

Coalition leadership

David Dutton examines the relationship between David Lloyd George and Austen Chamberlain, the Liberal and Unionist leaders of the coalition government from 1921

The Odd Couple

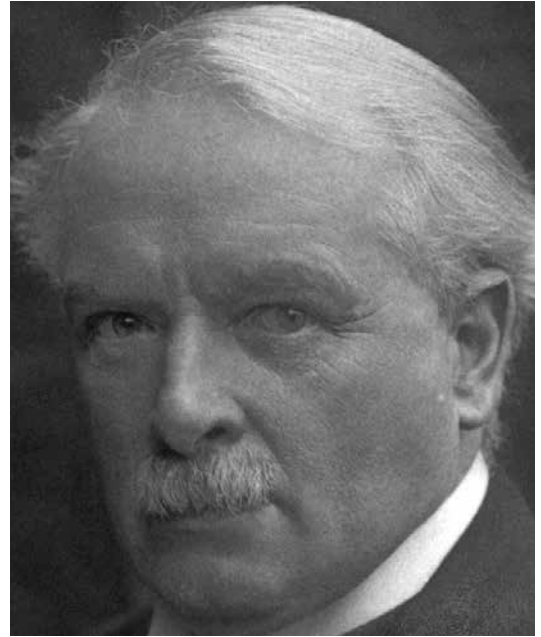
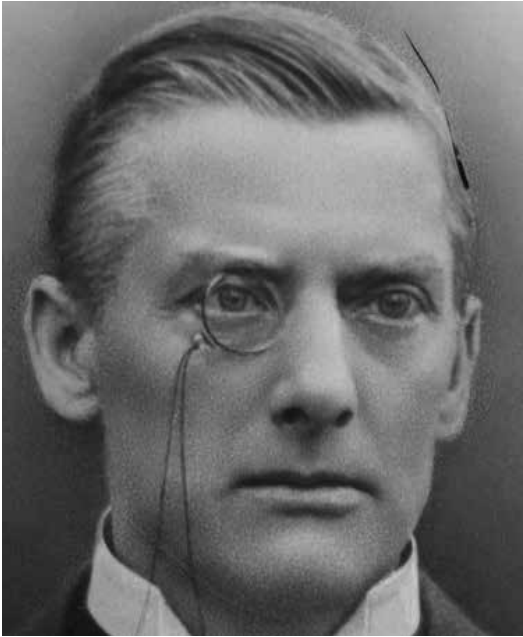
Lloyd George, Austen Chamberlain and the Post-war Coalition, 1918–22

WITH THE AUTHORITY that comes with being the country's leading psephologist, the late David Butler once wrote that 'if a coalition is to succeed at all, there must be a reasonable working relationship at the top, based on some degree of trust'.¹ This proposition is scarcely contentious, but Butler's mild phraseology barely captures the fundamental importance of the personal relationship between the leaders of the participating political parties to the fortunes of a coalition administration. This article will focus on the relationship between David Lloyd George and Austen Chamberlain at the head of the coalition government, 1921–22, but will begin by setting that relationship in a broader historical context of twentieth-century coalitions, including the first years of the Lloyd George government before Chamberlain's elevation to the Conservative Party leadership.

Relevant case-studies in modern British political history are, of course, somewhat thin on the ground, but the two most recent coalitions – one the product of wartime emergency, the other the result of the inconclusive verdict of the electorate – certainly confirm this generalisation. From the outset of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat government of 2010–15, it was clear that there was a positive chemistry between the two party leaders, David Cameron and Nick Clegg. This was most evident at the celebrated press conference

in the Downing Street Rose Garden, when the two men spelt out their joint endeavour to work in the national interest. Admittedly, this event was staged for the watching public. 'We mustn't come up short here,' urged Cameron just as the two leaders stepped outside. 'It is one of those times when we need to give it 20 per cent more than feels appropriate.'² Nonetheless, as Cameron later reflected, 'the banter and bonhomie *did* help to set the tone for what we were about to embark on. They showed that Nick and I were confident we could work together and were clear about our task: to confront the economic challenge ahead of us.'³ Inevitably, the relationship became more difficult as policy differences intruded, especially following the Alternative Vote referendum. Insider accounts written from a Liberal Democrat perspective have painted a less positive picture of the Cameron–Clegg partnership than that offered in Cameron's memoirs.⁴ Even so, and contrary to many predictions, the coalition did stay the course of a full five-year parliament, with the so-called 'Quad' of four leading ministers, two from each party, successfully maintaining the government's stability and resilience.

