

## Liberal ideology

David Dutton traces the political voyage of one MP through the changing currents of Liberalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Part I: 1861–1914.

# A Liberal for All Seasons? Percy

**I**N THE EXTENSIVE literature devoted to the problems of the British Liberal Party in the first half of the twentieth century, insufficient attention has perhaps been paid to the simple difficulty of retaining men and women of considerably differing outlook and ideology contentedly within the same political movement and organisation. Being a broad church is regularly and rightly extolled as a prerequisite of party-political success. No political movement is likely to secure power in Britain unless it can appeal to a significantly wide (and, almost by definition, divergent) spectrum of opinion. But the further this diversity is stretched, the greater the resulting potential for disaffection, alienation and disintegration. Even if actual disintegration is avoided, the consequences for electoral support are inevitably damaging. Quite simply, voters are disinclined to back a patently divided and internally disputatious party. Thus, the self-same broad-church characteristic, deemed essential for victory at the polls, risks, if taken too far, the destruction of the party itself.

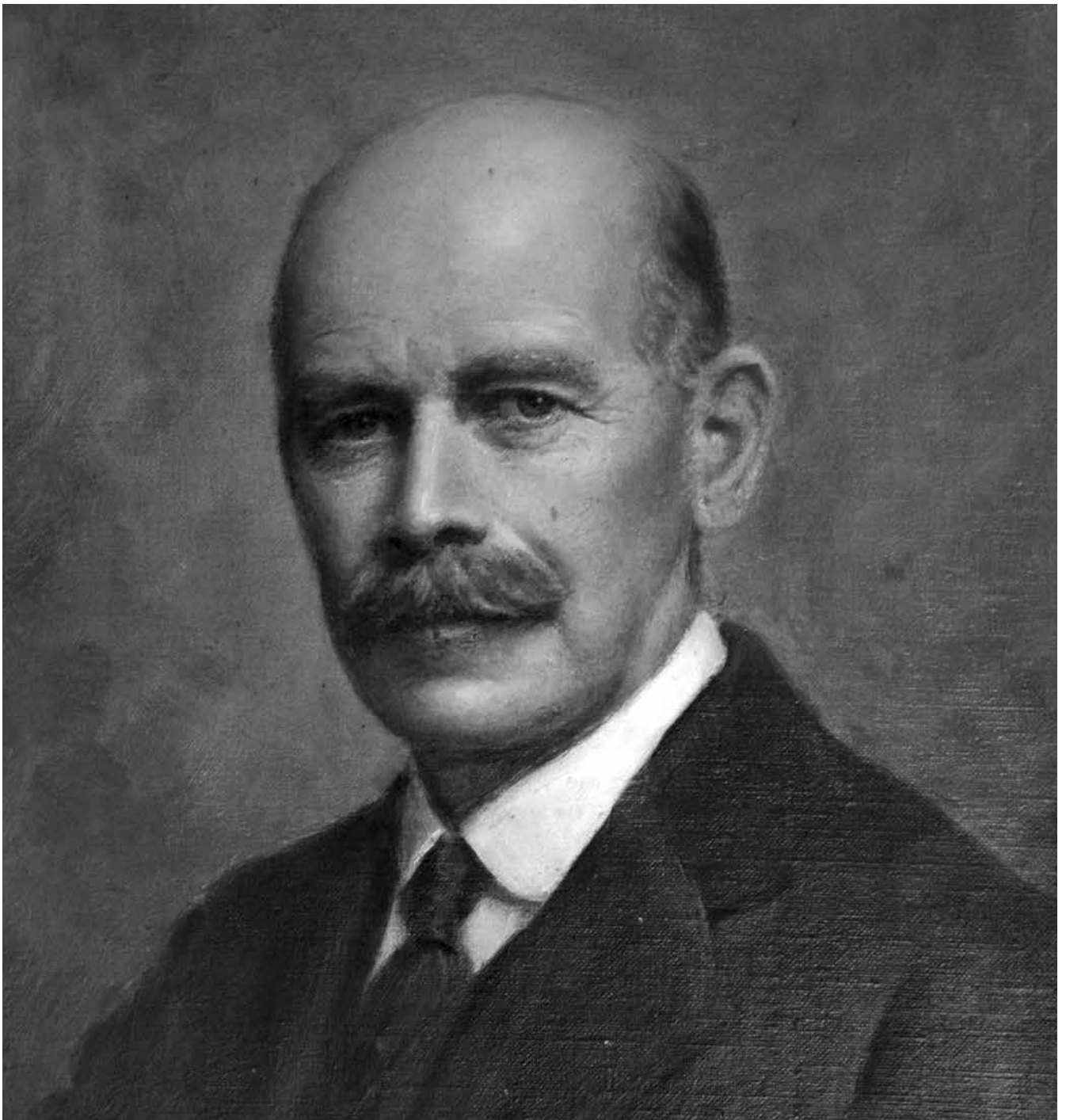
The Liberal Party has certainly exhibited such strains and tensions, with serious consequences for its long-term strength and viability. The career of Percy Molteno, Liberal MP for Dumfriesshire, 1906–18, offers an interesting prism through which to examine these issues. He was active in the affairs of British Liberalism for around four decades. Yet for only a relatively brief interlude, straddling the turn of the century and coinciding in practice with the party leadership of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, was he genuinely at the heart of the Liberal movement. For the bulk of his career, Molteno's concerns were more with what he considered the errant course charted by the party to which he unfailingly claimed allegiance than with the activities of his declared opponents in other political movements.

Locating Molteno's position within the broad Liberal church is not a straightforward task. Certainly, the simple and traditional descriptions of 'left' and 'right' are of limited value.<sup>1</sup> If it was of the Liberal Left to oppose British involvement in the South African War of 1899–1902, to strive to prevent Britain's declaration of hostilities against Germany in August 1914, and to vote against the introduction of conscription two years later, then Molteno ticks all the necessary boxes. But if it was of the Liberal Right to espouse Gladstonian principles a generation after the death of the Grand Old Man, to oppose female enfranchisement, to champion an unadulterated vision of Free Trade and small government through the inter-war era, and to support the appeasement of Nazi Germany, then Molteno's credentials were equally impeccable. He could credibly maintain that his views remained remarkably consistent over his entire career; it was the party which had deviated from the true faith. But, according to those who disagreed with him, his ideas failed to adapt and evolve in the face of dramatically changed circumstances.

Molteno, whose family was South African but of Italian origin, was born in Edinburgh on 12 September 1861.<sup>2</sup> The location of his birth, resulting from his father's decision to visit Britain at that time, formed an emotional bond with Scotland that became important in shaping his later political career. Molteno's early years were divided between South Africa and Britain at a time when the politics of the two were becoming increasingly intertwined. His contacts with South African politics, where his father, John Charles Molteno, had served as the first prime minister of Cape Colony,<sup>3</sup> enabled him to speak of the subcontinent with knowledge and authority to those he befriended in Britain. After school in South Africa, he read mathematics and law at Trinity College, Cambridge, and

Percy Alport  
Molteno,  
12 September 1861 –  
19 September 1937  
(painting: [https://  
www.moltenofamily.  
net](https://www.moltenofamily.net))

# Alport Molteno, 1861–1937



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was subsequently called to the Bar at the Inner Temple. He practised law in Cape Colony for several years before moving to Britain. There, in September 1889, he married Bessie Currie, the daughter of a prosperous shipping magnate, and gradually worked his way through the management of the Castle (later Union Castle) shipping line, eventually becoming company chairman. This company had for many years held a leading position in the carrying trade between Britain and South Africa.

