suspicion about this quotation is found in Violet's diary for December 1916 about her father: 'He will hit always 3ft above the belt at least'.¹⁰ So, Violet's 'remembered store' has created what maybe a mythical quotation, now permanently attached to Lloyd George.

Political issues

Margot was initially opposed to Gladstone's Home Rule Bills: however, 'Events have proved that I was entirely wrong.'¹¹ On South Africa, she was divided between support for Asquith's position and an emotional tie to the Boers. While she eventually supported his action to cut the powers of the Lords, she objected to the speeches of Lloyd George and Churchill as they attacked the peers. Asquith's original initiation of the Old Age Pensions Act is not referred to in her autobiography, nor are Lloyd George's subsequent social insurance policies. The struggles over increased expenditure on the Navy are referred to largely in terms of the personal struggles between Churchill and McKenna on the one hand and Lloyd George on the other.

She supported and may have influenced Asquith's reluctance to reunifying Liberals after 1916. She approved Asquith's approach on the general strike of 1926 and gave vigorous support to the attempt to eject Lloyd George. Like Asquith and Violet, Margot opposed women's suffrage, and women politicians. She was no torch bearer for women – rather a torch extinguisher in her comments about them. Yet she constantly expressed political views as if they were as valuable as those of men.

As war grew closer in 1914, Margot received information about cabinet discussions and potential resignations but offered no views on

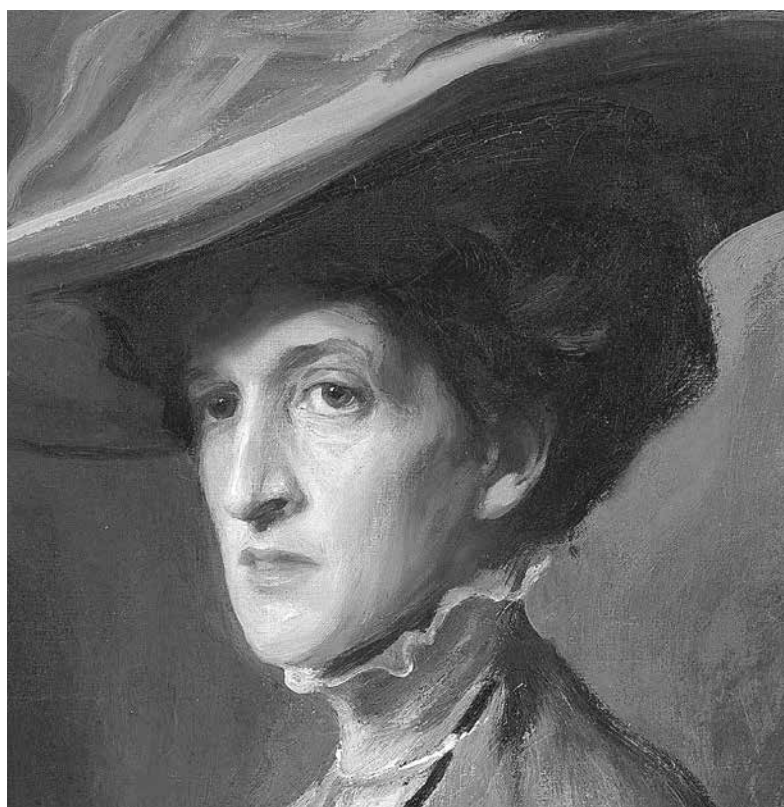
whether it was right to take military action. She strongly opposed conscription in 1915 in letters to ministers. She disliked the coalition of 1915, hysterically regretting the destruction of the cabinet.

Violet's view of her stepmother's politics was 'her passion for politics was a strange aberration, for – paradoxically – politics was her blindest spot. She often judged politicians astutely but she had not the smallest grasp of any political or economic problem.'¹²

Margot's influence on Asquith

Asquith wrote 'there can never have been a politician who owed more than I have done to the wise counsels, the unfailing courage and the ever-vitalising companionship of a wife.'¹³ He gave no examples of her counsel. One successful influence was to change the name she used

Margot Asquith
(1864–1945)



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for him from Herbert (common she thought) to Henry. (She had changed from Margaret to Margot).

Roy Douglas wrote that Margot 'appears to have exerted significant influence over the career of her husband.'¹⁴ The Brocks wrote that Asquith often disregarded 'specks of gold in the dross of her advice.'¹⁵ Eleanor Brock in the *Dictionary of National Biography* asks what influence Margot had, but does not answer the question. The main biographers of Asquith (Spender and Asquith, Jenkins and Koss) make no comments about her influence.

There are two reasons to suspect the assertion she had influence. The first is that Asquith thought women were vessels largely incapable of exercising sensible and rational thought on issues. The second is specific to Margot: Asquith would have had every reason to suppose that her uncontrolled indiscretions would make it too dangerous for him to consult her. Perhaps it was the noise created by her conversation and letters that encouraged some to believe that she must have influenced him. Her autobiography, diaries and letters imply by the absence of comment that she may not have tried. She did claim to have joined with Margaret Lloyd George in influencing the creation of a Ministry of Munitions. Clearly, she did not speak to Asquith directly, because when Lloyd George gave her praise for her role in this suggestion her husband was surprised. Her reaction is revealing: 'Well, I didn't worry you, as wives with ideas are often boring.'¹⁶ But her claim is contradicted by other information (see Margaret Lloyd George later). The biographers of Asquith and Lloyd George make no reference to this claim of responsibility. Her own biographer offers inconsistent views on her influence, saying first that she was never able to influence Asquith but later giving an example where she did, on the question of Chinese labour.¹⁷ On most major issues – Relugas, the formation of Campbell Bannerman's cabinet, House of Lords and Budget, the war, the coalition of 1915 and the crisis over the War Committee in 1916, taking a peerage in 1926 – she was a recorder not an influencer.