Much the same may be said of the wartime coalition formed by Winston Churchill in May 1940. The importance of personal relationships at the top of this government cannot be overstated. Churchill and the Labour



Sir (Joseph) Austen Chamberlain, 30 November 1923; David Lloyd George, 1921
(both © National Portrait Gallery, London)

leader, Clement Attlee, were very different men, but they managed to forge a remarkably successful partnership. It certainly helped that Attlee viewed Churchill as the greatest war leader in British history (even remaining a champion of his controversial role in the Dardanelles campaign of the First World War). But Attlee was never the prime minister's 'yes-man'. He selected his points of disagreement with care, but showed a willingness to stand up to Churchill over issues such as India's constitutional development and the premier's readiness to end cooperation with de Gaulle. At the same time, he sided with Churchill when the latter most needed his support at the critical moments of May 1940 and, in opposition to the chiefs of staff, in late 1942. For his part Churchill knew that he could rely on Attlee's loyalty and was happy to leave the day-to-day running of the government in the Labour leader's capable hands when the war necessitated his own absence from London. Churchill was not above poking fun at the expense of the undemonstrative deputy prime minister,

but this was a transgression reserved for himself and he reacted angrily against anyone who followed the same course.⁵ Churchill knew that the coalition would eventually break up, but Attlee was surely in his thoughts when, in November 1944, he declared his hope that 'the bitterness of party conflict would be assuaged by the knowledge we had all gained of one another's zeal in the cause and devotion to our country'.⁶

The Lloyd George coalition (1916–22) differed from these two successors in several obvious but important ways. Unlike the Churchill government, it extended into the years of peace and reconstruction. Unlike the Cameron administration, it was not imposed, at least after the coupon election of 1918, by the necessities of parliamentary arithmetic. Unlike either, it was marked by a change of personnel at the top when the Conservative leadership passed from Andrew Bonar Law to Austen Chamberlain in March 1921. And, again unlike either and perhaps most importantly for the present discussion, the premiership was held

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throughout by the smaller of the component parties to the coalition.

That Lloyd George and Bonar Law formed a close and effective partnership at the top of government appears beyond dispute. Stanley Baldwin's judgement that it was the most perfect partnership in political history may be an exaggeration, but it has in essence been confirmed by many historians.⁷ According to Peter Rowland, for example, 'they admired and liked each other and their harmony increased with the passing of the years. It was, in very truth, the perfect partnership. So long as they held together the Government would be invincible.'⁸ In no sense was the partnership based on a similarity between the two characters. Indeed, as Lloyd George recalled, there was 'a complete contrast in temperamental and mental equipment. We had nothing in common, except a lowly origin.'⁹ Rather it was a case of different but complementary qualities, combining to create something greater than its component parts – 'the indisputable man of genius with the quiet steady influence alongside him, the public and the private face of government. They sustained each other.'¹⁰

Penetrating Law's somewhat dour exterior, Lloyd George was one of the few who discovered the warmer, more human figure underneath – the 'wonderful lovable character of the

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man' Walter Long once described.¹¹ The two men genuinely liked one another. They could confide in one another, share a joke and even have fun together. Despite pre-war antagonism, Law had found himself on the same side as his former political opponent on key issues relating to the conduct of the war, including

conscription. Then, having been instrumental in making Lloyd George prime minister in December 1916, and increasingly convinced that he was the only man capable of leading the nation to victory, Law soon established a position of intimacy and cooperation, becoming the premier's closest confidant and invaluable adviser. Law 'trusted his judgment. Even more surprisingly, [he] now trusted his integrity.'¹² Lloyd George and Bonar Law sometimes disagreed; sometimes they quarrelled. But Lloyd George valued the way his colleague would search out the difficulties and dangers in any project placed before him. It was an idiosyncrasy that Lloyd George found 'useful and even exhilarating'.¹³ But, if the prime minister decided nonetheless to go ahead, he knew that in the last resort Law would back him without qualification. The cabinet secretary, Maurice Hankey, who was well placed to judge, noted that Law's loyalty gave him an 'influence on Lloyd George which was wisely exercised and exceeded that of any other member of the Government', a situation that worked to the benefit of both the government and the country.¹⁴ Rowland goes as far as to suggest that, though 'theoretically Lloyd George's second-in-command', Law was in practice 'his partner'.¹⁵ And, in a striking assessment, Kenneth Morgan, the doyen of Lloyd George

scholars, concludes that the coalition cabinet's 'inner coherence compares favourably with that of most British governments' of the twentieth century.¹⁶

Precisely where the Lloyd George–Bonar Law partnership might ultimately have led remains

uncertain. For some time after the end of the war, Law seems to have been attracted by the idea of fusion between the Tories and the Liberal coalitionists, with Lloyd George perhaps emerging as the leader of the new party. But by early 1920, his enthusiasm for fusion was on the wane and he was probably relieved when,

in March, Lloyd George's attempts to persuade his Liberal colleagues of the virtues of such a development, which would of course have closed down the option of Liberal reunion, were firmly rebuffed.¹⁷ Thereafter, Law was more inclined to pursue the goal of a loose united front, but the difficulties of maintaining this became increasingly apparent. Always much more sensitive than his successor to the feelings of his party at large, Law would surely have been obliged to insist on changes at the top of the government to reflect the Conservative preponderance within the coalition. At all events, it was Law, eighteen months after his enforced retirement from the cabinet, who most effectively gave voice to the mounting Conservative desire for independent action at the next general election.