He moved easily and naturally from the politics of South Africa, where his father was firmly in the progressive tradition, to the British Liberal Party. Molteno had spent his childhood in a home where politics, business and finance were discussed with total freedom. He revered his father and unhesitatingly followed his liberal example. Second only to his father in the influence exerted on the young Molteno's development was his father's friend and his own future father-in-law, Donald Currie. The latter was a zealous supporter of Gladstone, who sat for a time as an MP in the Westminster parliament. Though he later became a Liberal Unionist, Currie remained close to Gladstone personally. Even as an undergraduate at Cambridge, where he, in a Union debate, opposed a motion of no confidence in Gladstone's government, Molteno's political views were already firmly fixed. A Cambridge contemporary recalled 'one of the most whole-hearted Liberals that I have ever known'.<sup>4</sup> Molteno owed his strict moral code to

his upbringing, rather than to religion. While his father was brought up as an Anglican and his mother was a practising member of the Dutch Reformed Church, there is nothing in his writings to suggest that Molteno was ever himself interested in religious questions.

His early associations and friendships indicated the type of Liberalism with which he felt at home and to which he would remain faithful for the rest of his life. Meeting John Morley, who had served in Gladstone's third and fourth administrations, in December 1897, Molteno recorded: 'He is a very fine character. His is the type of Liberalism I most admire and would be most disposed to follow.'<sup>5</sup> A few months later, an encounter with Robert Reid, the future lord chancellor, Lord Loreburn, left him equally impressed. As Molteno's biographer explains:

From that time onwards . . . Robert Reid was one of the few political leaders whom Molteno trusted. The confidence was mutual. Reid found that he could always rely on Molteno for accurate information and sound advice on South African questions, and Molteno found that Reid, once he was convinced of what was right, was able and ready to give clear and bold expression to their views in Parliament and on the platform.<sup>6</sup>

As Britain and the Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State moved ever closer

Percy Molteno, late 1870s (left) and (probably) 1890s (right) (photos: <https://www.moltenofamily.net>)

to war, Molteno came to occupy a crucial position in attempts to avert the outbreak of hostilities. ‘Nothing in his life’, suggests his biographer, is ‘more to be admired than his unsuccessful efforts to prevent the Boer War.’<sup>7</sup> But Britain’s Liberal Party was badly divided on this matter between the Liberal Imperialists, who offered broad support to Lord Salisbury’s Unionist administration, and radicals who believed that the government was pursuing an unnecessarily aggressive and provocative course. Molteno was firmly in the latter camp. He was convinced that the colonial secretary and former Liberal, Joseph Chamberlain, whose true role in the abortive Jameson Raid of December 1895 had been concealed from public scrutiny,<sup>8</sup> was intent upon a military solution:

The time appears to have arrived when those of us who have known South Africa must speak out in protest against resort to the arbitrament of war, which is now advocated as the solution of the South African difficulties ... [Chamberlain’s] advocacy of drastic methods at the present moment loses force when we recall the fact that he has always, from the first few days after the Raid, attempted to use force in the solution of these difficulties.<sup>9</sup>

Molteno was among the speakers on 10 July 1899 at the first public meeting of the Transvaal Committee, whose purpose was ‘to watch the proceedings of the Colonial Office and to rouse public opinion to prevent a war between the British Empire and the Transvaal’.<sup>10</sup>

The more dangerous the international situation became, the more valuable was Molteno’s contribution to Liberal politics. As he explained in July 1899:

I must do anything I possibly can to avert war, regardless of cost to myself or my interests ... I have interviewed several editors and have seen many Members of Parliament; I have now got into touch with Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the Leader of the Liberal Party. I lunched at his house yesterday and entered most fully into the whole situation. He takes the view, which we do, that nothing but disaster can come of the use of force; but he says the situation is most difficult because action on his part might precipitate a crisis. I am now working with his lieutenants and we are arranging questions in Parliament, the first of which was asked today as to whether the Cape Ministry has been consulted.<sup>11</sup>

Characteristically, Molteno looked to the example of the Liberal titans of the mid-Victorian era to guide the party of his own day. ‘Would that John Bright were still among us,’ he wrote to Bright’s daughter, ‘to paint in its true colours our treatment of the Transvaal and the present cry for force and violence when every consideration demands prudence, forbearance and patience.’<sup>12</sup>

In the event, it was the Boers who brought matters to a head, issuing an ultimatum at the beginning of October and opening hostilities almost immediately thereafter. This was a tactical blunder on the Republics’ part, not least because it made the propagation of the anti-war case in Britain much more difficult. Molteno, however, was undeterred. He helped fund and was an active participant in the South African Conciliation Committee, to which he contributed several pamphlets. He also wanted the public to be better informed of the circumstances surrounding the outbreak of the war, in particular the activities of Chamberlain and Sir Alfred Milner, the British High Commissioner, and hoped that the Cape Colony parliament would investigate such matters and produce a report. Support for Molteno’s stance came from predictable quarters. Morley ‘is entirely with us on the horror and disgrace of the war and the way in which England’s honour has been sullied’.<sup>13</sup> But Molteno recognised Campbell-Bannerman’s need to proceed cautiously: ‘Campbell-Bannerman fully understands the position; but he is paralysed. Being the official leader he must indulge in platitudes to avoid breaking up the Liberal Party.’<sup>14</sup> The *Annual Register* for 1900 estimated that sixty-two Liberal MPs backed the Unionist government over the war; sixty-eight could be described, in most cases somewhat misleadingly, as ‘pro-Boers’; with twenty-seven either uncertain or backing Campbell-Bannerman’s efforts to occupy a middle ground. In any case, the realities of parliamentary arithmetic imposed severe limits on what even a united Liberal Party might achieve: ‘The Government have a large majority and they mean to use it brutally if necessary.’<sup>15</sup>

The war’s early stages saw the British army, ill-prepared and poorly led by the sometimes-inebriated General Sir Redvers Buller, incurring a series of embarrassing defeats. But the military situation quickly improved in 1900 once the British government despatched reinforcements under Lord Roberts and General Kitchener. Indeed, such was the turnaround that Roberts returned home in October, leaving Kitchener to deal with any residual enemy opposition, while *The Times*, ignorant of the

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skill and tenacity with which the Boers would pursue guerrilla tactics, mistakenly declared that the war was over. British military successes brought Molteno scant comfort. He was appalled by the jingoistic enthusiasm with which the country greeted its victories on the battlefield. Its people, ‘hopelessly misled by lies’,<sup>16</sup> had lost their sense of moral compass – ‘the natural result of violent feelings aroused by war, when passion unseats reason and judgment, and men no longer ask whether anything is right or wrong, but only whether it is on their side or not.’<sup>17</sup> Evidence began to emerge of atrocities committed by the British army in its attempts to mop up remaining Boer resistance:

It is indeed all terrible and such as none of us could have believed we would have lived to see under the British flag. My heart beats for all the poor people who have been so monstrously treated under the so-called martial law, and for the poor women and children whose homes have been burnt in such a wicked and uncivilised manner in the Free State, and now for the poor women and children who are being turned out of Pretoria. Ever since the war began it has been like a horrible nightmare and one has felt powerless to stop things or to do much to help.<sup>18</sup>

Not surprisingly, the government could not resist trying to reap electoral advantage from the prevailing situation and the country went to the polls in the early autumn. Molteno had been approached by Herbert Gladstone, then the party’s chief whip, about the possibility of standing for North Buckinghamshire. Notwithstanding the provenance of this invitation, Molteno declined, judging the moment was not opportune. He was, in any case, under pressure from his father-in-law to continue to focus on his business career. In all the circumstances, however, the Liberals nationally (though less so in Scotland) performed surprisingly well, with the government’s pre-election majority increasing by just four seats. Molteno observed that ‘those who have taken a strong point of view against the war have come back with renewed courage and confidence’.<sup>19</sup> But he still shied away from a parliamentary career for himself, declaring, revealingly, when approached early in 1901 about the possibility of a candidature in Grimsby, ‘I must advance views which I can never hope to be very popular’.<sup>20</sup> Instead, he spoke frequently at meetings of the South African Women and Children’s Distress Fund Committee. Encouragement came in June when, shocked by the first-hand reports of conditions

in southern Africa posted by Emily Hobhouse, sister of the Liberal theorist, L. T. Hobhouse, Campbell-Bannerman dropped all pretence of even-handedness. In a famous speech at London’s Holborn Restaurant, the Liberal leader queried whether the Boers’ distress could be brushed aside as the regrettable but inevitable cost of war: ‘When is a war not a war?’ he enquired. ‘When it is carried on by methods of barbarism in South Africa.’ Campbell-Bannerman went on to warn that present government policy would not just result in political antipathy on the part of the Boers but ‘personal hatred and a sense – an ineradicable sense – [of] personal wrong’.<sup>21</sup> This intervention ended any idea of equivocation on Campbell-Bannerman’s part. ‘Pro-Boers’ such as Molteno could now number the party leader among their camp. By the end of the year Molteno had decided to stand for parliament at the next election.

