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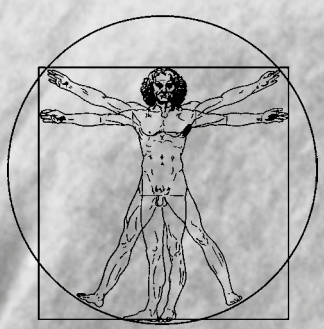
The Lloyd George Coalition



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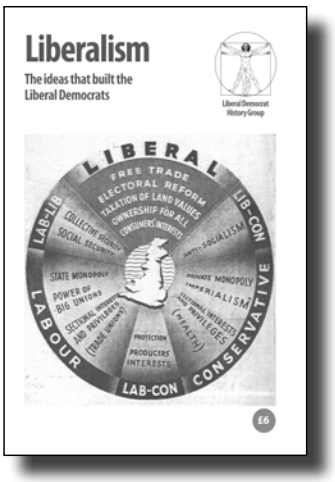

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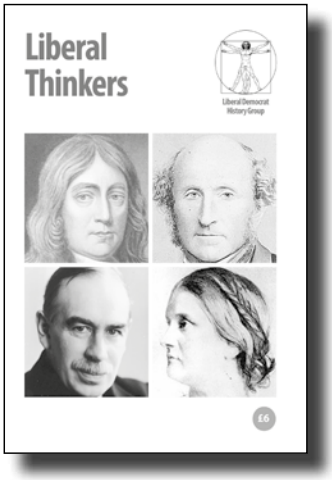

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Special issue: the Lloyd George coalition governments

Liberal Democrat History Group

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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
(© National Portrait Gallery, London)

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

Lloyd George in wartime

Did Lloyd George 'abandon Liberalism' in the face of the demands of fighting total war? **Matthew Johnson** examines the evidence.

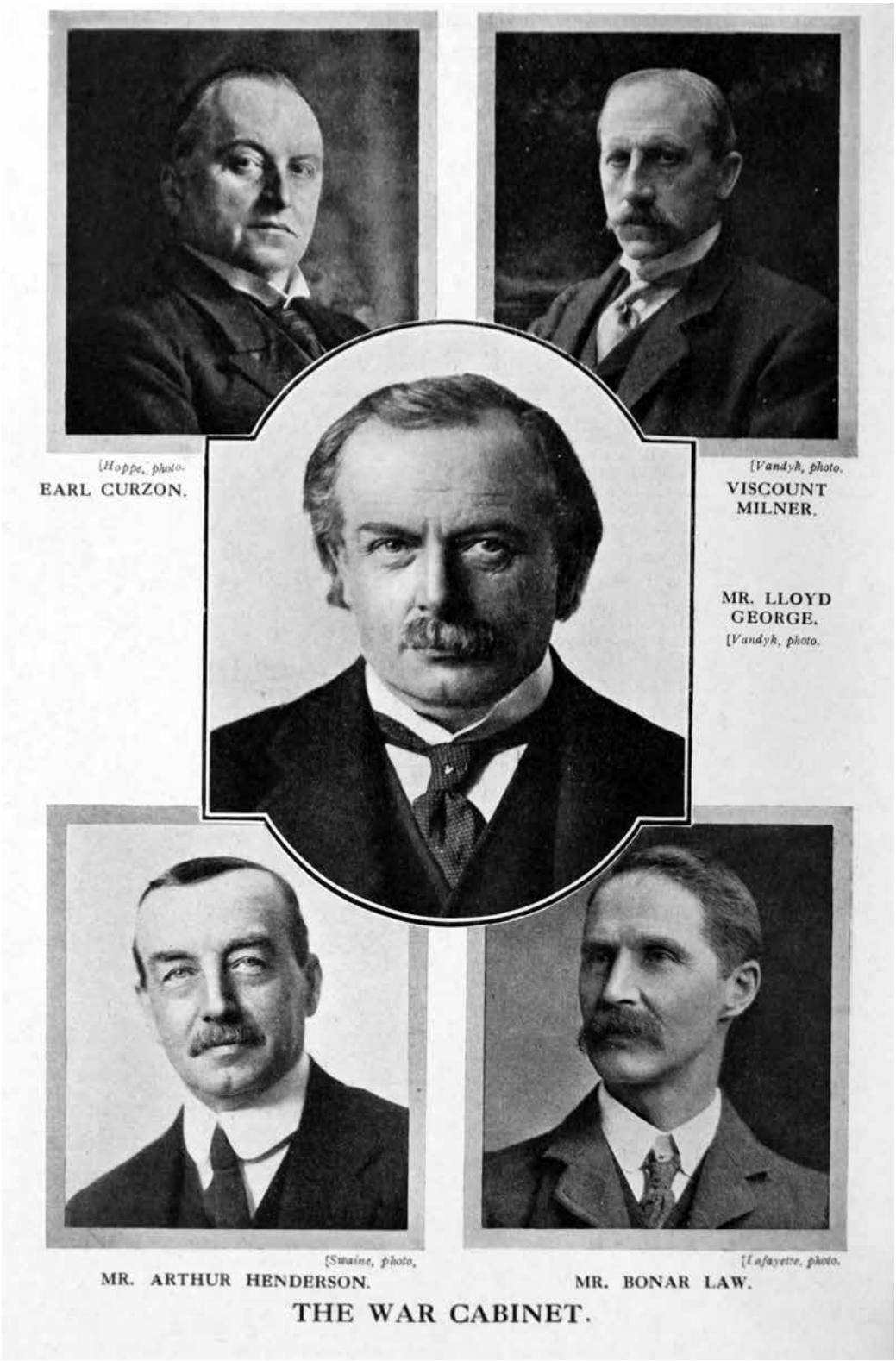
Lloyd George, the Liberal Crisis, and the Unionist Party during the First World War