A year after the drive for fusion was effectively aborted, Law, exhausted and unwell, resigned from the government. It seemed most unlikely that his successor as Conservative leader, Austen Chamberlain, would be able to strike up a comparable relationship with the prime minister. In May 1921 Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George's secretary and mistress, confided her thoughts to the privacy of her diary:

Since Bonar left [Lloyd George] has lost an ideal companion with whom he could laugh and joke and enjoy himself. He cannot do that with Chamberlain, who is pompous to the last degree and has become increasingly so since he took Bonar's place. He is a vain man.¹⁸

As was the case with Lloyd George and Law, the prime minister and Chamberlain were very different men, but their qualities and characteristics were far less complementary than had been the case in the earlier relationship. Lloyd George was primarily concerned with results; the means by which they were achieved were altogether less important to him. Chamberlain was obsessed with correct form; he would not cut corners nor engage in

dubious activity, even if such methods offered him clear advantage. Where Lloyd George was easy-going and informal, Chamberlain seldom relaxed his guard, striking most observers as stiff and austere. While Chamberlain sought comfort in a conventionally stable family life, Lloyd George was notorious for his marital indiscretions, leading a near-bigamous existence since the beginning of his relationship with his secretary, Frances Stevenson. For years to come, many political contemporaries would find it difficult to comprehend how a figure such as Chamberlain 'took such pride in [his] post-war association with the new Ishmael of public life'.¹⁹ Ironically, in different circumstances Lloyd George might have been better paired with Chamberlain's father, 'the provincial voice of Nonconformist radicalism, and of social and municipal reform'.²⁰

Furthermore, Chamberlain and Lloyd George had a shared history going back to the last years of the nineteenth century which did not bode well for their enforced partnership at the top of the coalition government. Famously, in the Commons debate on the address in December 1900, Lloyd George had asked awkward questions about the financial interests of the Chamberlain family in munitions firms that had derived substantial profits from the Boer War. In the years that followed, both men advanced steadily through the ranks of their respective parties, emerging as leading figures at a time when party acrimony reached a level rarely seen in British history, when genuine hatred replaced the conventional ceremonial of parliamentary debate and disagreement. This era may be said to have begun with the rejection of Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' of 1909 by the Conservative-dominated House of Lords. In the Commons Chamberlain led for his party on this matter. After a moderate initial response, he condemned the Chancellor's measures as the first step in an insidious process of confiscatory socialism. By the following year, the parties stood deadlocked and, prompted in part by the death of the king, sought a compromise way out through an

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inter-party conference at which Lloyd George surprisingly floated the idea of coalition, suggesting that contentious issues such as free trade, Welsh disestablishment, the House of Lords and even Irish home rule, which he now dubbed 'non-controversial', could be settled on the basis of cross-party agreement. Chamberlain and his colleagues were not impressed, but it is striking that Lloyd George found Chamberlain 'such a slow and commonplace mind that he did not count'.²¹

With the outbreak of war in 1914, Chamberlain did concede that the Liberal chancellor had handled the financial aspects of 'a very difficult situation with great tact, great skill and great judgment'.²² Becoming a member of Asquith's first wartime coalition in May 1915, Chamberlain continued to regard Lloyd George with deep suspicion and, though retaining his post (as secretary of state for India) when Lloyd George took over the keys to 10 Downing Street in December 1916, viewed the change of prime minister without enthusiasm:

I take no pleasure in a change which gives me a chief whom I profoundly distrust – no doubt a man of great energy but quite untrustworthy; who doesn't run crooked because he wants to but because he doesn't know how to run straight.²³

Chamberlain resigned from the government in July 1917 following the publication of the report of the commission set up to investigate the ill-fated Mesopotamian campaign (for which he had been nominally responsible) and the government's subsequent decision to establish a court of enquiry. Many regarded his withdrawal as unnecessary, testament only to his high-minded but exaggerated commitment to public rectitude and probity. Strikingly, Lloyd George appealed to Chamberlain to reconsider his decision – but without success.²⁴ While Chamberlain was glad to be relieved for the time being of the burdens of office, his Conservative colleague Lord Lansdowne warned that his 'official reincarnation will

probably take place sooner than you would wish'.²⁵ His enforced leisure at least gave him scope to speculate on the shape of post-war politics. Interestingly, he believed that Lloyd George saw himself at the head of a Liberal–Labour combination and he wondered what, if this came to pass, would be the role of men such as himself 'of conservative tendencies'.²⁶