The war came to an end in May 1902 when the Boers finally accepted terms of surrender. Molteno returned briefly to South Africa, but by the summer of 1903 had opened negotiations with the Dumfriesshire Liberal Association. Robert Reid, the MP for Dumfries Burghs, acted as a valuable intermediary and sponsor, and in September 1903 Molteno was adopted as Liberal candidate. The constituency was held by a Unionist, but a strong radical tradition persisted and Molteno found a ready audience among the farmers, farm labourers and smallholders of the county. The *Dumfries and Galloway Standard* under the editorship of Thomas Watson offered significant support.

Molteno’s approach to political campaigning was straightforward, devoid of frills, but above all open and honest. As a close associate recalled:

At the outset he made it plain that he was opposed in principle to the sort of campaigning which meant attendance at every parish fete or sale of work; and he would make no contributions to anything that savoured of a bribe for votes.<sup>22</sup>

Arthur Balfour had succeeded Lord Salisbury as prime minister in July 1902, but it was not long before his government got into serious difficulties, particularly after the resignation of the colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, in October 1903, rapidly followed by that of the lord president, the Duke of Devonshire. Chamberlain now embarked on his last great crusade to convince the country of the merits of tariffs and believed he could best do this from the freedom of the backbenches. At the

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same time, Liberals of all stripes felt encouraged to rally enthusiastically to the defence of free trade. There seemed a genuine prospect of an early general election. ‘The Duke’s defection is very disastrous for Balfour’, judged Molteno, ‘and we may have a General Election at any time.’ This view was widely shared, but perceptively Molteno added, ‘I think Balfour will try to avoid it and trust to something turning up in the meantime.’<sup>23</sup> His prediction proved an accurate description of the prime minister’s tactics. In the event, the government would hang on until December 1905, when Balfour finally resigned, allowing Campbell-Bannerman to form a minority administration before calling a general election at the start of 1906. In the meantime, Molteno had become increasingly active in domestic politics, consistently espousing the traditional doctrines of Gladstonian Liberalism. In June 1904 he spoke alongside Robert Reid at a joint meeting of the Cumberland and Dumfriesshire Liberal Associations to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Richard Cobden, another of the iconic Victorian Liberals whom Molteno revered.<sup>24</sup>

While there remained political capital to be made from the government’s conduct of the South African war, Molteno had necessarily to broaden his electoral appeal. When Morley visited the constituency to speak on his behalf in November 1903, Molteno took the opportunity to declare his unshaken attachment to the principle of free trade and opposition to any proposal to introduce preferential or retaliatory tariffs.<sup>25</sup> The concept of ‘retrenchment’ figured prominently in Molteno’s message at this time. Speaking in December 1904, he focused on the level of government spending:

In ten years our expenditure had been nearly doubled, having been increased by 141 millions. But with all this taxation, unfortunately, we were not even paying our way, our debt having increased by 414 millions in ten years. We were living upon our capital, and the consequences must be disastrous if a stop were not put to this.<sup>26</sup>

At the election, Molteno faced an untried opponent. The sitting MP, William Jardine Maxwell, stood down and his replacement, J. H. Balfour Browne, though a distinguished lawyer, seemed uncomfortable when dealing with the issue of tariffs, including Balfour’s compromise proposals based on retaliation. In the personal manifesto placed before his electors, Molteno returned to the theme of government spending:

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In regard to the expenditure of the country, this has been enormously increased under the late Government. They have failed to carry out those measures of retrenchment which seem to be essential after the expenditure of a great war. Our annual taxation has become so great as to endanger the stability of our finances, the consuming power of the nation, and the maintenance of our trade.

But tariffs offered no remedy for the country’s problems. Molteno argued that free trade had added enormously to the British people’s comfort, well-being and happiness. Returning to the protective system that had prevailed sixty years earlier would ‘bring about a state of misery and degradation for our people similar to that from which Cobden, Bright and Gladstone freed them’. Molteno’s peroration could almost have come from the GOM himself: ‘I believe that free trade, peace and good-will among nations, and retrenchment and reform at home, will confer the greatest blessings upon our people.’<sup>27</sup>

‘It is unthinkable’, suggested the staunchly Unionist *Dumfries and Galloway Courier*, ‘that ... the hard-headed people of Dumfriesshire will prefer an “undesirable alien” like Mr Molteno to one of the ablest and most distinguished natives of the county in the person of Mr J. H. Balfour Browne.’<sup>28</sup> In the event, the electoral pendulum swung decisively in favour of the Liberal Party, not only in Dumfriesshire but across Britain as a whole. The party secured a total of 400 seats in the new parliament, the best performance in its history, while Molteno comfortably defeated his Unionist opponent.<sup>29</sup> The member for Dumfriesshire could easily have been swamped in the sea of new Liberal representatives. He was not offered a ministerial appointment. No more than a competent speaker, he was unlikely to make a mark on the basis of his oratory. But Molteno faced the political future with optimism, confident of what his own role and priorities would be. A letter he sent to J. W. Sauer, for long a prominent figure in South African politics, as the scale of the Liberal victory started to emerge, is revealing:

You will see from C-B’s address that he is going to stand no nonsense, and will not have any weak policy of Toryism and water instead of real Liberalism. You may rely on it that I will do all I can to assist in getting a proper Constitution granted [for the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony], and as

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you will see C-B and our friends Sir Robert Reid,<sup>30</sup> Sinclair<sup>31</sup> and others are well placed to assist.<sup>32</sup>

Molteno had long feared that the Boer War's abiding legacy would be lasting animosity between Britain and the former republics. Ensuring that the latter were quickly granted a generous measure of internal self-government was, he believed, the way to avoid this outcome. Even before the last results of the election were confirmed, Molteno felt confident that 'real responsible government will be granted very shortly'.<sup>33</sup> Primary responsibility for developing the new constitutions was entrusted to the lord chancellor, Loreburn, but he relied heavily on Molteno for accurate information and sometimes to offer a corrective to the advice coming from Lord Selborne, whom the out-going Unionist government had appointed governor-general of the Transvaal and high commissioner for South Africa in February 1905. Molteno had the advantage of enjoying not only the trust and confidence of key members of the Liberal cabinet, including Campbell-Bannerman, but also of leading figures in South Africa from both the British and Boer communities.