She was violently opposed to Lloyd George going to the War Office on Kitchener's death, but had no influence on the decision. In fact, it led to 'the first acute political difference we have ever had and now we can't speak hardly on politics.'¹⁸

Asquith responded impatiently to her complaints about Lloyd George. Asquith revealed to Violet his reaction on some occasions: 'I have sometimes walked up and down that room until I felt as tho' I were going mad. When one

needed rest to have a thing like the *Morning Post* leader flung at one, things more controversially put even than by one's colleagues.'¹⁹

She thought in 1915 that Asquith should show a little more drama and colour, but there is no indication that she actually spoke to Asquith – there was certainly no change in his behaviour. When Lloyd George communicated his ideas about a war committee Margot wrote 'I had never heard of these proposals'.²⁰ Asquith decided to proceed for his usual weekend away from London. Margot unsuccessfully tried to persuade him not to go. In fact, he was brought back by his political secretary, Bonham-Carter. She had some influence on Asquith's involvement in politics after December 1916, supporting his refusal to accept a subordinate position under Lloyd George as Lord Chancellor.

Her recording of late-night discussions usually in her bedroom and at least once in her bath produced no change of mind or actions different from those which Asquith had already decided. Asquith had told her before their marriage that he did not want a wife who was an enthusiastic partisan on his side of politics. That was, however, what he got with volatile and voluble Margot, but she did not influence him.

Other relationships

Her attempts to influence occurred elsewhere. The number of her interactions with other politicians and particularly with Liberal ministers was astonishing at least for the twentieth century. She wrote to ministers telling them what to do. In 1910 she advocated a general election in telegrams to the chief whip and her husband. She did not accept the arguments in favour of conscription in 1915 and wrote several times to her favoured ministers. The most bizarre letter was a long defence of Haldane to the editor of a paper which attacked Liberal ministers: 'But I think you are quite right to attack Henry. Go on calling him a lazy man. The only men you must not attack are our generals.'²¹ Later she tried to persuade Crewe to influence Asquith to save Haldane at the formation of the coalition.²²

Margot had a low opinion of Churchill. She thought him entirely driven by ego. Before 1916 she unfavourably compared him to Lloyd George, who was prepared to listen rather than to deliver a set of speeches with no interaction with others (particularly herself). Following Asquith's fall in December 1916, she developed and maintained for the rest of her life a violent antipathy to Lloyd George. She was infuriated by the description of Lloyd George as 'the man who won the war'. In 1933 she wrote 'for personal reasons it is difficult for me to write about

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Mr Lloyd George.’ She then spent four pages on him.²³

Before the great betrayal, her view of him had been changeable. On 29 November 1910, she sent him the most extraordinary letter criticising his speech: ‘Don’t when you speak on platforms arouse what is low and sordid and violent in yr. audience; it hurts those members of it that are fighting these elections with the noblest desire to see fair play.’ The reason was ‘they lose us votes’.²⁴ Lloyd George made a scathing response and Margot had to apologise. She advised him in friendly terms on Marconi, and on the naval budget. But after 1916 she saw him as a liar, an ingrate and destroyer of the Liberal Party.

Margot as a writer

Margot was the first prime minister’s wife to write an autobiography and the Brocks describe her as ‘an opinionated egoist, often inaccurate, the victim of flattery, and occasionally prone to fantasy’.²⁵ Her version of what Asquith said contains at least two levels of potential inaccuracy – whether Asquith was accurate about his own and other’s statements, and whether Margot captured what he said with any precision. (Asquith’s accounts to Venetia Stanley were at least his direct version). There are different versions of events in her diary and her autobiography. There were complaints then about the indiscretions and personalisation of people and issues in her autobiography and later books. Of course, it was the revelations which made the autobiography a best seller. Now the revelations seem very mild.

Margaret Lloyd George

There are no observable similarities between Margot Asquith and Margaret Lloyd George except they were both married to Liberal prime ministers. Margaret married in 1888 at the age of 22; Margot had been 30 on her marriage. Margaret was the daughter of a small farmer in North Wales; Margot, a daughter of a rich industrialist. Margaret led a very active social life in London with upper-middle-class politicians and other rich guests. Margaret was always more dedicated to life in Wales. This was the source of early and constant complaints by Lloyd George about the solitary unsupported life he led.

Margaret was penny pinching in both Criccieth and Downing Street, unlike Margot’s extravagance on her homes and clothes. Nor did Margaret provide the record of her husband’s activities that Margot did through her diary and autobiography. Margot’s clamorous talk had no echo in Margaret’s style. Margot’s

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dutiful attentions to her stepchildren were later complemented by her devotion to her own two children: Margaret’s focus on her five children was evidenced by her frequent absences with them in Criccieth.