By the autumn of 1917, Chamberlain's return to office was being widely discussed. Lloyd George himself may have considered it safer to have him inside his political tent at a time of considerable difficulty for the government. While his misgivings about the prime minister were as strong as ever, Chamberlain also now recognised that Lloyd George was 'the best man for the place and our present Govt as good as and stronger than any by which it could be replaced'. For the moment he proposed to support the administration from the outside, but he did not rule out 'the possibility of entering it again if asked'.²⁷ Chamberlain maintained this somewhat equivocal stance for the next few months, telling his sister in March 1918 that, while in some ways he would like to be back in office, the prime minister 'fills me with growing distrust ... The company he keeps does not endear him to me and I cannot shout myself hoarse over the cry Great is our David or proclaim myself his prophet'.²⁸ Meanwhile, the generally well-informed courtier Lord Esher suggested that Chamberlain 'seems to be the alternative Prime Minister, if by some mischance Lloyd George were to be killed by a golf-ball'.²⁹

Chamberlain finally rejoined the government as minister without portfolio with a seat in the war cabinet in April, though he did so with a distinct lack of enthusiasm: 'I never felt less pleasure or elation in taking office – indeed I feel none – but I believe I can be of use and I know that I ought to try'.³⁰ Chamberlain attempted to make a federal settlement for Ireland, involving devolution throughout the United Kingdom, and a promise that Ulster would not be coerced into this general scheme until it had been applied across the

British Isles, conditions for his return to office. Lloyd George countered that Irish home rule could not be delayed until a complete scheme of devolution had been worked out. In the end, Chamberlain settled for a seat on the government committee charged with drawing up the legislation for an Irish settlement. This, together with almost daily meetings on the conduct of the war and chairmanship of the cabinet's Economic Defence and Development Committee, kept him fully occupied during the remaining months of the conflict. Peace came relatively suddenly in November and before long the country was in the throes of a general election campaign which the government fought and won as a coalition.

That the coalition government should be maintained into the peace provoked less controversy and debate than might have been expected. In part this was a function of Lloyd George's commanding status as the man who had 'won the war'. In Law's famous remark, he could now be 'Prime Minister for life if he likes'.³¹ But more profound thoughts also underlay the continuation of coalition. Men's motives varied and idealism and baser calculations were often present in the mind of the same individual. Kenneth Morgan has argued persuasively that Lloyd George aimed to build on the spirit of national unity created by the war to resolve the inequalities and injustices that scarred British society. This would

Lloyd George and his more thoughtful coalition Liberal colleagues also understood that, notwithstanding his overwhelming triumph at the polls, he was a prime minister without a party, at least in the sense of a structured organisation. Outside Wales, a large majority of local Liberal associations had remained in Asquithian hands.

For the Unionists, Law regarded it as a national necessity to offer ongoing support to the coalition and regarded Lloyd George as the only leader capable of tackling the enormous work of post-war reconstruction. This was a belief shared by the majority of Law's party – though not one they would retain indefinitely. Lloyd George was undoubtedly an electoral asset in 1918, but one whose value would decline with the passage of time.³⁴ Austen Chamberlain, too, was concerned that the administration should remain as broadly based as it had been during the latter half of the war, since it would need the maximum support possible from the country to handle immensely difficult problems of demobilisation and reconstruction.³⁵ But other factors were probably more prominent in his thinking. His overriding sense of loyalty made it unlikely that he would now treat as political enemies those who had been his cabinet colleagues since 1916. Even more important, Chamberlain was becoming obsessed with the threat posed by the Labour Party. As he later

wrote: 'A new party has come into existence ... and this party, however moderate be its leaders, is divided from both the old parties on what are likely to be the greatest issues of

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involve overcoming the conflicts and divisions of the pre-war era without regard to the tribal party loyalties of earlier times.³² As Lloyd George's former ministerial colleague C. F. G. Masterman put it, the old parties 'with all their ancient loyalties' had 'fulfilled their purpose in their generation' and had no place in the 'changed world' of post-war Britain.³³ But

the next few years, for it challenges the basis of our whole economic and industrial system.³⁶ The transformed political landscape was accompanied by a greatly expanded electorate following the Representation of the People Act of 1918. This ushered in universal male suffrage while also granting the vote for the first time to women over the age of 30 who

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were householders or married to householders. This produced a total electorate of around 21 million (something like three times its pre-war size), of whom 8.4 million were women, which because of its working-class bias inevitably threw into question the long-term survival of the Conservative Party as a party of government. It is easy to forget that for most of Chamberlain's political life, in fact since the Khaki election of 1900, the Conservatives had not managed to secure a majority of parliamentary seats. Chamberlain was therefore convinced of the need to maintain a post-war coalition with Lloyd George's wing of the Liberal Party as the best means of barring Labour's path to power. Then, once 'hostility and prejudice ... old habits and rivalries' had been 'softened or removed', fusion would be the logical, indeed probable, conclusion.³⁷ There was little wrong with Chamberlain's analysis. Over the next two decades many leading Liberals did defect into the Tory ranks and capturing a substantial part of the 'Liberal vote' was an important factor in the Conservative electoral hegemony of the inter-war years. Mopping up residual Liberal support remained the ambition of many Conservative strategists at least into the 1950s. But, as will be seen, where Chamberlain did fail was in convincing his own party of the validity of his approach. As party leader, he failed to lead.