Responsible self-government was returned to the Transvaal on 6 December 1906 and to the Orange River Colony, restored to its old name of Orange Free State, on 5 June 1907. Critics ranged from the king (privately) to Rudyard Kipling (in the press). For the Unionists, Balfour condemned the government's action as 'the most reckless experiment ever tried in the development of a great colonial policy'.<sup>34</sup> More generously, and with greater justification, General Smuts later paid tribute to 'one whose name should never be forgotten ... Campbell-Bannerman, the statesman who wrote the word *Reconciliation* over ... that African scene, and thus rendered an immortal service to the British Empire'.<sup>35</sup> Molteno merits honourable mention among the premier's supporting cast. Strikingly, it was an intervention by Molteno that persuaded General Botha, elected under the new constitution as prime minister of the Transvaal, to attend the inaugural Imperial Conference in London in 1907 – a symbolic step which did much to cement the position of the former republics within the imperial system. Nonetheless, the new constitutions involved one great disappointment from Molteno's point of view. His efforts to persuade Botha and Smuts to accept a franchise that included the majority black population were unsuccessful.

In this matter, both the Liberal government and Molteno personally were in difficult positions. The government was guided above all by the quest for reconciliation with the Boers. This, it believed, was dependent upon a timely concession to the former republics of political autonomy within the Empire. Humanitarian feelings towards the non-European population, sadly but perhaps inevitably, took a poor second place to the need to bond together the two European peoples in South Africa. Furthermore, the government felt constrained by Article 8 of the Treaty of Vereeniging, which had brought the war to a close, under which it had been agreed by the then Unionist government that the question of 'granting the franchise to natives will not be decided until after the introduction of self-government'.<sup>36</sup> But the constitution of the Cape of Good Hope, established as long ago as 1853–4, was colour-blind. This principle had been sacrosanct to the Cape's first prime minister, John Molteno, Percy's father. There was a financial qualification for the franchise, but no colour-bar. As a result, non-whites had been eligible to vote in quite considerable numbers. A superficially similar system existed in Natal, but in practice numerous restrictions had reduced the black vote there to vanishingly small proportions. By contrast, the constitution of the Transvaal was unequivocal. It stated that 'the people desire to permit no equal standing between the coloured people and white inhabitants, either in Church or State'.<sup>37</sup>

In relation at least to the fundamental aims of the British government, Campbell-Bannerman's boldness was rewarded sooner than might have been expected. The future Union of South Africa's constitution was hammered out in a series of conventions in Durban, Cape Town and Bloemfontein in 1908–09, with the former Boer republics and the British colonies of Cape Colony and Natal represented as equals. The result was a unanimous decision in favour of union and agreement on a draft constitution. Once again, the absence of a black franchise was a striking feature and, with the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to date the ultimate emergence of the apartheid regime from this moment. But it had soon become clear that any attempt to extend the more liberal franchise of the Cape to the whole of the proposed Union would have led to the Transvaal and Orange Free State walking away from the negotiations. While nothing had been possible in respect of native rights before the restoration of self-government because of Article 8, 'nothing could be done after because there was self-government'.<sup>38</sup>

It might have been possible for Molteno to move an amendment as the enabling legislation passed through the House of Commons. But, to improve the chances of agreement, a conscious decision had been taken to leave the negotiating process to the South Africans (albeit only those of European heritage), rather than to impose a settlement from London. Molteno regarded the resulting Union constitution as a delicately balanced compromise between the views of the new state's four component units and believed that any late attempt to change it might only wreck the whole edifice. Granted, however, the enormity of the South African tragedy that ensued and in the light of his own father's legacy, there is a strong feeling, not least in the Molteno family itself, that he should have tried, even if failure was the inevitable result. As it was, his only hope was that the injustice done to native Africans would, in time, be recognised and remedied by the Union parliament itself. Yet 'the liberal hope ... that the less repressive official racial attitude of the Cape would somehow miraculously convert the hard-line Transvaal and Orange Free State was soon shown to be a brittle illusion'.<sup>39</sup>

Molteno's 1906 election manifesto had extolled the virtues of all three components of the famous mantra 'Peace, Retrenchment and Reform'.<sup>40</sup> But his understanding of 'Reform' was more limited than might be imagined. If he had been at all influenced by the doctrines of the 'New Liberalism', he had no vision of the sort of far-reaching (and expensive) programme of social legislation from which the incoming Liberal government would in time reap lasting fame. Granted his earlier warnings about government expenditure and debt, this could not have been otherwise. The notion of an interventionist state – 'big government' – was alien to Molteno's fundamental beliefs. Nonetheless, as his parliamentary career opened, he did have one clear objective in the realm of social reform. Given the nature of his rural constituency and advised by his farming friend Matthew Wallace, prominent in the Scottish Chamber of Agriculture, Molteno recognised the need for land reform in both England and Scotland. The problems he confronted have a curiously contemporary resonance. Two-thirds of Scotland's landmass, he noted, were held by just 330 individuals; 70 landowners controlled 9 million acres – an area the size of Denmark.<sup>41</sup> Molteno felt strongly about rural depopulation and was convinced that existing laws were serving to denude the countryside of its people. Taking care to master the details of his subject, he worked closely with Sinclair, the Scottish

Secretary, on the Small Landholders (Scotland) Bill. It sought to encourage the formation of small agricultural holdings and was, his biographer suggests, his 'most constructive work in Parliament'.<sup>42</sup> The measure enjoyed only limited support inside the cabinet and initially fell victim to the Unionist-dominated House of Lords, but was finally passed in 1911, coming into operation the following year. 'It is doubtful whether the bill would ever have got through but for Percy Molteno'.<sup>43</sup>

Molteno visited South Africa between November 1907 and March 1908. Shortly after his return, Campbell-Bannerman, in poor health for some time, resigned and soon died. He was succeeded by the chancellor of the exchequer, Herbert Asquith. At one level it was an exceptionally smooth transition. Asquith's elevation was uncontested, and he had in practice filled the premier's role for some months before formally taking office. Later, however, it became apparent that the succession marked a significant shift in the balance of power within the governing party, a shift compounded four years later when illness compelled Loreburn's resignation from the Woolsack. Molteno, who regarded the loss of Campbell-Bannerman as 'irreparable',<sup>44</sup> came to believe that it was now a Liberal Imperialist government presiding over the country's fortunes.<sup>45</sup> In later years, particularly as his attention turned increasingly to foreign affairs, he felt Campbell-Bannerman's absence with growing intensity: 'Those who are living on his legacies have none of his courage or good sense'.<sup>46</sup>

For all that, Molteno was, initially, prepared to give the new prime minister the benefit of the doubt. Asquith's management of the national finances – ending borrowing for the capital account and reducing the national debt by £47 million – had won Molteno's approval. Of his last (1908) budget he wrote: 'Yes, the Budget is splendid, and is another illustration of our getting by Free Trade all Mr Chamberlain's promised blessings without any of his taxes'.<sup>47</sup> Molteno was pleased that expenditure had been controlled, leaving Asquith sufficient funds to initiate a scheme of old age pensions. Thereafter, however, his verdicts steadily cooled. His attitude to the first budget of the new chancellor, David Lloyd George's famous 'People's Budget' of 1909, was at best equivocal. While offering general support, he worried about the impact upon the agricultural community. Increased death duties would, he feared, hit the landowning class, 'the financiers of the rural districts', who would have difficulty meeting such charges out of their available

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resources. More broadly, the budget ‘appears ... to abandon economy as a principle entirely, which I regard as very serious’.<sup>48</sup> But at least the budget, or more accurately its rejection by the Unionist-dominated House of Lords, brought the simmering question of the upper chamber’s veto power to the forefront of the political agenda. Granted that the Small Landholders (Scotland) Bill had twice suffered at the hands of the unelected House, this was a matter upon which Molteno felt strongly, as an earlier letter to his brother makes clear: ‘It will be impossible to keep up the spirits of our Party if we allow the Lords question to get into a backwater. We have got to act so as to make it the dominant question.’<sup>49</sup> He wanted to take up reform proposals which Campbell-Bannerman had brought forward in 1907 and he raised the matter directly with Asquith’s private secretary, Vaughan Nash.

