The Lloyd George Coalition

Introduction to this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*, focusing on the record of the Lloyd George coalition governments; by **Kenneth O. Morgan**.

Lloyd George and the Hard-faced Men, 1918–22

A hundred years ago, Britain saw the downfall of one of the most controversial governments of our history. It followed the return to power of David Lloyd George's coalition, which had received a colossal vote of support in December 1918, shortly after the armistice. The precise results are difficult to work out, since the allegiances of several MPs were hard to ascertain in the confused atmosphere of post-war Britain, but the returns announced just after Christmas declared that the coalition had 521 supporters returned by an overwhelming landslide victory with over 5 million votes behind them, including, it seemed, a significant majority of the new women voters. A mammoth total of 473 'couponed' coalition MPs were elected (64 unopposed): 332 Unionists and 127 Liberals. There was also a handful of 'National Labour'. The opposition consisted of only a few small fragments, fifty-seven Labour (though representing almost two and a half million votes), thirty-six anti-coalition Liberals, a shifting number of independent Conservatives (or Unionists), and seventy-three Irish Sinn Fein republicans who announced that they did not intend to participate in the parliament of Westminster. These remnants were the crushed victims of post-war unionism lined up behind the Liberal prime minister and his overwhelmingly Conservative following, many of the latter popularly classified as 'die-hards'. The prime minister urged that unity of command between the British, French, American and other allied forces had been the key to winning the war. The same principle, translated into domestic politics, would win the peace. 'National unity', he told the Manchester Reform Club, 'can save Britain, save Europe, can save the world.'[1]

But it was not to be. The government proved to be unstable from the start. Rocked by internal conflicts between its constituent parts over Ireland, labour, public spending and the most serious economic difficulties for over a century, the government lurched from crisis to crisis and met with ferocious external challenges over a peace settlement on which it faced a virtual vote of confidence only three months after the election. It became and remained intensely unsteady, losing by-election after by-election, most famously Spen Valley to Labour at the end of 1919. The small group of Labour MPs became remarkably

David Lloyd George, 10 December 1918
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effective, the larger group of notionally pro-coalition Unionists became rebellious and yearned for freedom and party independence. In between, the two groups of Liberals were bitterly divided and almost impotent, though it could be argued that the 'coupon' arrangement gave them more Liberal MPs than they might otherwise have received. The nominal opposition Liberal leader, the former prime minister Asquith, seemed a spent force. For Lloyd George himself, charismatic and triumphant for nearly twenty years before the outbreak of war, hailed as 'the man who won the war' in 1918, later in 1923 to drive triumphantly down Wall Street in an open-top

limousine as a world-famous celebrity, these years as post-war premier were a gloomy period. He would never be a dominating politician again. His government disintegrated, laid low by backbench rebellions and ministerial resignations, with a Conservative uprising in parliament and the entire confidence of backbenchers in the probity of the constitutional system thrown into doubt. The 1922 Committee, which grew up during the final revolt against the prime minister's leadership, was one legacy. Despite a final flourish in his innovative policies on unemployment, devised with Keynes during the 1929 general election, the age of Lloyd George was effectively over.

The coalition's troubles went on long after its fall from power. It was condemned on all sides in hindsight. Labour saw it as a government identified with class war and mass unemployment unknown since the Napoleonic wars. Conservatives identified it with political crookedness, irregular financial practices by No. 10, and the irresponsible sale of peerages and other honours by an apparently dishonest premier. Lloyd George was not to receive the national acclaim of Churchill after 1945 and his own relatively harmonious wartime coalition of 1940–45. In the centenary commemoration of the First World War, his role received relatively limited acclaim in 2014–18. The prime minister suffered most savagely from blows from his fellow Liberals, bitter at the divisions that he had created, claiming that he had destroyed the once great party of Fox, Gladstone and Mill and left it as a third party, lagging behind the fledgling Labour Party as the voice of the progressive Left. The Spender family and other Liberal commentators directed venomous fire on Lloyd George as a dishonourable reformer, his performance in office after 1918 in undermining Liberal principles of free trade with import duties, violent 'retaliation' in the 'troubles' in Ireland and the lurch into mass unemployment, all contrary to the election pledges in 1918. In clubland, the Reform Club in Pall Mall was bitterly divided, with busts of Asquith and Lloyd George left in a solitary state in different rooms. The National Liberal Club at least contained a large portrait of Lloyd George by the Welsh artist, Christopher Williams.

But there was one author, one great intellectual, who did more than anyone else to destroy what reputation the government and the prime minister retained. This was John Maynard Keynes, once the government's key financial adviser at the Paris peace conference. He used his great economic insights and literary flair in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1923), followed by *Essays in Biography* published ten years later, in which he portrayed Lloyd George as a man 'rooted in nothing', 'a vampire and a medium in one'.[2] He condemned the entire settlement of Versailles for dragging Germany into a spiral of decline, the result of economic ignorance about reparations and war debts, and political chauvinism through the conduct of the 1918 general election. Germany was further alienated and weakened by the loss of territory and the moral error of claims of war guilt and demands for hanging the Kaiser. Lloyd George's parliamentary followers were largely chauvinist extremists bent on revenge. They were a body of 'hard-faced men who looked as if they had done very well out of the war (a phrase Keynes had picked up from Stanley Baldwin). Keynes's philippic had an immense impact on succeeding generations (Bush and Blair were still quoting him to attack 'appeasement' during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, with implausible comparisons between Saddam Hussein and Hitler). It took at least half a century before professional historians in Britain like Margaret MacMillan began to influence and challenge Keynes's conclusions, questioning whether the 1918 election was really dominated by chauvinist hysteria (it was not) or whether Germany was not so impoverished by the peace settlement that it was unable to fight a huge war on two fronts twenty years later. But long before then the damage wrought by Keynes's judgements had penetrated the public psyche and played a large part in generating long-term debate about the virtues or evils of appeasement.