In the wake of the general election, Lloyd George carried out a cabinet reshuffle whose main purpose was to relieve Law of some of the excessive workload he had carried over the previous two years. While remaining leader of the Commons and *de facto* deputy prime minister, Law now surrendered the Exchequer to Chamberlain.³⁸ This was a promotion that would have delighted most ambitious politicians, but Chamberlain seldom missed an opportunity not merely to take offence but to grasp it with open arms. Leo Amery's words of a few months earlier seem singularly apposite. He noted Chamberlain's 'lack of proportion in dealing with anything that savours of breach of good form, personal loyalty or political etiquette'.³⁹ On

this occasion Chamberlain objected to the fact that Lloyd George (busy with preparations for the coming peace conference) offered him the post without a personal interview. 'No, I am not happy', Chamberlain confessed to his step-mother. 'As you know, I do not like the duties of Ch of the Ex' [a post he had held as long ago as 1903–5] and 'the way in which the place was offered to me did not lessen my dislike for it'.⁴⁰ When Chamberlain suggested that the job had been thrown to him, like a bone to a dog, Lloyd George could not resist the riposte that 'there is a good deal of meat on that bone'.⁴¹ It is doubtful whether Chamberlain enjoyed the joke in the way that Law might have done. But it was Law who smoothed ruffled feathers and persuaded Chamberlain to accept appointment, sorting out difficulties over Chamberlain's membership of the war cabinet (which Lloyd George insisted on maintaining, even though the conflict was over) and the chancellor's official residence.⁴²

Whether he would retain his new office, Chamberlain concluded, would depend on the extent to which the prime minister gave him his confidence and support – 'a very doubtful factor'.⁴³ His task to bring government spending under control was certainly daunting. 'The normal working of the Treasury control of finance has been utterly overthrown first by Lloyd George as Chancellor and afterwards by four years of war'.⁴⁴ Almost a year into the job, Chamberlain's attitude towards the Exchequer – 'it is all very hateful and wearing' – had scarcely changed, but his view of Lloyd George had certainly warmed: 'curiously enough my only ally is the Prime Minister'.⁴⁵ His approval extended beyond the premier's support in cabinet. When in April 1919 Lloyd George had used a Commons speech to attack the pro-German stance of the newspaper magnate, Lord Northcliffe, Chamberlain was both pleased and impressed:

He marshalled his speech admirably, showed good sense, reticence where reticence was required, and courage. I never liked him better, and there was but one

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verdict throughout the House at the moment as to his success and the masterly way in which he carried it off.⁴⁶

This trend continued through 1920 and involved ministerial alignments that cut across nominal party boundaries, with Chamberlain often siding with the prime minister against both backbenchers and grandees within his own party. ‘Is it not amusing to see Curzon [the foreign secretary] in the camp of the extremists and Lloyd George on the side of moderation and prudence?’ he commented following the government’s decision not to go ahead with a war levy.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Law assured the chancellor that, having at first underrated him, the prime minister had now come to appreciate Chamberlain’s qualities and importance to the government.⁴⁸ Lloyd George could easily disguise his true feelings in a way that Chamberlain could not, but the offer to the latter of the Indian Viceroyalty in October 1920 is worthy of note:

The PM was very flattering. He said that I was so obviously the best man for India that he had felt bound to offer it to me but that I should be so great a loss to the govt at home with the difficult problems in front of us that ... he was after all ‘rather relieved’ [that Chamberlain declined the offer] – and for the time at any rate he was certainly speaking his real thoughts.⁴⁹

By the end of 1920, the turn-around in Chamberlain’s attitude towards Lloyd George was striking:

My one consolation, under circumstances of extraordinary difficulty and anxiety, and in face of a very unscrupulous hostile press, is that the Prime Minister himself has a real appreciation of the dangers of the financial situation and gives me that large measure of support and assistance without which my position would, indeed, be intolerable. I doubt if Parliament or the

country give [Lloyd George] credit for the real endeavour he is making to reduce expenditure.⁵⁰

But the Chamberlain–Lloyd George partnership would soon face its severest test. On 17 March 1921 Bonar Law, after an apparently minor indisposition but upon insistent medical advice, announced his resignation from the government and the leadership of the Conservative Party.