The Lords question helped precipitate two general elections during 1910. Molteno’s address for the January contest concluded in familiar terms: ‘I am entirely against militarism and aggression, and I believe that Free Trade, Peace and Goodwill among Nations, with retrenchment and reform at home, will confer the greatest blessings upon our country.’<sup>50</sup> Molteno was confident about the electoral outcome:

I find the electors are realising the immense issues at stake. We must once and for all clear the pass of an obstruction which has too long barred our way to progress and which has crippled the development and delayed the bringing of happiness to the people of this country.<sup>51</sup>

In the event, the Liberals retained their grip on power, but only with the support of Labour and Irish Nationalist MPs. The party’s massive majority from 1906 disappeared and in Dumfriesshire Molteno saw a significant reduction in his own majority.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, he believed that the government now had a mandate to act against the Lords. ‘The feeling in Scotland’, he told the prime minister, was ‘that the issue has been Peers versus People, and the People having won the Peers must be dealt with as the first matter.’<sup>53</sup> Asquith, however, was more cautious. The result of the January poll ensured that their Lordships would now have to pass the previous year’s Finance Bill; but action against the upper chamber required a further appeal to the electorate and, in practice, assurances from the monarch that he would be prepared, if necessary, to create sufficient new Liberal peers to ensure the passage of any necessary legislation

through the upper chamber itself. Accordingly, after a constitutional conference failed to resolve the matter by inter-party agreement, the country went to the polls again in December. Though several seats changed hands, the overall result was almost a carbon copy of the January contest; Molteno’s majority remained virtually unchanged.<sup>54</sup> Finally, in the torridly hot summer of 1911 and with a political temperature to match, the celebrated Parliament Act reached the statute book, abolishing the Lords’ right of veto altogether over financial measures and substituting a delaying power of up to two years for all other legislation.

Pre-occupied by South African affairs, Molteno played little part in the parliamentary passage of the National Insurance Bill of 1911–12, but he was annoyed by Lloyd George’s haste in pushing through a complicated piece of legislation without permitting proper scrutiny by the Commons. The use of the guillotine facilitated the passage of 470 government amendments without debate. Lloyd George’s ‘profound mistake’ had, he believed, ‘impaired our position in the country more than anything we have done since 1906’.<sup>55</sup>

By this time Molteno’s focus on domestic affairs was accompanied by a growing concern over the drift of British foreign policy under the stewardship of Sir Edward Grey. A turning point came with Lloyd George’s Mansion House speech of July 1911, in which the chancellor, at the height of the Agadir crisis, warned Germany that Britain would not pursue a ‘peace at any price’ policy if her own vital interests were in play. Molteno was enraged by the content of Lloyd George’s speech and also by the fact that it was delivered outside parliament:

It was very wrong to make an appeal to the public at an after-dinner speech, and to make a threat of war in that manner to a proud nation like Germany ... The way we have been treated is really very wrong. We have left the Government a free hand, and this sort of thing is done. I shall do anything I can to improve our relations with Germany.<sup>56</sup>

Though never close to the chancellor in the past, he now felt ‘a great loss of confidence’ in him for the way his speech had embittered Britain’s relations with Germany.<sup>57</sup> It was another moment at which the cabinet’s internal balance appeared to tilt. Whatever his faults from Molteno’s perspective, Lloyd George had the pedigree of a prominent ‘pro-Boer’, still seen as a key radical within the administration. Now,

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Percy Molteno and his wife Elizabeth (Bessie) at their silver wedding, with daughter Margaret and son Jervis; Glen Lyon, Scotland, September 1914 (photo: <https://www.moltenofamily.net>)

that assessment might need revision. By late 1911 a group of like-minded Liberals, including Molteno, began to coalesce in the Liberal Foreign Affairs Committee – ‘internal opposition’ would be too strong a phrase – to monitor the government’s activities.<sup>58</sup> Critics were becoming suspicious that undeclared commitments towards France had been entered into, but kept from the purview of the House of Commons. It seems possible that Molteno was briefed on the reality of the situation by his old friend, Lord Loreburn, who had led opposition to Grey’s foreign policy at two stormy cabinet meetings in November 1911, when the full cabinet became aware for the first time of the extent of Anglo-French entanglement dating back to military conversations in 1906.

If Molteno believed that the cherished goal of ‘peace’ was under threat as a direct result of his own government’s conduct, ‘retrenchment’ too was in constant need of defence. When Lloyd George did manage to produce a budget surplus of £6.5 million for the fiscal year 1911–12, Molteno took steps, including a direct approach to the prime minister, to ensure that, as the law required, this was used to repay government debt. In the field of armaments expenditure, these two pillars of Gladstonian rectitude were closely related. Matters almost inevitably came to a head when Winston Churchill became first lord of the admiralty in October 1911, for he now ‘embraced the cause of naval might as eagerly as he had

[once] retrenchment’.<sup>59</sup> In the Commons debate on naval estimates in July 1912, Molteno joined around three dozen like-minded Liberals in support of Arthur Ponsonby’s motion, asking the Committee of Imperial Defence to move a reduction. Molteno believed that increased expenditure would be unnecessary if the government were to pursue a different foreign policy: ‘Before we enter upon this endless vista of expenditure we should ask the Prime Minister whether the door is closed to every other means of bringing about a better state of things, whether there are not other methods of reducing armaments and bringing about better relations.’<sup>60</sup>

The following year, when Churchill proposed a further large addition to naval expenditure, Molteno determined to bring pressure on the government. At the end of November 1913 he and Gordon Harvey, MP for Rochdale, issued a statement to about 100 Liberal MPs judged to be in broad sympathy with their views: ‘In the present state of international relations on the Continent [which seemed, despite localised war in the Balkans, more peaceful than for some years] no nation will dare attack us unless provoked beyond endurance; they all desire our friendship.’<sup>61</sup> On 17 December, Molteno led a delegation of radical critics to Downing Street to inform the prime minister of the backbench opposition to Churchill’s proposals. Asquith was emollient but non-committal. He ‘stated that he sympathised fully with

the anxiety ... at the growth of expenditure and that the matter was receiving earnest and constant attention'.<sup>62</sup> A meeting of supportive MPs under Molteno's chairmanship in February 1914 resolved to place the following motion on the parliamentary order paper: 'That this House deplores the uninterrupted growth of expenditure on armaments and expresses its opinion that in existing conditions there should be no further increase beyond what is involved in present commitments.' Asquith, however, refused to make time for a parliamentary debate.<sup>63</sup> The best that Molteno could do was to question Churchill closely in the Commons and propose areas where savings could be made.

Molteno is perhaps best known to history for his participation in the so-called 'Holt Cave', a group of dissident MPs led by his friend, Richard Holt, the member for Hexham, and formed to oppose Lloyd George's 1914 budget. The Cave's purpose and impact have become a matter of some historiographical debate. The notion that it 'clearly defined the limits of the Party's tolerance for social and economic change' is certainly an exaggeration. Still less is it the case that 'the budget debacle of 1914 marked the end of the new Liberalism'.<sup>64</sup> Ian Packer has rightly suggested that the Cave's members 'represented a kaleidoscope of Liberal opinion and discontents' and that it was 'by no means a straightforward expression of anti-progressive sentiments'.<sup>65</sup> But in separating Molteno from Holt and stressing that the former's 'objections were specifically focused on spending on the Navy', he perhaps overstates his case.<sup>66</sup> Holt was also involved in efforts to curb naval expenditure and had joined Molteno's parliamentary campaign to reduce Churchill's estimates. As Dr Packer suggests, Molteno focused his parliamentary interventions on the technical point that Lloyd George was attempting to raise money before determining upon what it should be spent, 'a dangerous innovation in constitutional practice'.<sup>67</sup> But Molteno's concerns over rising public expenditure were broader than this and it pained him to have 'to listen to attacks from so-called Liberals upon Bright, Cobden and Gladstone because of their economy in public finance ... I certainly never thought I should live to see such a day'.<sup>68</sup>