It was not the policies of the coalition in 1918–22 that were flawed. It was something more profound. The coalition became a paradigm for values more fundamental, a discrediting of the basic principles of the British constitution, the cherished ideas of Blackstone and Dicey, not to mention Montesquieu and Voltaire, over the centuries. For its enemies, like dissenting Unionists and disillusioned Liberals and Labour, the entire moral tone of the coalition was squalid and disreputable. In part, this reflected the freewheeling, freeloading methods of the prime minister, not just in destroying his own party with the 'coupon' arrangements with Bonar Law before the 1918 general election but going on to treat parliament and government with contempt. He had long shown a penchant towards forming unlikely coalitions, as at the height of the House of Lords conflict in the summer of 1910. He had of course succeeded in forming one himself in 1916. It was therefore no surprise to see him using 'Bronco Bill' Sutherland and the sinister Maundy Gregory[3] in selling off titles in London's clubland, in the so-called 'honours scandal' in 1922, for political and financial gain. Some of the criticism was hypocritical – Unionists complaining that the coalition Liberal chief whip, Freddie Guest, was handing out patronage to people who were actually Conservatives – 'Freddie is nobbling our men'.[4] But many thought that it showed up Lloyd George as personally corrupt. Arnold Bennett's *Lord Raingo*, a racy account of a dishonourable, libidinous Celtic prime minister, Andy Cleyth (in fact, a Scot not Welsh), summed up critics' disgust at Lloyd George's impropriety. The fact that he had been praised earlier as a Welsh Baptist outsider challenging the respectable norms of the establishment made him vulnerable now. It surprised no one when his insatiable womanising was revealed after his death. Merely working with him could cause problems to others. Lionel Robbins noted how the unquestionably ultra-moral historian, H. A. L. Fisher, an Oxford don who became minister of education in the coalition, was somewhat ambivalent about his years in government. 'He seemed like a man who had spent some time in a brothel and *rather enjoyed it*'.[5]

The dubious reputation of Lloyd George in his last phase in government began with the very origins of his administration – a secretive putsch in the enclosed world of high politics about which the general public knew nothing. Asquith was turfed out of office in the first week of December 1916.[6] It was a coup arranged with political cronies and especially press magnates like the always suspect Canadian Lord Beaverbrook. The government could never outlive its origins. Its reputation was made worse by the equally doubtful 'coupon' arrangement with the Unionists in the summer of 1918 when Lloyd George was pondering his post-war future. In many ways the 'coupon' arrangement, to determine who the coalition's supporters really were, was a farce. The 'coupon' of coalitionist was awarded on the dishonest basis of acknowledging supporters in the house. The result of the Maurice vote in July 1918, often cited, had only a haphazard relationship with whether individual MPs had in fact supported the government. The party was destroyed in almost a casual manner.

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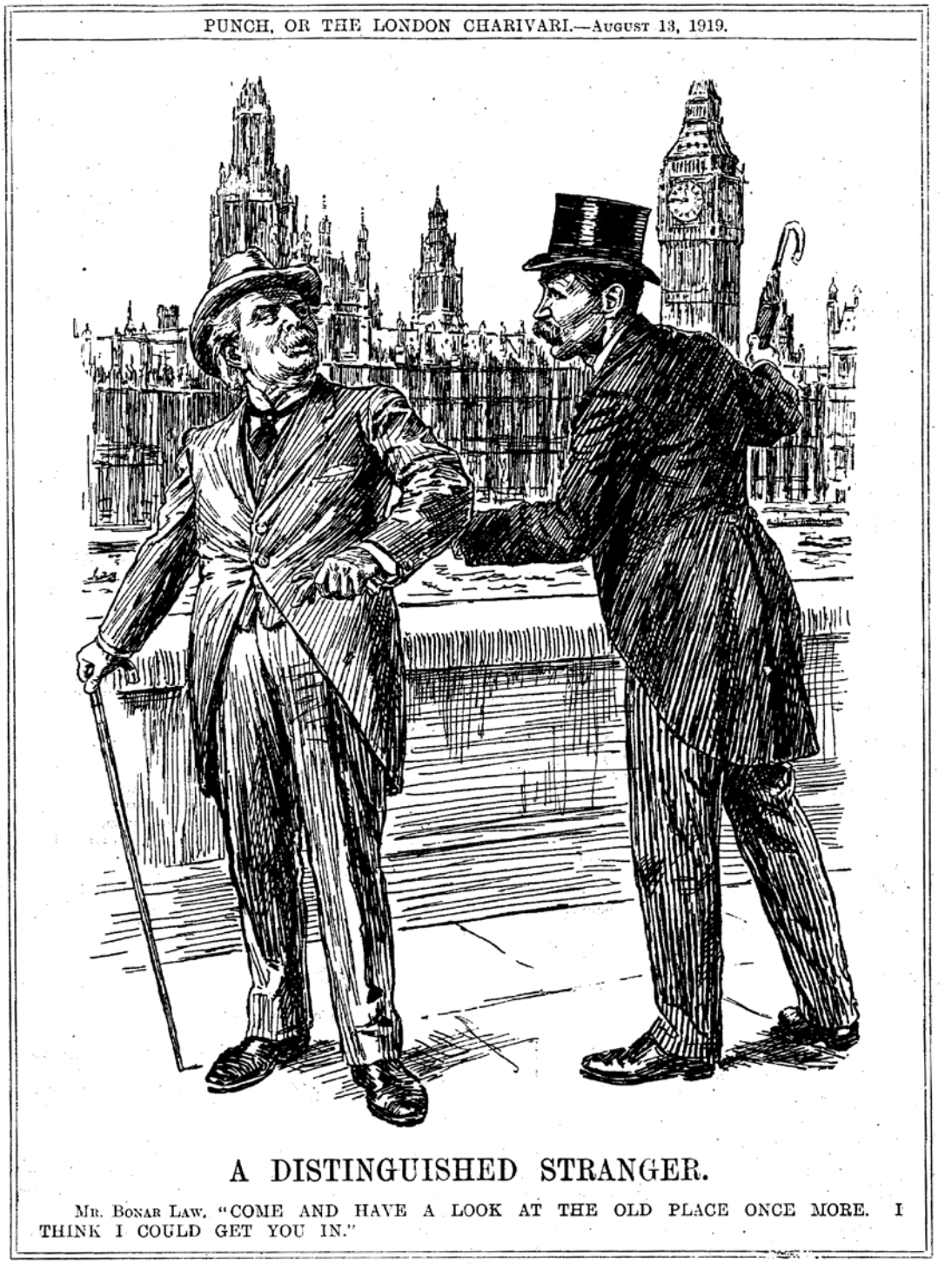
Squabbles like this arose with increasing frequency during the coalition's history. Many of them involved the beleaguered coalition Liberals whose members of the government were under many kinds of pressure, out of sympathy with their Unionist fellow-ministers and many of them hoping for some kind of reunion



