Carlton Club meeting

The meeting that brought Lloyd George down; by **Alistair Lexden**

Lloyd George and the 1922 Committee

On 19 October 1922 Unionist MPs piled into the Carlton Club to settle Lloyd George's fate. The meeting, which swiftly became one of the best-known episodes in modern British party politics, had been eagerly anticipated in the media for days. It was the biggest political event of 1922. The leading lights in the Party – Arthur Balfour (a former Prime Minister), Andrew Bonar Law (former and future Party leader and briefly Prime Minister), Austen Chamberlain (current Party leader), and the dashing, erratic F. E. Smith, ennobled as Lord Birkenhead – were objects of particular press attention. So too, for the first time in his career, was Stanley Baldwin, whose contribution to Lloyd George's downfall – through a short, but powerful, speech at the meeting – marked the start of his climb to a position of political ascendancy, which was to become as strong as Lloyd George's in its own, very different, way during the next few years.

By October 1922 Lloyd George's standing with his Unionist coalition supporters was weakening, under strain from their dislike of the Irish settlement, the honours scandal and the government's bellicose response to the Chanak crisis. How could the tide be turned in Lloyd George's favour? A general election was his answer. Almost all the Unionists in his Coalition cabinet agreed enthusiastically. They felt their overall record in government would stand up to electoral scrutiny. And they had a terrifying bogey at their disposal: the spectre of a Labour government, seen widely as a serious prospect for the first time in 1922. 'Vote for Lloyd George's coalition to stave off the red revolution': that was to be the election slogan.

The three most prominent Unionist ministers – Chamberlain, Balfour, the flamboyant Lord Birkenhead – all adored working with Lloyd George. (A fourth, the Foreign Secretary, George Curzon, found it rather harder.) Their former leader, Bonar Law, until recently also one of Lloyd George's greatest fans, was having second thoughts, after recovering from serious illness which had forced him to resign as number two in the cabinet the previous year. That meant that a serious potential successor as Prime Minister was available.

Chamberlain, the incumbent Party leader, was absolutely adamant that the Party must fight the forthcoming election in partnership with Lloyd George. In a speech on 16 October 1922, he said that the Coalition must be maintained in the face of the 'common foe', Labour. No question of principle, he asserted, divided the Coalition Liberals and the Unionists, and it would be 'criminal' to allow personal or party prejudices to prevail 'at a moment of national danger'. Division between them would allow Labour to win, and it would 'not be the moderates of the Labour Party who would prevail'.

Would the thought of filthy capitalists dangling from lamp-posts silence the criticism of Lloyd George that had been growing in the ranks of the Unionist Party throughout 1922, and unite it beneath the Coalition banner? That was the issue that Chamberlain expected to be settled in accordance with his wishes at

The Carlton Club in 1920

the meeting to which he summoned MPs and selected peers at the Carlton Club.

Chamberlain chose to hold it on 19 October because he expected a by-election at Newport in Wales to produce a Labour victory in a Coalition Liberal seat where an independent Conservative was also standing. That would help reinforce his view that Coalition alone could stem the advancing red revolution. But Unionist MPs woke up on the nineteenth to the news that the independent Tory had won the Newport by-election, and also that, after much agonising, Bonar Law had decided to attend the Carlton meeting.

A vivid account of the meeting was recorded by the Earl of Crawford, a Unionist member of the Coalition cabinet, in his brilliant diary, edited for publication in 1984 by a great political historian, Professor John Vincent: 'We assembled at eleven', Crawford wrote, 'a thoroughly good-humoured crowd. We were just about to begin when a waitress advanced with two immense brandies and soda to lubricate Chamberlain and F. E. [Smith, Lord Birkenhead]. Much cheering… Austen, who spoke from 11.15 to 11.35… was very grave, but very rigid and unbending: needlessly so… Stanley Baldwin followed – gulping and hiccoughing a lot of good sense – no hesitation in denouncing the coalition and Lloyd George in particular – a clear declaration of war.'

Bonar Law's speech, seen by everyone as crucial, came late in the proceedings. Crawford recorded that he 'condemned the coalition. He looked ill, I thought – his knees more groggy than ever, his face more worn with distress. His voice was so weak that people quite close to him had to strain their ears – but his matter was clear and distinctly put. After his speech the issue was unmistakable, and he was hailed as the Leader of the Party' once again.

The motion before the meeting, which was passed by 185 to eighty-eight with one abstention, declared that the 'Party, whilst willing to cooperate with the Liberals, should fight the election as an independent party, with its own leader and with its own programme'. It was a vote for independence from Lloyd George, not a vote to strike out in a new right-wing direction, freed from Liberal constraints. Baldwin, man of the future, summed up the central issue at the meeting: 'it is owing to that dynamic force, and that remarkable personality, that the Liberal Party, to which he formerly belonged, has been smashed to pieces, and it is my firm

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conviction that, in time, the same will happen to our party'. Seven months later, he was Prime Minister, and in the following year, 1924, proudly coined the phrase 'one nation', signifying his wish to unite, in his words, 'those two nations of which Disraeli spoke'.

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It was quite something for disaffected backbench MPs to have toppled a statesman of international renown, who was not even a member of their own Party. What could be more likely than that they followed their triumph by forming a backbench parliamentary Committee with the year 1922 in its title, ready to take action against future Prime Ministers who displeased them?

Over the years the 1922 Committee has held celebrations at the Carlton Club to mark the anniversary of its birth in October 1922. They are to do so again on the centenary this year *[2022]*. They celebrate under false pretences. Even recent history can be misremembered. The Conservative 1922 Committee did not spring from the meeting that brought down Lloyd George. It was set up in April 1923 by Tory MPs who were finding their feet in the Commons after entering it for the first time at the general election of November 1922, which followed Lloyd George's downfall. The new boys set up the Committee to help them understand the curious ways of the institution they had just joined.

Membership was widened over the next few years to include all backbench Conservative MPs. The most important development in the Committee's history occurred in 1965 when it was put in charge of the arrangements for electing Conservative Party leaders. In 1975 it became possible to fire and replace incumbent leaders under the Committee's rules. Yet perhaps one should be cautious in spreading the truth about the Committee's origins. It may be best to encourage the belief that they are the direct heirs of the MPs who got rid of Lloyd George. A century on, the Committee helped kick out a discredited prime minister. It may not be long before it is called on to do its duty again. *[This article was published in 2022, when Boris Johnson was still Prime Minister.]*

Alistair Lexden is a Conservative peer and Chairman of the Conservative History Group, contributing regularly to its annual Conservative History Journal. *This is an edited extract from an article published originally in* The London Magazine *in 2022.*