Holt's contemporary evaluation of his own activities is instructive. He described the Cave as 'really a combined remonstrance against the ill-considered and socialistic tendencies of the Government finance'. Furthermore, he named Molteno as one of the four 'principals' in the Cave in addition to himself. Holt's complaint that 'we have certainly travelled a long way

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from the old Liberal principle of "retrenchment" and I deeply regret it' was one with which Molteno would readily have agreed.<sup>69</sup> A few months earlier Molteno had spoken to the Scottish Secretary, Thomas McKinnon Wood, bemoaning the fact that the Treasury had become 'a spending department', ceasing to act as a 'guardian of the public purse'.<sup>70</sup> A humane man, Molteno was not opposed to social reform per se. Certainly, he preferred money to be spent on the welfare of the people rather than on a competitive expansion of armaments and had told his constituents in January 1914 that the arms race would mean 'good-bye to Social Reform'.<sup>71</sup> But improving the lot of the people was never for Molteno the burning issue it was for some of his contemporaries. Not having grown up in Britain and, when he did settle there, living in a restricted and privileged social environment, he was less aware of the poverty and hardships endured by many of his fellow citizens than might otherwise have been the case. Furthermore, as had been apparent when old age pensions were introduced, he could never regard the cost of such measures with indifference. A balance had to be struck and Molteno was convinced that ministers, particularly Lloyd George, had misjudged it. At the height of the Cave's activities and with the government struggling over the parliamentary passage of the bill bringing home rule to Ireland, Molteno thought it 'deplorable that, when we are facing such a difficult problem as Home Rule for Ireland, we should be embarrassed by reckless and improvident finance, and by Ministers like Lloyd George and Churchill playing for their own hands'.<sup>72</sup> Small wonder that Asquith wrote to his young confidante (and probable lover) Venetia Stanley that the chancellor attributed 'all the trouble to the "Radical millionaires" i.e. Mond, Molteno, de Forest & Co'.<sup>73</sup>

In such troubled times Molteno could – or so he thought – take comfort from the international situation. As recently as the end of October 1913 he had told his constituents that he had it on good authority that 'our relations with Germany had become most cordial'.<sup>74</sup> The crisis of July 1914 took Molteno – and most of the country – by surprise. The budget, even the possibility of civil war in Ireland, were suddenly relegated to the second order of political concerns. His task now was to avoid British participation in a potentially disastrous European conflict.

Though history tends to date the crisis which culminated in the outbreak of the First World War from the assassination of

the Austrian Archduke Franz-Ferdinand on 28 June 1914, it was not until the delivery of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, nearly a month later, that the enormity of the situation became apparent to Britain's ruling elite. Winston Churchill memorably described the scene when, on 24 July, Foreign Secretary Grey interrupted the cabinet discussion of the deadlocked situation in Ireland to read out the terms of the ultimatum.<sup>75</sup> Writing to his wife, Churchill declared: 'Europe is trembling on the verge of a general war. The Austrian ultimatum to Serbia being the most insolent document of its kind ever devised.'<sup>76</sup> For those seeking to prevent the ultimate catastrophe of British involvement in such a war, time was of the essence. As Molteno's biographer later recalled: 'A great many of us, with the support of Bryce<sup>77</sup> and Loreburn, worked very hard in the short week we had to keep Britain at peace.'<sup>78</sup>

Molteno was at the heart of these efforts. He was one of eleven members of the Foreign Affairs Committee who met on 29 July to endorse a resolution calling upon Britain to act as honest broker in the developing situation in the Balkans, while itself maintaining a stance of strict neutrality.<sup>79</sup> But the radical dissidents understood that the crucial decisions would be taken inside the cabinet and believed that there were still, despite changes in the ministerial balance since 1908, sufficient numbers of their way of thinking to block British participation in the conflict. Indeed, as late as 29 July the colonial secretary, 'Loulou' Harcourt, was 'certain' he could take 'at least 9' cabinet colleagues with him in resigning.<sup>80</sup> On behalf of their colleagues, Molteno and Bryce separately visited Harcourt on 30 July. The latter recorded: 'Both s[ai]d they were confident in me and as long as I stayed in Cabinet they w[oul]d assume peace was assured.'<sup>81</sup> It seemed possible that the government itself might collapse if any attempt were made to abandon Britain's neutrality, and Molteno was quick to congratulate John Burns, the president of the Board of Trade, who despatched a letter of resignation late on 2 August.<sup>82</sup> He would have drawn further comfort had he known that, as late as 31 July, even the prime minister dismissed Serbia as 'a wild little State ... for which nobody has a good word, so badly has it behaved', adding that it 'deserved a thorough thrashing'.<sup>83</sup>

But events moved rapidly over the first days of August, with France and Germany ordering general mobilisation and Germany declaring war on Russia. Meanwhile, the question of Belgian neutrality came into play. Now, wavering ministers were persuaded to stay their hands or,

in the case of John Simon and Lord Beauchamp, actually withdraw their resignations. On a stance of calculated ambiguity on Britain's part, reinforced by the recognition that the government's collapse would merely produce a Unionist replacement, united in its determination to declare war, Asquith held his querulous cabinet together, although the veteran Lord Morley did join Burns in returning to the backbenches.

As far as Liberal MPs were concerned, the crucial event was Grey's famous speech in the Commons on the afternoon of 3 August. It was a clever though somewhat contradictory statement, taking his audience, selectively, through the evolution of Anglo-French relations since 1906. For many MPs it was the first they had heard of the exchange of letters between Grey and the French ambassador, Paul Cambon, in 1912 or of the agreement of the two countries to concentrate their fleets in defined but separate waters, leaving Britain with responsibility for the Channel and North Sea and France the Mediterranean. Grey still stressed that Britain retained its free hand and was under no binding commitment to France. Skilfully, however, he posed the question of whether 'friendship' entailed obligation. It was up to 'every man [to] look into his own heart and construe the extent of the obligation for himself'. But, Grey asserted, if an enemy attacked France's undefended northern coast, 'we could not stand aside and see this going on practically within sight of our eyes ... looking on dispassionately doing nothing!' Only now did Grey reveal that in these circumstances he had, on the previous day, given Cambon a pledge of naval support. Reinforcing his argument with news of the imminent threat to Belgian neutrality, guaranteed by the Powers including Britain in 1839 – quoting from a Gladstone speech of 1870 must have been designed to appeal to Liberals of Molteno's persuasion – Grey concluded that remaining neutral would deprive Britain of respect in the international community and damage her fundamental interests.<sup>84</sup>

'Interests and honour', writes Douglas Newton perceptively of Grey's speech, 'were carefully interleaved to the last.'<sup>85</sup> Grey's oratory changed many Liberal minds. But until recently too many historians<sup>86</sup> have followed misleading contemporary assessments to conclude that the foreign secretary had effectively put an end to radical dissent, allowing the political nation to enter the war united. Among contemporaries, Christopher Addison, Liberal MP for Hoxton, judged that Grey had 'satisfied all the House, with perhaps three or four exceptions, that we were compelled to participate'.<sup>87</sup>

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## A Liberal for All Seasons? Percy Alport Molteno, 1861–1937

Colonel Repington, the generally well-informed military correspondent of *The Times*, even suggested that Germany's ultimatum to Belgium overcame the 'whole spirit of "Gladstonian Liberalism"' which 'hated war like the plague' and enabled the entire country to enter 'the war wholly united and in a good cause'.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Kate Courtney, sister of Beatrice Webb, concluded that 'the German violation of Belgian neutrality [which followed within hours of Grey's speech] was the rock on which all the anti-war feeling was shipwrecked'.<sup>89</sup>