with the Asquithian Liberals across the house. It was, in any case, a handicap that most of the Liberal ministers – men like Short, Munro, MacPherson and McCurdy – were politicians

of no great weight, with the exception of Winston Churchill, now drifting rightwards, and perhaps Sir Alfred Mond. A difficult phase arose in early 1922 when two prominent ministers resigned after serious policy disagreements. These were Christopher Addison, minister of health, a controversial architect of the administration's social reform policies,[7] and the secretary for India, Edwin Montagu, who objected to the government's treatment of Indian Muslims. The government was moving sharply to the right. Lloyd George's attempts to revitalise his colleagues – for instance the cabinet met in September in 1921 not in London, or even England, but in Inverness town hall to accommodate the prime minister's having a break in the Highlands – merely caused more governmental turmoil (apart from creating nightmares for the Inverness postal system). A cartoon in *Punch* (13 August 1919) showed Bonar Law inviting the prime minister, who was having a stroll along the Thames embankment, to 'Come and have a look at the old place once more.'

It followed that the government, however strong its apparent position in the Commons, was in party terms unstable. Lloyd George in the summer of 1921 thus reached the conclusion that the best solution for the woes of a coalition government' would be some kind of coalition party.[8] This would mean the 'fusion' of the two major parties within the government, the coalition Unionists and the coalition Liberals (the handful of coalition Labour, such as Barnes, did not count). Neither side was at all keen. And there was no bloc of MPs showing any wish for any kind of 'centre party'. Although some major Unionists such as Austen Chamberlain and Birkenhead wanted the coalition to go on, many Unionists would have been happy to be rid of the 'Coaly Libs' in any case; this included some influential Unionists like Edward Wood (later Lord Halifax), Samuel Hoare and Lloyd Graeme, backed by the little-known cabinet minister, Stanley Baldwin. The Liberals' proposals for the programme for a party of 'fusion', drawn up by Minister for Education Fisher, included radical ideas which startled some Conservatives, such as proportional representation and home rule for Scotland and Wales.

But the decisive resistance came from the despised ranks of the coalition Liberals. There were two leading Liberal supporters of the fusion idea, but for radically different reasons. The leftish Cristopher Addison wanted 'fusion' as a means for pushing forward a platform of inter-party social reform.[9] The other was Winston Churchill, now in sternly anti-Bolshevik mood and seeking a power bloc to resist the trade unions and uphold a strong capitalist order (later recalled with much bitterness by working-class voters in the 1945 general election). Most of their colleagues took a different view. They were still Liberals and feared this new scheme would mark the end of their party. Nor was there any enthusiasm in the constituencies, after many coalition Liberal defeats in by-elections in industrial seats. Lloyd George knew when he was beaten, and promptly dropped the idea. Fusion with Tories only took place with the Liberal Nationals led by Simon, following the appearance of the 'National' government after the 1931 financial crisis. In 1921, the Liberals announced that they were not Conservatives of any kind, and had no wish to be. 'Fusion' as a basis for a new party had no future. Of its main supporters, Addison joined Labour in 1923, served in the second Labour government of 1929 and ended up serving with distinction in Attlee's government for six years after 1945, while Churchill found his home in the Conservatives and became an eminent prime minister. The coalition had no future and no hope.

But this was only part of the story. In the crucial area of governmental policy, the Lloyd George coalition had major successes, leaving important legacies at home and abroad. These have been overshadowed by Keynes's onslaught against them. In each case, the government applied pragmatic solutions alongside some far-sighted vision. These achievements came in the four areas of social reform, Ireland,

foreign relations and the handling of labour. In most of these, the government followed progressive lines of action that were in line with the essence of Lloyd George's election campaign in December 1918. Here, the spirit of the land after the controversial 'coupon' election may be said to be said to be positive, even distinguished in places.