Lloyd George in advance of his marriage to Margaret wrote to her in 1885 or 1886: ‘My supreme idea is to get on. To this idea I shall sacrifice everything – except I trust honesty. I am prepared to thrust even love itself under the wheel of my Juggernaut if it obstructs the way.’²⁶ Margaret’s protestations in 1940 that she was devastated in 1889 when Lloyd George sought and accepted candidature for the Caernarvon Boroughs constituency, that she had expected to be marrying only an ambitious lawyer, is contradicted by this letter.

Margaret provided a loving relationship which continued to exist at some level throughout their lives together, despite Lloyd George’s notorious infidelities, including a long-standing affair with Frances Stevenson. There were eventually two separate households, Margaret in the house she owned in Criccieth and Frances in Lloyd George’s house Bron-y-de, in Churt. Frances after the earliest years never appeared in Criccieth, whilst she disappeared through the back door at Bron-y-de if Margaret or other family members visited. Margaret provided the public appearance of a happy marriage, important to Lloyd George’s constituents and his general public image and did not try to divorce him, which would have ended his political career.

Margot’s opinion of Margaret was characteristically acid ‘a little woman inferiorly dressed with no distinction of appearance’.²⁷ She described her as ‘a very homely, intelligent, little servant of a woman with a heart of gold and no ambition of rise in her’.²⁸ (Margaret’s opinion of Margot is not known.) Margaret provided something much more: Lloyd George described her as having ‘a woman’s susceptibility with a man’s brain’; Hague thought this was intended as a compliment.²⁹

Lloyd George at a celebration of their Golden Wedding in January 1938 offered a description of their two personalities. He had lost none of his verbal dexterity: ‘We have lived together in perfect harmony for fifty years. One of us is contentious, combative and stormy. That is my wife. Then there is the other partner, placid, calm, peaceful and patient. That is me’.³⁰ The description is close to being accurate – but in reverse.

Contribution to politics

Margaret provided a new dimension to the role of a politician’s wife, unique at this time.



Margaret Lloyd George (1864–1941)

Unlike Margot, a decorative adornment at Asquith's meetings, Margaret was active in direct campaigning, initially in Lloyd George's constituency. She was Lloyd George's contact with his constituents and spoke at meetings in North Wales and eventually further afield in England. Her contribution to sustaining the Liberal Party in Wales was extraordinary for a woman at that time. In support of one of Lloyd George's secretaries as a Liberal candidate in a by-election in 1921, she delivered fifty-eight speeches in a fortnight.³¹ In 1918 and 1931 she took on the full responsibility of representing Lloyd George in his constituency. She worked hard to secure the Liberal nomination for daughter Megan in 1928 for Anglesey, and in the successful general election in 1929.

In 1908 she stood for the Executive Committee of the Women's Liberal Federation in Wales. 'I can help to rouse the women to support both the Government and the great cause of their own enfranchisement.'³² She became president of the North and South Wales Women's Liberal Federation and first councillor and then chairman of the Criccieth Urban District Council.

She was a strong advocate of temperance, a significant issue for Nonconformist Liberals. There are no indications of her views on other Liberal issues such as free trade or the welfare provisions that Lloyd George introduced. Her views on the right of women to vote changed slightly from an early belief in the principle, through antagonism to militant

suffragettes, towards eventually agreeing that women should have the vote. She did not think women in general were suited for the House of Commons (just like Margot Asquith but less stridently), nor should young marrieds have a political career. This is not surprising in terms of her own priority for family in relation to her marriage to Lloyd George.

Influence on Lloyd George

Hague writes 'He might turn to another woman for romantic love, but it was Margaret he consulted on political matters'³³ but provides no evidence. Her son Richard and daughter Olwen claimed that as prime minister Lloyd George consulted with her and usually took her advice but gave no examples. Yet, Richard also said she never interfered in political affairs.

A review of some of the major issues in which Lloyd George was involved suggest that Margaret had little influence at the time on the Marconi affair, entry to the First World War in 1914, formation of the coalition in 1915, Lloyd George's ascension as prime minister in 1916, or the Maurice Affair. For nearly all these events Margaret was actually in Wales. His move to the Ministry of Munitions in 1915 was 'against the wishes of his wife and Uncle Lloyd.'³⁴

In 1909 she decided to attend court with him as he denied any sexual relationship with a Mrs Edwards. Their son Richard claimed that his mother told him that Lloyd George was actually guilty, and that she stood by him not because of his potential political contribution but because she felt obliged to help her husband in grave trouble. Whatever her motivation, here was Margaret's major contribution to the Liberal Party – the survival of Lloyd George to carry out his improvements to the lot of poor people (putting aside a not specifically Liberal contribution in helping to win the war).

As a direct recipient of Lloyd George's views in so many letters, Margaret is a more reliable source than Margot's version of Asquith's conversations. She received boastful letters about his success – but did not have the obsessive interest in political matters that Frances Stevenson shared with him.

There are few published letters from her, and little evidence of her influence. Nor are there exciting revelations of conversations with or letters to politicians as with Margot. One significant example is that in late June 1920 Lloyd George's plan for fusion between his liberals and some Conservatives was rejected by Liberal ministers. In discussion with Beaverbrook, 'He regretted the decision. Dame Margaret Lloyd George who came with him, rejoiced. She

never liked the Tories and never failed to say just so.³⁵ This however is clearly an example of her disagreeing with Lloyd George after the event rather than proving influence before it. Margaret opposed Lloyd George's original intention to write his war memoirs in 1922. There is no indication that he asked for or was given any contribution by Margaret to those memoirs.