Characteristically, Chamberlain was not prepared to struggle for the succession, but would accept it if it fell into his lap. He felt as he ‘felt ten years ago [when he had renounced claims to the leadership in favour of Law] that the only right thing to do was to keep quiet and leave members to make up their own minds without either courting their favour or shunning responsibility if their choice fell upon me.’⁵¹ In fact, no rival emerged to contest Chamberlain’s silent claims. He now stepped into Law’s shoes with another show of the reluctance that had characterised his previous ministerial appointments since the beginning of Lloyd George’s premiership:

[T]he wheel of fortune turning full circle brings to me again what ten years ago I should have liked and what I now accept as an obvious duty but without pleasure or any great expectations except of trouble and hard labour. For we are no longer an independent party with a clearly defined and perfectly definite policy but part of a coalition bound necessarily to much compromise and as such coalitions must be, largely opportunist.⁵²

There were also misgivings about Chamberlain’s suitability for his new role on the Liberal side of the government, with Philip Kerr, private secretary to Lloyd George, insisting that his boss ‘would never work in harness with Chamberlain’.⁵³ For the time being, however, such gloomy forecasts were belied by events. In language that would have been unthinkable

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only a year or two earlier, Chamberlain had already paid tribute to the prime minister's 'great qualities and ... great services' to the nation. 'No living Englishman [sic] can compare with him and when the history of these times comes to be written can you doubt that he will stand out like the younger Pitt if not with the effulgence of Chatham!'⁵⁴ Then, speaking in May to both Conservative and Liberal MPs in the so-called New Members Coalition Group, he confessed to seeing no end to the 'necessity of Coalition', asking whether the ties of party were 'so rigid and omnipotent that we cannot look beyond them to the national interest'.⁵⁵ Pleased to be freed from the responsibilities of the Exchequer, Chamberlain was 'beginning to like it' and proud to be leader of his party and 'above all Leader of the House'.⁵⁶ For his part, Lloyd George seemed ready to give Chamberlain his full confidence, 'essential to successful cooperation'. 'I think he recognises that I am a force', noted Chamberlain with satisfaction, 'and that if he runs straight with me he will have no reason to complain of my action.'⁵⁷ Getting on

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with him better than he expected, the prime minister recognised that, while he had enemies inside his own government, Chamberlain was not one of them. He would, Lloyd George believed, 'stick to him'. 'Austen plays the game, and he sees that he can trust the PM who conceals nothing from him.'⁵⁸

What then went wrong? In the letter to his sister, cited above, written at his accession to the party leadership, Chamberlain – perhaps unknowingly – hit upon a fundamental weakness in his credentials as a coalition partner:

I have still to learn this House. I wonder whether I can cultivate pleasant colloquial habits. To be hail fellow well met with

all my 'followers'. I must try but I haven't shown much ability that way so far.⁵⁹

It would be Chamberlain's relationship with his own party rather than with the prime minister that would ultimately prove disastrous for the coalition.

Leadership brought out the least positive features of Chamberlain's character. 'He had quite a good opinion of himself,' judged Leo Amery. But, at least in part in reaction to the reputation of his father Joe (whom in most respects he revered), Chamberlain had 'an exaggerated fear of being regarded as pushful ... or other than scrupulously correct and loyal in all his personal dealings'.⁶⁰ There lurked in his mind an uneasy, if largely unspoken recognition that Joe had not been entirely a gentleman. Now, as leader, his long-standing dignity and integrity transmogrified into an aloof pomposity that made him difficult to approach, let alone influence. Chamberlain placed loyalty at the top of a gentleman's virtues and believed that he had always been loyal to the array of figures – Balfour, Law,

Lloyd George and later Baldwin – under whom he worked. This was only partly true. In private he often railed against the shortcomings of those

under whom he successively served. As leader himself, 'loyalty' translated into an expectation that his party's MPs and rank and file should abide by the policy he determined. This inherently risky approach led inexorably to disaster as Chamberlain made little attempt to convince his party of the correctness of his electoral strategy. If Chamberlain somehow managed to reconcile his own gentlemanly scruples with Lloyd George's political wizardry, most Conservatives could not. Never happy in the Commons smoking room or bars, Chamberlain increasingly lost contact with the party he nominally led. As leader, he revealed the same deficiency he displayed on a smaller stage as a constituency MP. In family

correspondence, his half-brother Neville repeatedly drew attention to the way Austen neglected his constituency duties, complaining in 1917 that Austen ‘goes so seldom to his constituency that he is getting to be more and more a stranger’.⁶¹ It was a surprising failing in one so concerned about the rise of Labour. Chamberlain’s West Birmingham seat vividly illustrated the problems confronting the contemporary Conservative Party in the face of Labour’s challenge.