On social reform, the prime minister demonstrated that he was still a Liberal and that the spirit of pre-1914 New Liberalism was very much alive. Much of the credit for this goes to Christopher Addison, a left-wing radical and distinguished professor of medicine, who in 1911 had helped his leader get the National Health Insurance Act through in the face of opposition from the British Medical Association.[10] Addison, a quiet academic with little public profile, was an important link between two generations of reform – the New Liberalism of Edwardian Britain and the post-1945 welfare state of the Attlee years. Addison was at Aneurin Bevan's side in getting through cabinet the more radical and redistributive aspects of the National Health Service Act of 1946, in the face of opposition from the doctors and the Conservative Party (and in cabinet from Herbert Morrison, the champion of local government).[11]

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Addison was appointed the first ever minister of health in 1919, following a period as minister of reconstruction contemplating post-war planning. He naturally devoted much effort to his own medical specialisms, such as the improvement of the professional status of nurses and the creation of a Welsh Board of Health, a significant move towards Welsh devolution. But his main energies went into housing, a relatively neglected part of the social services. There had been important inquiries during the war proposing schemes for subsidised housing built by the local authorities, notably that of Tudor Walters on which Addison reflected as minister of reconstruction in 1918. After the armistice he pulled earlier inquiries together in a radical new Housing and Town Planning Act, having obtained the important support of key Unionists such as Bonar Law and Carson, with whom he was especially friendly. A most influential source of support was the Cabinet Home Affairs Committee which was dominated by Liberal ministers and whose chairman was H. A. L. Fisher, himself engaged in a large-scale expansion of state education. The new housing measure of 1919 focused on two major themes. Local authorities should be ordered to submit schemes for future housing programmes, with a Treasury subsidy making up the difference between the capital cost of house building and the rent that working-class tenants could afford. The other major objective was a large-scale attack on slum housing in larger towns and cities, much of which, as in Merthyr Tydfil, went back to the eighteenth century. Addison began with a big whirl of publicity, announcing a target of close to 200,000 houses, in the face of campaigns by 'Anti-Waste' Tories, who had an animus against public expenditure, alarmed at the probable cost to the taxpayer and the impact on the national debt.

But the government's social reform agenda soon ran into grave problems. It proved difficult to keep up the rate of house construction required. Local authorities varied considerably in their ability to build at the necessary pace or to deal with a shortage of key workers, such as builders and carpenters. In due course, Addison found it necessary to scale down council-house building. To speed matters up, he decided to turn to a direct subsidy to private housebuilders (a hazardous policy)

and to impose a limit on expenditure. By the spring of 1921, Unionist 'anti-waste' critics were in full cry at the upward spiral in housing expenditure. Lloyd George himself finally joined them in June 1921 and fell out bitterly with his old ally and lieutenant, Addison. He resigned from the government making a defiant defence of his health and housing policies which gained widespread applause from the left-wing press.[12] It was the end of his career as a Liberal minister. For all that, his housing initiatives became henceforth a staple of social policy and marked a long-term transformation of British cities. Industrial towns like Swansea, with its Townhill estate above the town, gave a new stimulus to working-class housing and the coalition could take the credit. It was far from the sole initiative in social provision. Another, to prove a godsend in the next decade, was the Unemployment Insurance Act which offered something of a shelter against the scourge of mass unemployment over the next twenty years, in the form of the notorious 'dole'.

Another important, and fortunate initiative, came in a quite different area of policy, namely Ireland. Lloyd George inherited a grave situation in the island, following the triumph of Sinn Fein in the 1918 general election and the start of hostilities between the British forces and the Irish Republican Army, which found a highly charismatic leader in Michael Collins. To some degree, this grave situation was Lloyd George's own fault. He had failed in a misguided attempt to impose military conscription on the south of Ireland (even though in fact a large number of Irishmen did enlist in the British armies at the front). While Lloyd George was engaged in the Paris peace conference, the situation in Ireland became more and more violent. Irish republicans found their own heroes in Kevin Barry, killed by the British, the famine unto death of Terence McSweeney, mayor of Cork and, most alarming of all, 'bloody Sunday' when British forces fired into a crowd of unarmed spectators at an Irish football game at Croke Park, Dublin. Irish bitterness was intensified not only towards the overwhelmingly Protestant Irish police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, but even more towards auxiliary forces brought in (notionally to assist the British army), popularly known as 'the Black and Tans'. The government gave them unqualified support: 'We have murder by the throat,' declared Lloyd George. Ireland seemed in chaos with mass violence in the countryside which rankled for generations, dividing communities and families. Liberal supporters of the prime minister, like C. P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, along with old Welsh allies like D. R. Daniel, broke with him. Many of the latter joined the Labour Party. On the other hand, the Irish secretary, Ian McPherson, deplored the weakness of his predecessor, Short, another Liberal, as 'the worst of all chief secretaries.'[13] This could not go on.