Yet perceptive observers noted some significant qualifications to this picture. The positive reception of Grey's speech owed much to the enthusiastic endorsement of Unionist MPs who, following post-1910 by-elections, now constituted the largest party in the House. Annan Bryce, Liberal MP for Inverness, suggested that during the course of the speech 'there was not one single cheer from this [Liberal] side of the House. The whole of the cheering came from the other side'.<sup>90</sup> Charles Trevelyan, who resigned from junior office at the Board of Education, confirmed that 'very few [Liberals] ... cheered at all, whatever they did later, while the Tories shouted with delight'.<sup>91</sup> The voice of dissent had its chance to be heard when, with some reluctance, the Speaker agreed to an adjournment debate that evening. The Commons was now 'allowed a little shadow puppetry, giving the mere appearance of a democratic decision for war'.<sup>92</sup> Before the debate opened, 22 members of the Foreign Affairs Committee, including Molteno, approved a resolution to be released to the press: 'After hearing Sir Edward Grey's statement [this meeting] is of opinion that no sufficient reason exists in present circumstances for Great Britain intervening in the War and most strongly urges His Majesty's Government to continue negotiations with Germany with a view to maintaining our neutrality'.<sup>93</sup>

Sixteen radical Liberals spoke in the evening debate in support of peace and British non-intervention. Molteno's contribution was among the most trenchant and persuasive.

The government, he insisted, particularly a government that had come into power as one of peace, had 'no right to plunge this country into war for anything short of our own vital interests'. By reminding the House of the repeated assurances given, not only by Grey, but also the prime minister, that Britain was under no obligation to support France in war, he came close to questioning the honesty of the government's two leading ministers:

We are now told that our obligations, though not obligations of Treaty or of agreement, are so strong and so binding that we shall be compelled to take up arms in defence of France. I complain that we, who are supporters of His Majesty's Government, should have been led into this state of false security on this most vital and important question.

Furthermore, the decision for war should not be taken by a small group of ministers. Anticipating the call for the 'democratic control' of foreign policy that would grow over the ensuing years, Molteno complained:

This is a continuation of that old and disastrous system where a few men ... wielding the whole force of the State, make secret engagements and secret arrangements, carefully veiled from the knowledge of the people, who are as dumb cattle without a voice on the question.

Inevitably, Molteno looked to his pantheon of Liberal heroes to support his case. 'As to this horrid "balance of power"', he told the House, 'which one would have thought had been disposed of by the eloquence of Cobden and Bright, it would be absurd for me to say anything more where their voices have not succeeded.' The government must not 'abandon even the last shred of hope before we are committed to this frightful struggle'. But he worried that nothing would satisfy Grey short of war. 'That was the impression given to us by the language of the Foreign Secretary'.<sup>94</sup>

It was, though, too late. In the absence of a German response to Britain's ultimatum, the two countries found themselves at war on 4 August. That war would be a watershed for Britain, for the Liberal Party and for Percy Molteno himself.

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- 1 For a helpful discussion of the problems of applying 'left' and 'right' designations in the context of Liberal politics, see the special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History* ('Liberals of the Right?'), 47 (Summer 2005), especially I. Packer, 'The Career of John Morley: From Left to Right?' pp. 16–21.
- 2 The Moltenos had come to prominence in the politics and society of Milan as long ago as the twelfth century.
- 3 Molteno wrote his father's biography, *The Life and Times of Sir John Charles Molteno* (London, 1900).
- 4 F. W. Hirst, *Man of Principle: The Life of Percy Alport Molteno* (unpublished biography), p. 131. The biography is available in galley proof form on the Molteno family website at [www.moltenofamily.net/biographies/a-man-of-principle-the-life-of-percy-molteno-m-p-by-francis-hirst](http://www.moltenofamily.net/biographies/a-man-of-principle-the-life-of-percy-molteno-m-p-by-francis-hirst). Hirst never gave his work a title, but the one adopted by the Molteno family has been used in this article. Extracts from Molteno's letters and diaries appear by kind permission of Mr Robert Molteno, great nephew of Percy Molteno, who has also offered numerous helpful comments and suggestions, particularly in relation to Percy's family background.
- 5 Molteno to brother, James, 21 Dec. 1897, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 215.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 231.
- 8 For Chamberlain's involvement in the Raid and the subsequent Committee of Inquiry, see D. Judd, *Radical Joe: A Life of Joseph Chamberlain* (London, 1977), pp. 195–201 and J. S. Marais, *The Fall of Kruger's Republic* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 94–5.
- 9 *The Times* 10 Jul. 1899.

- 10 S. Koss, *The Anatomy of an Anti-war Movement: The Pro-Boers* (London, 1973), p. 4.
- 11 Molteno to sister, Betty, 4 Jul. 1899, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 232.
- 12 Molteno to Mrs Clark, Jul. 1899, cited in *ibid.*, p. 240.
- 13 Molteno to sister, Caroline, 17 Nov. 1899, cited in *ibid.*, p. 252.
- 14 Molteno to brother, Charlie, 23 Mar. 1900, cited in *ibid.*, p. 267.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Molteno to 'a friend', 22 Jul. 1900, cited in *ibid.*, p. 272.
- 17 Molteno to brother, Charlie, 1 Jun. 1900, cited in *ibid.*, p. 271.
- 18 Molteno to 'a friend', 22 Jul. 1900, cited in *ibid.*, p. 272.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 275. In fact, 'pro-Boer' Liberals had performed less well than Liberal Imperialists; P. Readman, 'The Conservative Party, Patriotism and British Politics: The Case of the General Election of 1900', *Journal of British Studies* 40, 1 (2001), pp. 137–9.
- 20 Molteno to T. Wintringham, 22 Jan. 1901, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 283.
- 21 The speech is reproduced in D. Brack and T. Little (eds.), *Great Liberal Speeches* (London, 2001), pp. 211–14.
- 22 Sir Matthew Wallace cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 312.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- 24 *Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser* (hereafter *Standard*) 8 Jun. 1904.
- 25 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 314.
- 26 *Standard*, 3 Dec. 1904.
- 27 *Standard*, 10 Jan. 1906.
- 28 *Dumfries and Galloway Courier and Herald*, 17 Jan. 1906.
- 29 Full result: P. A. Molteno (Liberal) 4814; J. H. Balfour Browne (Unionist) 3431. For the election more generally, see A. K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide: The General Election of 1906* (Newton Abbot, 1973).
- 30 Reid's elevation, ennobled as Lord Loreburn, to the Woolsack was one of Campbell-Bannerman's most important appointments in terms of asserting his own authority and resisting a potential power grab by the leading Liberal Imperialists.
- 31 John Sinclair, formerly Campbell-Bannerman's parliamentary private secretary, was now appointed Secretary for Scotland. Molteno had already befriended him, and his support proved important for Molteno's plans.
- 32 Molteno to Sauer, 15 Jan. 1906 cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 321.
- 33 Molteno to brother, Charlie, 25 Jan. 1906, cited in *ibid.*, p. 322.
- 34 Hansard, H.C. Debs. (series 5), vol. 162, col. 84.
- 35 K. Hancock, *Smuts: The Fields of Force* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 518.
- 36 N. Mansergh, *The Commonwealth Experience*, vol. 1 (London, 1982), p. 105.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 39 D. Judd and P. Slinn, *The Evolution of the Modern Commonwealth 1902–80* (London, 1982), p. 26.
- 40 In 1859 John Bright had declared: 'I am for "Peace, retrenchment and reform", the watchword of the great Liberal party thirty years ago.' The campaign of the Radical MP, Joseph Hume, in the 1820s against extravagant government expenditure had caused 'retrenchment' to be added to 'peace and reform'. The phrase was used by Earl Grey in 1830 and again by Gladstone in 1880. R. B. McCallum, *The Liberal Party from Earl Grey to Asquith* (London, 1963), pp. 68–70.
- 41 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 347.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 311.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 383. The passage, contents and subsequent history of the act are considered in L. Leneman, 'Lowland Land Settlement in the Twentieth Century', *Scottish Historical Review*, vol. lxxvii, no. 184 (1988).
- 44 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 337.
- 45 It would be wrong to suggest that radical, non-interventionist Liberalism was now excluded from Asquith's cabinet. As late as the crisis of July 1914, it seemed initially possible that up to half that body's membership would oppose participation in war against Germany. But increasingly the key posts in the government were in Liberal Imperialist hands.
- 46 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 375.
- 47 Molteno to constituent, 12 May 1908, cited in *ibid.*, p. 350.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 358.
- 49 Molteno to brother, Charlie, 6 Jan. 1909, cited in *ibid.*, p. 353.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 364.
- 51 Molteno to Merriman, Dec. 1909/Jan. 1910, cited in *ibid.*, p. 370. Molteno's words clearly recall the 'obstruction theory', identified by some historians as the means by which nineteenth-century Liberal leaders, especially Gladstone, secured party unity behind campaigns designed to remove obstacles to further progress. See, in particular, D. A. Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 134–5, 324–6.
- 52 Full result: P. A. Molteno (Liberal) 4666; W. Murray (Unionist) 4091. For the election more generally, see N. Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People: The General Elections of 1910* (London, 1972).
- 53 Molteno to Asquith, 7 Feb. 1910, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 366.
- 54 Full result: P. A. Molteno (Liberal) 4708; W. Murray (Unionist) 4146.
- 55 Molteno to Lord Channing (Liberal MP for Northamptonshire East, 1885–1910), 11 Oct. 1912, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 400.
- 56 Molteno to N. MacMillan, 11 Dec. 1911, cited in *ibid.*, p. 385.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 18 Dec. 1911, cited in *ibid.*, pp. 385–6.
- 58 Z. Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (London, 1977), p. 141.
- 59 T. Morgan, *Churchill: Young Man in a Hurry 1874–1915* (New York, 1982), p. 315.
- 60 Hansard, H.C. Debs. (series 5), vol. 41, cols. 1428–9.
- 61 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 416.
- 62 S. Koss, *Sir John Brunner: Radical Plutocrat 1842–1919* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 264; *The Spectator*, vol. 111 (1913), p. 1066.
- 63 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 419.
- 64 B. B. Gilbert, 'David Lloyd George: The Reform of British Landholding and the Budget of 1914', *Historical Journal*, xxi (1978), p. 141.
- 65 I. Packer, 'The Liberal Cave and the 1914 Budget', *English Historical Review*, 442 (1996), p. 621.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 631.
- 67 *Ibid.*, pp. 626, 631; Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 425.
- 68 Molteno to Provost Halliday, late Jul. 1914, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 427.
- 69 Liverpool Record Office, Holt MSS, 920 DUR 1/10, diary 19 Jul. 1914.
- 70 Molteno diary, 12 Feb. 1914, cited in Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 419.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 418.
- 72 Molteno to brother, Charlie, 8 Jul. 1914, cited in *ibid.*, p. 428.
- 73 M. and E. Brock (eds.), *H. H. Asquith: Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford, 1985), p. 89. Alfred Mond was Liberal MP for