On 19 October 1922, Conservative MPs gathered at the Carlton Club in London and voted to withdraw their support from David Lloyd George's coalition government. After six years as prime minister, finding himself now unable to command a majority in the House of Commons, Lloyd George resigned. He never again held governmental office. His fall from power was not simply a personal defeat. It was also, in many respects, the symbolic culmination of a period of acute Liberal crisis in Britain. The Liberal Party had fractured during the First World War, dividing into rival factions loyal to Lloyd George and to his predecessor as prime minister, Herbert Henry Asquith. This division quickly hardened, effectively creating two rival Liberal parties that contested the general elections of 1918 and 1922 in opposition to one another.

More profoundly, historians have often talked of this period in terms of a crisis, not only for the Liberal Party, but for Liberalism itself. The demands of waging 'total war' after August 1914 – the growth of state economic and industrial control, the curtailing of individual liberty, censorship of the press, and, above all, the introduction of military conscription – have been seen as posing an existential challenge to Liberal values.[1] According to A. J. P. Taylor, by 1916 Liberals found themselves confronted by a stark choice: 'abandon Liberalism or abandon the war'.[2] Lloyd George, it has often been claimed, chose the former option.[3] Despite his past as a radical opponent of British imperialism during the South African war of 1899–1902, Lloyd George emerged during the First World War as a strong advocate of military conscription and state-directed industrial mobilisation, and in December 1916 he joined with the Unionists (as the Conservatives were then known) to overthrow Asquith and form a new coalition government, committed to a more vigorous prosecution of the war.

Lloyd George remained in office following the military victory in 1918 and the famous 'coupon' election that was called immediately thereafter. But he was always dependent on Unionist support for his parliamentary majority. The reputation that Lloyd George gained during the war – that of a cynical politician who abandoned his Liberalism in pursuit of military victory and political power – followed him to the end of his life. In the damning verdict of the economist John Maynard Keynes, Lloyd George was merely a political adventurer, 'rooted in nothing'.[4] In this telling of the story, Lloyd George's ignominious eviction from office in 1922 might seem a fitting fate: having abandoned his principles and his party, the prime minister was cast aside in turn by his former coalition partners.

Lloyd George himself sometimes appeared to concede the charge that he had turned his



[Hoppé, photo.
EARL CURZON.

[Vandyk, photo.
VISCOUNT MILNER.

MR. LLOYD GEORGE.
[Vandyk, photo.

[Swaine, photo,
MR. ARTHUR HENDERSON.

[Lafayette, photo.
MR. BONAR LAW.

THE WAR CABINET.

back on his Liberal faith during the war. In his *War Memoirs*, published in the 1930s, he frankly acknowledged the scale of the dilemma that had faced Liberal politicians after August 1914, and did not shy away from the ideological compromises he had felt compelled to make in pursuit of military victory. 'War', he observed, 'has always been fatal to Liberalism', because its prosecution demanded the 'surrender [of] individual right and freedom', and victory could be achieved only by 'the triumph of force and not of reason'.[5] Lloyd George sometimes presented his own wartime actions as having been driven by a ruthless pragmatism, which saw him welcome support from any quarter, without regard to peacetime partisan loyalties. He was scathing in his criticism of Liberal cabinet colleagues such as Reginald McKenna, whom Lloyd George described as lacking in 'imagination, breadth of vision, or human insight', while paying warm tribute to the Unionist Party leaders, whom he hailed as 'men of high character and capacity whose patriotism was above suspicion'.[6]

However, Lloyd George's relationship with Liberalism during the First World War was always more complicated than this narrative suggests. He never wholly suppressed his radical Liberal instincts after August 1914, and this fact was to have significant implications for his relationship with the Unionists, during the war and afterwards.