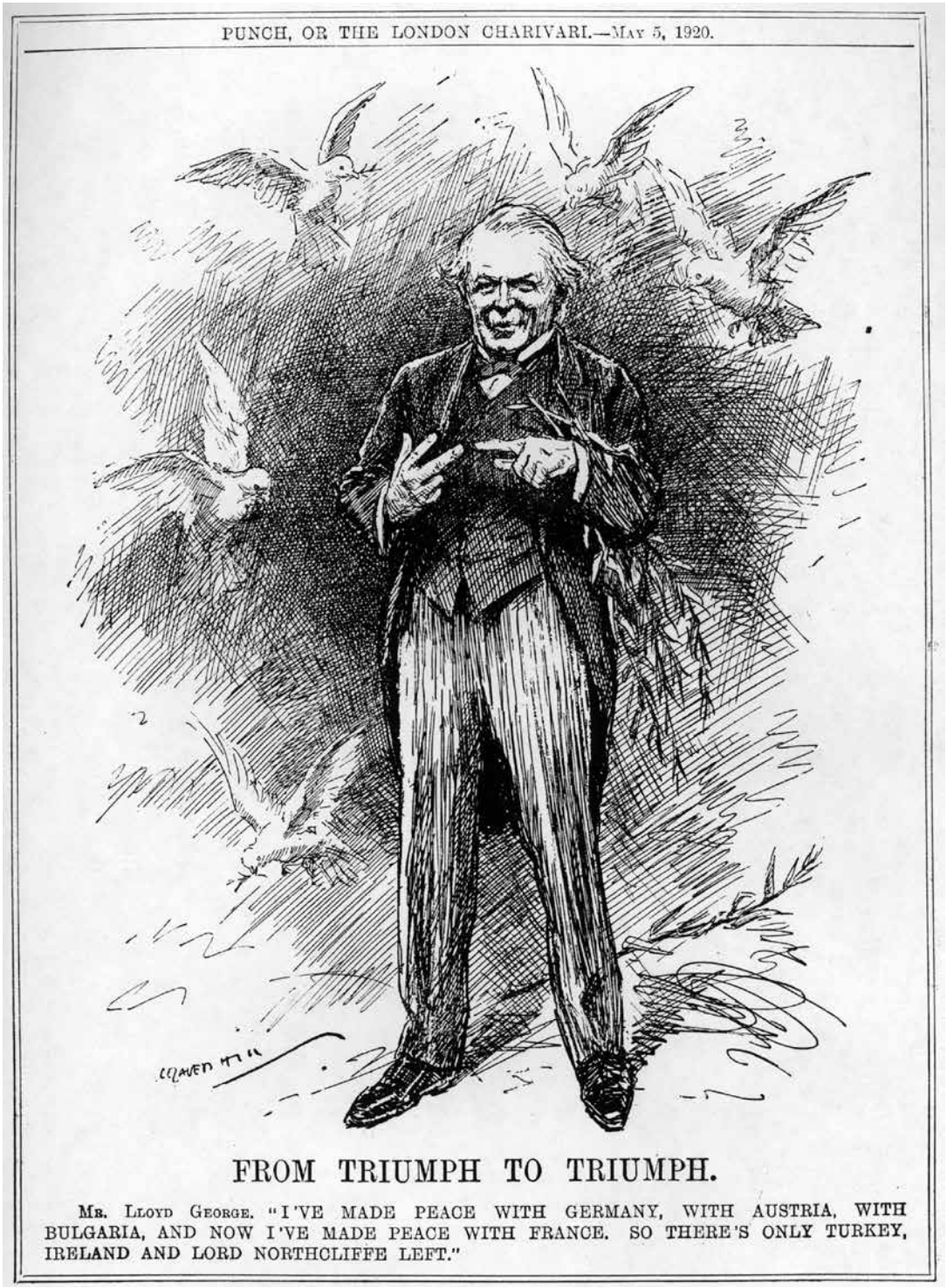
Nor did it. Lloyd George reversed policy totally in June 1921. He had been engaged, through Alfred Cope, an adviser who had served him in the munitions ministry during the war, and now built links with key Republican/Sinn Fein leaders like Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins. After a chilly meeting with the president of Sinn Fein, Eamon de Valera, in 10 Downing Street (the first of many colonial surrenders by a British government), he had a full-scale negotiation with five Sinn Fein delegates (de Valera did not attend) in London in the autumn. It was a difficult passage, though Lloyd George found important support from colleagues like Churchill, Austen Chamberlain, and his deputy secretary of the cabinet, Thomas Jones, with whom he conversed pointedly in Welsh, discussing such matters as whether the word 'republic' existed in that language (in fact, it does not). There were difficult sessions over the precise oath of allegiance (if any) to the Crown and the need for partition of an independent Ireland between the mainly Protestant north and Catholic south. In the end, a mixture of beguiling diplomacy and threats got Lloyd George home. A treaty was endorsed, by the parliament at Westminster, where it was unopposed, and by

the much-divided Sinn Fein Dáil in Dublin. After centuries of conflict and bloodshed, the 'Irish question' in its most violent form had been resolved. Lloyd George had succeeded where Pitt, Peel, Gladstone and Asquith had all failed, and the island looked forward to a more peaceful and civilised future, despite the abiding provocation of partition. In March 2016, the centenary of so inflammatory an episode as the Dublin Easter Rising, during the First World War, passed by without trouble. The prime minister's remarkable success was sealed at the Unionist party's annual party conference in Liverpool very soon afterwards, when Bonar Law, Birkenhead, Austen Chamberlain and other ministers persuaded the delegates in that immigrant Irish stronghold, Catholic and Protestant alike, to vote for peace.

A third area where the coalition could claim good intentions if not positive results was again an achievement of the prime minister. This was in the realm of foreign policy. At the peace conference in 1919, Lloyd George, with the important support of Churchill amongst his ministers, had battled hard for a peaceful, relatively conciliatory settlement. He sought to bring the new Bolshevik Russia and the defeated Germany into the European comity of nations, on the basis of cooperation in trade, economic collaboration and long-term peace. This was a long-standing aspiration of the prime minister ever since his famous visit to Germany while president of the Board of Trade in 1907. He spelt out this objective in his famous Fontainebleau memorandum drawn up in the local forest in February 1919.[14] It was noticeable that his team of advisers by-passed the foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, who was content with 'a free hand for the little man'. His successor, Curzon, was treated by the prime minister with something close to tact. Lloyd George ran his own foreign policy in a way no prime minister save perhaps Palmerston and Salisbury had done before. Richard Crossman was later to see this period as the dawn of a presidential premiership. The memorandum was drawn up by advisers and civil servants: Hankey and Thomas Jones of the Cabinet Office, Philip Kerr of the 'garden suburb' or private advisers, E. F. Wise, a left-winger of the Foreign Office and, remarkably, General Smuts, co-opted from South Africa, of whom, like his Afrikaner compatriot, Botha, Lloyd George was a warm admirer.