Margot and Margaret were both active politically, though in significantly different ways. Margaret broke the mould by being a direct participant not just an observer.

Margaret was made Dame of the British Empire in 1919 in recognition of her service to charity for Welsh soldiers during the First World War. Margot who had done nothing of substance, became Countess of Oxford and Asquith in 1925 on the elevation of Asquith to an Earldom.

Frances Stevenson

Frances, born in 1888, was the daughter of a lower-middle-class London family. Unusually for a woman, at that time, she took a degree, and became a schoolteacher. Lloyd George and his wife Margaret decided that Megan, their youngest daughter, needed additional educational support and Frances, because she spoke French (and perhaps because she was very pretty), was chosen by Lloyd George to provide this.

Involvement with Lloyd George continued after Megan no longer needed her because he began to give her secretarial and research work. They fell in love and their passionate affair continued from its fruition on the 21 February 1913, a date they identified as their 'marriage', which was in effect bigamous. She was 25 and Lloyd George 50. She became his private secretary as chancellor and prime minister – the first female private secretary to a PM. His early interest may well have been sexual – Lloyd George is believed by some to have been the most libidinous prime minister since Palmerston – but it became in addition an extremely effective working relationship.

She was a willing partner in an unequal relationship, on his terms, which meant no divorce and no scandal. Her diary³⁶ and the letters they exchanged³⁷ show the depth of love between them. She was attractive not only in her looks but in her soft well-spoken non-competitive manner (although Lloyd Georges' daughters in later life took a much harsher view of her). They married in 1943 but their earlier relationship was never revealed publicly until Frances described it in her autobiography.

Margaret Lloyd George did not challenge the 'two household' arrangement in Criccieth and Churt. Her children, especially Megan, were less accepting. They descended on him in 1932 to reveal that Frances had another lover, Colonel Tweed, one of Lloyd George's political advisers. The family was aware that Frances in 1929 had given birth to a baby, Jennifer, much loved by Lloyd George with whom she spent a great deal of time. Whether Lloyd George or Tweed was the actual father is not an issue for this article. Lloyd George accepted an earldom in 1945 in his extreme old age, so Frances became Countess Lloyd George.

Many historians and biographers have criticised Lloyd George's morals in taking a mistress twenty-five years younger than himself. No attention has been paid to the other moral issue. While Frances said, about their informal contract in February 1913, that it was totally contrary to the values and upbringing she had had, she said nothing about the conflict of morals involved in taking Lloyd George away from his wife. Instead she provided excuses for herself and her lover through criticisms of Margaret.

Political issues

While often present at political discussions with Lloyd George, there are no records of her contributing. Her published diary starts on 21 September 1914, after the dramatic events around Britain's decision to join in the war against Germany. Her autobiography in part makes up for

Frances Stevenson
(1888–1972)



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this omission and particularly records her views on how, when and why Lloyd George decided to support Britain's decision to support France and Belgium against Germany. The diary was a record of Lloyd George's activities, beliefs, successes and obstacles.

One of the few political issues on which we know her views occurred before her involvement with Lloyd George; she was a suffragist. We do not know, for example, whether she believed it right that Britain should enter the war in 1914, nor whether she thought the coalition governments of 1915 and 1916 were appropriate answers to the problems of the time. We learn of some of the intensity of feeling Lloyd George developed about conscription – but no view is offered by Frances. She thought that Asquith was ineffective but recorded Lloyd George's hesitation about becoming prime minister.

We know nothing of her views on the objectives Lloyd George had at the post-war conferences she attended with him. She thought Lloyd George had done a dramatic and eventually successful job on the peace treaty over Ireland in 1921. Did she believe in home rule or this version of it? We have no idea whether she thought either the politics or the economics of his 1920's policies were right.

Influence on Lloyd George and others

Unlike Margaret, Frances had no public political role. Hattersley wrote that she never aspired to influence Lloyd George's attitude towards great issues.³⁸ However, A. J. P. Taylor wrote that 'After protestations of love, he would turn to great affairs, initiate her into state secrets and – most skilful of all – appeal for her advice.' He also writes 'later on she was Lloyd George's principal adviser in the years when he had hoped to return as leader of the Liberal Party or even perhaps as National prime minister.'³⁹ John Campbell wrote that she was 'a great consolation to him in years of political frustration but she also had political influence.'⁴⁰ Enhanced claims about her influence appear in Hague's book: '... he relied on Frances' judgment when it came to politicians and statesmen.'⁴¹ Frances's granddaughter Ruth wrote, 'it was not that he allowed her opinions to affect his own view of a man, but he liked to hear her views.'⁴²

Frances herself contradicts these views: 'He may have given the impression he was open to argument. My conclusion is that at no time was it possible for me to influence Lloyd George. ... Influencing others, he was himself impervious to influence. ... Once he had made up his mind no one could move him.'⁴³ She wrote to a friend on 7 August 1935 that she was 'profoundly

unhappy' about Lloyd George's Council of Action campaign. 'But it is hopeless trying to influence him. He has had his own way for so long that it would take a far stronger person than myself to attempt the job, and even then, they would probably be broken in the process. I've been bruised enough.'⁴⁴