- Swansea Town; Arnold Maurice, Baron de Forest was Liberal MP for West Ham North.
- 74 Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 409.
- 75 W. S. Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 1 (London, 1968), pp. 113–14.
- 76 Churchill to Clementine Churchill, 24 Jul. 1914, R. S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill*, companion vol. ii, part 3 (London, 1969), pp. 1987–8.
- 77 Viscount (James) Bryce (1838–1922). Liberal MP 1880–1906; Ambassador to the United States 1907–13.
- 78 F. W. Hirst to Nicholas Murray Butler, 15 Aug. 1914, cited in D. Newton, *The Darkest Days: The Truth Behind Britain's Rush to War, 1914* (London, 2015), p. 304.
- 79 C. Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War July 1914 to May 1915* (London, 1971), pp. 36–7.
- 80 Harcourt cabinet memorandum, 29 Jul. 1914, cited in Newton, *Darkest Days*, p. 61.
- 81 Harcourt cabinet memorandum, 30 Jul. 1914, cited in M. Webb, 'Lewis Harcourt's Political Journal 1914–16: A New Source for the Liberal Party and the First World War', *Journal of Liberal History*, 87 (2015), p. 49.
- 82 Burns diary, cited in K. Robbins, *The Abolition of War: The Peace Movement in Britain 1914–1919* (Cardiff, 1976), p. 36.
- 83 C. Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2012), p. 26.
- 84 Hansard, H.C. Debs. (series 5), vol. 65, cols 1809–27.
- 85 Newton, *Darkest Days*, p. 225.
- 86 Important recent exceptions include D. Marlor, *Fatal Fortnight: Arthur Ponsonby and the Fight for British Neutrality in 1914* (London, 2014) and, particularly, Douglas Newton's excellent *Darkest Days*.
- 87 C. Addison, *Four and a Half Years*, vol. 1 (London, 1934), p. 32.
- 88 C. à C. Repington, *The First World War*, vol. 1 (London, 1920), pp. 18–19.
- 89 Pennell, *Kingdom United*, p. 35.
- 90 Marlor, *Fatal Fortnight*, p. 113.
- 91 Trevelyan's 'Personal account of the beginning of the War, 1914', cited in Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War*, p. 64.
- 92 Newton, *Darkest Days*, p. 248.
- 93 *Ibid.*, p. 239; Hirst, *Man of Principle*, p. 436.
- 94 Hansard, H.C. Debs. (series 5), vol. 65, cols 1848–53.

# Letters to the Editor

## Tony Greaves

I am surprised that the richly deserved tributes to Tony Greaves published in the *Journal* (*Journal of Liberal History* 111 (summer 2021) and 112 (autumn 2021)) have not mentioned that he was in effect elected to the House of Lords as a Liberal Democrat representative. Michael Meadowcroft writes that: 'Charles Kennedy ... had the imaginative idea of nominating Tony Greaves as a life peer.' The nomination was certainly made by Charles Kennedy, but the 'idea' came from the panel of potential nominees that was elected by Liberal Democrat conference representatives. (The panel was supposed to tide us over the short period before the expected reform of the House of Lords by the Labour government ...) As I recall, something like a hundred members put themselves forward for election to the panel. Each produced an election address but there was nothing in the nature of a traditional election

campaign. That Tony Greaves topped the poll is the clearest possible demonstration of the esteem in which he was held by the most committed members of the party at that time.

David Cannon

## Shirley Williams (1)

The 'what ifs' in history can be both fun and revealing but they are best based on evidence of what did happen. Unfortunately, Dick Newby's claim that in ducking the Warrington by-election Shirley Williams made 'her biggest political mistake' (*Journal of Liberal History* 112 (autumn 2021)) fails to fit the electoral evidence; there is no good reason to suppose that she would have won where Roy Jenkins failed.

Like many who canvassed for Alliance candidates thirty years ago, I can echo Dick's feeling that Shirley seemed to have more rapport with the

electorate than Roy. Yet while Shirley was able to add 34.8 percentage points to the previous Liberal vote in the November 1981 by-election in Crosby, Roy's score in Warrington in July (+33.4) was essentially similar.

Why? Both constituencies had the significant Catholic presence that Dick suggests as relevant, though they were otherwise very different. On the face of it, Crosby, with more of the professional middle class so attracted to the SDP, and a Labour (rather than Tory) vote to squeeze, was a better prospect than Warrington. Timing points in the same direction. November (following both the further wave of defections after the damaging Benn versus Healey Labour battle and the Alliance victory in Croydon) was an easier time to win than July – as witnessed by the rise in the opinion polls.

One can only conclude that in these two constituencies, at that period, it