The Fontainebleau document called for conciliation towards Germany and a scaling down of reparations indemnities which should be wound up as soon as possible, and declared its objection to removing German-speaking territories from the defeated Reich and transferring them to other newly formed territories such as Poland and Czechoslovakia. This initiative got nowhere as both the French premier, Clemenceau, bent on revenge, and the American president, Woodrow Wilson, an erratic and somewhat inconsistent idealist, refused to back it. Clemenceau claimed it only dealt with purely British needs such as the freedom of the seas. Lloyd George responded that this showed how scant was Clemenceau's interest in maritime matters.

Nevertheless, in conference after conference, Lloyd George persisted in trying to purpose a middle course between French chauvinism and American abstractions. He achieved local gains, such as managing to award self-determination to Upper Silesia (which preferred to stay with Germany). There was also slow progress on reparations in the San Remo conference in April 1920. The colossal sum of £22,400m, proposed by the Cunliffe committee in Britain, was drastically whittled down. But the other pivot of Lloyd George's policy was trying to repair the somewhat fractured Entente Cordiale with France, which the premier had always supported since its foundation in 1904. This meant a guarantee for French national security to protect the nation against further German aggression as had occurred in 1870 and 1914, and which the British premier felt that the idealistic declarations of Woodrow Wilson did not begin to address. He made progress with one of Clemenceau's successors as prime minister, Aristide Briand,



whom Lloyd George believed to be a fellow Celt from Brittany. At a conference in Cannes, Lloyd George almost succeeded in framing a continental guarantee (by Britain, though

significantly not by the United States) for France against future aggression on its eastern frontier. It would have been the first since the Peninsular War. However, in a disastrous piece of levity he persuaded Briand to join him on the Cannes golf course – and golf was a game the French prime minister had never played. The French press exploded with rage at their prime minister being ridiculed deep in bunker after bunker, Briand had to return to Paris where he lost a vote of confidence and had to resign. The British guarantee never materialised. Later that year, in May 1925, an ambitious international conference in Genoa was equally fruitless and Lloyd George's ambitions for a concert of Europe collapsed. His foreign policy eventually fell apart when he was for once linked with a warlike stance in Asia Minor, after he had unwisely supported Greece in its conflict with Turkey. British forces confronted the Turks at Chanak, near the Dardanelles. Their supply lines stretched to breaking point, the British had to withdraw, humiliated. The Unionists, always the pro-Turk party, rebelled; Austen Chamberlain lacked authority; and the government broke up on 19 October.[15] The end had come at last.

Nevertheless, the judgement on coalition foreign policy should not be wholly negative. Lloyd George was the most far-sighted of the 'big three' at Paris. He alone saw the vital need for a constructive relationship between Germany and the victorious allies. It is notable that his warmest defender was Keynes, his savage critic in 1920, but who now wrote several works applauding Lloyd George's approach. He and the prime minister were later to collaborate closely in working out policies to 'conquer unemployment'. Elsewhere, Lloyd George's other foreign policy objective, peace with Bolshevik Russia, was clearly successful. Warding off Clemenceau's complaints, he withdrew British forces from Russia, where they had been unwisely, even rashly, sent, supporting the defeated White Russians in a civil war extending from Murmansk to Vladivostok. He resisted the warlike pronouncements of Winston Churchill whose view on Bolshevik Russia seemed to him reckless, almost unhinged. Lloyd George opted instead for more constructive methods of bringing the new Soviet Union into the comity of nations: a protected trade treaty with open market, and a de facto recognition of the new Bolshevik regime. Richard Ullman, the leading historian of these matters, concluded that 'Lloyd George was' the best of his time'.[16]

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If social reform, Ireland and foreign policy all had positive features, it is difficult to say the same of the last of these four areas, the handling of labour. The post-war experience for the working class appeared to be one of injustice and hardship, the complete reverse of any kind of 'land fit for heroes' rhetoric at the polls in 1918. It provided a harsh memory for Attlee and his Labour colleagues when they took office in 1945 – 'never again' was the cry then. Certainly, the trade unions were in no mood for compromise on fundamental principles. This was especially the case with the miners, whose union membership in the Miners' Federation of Great Britain had vastly increased, and who were bound in the Triple Alliance with the Transport Workers and the Municipal and General Workers. The spectacle of such huge numbers of industrial workers being linked in an alliance of this kind terrified members of the government such as Balfour. They anticipated something close to red revolution; and

growing membership of the Communist Party amongst such workers as the miners of Scotland and South Wales, and new militant leaders like Arthur Cook of the Miners seemed a portent of a general strike or still worse.

But not all the government nor the Unionist MPs felt so alarmed. Not all 'Keynes's men' were so 'hard-faced' after all, other than the coal-owners perhaps, nor was the government extremist. The minister of labour, Sir Robert Horne was certainly not one. He was a cheerful extrovert bachelor, a ladies' man said to be 'poetry in motion' on the dance floor. The new ministry, however, was never a strong one until Bevin's time there in 1940. A more important figure seeking peace on the labour front was the prime minister, who had a famous record of success as a labour negotiator on the labour scene, going back to his time at the Board of Trade in 1907. He was widely regarded as friendly to labour. The government's initial approach towards the workers was for class conciliation rather than class war. Some hope was offered in the creation of the National Industrial Council, a kind of intended industrial parliament where both sides of industry would meet and discuss. This initiative, however, did not succeed. It clashed with the hard class realities of capitalist society, and it soon broke up on the minimum wage. Other attempts were more successful, such as the Whitley Councils set up to discuss pay and conditions in white collar professions such as civil servants and school teachers, in which women were strongly represented.