Since presumably Taylor had read all the diaries, he was best placed to prove influence. His failure or inability to do so has led to the inaccurate picture used by other writers, again unsupported by evidence. A review by the author of this article of her record of attempts to influence him on political issues, shows a total of twenty – over thirty-three years. This does not show him appealing for her advice, or that Lloyd George relied on her judgement. Amongst the few important examples, in March 1916 she said that people were asking why he was not turning Asquith out. 'I think he ought to speak his mind. Otherwise I tell him he will be classed with the rest of Cabinet as a body of failures.' She records Lloyd George 'pondering' this.⁴⁵ When Aitken and Carson 'suggested he should take over, he had said no. ... I pointed out to him that in the event of his being offered the Premiership he would be bound to accept – he could not refuse to do his best to save the country.'⁴⁶ He floated the idea of a War Committee of three to run the war: 'I told him that I do not think the Committee of three idea a good one.'⁴⁷

In February 1917, Lloyd George was back to considering his position and talked of taking a rest: 'I tell him he must not think of taking a rest until the War is over.'⁴⁸ In 1925 the Liberal organisation asked for money; Frances responded, 'they have misused what money they had, and cannot raise any more, so what is use of you giving them more, which will only go the same way?'⁴⁹

In June 1940 she advised Lloyd George (unsuccessfully) to accept an offer from Churchill to join the cabinet as his patriotic duty. Sylvester reported Frances, '... had told him [Lloyd George] categorically that he had done absolutely nothing to help his country in this War.' Lloyd George said, 'A damned lie.'⁵⁰

Frances assisted Lloyd George with his speeches, but we do not know what this involved. In May 1932, he asked: 'Write me your frank and candid view about 1. the general line, 2. any argument, simile or phrase. You know what decisive value I attach to your judgement.'⁵¹ Frances indeed did advise him on the content, and he ignored her comments.

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are doubtful about it why not send a telegram refusing that would be an end to the matter.⁵²

Her writing

Frances produced a book, on the personalities involved in the conferences after the Great War. It was published anonymously 'by one who knows'.⁵³ Inevitably she emphasises Lloyd George's towering presence and influence.

Her letters showing the deep love she had for Lloyd George perhaps demonstrate that other people's love letters can produce a feeling of queasiness amongst wider readers. The diaries are well written, the product of an organised mind without the violent slapdash comments seen in Margot Asquith's writings. The diaries and her autobiography give no real insight into Frances herself (unlike Margot's).

Violet Bonham Carter

Violet was born in 1887, the only daughter of Asquith's first marriage. A Lady three times: when her husband Maurice Bonham Carter was knighted; as the daughter of Asquith when he became an earl; and finally and belatedly, in 1965, she became a life peer, as Baroness Asquith of Yarnbury – the Asquith element a final obeisance to her father.

Unlike any previous prime minister's daughter, she campaigned with Asquith from 1910 onwards. Churchill described her as Asquith's 'champion redoubtable', basing this on her extraordinary work on Asquith's behalf in 1920 at Paisley, which created more national attention than Margaret Lloyd George's speeches in 1918. Her attachment to her father (competing with Margot) was intense and for her the party was always Asquith's Liberal Party. There is remarkably little in her diaries about her relationship with Margot: Violet was rational and careful, Margot emotional and indiscrete.

In 1915 she married Maurice Bonham Carter (Bongie), Asquith's private secretary. There is little reference to discussion with him about political matters. They had four children; she declined opportunities to stand for parliament in order to look after them, the natural decision at that time. The published photographs of Violet show a severe countenance: only one shows her smiling. She generally looks as if something unspeakable had occurred to her – possibly a thought about Lloyd George.

Her personality was 'patrician'; BBC recordings reveal her upper-class voice with modulated emphases literally unheard today. This gave distinction to her on platforms, and in radio and television discussions after 1945. She

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was never afflicted by self-doubt about why her opinions were of importance. Roy Jenkins wrote that she was: 'the most effective woman orator I have heard'.⁵⁴ Her description of the choice in the 1922 general election 'between Lloyd George, suffering from St. Vitus's dance, and Bonar Law suffering from sleeping sickness' captured them brilliantly.⁵⁵

She achieved several firsts as a politician – her platform support for her father, selection as the first woman president of the Liberal Organisation in 1945, the first woman governor of the BBC, the first woman to deliver the Romanes Lecture in June 1963 and the first woman to speak at the Royal Academy dinner in 1967.

Political issues

Violet's views were wholly influenced by her father's, including opposition to votes for women, until the 1930s when she made her own choice about how to handle the resurgence of Germany and the threat of Hitler. In October 1938 she described appeasement as being for 'peace at any price that others can be forced to pay'.⁵⁶ There is no indication at any time of great interest in social reform. Her only comment about the Beveridge Report was that it had been widely praised and gave fragile hope.

One problem for Liberals from 1918 was any substantial definition of what they actually intended to achieve in politics, with the exception of Lloyd George's policies and campaigns leading up to 1929. There is no record of Violet's views on these. Her letters on the General Strike deal not at all with the issues involved, but only with vituperation about Lloyd George.