As early as October 1919, Robert Sanders, former whip and now deputy chairman of the party, had noted that the coalition was not running smoothly in the constituencies and that ‘reports of ill-feeling are constant’.⁶² This was a situation that a newly appointed leader needed to address as a matter of urgency, but Chamberlain failed to do so. Calls for Law’s return were not uncommon. ‘Come back and lead us,’ wrote one disgruntled backbencher. ‘Your successor won’t do ... We want you back badly.’⁶³ The eccentric Lord Robert Cecil generally spoke for few in the party apart from himself. On this occasion, however, Chamberlain would have done well to heed his strictures. Unconvinced by Chamberlain’s vision of an anti-socialist alliance as the only way to thwart Labour ambitions, Cecil warned that ‘if it becomes inevitable to repeat constantly to the country that the only alternative to Lloyd George is Labour, sooner or later the country will say that in that case they will try Labour; and I do not know that I should blame them’.⁶⁴ The writer and businessman F. S. Oliver, one of the few men able to address Chamberlain frankly and without reserve, declared:

I am conscious of a considerable change in my feelings towards your government ... My main theme is that you are persuading your fellow countrymen to do what they believe to be wrong. (And you are taking no steps whatever to show them that it is right; only that it will save a lot of bother.) And that, in *you*, even more than in *them*, is the sin against the Holy Ghost.⁶⁵

In fact, the loss of Conservative support for Lloyd George, however indispensable he had seemed in December 1918, proved remorseless, leading to growing resentment that Conservatives were being required to submerge their separate identity within a government whose politics, policies and methods they increasingly abhorred. Each area of government activity to which Lloyd George applied his mercurial mind only added to the problem. Successive initiatives including a settlement of the Irish impasse and latterly in foreign policy, including the proposed unilateral recognition by Britain of the Bolshevik regime and even a readiness to risk renewed war with Turkey, loosened Conservative support for the government as a whole. Pervading everything was the whiff of corruption, epitomised in the scandal over the sale of honours – to the apparent benefit of Lloyd George’s private political fund – which came to a head in June 1922. On this issue Chamberlain was uncharacteristically silent, at least as evidenced by the surviving historical record. His regular letters to his sisters, Ida and Hilda, which usually provide the clearest insight into his private thoughts, offer no clues and indeed dried up completely for two months in the early autumn of 1922. Chamberlain perhaps believed that Lloyd George’s ‘crime’ had been overstated. The prime minister’s actions merely continued a practice pursued by his predecessors since the days of Palmerston. Possibly, Chamberlain was quietly sympathetic to Lloyd George’s predicament, with Liberal Party finances remaining firmly under the control of the Asquithian wing of the party. Whatever the explanation, Chamberlain’s standing as leader suffered collateral damage, largely because of his reluctance to distance himself in any way from the conduct of the prime minister. The perception was that he exercised less influence at the top of government than had Law and that he was in effect Lloyd George’s prisoner rather than the leader of the largest party in the House of Commons. His role in the Irish settlement well illustrates Chamberlain’s predicament. His

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success in shifting majority Conservative opinion from its absolutist pre-war opposition to home rule has met with the approval of several historians.⁶⁶ But it was at the cost of permanently alienating the not inconsiderable ‘die-hard’ wing of the party. The assassination on 22 June 1922 on his Belgravia doorstep of Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff at the end of the war and now Unionist MP for North Down, reawakened backbench misgivings over Lloyd George’s Irish settlement. But when Chamberlain visited Wilson’s widow to offer his condolences, he was greeted with the single word, ‘Murderer’.⁶⁷

Most damagingly, Chamberlain, seemingly content that he had the backing of senior Conservatives in the cabinet such as Balfour and Birkenhead, failed to pay attention to the warnings of those whose very job it was to ensure that the leader remained in touch with the parliamentary party and the extra-parliamentary organisation. He ploughed on, often in outright defiance of men such as the chief whip, the party chairman and the principal agent, figures whose primary loyalty was to the party ‘as a concept and a whole, rather than to any particular leading figures’.⁶⁸ Only in December 1921, when Lloyd George floated the idea of calling an immediate general election, did Chamberlain seek the advice of his party’s senior officers, probably because he anticipated that such advice would confirm his own inclination to oppose the prime minister on this matter. Figures such as the principal agent, Malcolm Fraser, duly obliged, with the result that, when Chamberlain wrote to Lloyd George in early January, he was able to draw on a weight of opinion in pressing him not to pursue the idea any further.⁶⁹

The story of the decline and fall of the Lloyd George coalition, with its denouement at the famous Carlton Club meeting in October 1922, has been well told elsewhere and will not be rehearsed in any detail here.⁷⁰ The crisis over a possible early election caused some temporary cooling of relations between Lloyd George and Chamberlain, not least when news that

the latter had been sounding out opinion on the matter was leaked to the press. But harmony was soon restored – at least between the two principals – with Chamberlain telling the prime minister in March that ‘we are doing very well’ and that there had been ‘a considerable reaction in favour of the Coalition’, conclusions that were hard to justify on the basis of objective evidence.⁷¹ Even when a meeting of 200 Conservative MPs on 14 March criticised the policy and conduct of the government, coming close to repudiating Chamberlain’s leadership, he dismissed this indiscipline as of ‘no real significance’.⁷² Yet while Chamberlain’s loyalty to Lloyd George remained unshaken and his commitment to the coalition as strong as ever, his interaction with his own party came increasingly to resemble a dialogue of the deaf.