The early crisis came over a nine-day national railway strike in 1919. It was complicated by the rivalry between the National Union Railwaymen and the train-drivers in ASLEF. This proved not to be so grave a crisis. The railwaymen were not a militant section of the workforce, and their president, Jimmy Thomas, was later to join MacDonald's National Government in 1931. The railwaymen caved in and accepted a not especially favourable settlement. 'Thomas is well beaten and he knows it', crowed a government minister, Bridgeman.[17] But the chances of a settlement were always strong amongst the railway workers, whereas amongst the miners, with their powerful sense of community in areas such as the Welsh valleys, Yorkshire and Clydesdale, and with the bitter antipathy between a peculiarly insensitive group of employers and an increasingly militant workforce, they were always remote. These elements were confirmed by a series of strong Labour by-election victories in mining constituencies.

The miners were a separate world, and their labour relations were especially intractable. In the spring of 1921, a general strike seemed possible, even probable. But it collapsed in dramatic fashion on 14–15 April 1921 when the union in the Triple Alliance abruptly broke up.[18] The mood in the coalfields was grim, with troops patrolling mining villages with fixed bayonets, the police operating as a nationally organised force, and people recalling Tonypandy in November 1910, when there was prolonged violence in this mining village in the Rhondda and a miner was killed. The end to the strike came, not from the government, but at a private meeting with MPs. A moderate coalition Unionist MP, Colin Coote, asked a question about a wages settlement and the miners' secretary, a moderate, Frank Hodges, gave a reply that appeared to indicate (although precisely what the reply was never became clear in press reports) that the miners were prepared to accept a settlement on their own without discussion of a wider wages pool.[19] The Triple Alliance was dead and Hodges himself became a Judas figure amongst the miners thereafter (he steadily drifted to the right). The coalition did not have to confront a general strike after all. That followed on, five years later.

The most bitter memory of these years arose elsewhere. A royal commission led by Lord Sankey was set up to report on the future management of the coal mines. In the end, there were two reports, a majority report that supported nationalisation of the mines, and a

minority one, written mainly by coal owners such as the Marquess of Londonderry, that supported private ownership with only a small public ownership element in relation to mining royalties. To many commentators his two reports seemed hard to credit; the miners, with such spokesmen as R. H. Tawney, had offered far more cogent analysis than the coal owners who often seemed poorly informed about conditions in the pits wherein they derived their mighty profits. In his private diary, the chairman Sankey observed that they were 'hopeless'.[20] There were loud protests throughout the union movement, but the pits remained poorly managed if unsympathetically regarded for the next quarter of a century. The class war went on.

On the face of it, the labour policy of the coalition government seemed anything but a success. They passed an Emergency Powers Act in 1920, a strike-breaking measure by the state to break the power of working people. The years 1919–22 witnessed the longest and most numerous strikes in British industrial history and feelings of class consciousness and inequality in the coalfield and other areas endured for a generation to come.

And yet, there is another story. Many countries experienced similar labour disputes after the war, notably France and the United States. Britain's were not the most severe. The government, unlike many of the capitalist owners, did not indulge in class war extremism, but rather in conciliatory approaches like the (admittedly unsuccessful) National Industrial Conference. Lloyd George himself pursued an industrial policy akin to Harold Wilson's 'beer and sandwiches at No. 10' (although no alcohol was served under Lloyd George). Under him, the doors of No.10 were always opens to union leaders. In 1924, when there was a Labour government under Ramsay MacDonald, new barriers seemed to have been erected between No. 10 and the unions. Some of them looked back, not with anger but even with some nostalgia, to the old days of Lloyd George's open house.

In the early spring of 1922, the coalition, weary after four years of crisis home and abroad, felt it could now consider a new lease of life. The Irish Treaty and the prime minister's diplomatic triumph there generated a new feeling of optimism. It was not such a bad record they had to proclaim. A revival of social reform through public works to combat unemployment, a petering out of the strikes that erupted in the immediate aftermath of war, a promise of better times in international affairs with the prospect of a grand international settlement at Genoa in May 1925, a boost for world peace with the naval treaty at Washington; elsewhere a possible progressive advance in Egypt and India through the partial settlement of the Allenby Declaration in Egypt, and the Reading reforms in India. Here, General Dyer, responsible for the massacre of several hundred unarmed Sikhs at Amritsar, had been sacked despite the resistance of bigots in the House of Lords. There was much to justify, as against the inexperience of Labour and the ineffectiveness of Asquithians and Cecils in the centre ground. So, Lloyd George undertook a course of action familiar for prime ministers under fire. He proposed a general election. According to *The Times*, on 2 January 1922, 'it was almost certain'.

But this was a plan that blew up almost as soon as it was suggested. The world had greatly changed since 1918. Any enthusiasm for an all-party coalition, especially as it excluded Labour, had greatly diminished. Coalition Liberals were broadly sympathetic – it would give this beleaguered minority a new purpose in life. Above all, the dominant party in government, the Unionists, proved hostile. At the very summit of the government there was Unionist backing, including in its 'directorate' (Churchill, Austen Chamberlain, Birkenhead and Horne were Unionists). But there was much doubt in the rank and file. Many feared a takeover by 'diehards', rather as mainstream Conservatives feared being swamped by UKIP supporters in the Boris Johnson era of politics. Protests mounted up

in constituencies all over the country. Some Unionists feared 'socialistic legislation', while others disliked the threat to education likely to follow the economies proposed in the Geddes report. Malcolm Fraser, the head Unionist party agent, thought an election 'would split the party from top to toe.'[21] Lloyd George himself seemed inclined to trot out again the idea of a 'fusion party'. It had scant support now. Dissidents like Younger, the Unionist party chairman, were dismissed with contempt by Birkenhead, never an acute reader of party-political entrails. He scorned Younger and his fellow apparatchiks as self-important 'cabin boys'.[22] (20) But the events of early 1922 showed that the cabin boys were taking over the ship of state.