She was interested after 1945 in the possibility of a deal with the Conservatives to ensure the success of some Liberals. She stood for Wells in Somerset in 1945 unsuccessfully, and more contentiously for Colne Valley in 1951; she lost again. There her long friendship with Churchill meant he encouraged the local Conservative Association to withdraw and he spoke at one of her meetings. She probably lost more Liberal votes than she gained from Tories. Martell, a prominent Liberal said, 'Her blatant pro-Tory attitude enraged many in the party who had hitherto held her in the highest respect and destroyed the public belief in our independence.'⁵⁷ Churchill offered Clement Davies the Liberal leader a cabinet post in 1951. Violet was the only one of thirteen Liberal Executive members to support acceptance of this offer. Violet would have accepted the junior post Churchill would have offered.

She opposed the Conservative government's adventure on Suez in 1956. After 1945



Violet Bonham Carter
(1887–1969)

she strongly supported the association of countries in Europe. Her strong moral views were reflected in a speech when the Labour government introduced control of immigration, on 29 February 1968. 'Only once before ... have I seen the honour of this country so flagrantly violated and betrayed.'³⁸

Like all Liberals she was interested in electoral reform: neither Conservatives nor Labour were interested in cutting their own throat. The split in the Liberal Party between Asquithians and supporters of Lloyd George in the 1920s was replicated in some ways from 1945–55 when Violet spoke for traditional Liberalism and antipathy to her party's Radicals, led by Megan Lloyd George. She helped keep the flame of liberalism alive – although it was low and guttering towards extinction for most of her life after 1945.

Influence

The only occasion on which she tried to influence her father was in 1911 when she intervened with Asquith on behalf of Lord Aberdeen, her friend Archie Gordon's father, who was Lord Lieutenant in Ireland and wanted to remain there; he did.

She recognised in 1915 in a letter to Bongie that there was a problem with Asquith's style of leadership in the war: 'I have felt sometimes lately as if his clutch hadn't got in – as if the full force of his mind wasn't in it.'³⁹ There is no indication that she made this point to her father. She

agreed with his rejection of the Lloyd George proposal of a new War Committee in December 1916. She also supported the idea of removing Lloyd George from the party over his stance on the General Strike. There is no evidence on whether Asquith discussed with her either his decision to resign as leader in October 1926, or his decision to accept an earldom.

Her long opposition to Lloyd George, always more personal than ideological, after December 1916 was a contributory factor to the split thereafter between the two factions of Liberalism.

She approved of Archie Sinclair as Liberal leader but had no particular influence on him. She influenced Clement Davies over the desirability, or otherwise, of peacetime conscription, where it is clear she changed his mind from being opposed to being in favour.

Born into a world where women were not politically entitled, she demonstrated through her involvement from around 1910 that a woman could have overt political influence, rather than the influence that they might exert through domestic contact. Her impact was not so much on the decisions of other politicians, but in continuing to demonstrate that there was a Liberal Party which was still just about alive.

Relationships

Violet wrote, the day after her wedding, 'you – who have always meant *everything* to me – since I can remember & are still the *closest* the most passionately loved of all human beings to me'. The letter was to her father, not to her new husband.⁶⁰

The other major relationship was antagonistic – with David Lloyd George. She disliked some of his inflammatory speeches around the Budget and the peers in 1909 and 1910. Her primary opposition to him was of course generated by what she perceived as his total disloyalty in helping to supplant Asquith in 1916. She gives no record of any substantial meetings with him – only lunches and dinners, until an accidental encounter on a train, in December 1923, where she obviously experienced, at least partially, Lloyd George's capacity to seduce a listener. She assessed him 'having no fidelities he also has no rancours – no embarrassment at meeting people with both' an obvious comparison with herself.⁶¹ But she never accepted that Lloyd George should be leader of the Liberal Party and wrote in 1926 that it would be 'impossible to serve a Party that half believes in Lloyd George'.⁶² She supported those attempting to bring Chamberlain down in 1940 and then encouraged her Liberal

colleagues to choose Churchill as prime minister.

From 1945, Clement Davies was leader of the Liberals in the Commons. Her published material on him is almost entirely disparaging, but unpublished letters revealed by his biographer show that she had a higher opinion than the edited letters indicated.⁶³ Family relationships continued, first through her son-in-law Jo Grimond, whom she admired, and her son Mark, whom she supported vigorously in his two campaigns to be elected in Torrington. Her relationship with Megan Lloyd George is covered later.

Her view of Grimond's successor, Jeremy Thorpe was favourable because of his 'vitality, & colour & passionate zest'.⁶⁴

She enjoyed lunches and dinners with J. M. Keynes but gives no reference to his views on economic policy.

Like her father she distrusted newspapers and newspaper owners; she regarded Beaverbrook as the quintessence of evil – a view on which she was by no means alone.

She does not seem to have engaged with (the few) other female politicians except for Megan Lloyd George. They were on opposite wings of the Liberal Party and were in public conflict occasionally, however there was no continuous bitterness. There was one major relationship not at all political: Venetia Stanley was her greatest friend until she decided to marry Edwin Montagu, who had been a protégé of Asquith and a frequent visitor at Downing Street and the Asquiths' holiday homes. Violet wrote an excoriating letter to him criticising his decision to force Venetia into the Jewish religion. Her claim not to have known about the passionate relationship between her father and Venetia is a tribute to her adoration of her father, not to the accuracy of her memory. Jenkins' acceptance of her denial is odd. He was persuaded by her to remove some comments about her father in his biography, but he reinstated them in later editions.