As leader, Chamberlain showed oratorical skills that few had previously noted. But these were as likely to be directed at critics in his own party as at his declared political enemies. Speaking at a meeting of the National Union in mid-November 1921, he had ‘full command both of myself and of the audience and the consequence was that I reached the top hole of what I can do’.⁷³ But the meeting had probably been too efficiently stage-managed for the leader to get an accurate picture of his standing within the party. At successive meetings with backbenchers, diehards and even junior ministers, Chamberlain seemed incapable of compromise. His lack of feel for the wider political mood and his own stiffness and arrogance served merely to entrench all groups in their respective bunkers.

On 17 September 1922 coalition leaders met at Chequers to assess the political situation. It was now decided that an election should be held as soon as the foreign situation allowed, and that the government should go to the country as a coalition. Conservative Party managers were outraged. The party chairman warned that if Conservatives were forced to enter an election with Lloyd George still at their head, the party would be split in two.⁷⁴



The cartoonist David Low attacks the coalition parties' record on waste as the 1922 election campaign kicks off; *Daily Star*, 24 October 1922.

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A crisis in Chamberlain's leadership was fast approaching, with increasing numbers concluding that he was failing in his primary duty:

[I]t is his first duty to try to preserve party unity, and to adopt a policy which he knows perfectly well will rend us in twain without ... taking steps to ascertain that the great majority of the party is behind him, would be, in my opinion, an outrage.⁷⁵

The only escape route from disaster probably lay in a clear declaration that Chamberlain would replace Lloyd George as prime minister immediately after the election if, as seemed likely, the parliamentary numbers justified such a change. Chamberlain, however, insisted that he was 'not willing to hand him such an ultimatum from our Party which would make his remaining impossible, and then to slip into his shoes'.⁷⁶ Yet this reasoning was unconvincing. In February Lloyd George had already offered to step down in Chamberlain's favour, providing the latter agreed to continue his policies in relation to Ireland and European pacification. Chamberlain had lost no time in declining the offer, a reflection perhaps of his obsessive loyalty and lack of confidence in his own credentials for the top job. He may privately have expected to succeed Lloyd George after the election, but was reluctant to say this in public. At all events the party at large concluded that he was ready to acquiesce indefinitely in a Lloyd George premiership.

Chamberlain thus approached the Carlton Club meeting on 19 October in a mood of some belligerence, determined to crush his critics. The meeting was carefully timed, allowing him to use the anticipated defeat of the Conservative candidate in a by-election in Newport as telling proof of the validity of his electoral strategy – that Conservatives needed to remain in partnership with Lloyd George and his Liberals if they were to prevail. Conservative MPs would be told 'bluntly that they

must either follow our advice or do without us'. In the latter event, 'they must find their own Chief and form a Government *at once*. They would be in a dd fix!'⁷⁷ The view of F. S. Oliver is again telling:

Theoretically I wish you had more of the Italian spirit, more suppleness, more sense of currents and gusts and other invisible but potent influences ... You are one of those that must always be breaking their heads if stone walls happen to be in the line of their charge. In attack you have no method but the frontal.⁷⁸

In fact, these words were written almost ten years earlier in January 1913, but their continuing relevance in 1922 is obvious.

Even Lloyd George now believed that a 'breakup' was inevitable, though he hoped to 'carry some of the other Ministers with me', including Chamberlain who, he curiously suggested, was really a Liberal.⁷⁹ Chamberlain's speech at the meeting 'immediately struck a note of discord that grated on the audience. It was the reproof of a schoolmaster scolding an unruly class, and when he claimed that there were no differences between the Conservatives and Lloyd George, there was a loud growl of disagreement.'⁸⁰ By a wide margin, the vote was lost. Chamberlain, his strategy confounded by the unexpected success of the Conservative candidate at Newport, immediately resigned as party leader; Lloyd George soon followed suit and the coalition was at an end. Lloyd George's ministerial career was over; Chamberlain's would be revived a couple of years later. A collapse of the relationship at the top of the government had not been the problem. Indeed, if Lloyd George hoped to carry Chamberlain with him, Chamberlain determined 'to keep the way open for a new coalition if such becomes necessary, as I think it will, by not letting go of Lloyd George'.⁸¹ So there was no recrimination between the two men. Indeed, as late as 1935 Chamberlain was still hoping that any reconstruction of the

National Government would include an attempt to bring Lloyd George into it.⁸² When, two years later, Chamberlain died, Lloyd George paid a moving tribute to a man who ‘strained the point of honour always against himself ... No public man of our time ... sacrificed more to integrity, to honour and to loyalty.’⁸³ The coalition of 1918–22 broke down because of the failure of that same man to convince his party that their own interests were being sufficiently upheld within the government’s policies and priorities.

After over forty years writing books and articles on twentieth-century British politics, David Dutton has more time in retirement to pursue other interests. His latest book, Game, Set and Championship: A History of the South of Scotland Tennis Championships was published in February.

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- 25 Chamberlain MSS, AC12/116, Lansdowne to Chamberlain 22

- Jul. 1917.
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