The later months of 1922 were a continuation of a failed attempt by Lloyd George to call a general election with 'a swing to the left'. A dismal period followed. There were the failure of the ambitious international conference at Genoa in May, the bad blood caused by the cuts in social spending coming from the Geddes report,[23] and the sense of scandal resulting from the sale of honours in the background. There was the continuing economic decline from the government's 'dear money' deflationary finance, which increased unemployment – a policy disastrously extended by Churchill at the Treasury when he restored the British economy to the gold standard at a quite unrealistic rate against the dollar. Then finally the collapse came in October 1922, most unexpectedly since it followed a warlike confrontation at Chanak by a government whose foreign policy had otherwise been consistently tranquil. That gave the hard-line backbench Unionists the excuse they had been long searching for. In just one day, 20 October, the whole administration disintegrated.

As was mentioned at the outset, Lloyd George's last stand as prime minister is usually seen as discrediting him and his party. Certainly, it divided his party into two, just as joining another coalition in 1931 divided it up into three, and joining a third coalition with the Conservatives in 2010 tarnished it until the setbacks of unpopular government gave the Liberal Democrats once again likely victories in by-elections. Certainly, at the level of party politics, the 1918–22 government was a disaster. A hundred years on, British Liberalism has still to recover. When Lloyd George called for national unity in the 1918 election it was the world of party that he was targeting. But a longer-term view reveals insights into major innovations in social and educational reform, the only feasible settlement of the Irish problem, an attempt to tone down or even by-pass the class war in a hopelessly divided country, and some serious attempt to solve social divisions through progressive change rather than conflict. It also enhanced the political rights of women. The monarchy remained stable, due in part to George V's fear of meeting with the fate of the Russian Czar and through a policy of 'meeting the people' through attending the Cup Final and other popular events, and through use of the new medium of broadcasting. This was at a time when the mighty imperial dynasties of Hohenzollern, Hapsburg and Romanov crumbled into the dust. The British Empire suffered no worse fate than the abdication of Edward VIII. When Britain is measured against the dictatorships that afflicted western Europe then, in Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Russia or Vichy France, or the illiberalism and the Red Scare, notably the Ku Klux Klan, which engulfed post-war American democracy, the British experiment in coalition is a middle way worthy of reflection if not always of respect.

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For endnotes, see page 29

Freeden, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 20–6.

28 Hansard, H.C. Deb. (series 5) vol. 82, col. 180 (1916).

29 Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. i, p. 444.

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31 See, for example, the rebuttal by William Pringle MP in the debate on the Military Service Bill: Hansard, H.C. Deb. (series 5) vol. 82, cols. 184–94 (1916).

32 Bentley, *The Liberal Mind*, p. 26.

33 Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. ii, pp. 1668–9, 1688–9.

34 R. Jenkins, *Asquith* (London, 1964), p. 367.

35 The premiership, the Exchequer, the Home Office, the Foreign Office, and the new Ministry of Munitions were all retained by Liberals, while Bonar Law had to content himself with the Colonial Office.

36 See, for example, the criticisms levelled at the government by the journalist Lovat Fraser: *Daily Mail*, 2 Aug. 1915.

37 McKibbin, *Parties and People*, pp. 35–6.

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Lloyd George and the hard-faced men, 1918–22

Continued from page 17

1 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George coalition government 1918–22* (Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 180.

2 J. M. Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (Macmillan, 1920) and *Essays in Biography* (Mercury Books, paperback edn. 1953), pp. 2–3.

3 A racy account is Tom Cullen, *Maundy Gregory* (Bodley Head, 1974).

4 George Younger to Bonar Law, 2 Jan. 1921, quoted in Lord Beaverbrook, *The Decline and Fall of Lloyd George* (Collins, 1962), p. 243.

5 Lionel Robbins, *Autobiography of an Economist* (Macmillan, 1971), pp. 112–13.

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14 David Lloyd George, *The Truth about the Peace Treaties* (Gollancz, 1938), pp. 100–33.

15 See for this episode Robert Rhodes James, *Memoirs of a Conservative: J. C. C. Davidson's Memoirs* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969)

16 R. H. Ullman, *Britain and the Russian Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 473.

17 Bridgeman diary, 22 Sep. – 5 Oct. 1921, Bridgeman papers. Bridgeman was first lord of the Admiralty.

18 Morgan, *Consensus*, pp. 274–6.

19 Sir Colin Coote to the author, 10 Nov. 1976; Colin Coote, *A Companion of Honour* (1965).

20 Sankey diary, 6, 10, 13 Mar. 1919, Bodleian library, Oxford; Coal Industry Report, and Minutes, vols. i and ii, Cmd. 299, 300 passim.

21 M. Fraser to Austen Chamberlain, 31 Dec. 1921, Birmingham University library, Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC 33/3/3; Austen Chamberlain to David Lloyd George, 4 Jan. 1922, House of Lords library, Lloyd George Papers, F/7/5/1.

22 Morgan, *Consensus*, pp. 458 ff.

23 The cuts in the education budget were stoutly resisted by Fisher, the education minister (National Archives, CAB 27/72). It is a little-known, but honourable, part of his career in high politics.