Her writing

Her diaries and letters are colourful, explicit and most often accurate. The editors, her son Mark Bonham Carter and later Mark Pottle chose to give most emphasis in their editing to the inclusion of material on political matters. It is none the less surprising how little there is about personal relationships after 1914, until the resumption of the diary when Mark was involved in military action.

Before her marriage her most serious relationship was with Archie Gordon; she got

engaged to him on his death bed. The diary then was formed for several years through letters written to him, as if he were still alive.

Her admiring book on Churchill contains an often-quoted account of their first meeting, where she said Churchill described himself as a glow worm.⁶⁵ This is questionable – there is no reference to this in her diary, nor in her subsequent account to her father.

Megan Lloyd George

Megan was born in 1902 and her childhood and teenage experiences centered around her father's position as first a cabinet minister and then prime minister. In 1928 she said, 'I've had politics for breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner all my life'.⁶⁶ When Lloyd George became a minister in 1905 her family was enabled to lead a middle-class life. Her mother brought her up as a Methodist and throughout her life she prayed every morning. She had more formal schooling than Violet, but in 1911, the fateful decision was made to give Frances Stevenson a temporary summer job to improve Megan's education.

She was an excellent speaker. Price claims 'her ironic wit, and her ability to coin memorable phrases formed her reputation' – but gives no examples.⁶⁷ Frances Stevenson and A. J. Sylvester agreed that she was clever 'in a certain kind of way but so self-centered'.⁶⁸ Frances also said of her, 'She was not a normal woman. She had this mixture of sex and religion'.⁶⁹ Frances was of course biased, but is difficult to find more positive statements about her except references to her charm. She was described by Jo Grimond, Violet and her own friends as being lazy. She did not even attend committees on her own political interests.

Political issues

The 1928 Act extending the vote to younger women provided the means for her direct involvement in politics. She secured the nomination for the Liberal Party at Anglesey in that year and was elected in 1929. Lloyd George certainly helped in the process of getting her selected, but she owed even more to her mother then and at the general election. She survived some antagonism as a woman and both gained and lost votes as the daughter of Lloyd George. She had not made any mark in the House of Commons before the general election of 1931. She was more prominent in the country because she was a Lloyd George and because there was a diminishing number of Liberal MPs. She was an effective broadcaster on radio and television (an opportunity not available to earlier

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political women). She had occasional positions of responsibility for example, as the president of the Women's Liberal Federation of Wales, and during the war she sat on committees where she was able to push, though unsuccessfully, for equality for women in terms of wages.

Like Violet she defined herself as the successor to her father, or at least the radical Lloyd George in 1929 and 1935. She wanted to get rid of the right wing of the party and recognised in November 1957 that she was 'too left for the modern Liberal taste'.⁷⁰ Always centred on Wales, she led the campaign to get a Welsh parliament in the 1950s, and for recognition of the Welsh language; she sought equal pay for women and pressed the interests of agriculture. Her most significant achievement was to lead the successful campaign for equal compensation for women and men for injuries during the Second World War. She was anti appeasement.

In 1949 the Liberal leader, Clement Davies, made her deputy leader, a rather grand position for a party, in reality of ten MPs, but significant for a woman. She supported nearly all of the Labour governments' measures from 1945 to 1951. She saw Labour bills on National Insurance and the National Health Service as inherited from Liberal pioneers.

After she lost the election in 1951, she declined to return as candidate for Anglesey, and instead joined the Labour Party in 1955: 'in the changed situation of today, it is only in the Labour Party that I can be true to the radical tradition.'⁷¹ Lloyd George had forecast that 'Gwilym will go to the right and Megan to the left eventually.'⁷² Gwilym became a cabinet minister in Conservative governments; Megan, a Labour MP but never held a government post. (She had declined an offer to join Churchill's wartime government.)

Influence

Megan's influence on Lloyd George was most dramatically evident during the Norway debate in May 1940. Dingle Foot, who was with her, wrote in an obituary that 'she rushed to persuade him to speak after Chamberlain's call on his friends'.⁷³ In the two parliaments from 1945 she wanted to keep the Liberal Party as radical – a term she preferred to left wing – but was unsuccessful. Perhaps not surprisingly, Frances' diaries do not show Megan as attempting to influence Lloyd George: Sylvester's accounts do. Megan supported Lloyd George's decision not to take Churchill's offer of a cabinet seat in May 1940.⁷⁴ But did she influence the decision or merely agree with it? There is nothing available on whether she was consulted on or agreed



Megan Lloyd George
(1902–1966)

Lloyd George joining the cabinet later, or the offer of the embassy in Washington. It seems likely that Lloyd George avoided discussing the possibility of accepting an earldom with her in 1944, which she opposed later. (Unlike Violet she did not like using her title.)

There is too little material available to assess her influence properly. She kept no diary, wrote few papers or letters that survive and acquired a biographer who gave tremendous detail about her love affair but much less about her political life.⁷⁵ The absence of her own materials is not remedied by accounts from other people – she is rarely referred to in contemporary diaries, biographies and autobiographies.

Relationships

The most important relationship for Megan was obviously with her father, both personally and politically. Yet Sylvester claimed, 'although she adored Lloyd George, she adored her mother more.'⁷⁶ Lloyd George was occasionally infuriated by her lateness and, as he saw it, occasional unwillingness to give full priority to him. He criticised her for not speaking more in the House. There is no record of her disagreeing with him on politics (unlike Frances). Hague says that there were differences in politics but neither quotes nor gives references for this claim.⁷⁷

She had friendly relationships with other women MPs – mainly Labour. She seems to have had no relationships with Tories other

than Thelma Cazalet Keir, and that was a friendship rather than any kind of political association. During the war, her closest Labour association was with Herbert Morrison, who tried to draw her later towards his party, as did Attlee. Her friendship with Barbara Castle (perhaps including dancing the cancan together) did not last.

Clement Davis was an ineffective leader of a fissiparous party and certainly had a difficult time with Megan. Her relationships with him and the other Liberal leaders were on the chilly side partly because of her radicalism and partly because they found her untrustworthy with anything involving work. Jeremy Thorpe saw her as a mentor. She encouraged him to join the Liberal Party.

With Violet Bonham Carter (also the fifth child of a prime minister) she had a contentious relationship. Yet Megan wrote: 'If she had only known no one could sympathise more than I could with her as a prime minister's daughter'.⁷⁸ They had different views on the nature of Liberalism, particularly Megan's view on the total undesirability of any kind of association with the Tories, unlike Violet. In 1950 Violet blamed Megan for the party's troubles.⁷⁹ It is, however, interesting that Violet refers to Megan only eight times in her published diaries.

Megan met Philip Noel Baker, a Labour MP, in the 1920s and became his mistress in 1936. As with Lloyd George, her career would have been terminated if this was known. He wrote 554 letters to her that have survived. Her letters to Noel Baker have disappeared, so we have only his version of their relationship, and the letters published by Mervyn Jones focus mainly on their love not on politics. He promised to marry her early on but would not divorce his wife. When she died in 1955, he reneged, unlike her father who kept his promise to Frances despite Megan's bitter opposition.

She apparently had no discussions with Keynes – not even over lunch or dinner as Violet did. Admittedly this could have been difficult after Keynes published his savage review of Lloyd George in 1933.

She discovered, probably in 1920, the nature of her father's relationship with Frances Stevenson (unlike Violet's stated ignorance of her father's obsession with Venetia Stanley). She became a bitter antagonist of Frances and did everything she could to make life uncomfortable for her. We have a small amount of evidence on this from Sylvester, rather more from Frances, and none at all directly from Megan. So, the reports of Megan talking to other people about the relationship and threatening to

bring it out to public attention are those given by Frances: it would seem odd that Megan should even threaten, as Frances claimed, to end Lloyd George's political life. She was angry about the prospect, let alone the actuality of Lloyd George's wedding to Frances. The feud continued, again as narrated by Frances, long after Lloyd George's death. Bitterness probably comprised three elements, personal betrayal because of her early relationship with Frances, anger at seeing her mother hurt, and competitive adoration of her father. Her Christian piety did not extend to even superficial forgiveness. She left no direct female legacy: there were no Liberal women MPs from 1951 to 1986, and no female leader until 2019.

Influence and significance

In 1906, 399 Liberal MPs were elected. In 1955, the nadir, there were 6 Liberal MPs. In part, this story of five women is obviously associated with this declining trajectory. Women continued to be patronised and disparaged in all fields of life. In the political context the significance of these women has to be assessed against what was possible. Were they constrained by the conventional view about women? Margot Asquith spoke with vehement intensity against women's suffrage yet behaved as someone entitled to influence politics. However, she was married to a man who believed women had no contribution to make and wanted none from her. It is important to look at the reasons why she failed to exercise influence on others, where she was strongly affected not only by sexism but also by the effects of her personality. The comparison with the Campbell Bannermans is instructive: unlike Asquith, Campbell Bannerman wanted advice and Charlotte delivered it in a way acceptable to him.

Margaret Lloyd George provides a different picture. Unlike Margot she was interested in direct interaction with ordinary people and demonstrated at least to people in Wales that she could speak publicly and organise voters. Frances Stevenson had neither the noisy but private role of Margot, nor the public role of Margaret. Nor are the claims for her as an influencer of Lloyd George well founded.

The Act of 1918 giving votes to many women and, in addition, opportunities to become MPs opened a new world for Violet Bonham Carter and Megan Lloyd George. Megan was enabled to become an MP when first entitled in 1929. Violet put her children before serious interest in becoming an MP. Both provided examples, in Violet's case primarily

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after 1945, of women who could give articulate promotion of Liberalism especially through radio and TV. Their prominence gave a misleading impression of their influence. Their importance was not in developing Liberal policies or influencing a husband or father but in being significant female figures in a shrunken Liberal Party. Both Violet and Megan acquired early notice as daughters. Megan was the sole Liberal woman MP from 1929 to 1951; there was no successor for thirty-five years. They never gained the influence that their names suggested. It may be that Megan, though not Violet, was inhibited by her father's success – but not because she was a daughter rather than a son. Twentieth-century sons of prime ministers – Law, Baldwin, Churchill and Macmillan – were faded reminders of their fathers.

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