As the diplomatic storm clouds darkened during the summer of 1914, Lloyd George had initially equivocated over the question of Britain's military obligations in Europe. But, once convinced of the case for military intervention, he emerged as one of the most energetic advocates of British entry into the war. This was a disappointment to some of his radical colleagues and supporters, but Lloyd George was firm in his insistence that the struggle against Germany should be understood as both a necessary and a just war. In a speech delivered at the Queen's Hall in London, on 19 September 1914, he dwelt on the lawlessness of the German invasion of Belgium and the moral imperative of confronting and defeating 'German militarism'.[7] This was a theme to which he returned repeatedly during the war, and again in his memoirs, where he reiterated his claim that 'the challenge to international right and freedom was so tremendous that Liberalism – *above all Liberalism* – could not shirk it'.[8]

It is worth emphasising that this position in no way placed Lloyd George outside the Liberal mainstream. Most Liberals were not pacifists. It is true that many elements in the cabinet, the wider party, and the Liberal press had initially hoped that British neutrality might be preserved in the summer of 1914. As late as 24 July, Asquith was able to write to his confidante, Venetia Stanley that, although Europe appeared to be on the brink of war, 'happily, there seems to be no reason why we should be anything more than spectators'.[9] However, the political situation was transformed by the German invasion of Belgium, and Liberal opinion quickly rallied behind the decision for war. The dissenters who resigned in protest from Asquith's government were isolated and their departure was of little immediate consequence. The Liberals might not have sought war, but nor did they shrink from it. Indeed, sixty-six sitting Liberal MPs would serve in the armed forces during the conflict.[10]

Where Lloyd George did begin to part ways from many other Liberals was in his enthusiasm for a more vigorous prosecution of the war. It was one thing for Liberals to agree in principle that the German violation of Belgium must be opposed, but quite another to embrace the full implications of 'total war' in practice. During the early months of the war, most Liberal ministers favoured a 'limited liability' strategy, under which the Royal Navy would sweep enemy warships from the seas and blockade the German coast, while the French and Russian armies would undertake the lion's share of the fighting on land. Leading ministers such as McKenna, the home secretary, and Walter Runciman, the president of the Board of Trade, were anxious to minimise economic disruption at home, while

preserving Britain's ability to lend financial and industrial support to the other *Entente* powers.[11] In practice, it soon became apparent that this cautious approach would not deliver victory. Within the government, Lloyd George railed with growing urgency against the 'Business as Usual' approach to the war favoured by his colleagues. In a cabinet memorandum prepared in February 1915, he called for the government to take sweeping new powers to 'mobilise the whole of our manufacturing strength' for war production, to deal as necessary with labour difficulties and shortcomings, and to close public houses in areas where armaments were being manufactured.[12]

Lloyd George never wholly suppressed his radical Liberal instincts after August 1914, and this fact was to have significant implications for his relationship with the Unionists, during the war and afterwards.

In May 1915, following a political uproar over the failure to supply the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) with adequate munitions – the so-called 'shells crisis' – Asquith dissolved his government and formed a new coalition administration with the Unionists and the Labour Party. Lloyd George was appointed to lead the newly created Ministry of Munitions, a role which he discharged with characteristic dynamism. Munitions production was rapidly and dramatically expanded through the creation of new state-owned National Factories and the contracting out of production to 'controlled establishments', in which industrial processes, conditions of labour, and profits were tightly controlled by the government.[13] Within months, however, Lloyd George had embarked on a new and still more controversial political campaign: an attempt to secure the introduction of military conscription. In his February cabinet memorandum, Lloyd George had urged that 'every effort should be taken to increase the number of men whom we can put into the field'.[14] But this was not simply a question of numbers: Lloyd George was also increasingly concerned about the indiscriminate and inefficient operation of Britain's system of voluntary recruiting, under which large numbers of skilled workers in vital war industries had enlisted in the forces, while other men who were not essential to the war economy had remained at home.

Lloyd George's enthusiasm for compulsory service saw him increasingly estranged from most of his senior Liberal colleagues (with the notable exception of Churchill, who resigned from the government in November 1915 to embark on a period of military service on the Western Front).[15] It also brought him into closer collaboration with the Unionist leadership, most of whom were strongly in favour of conscription. In combination with the Unionists, Lloyd George placed increasing pressure on Asquith over the second half of 1915 to abandon the system of voluntary recruiting. By the end of the year, Lloyd George was threatening resignation if steps to introduce conscription were not undertaken.[16] In January 1916, Asquith finally took the plunge, and introduced a Military Service Bill providing for the compulsory enlistment of unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 41. A second Act, extending liability for military service to married men, was passed four months later. Radicals were appalled. H. W. Massingham, the editor of the Liberal weekly journal *The Nation*, warned darkly that a political party could scarcely 'commit suicide more effectually than by surrendering its principles, which are its spiritual life'.[17]

The introduction of conscription brought little political respite to Asquith's government. The following months saw the outbreak of the Easter Rising in Ireland, the surrender to Ottoman forces of the British garrison at Kut al-Amara, a costly and inconclusive naval engagement at Jutland, and the appalling casualties suffered by the BEF in the Somme offensive. Lloyd George increasingly despaired at

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[December 20, 1916.]

the lethargy and the lack of a coherent strategic vision that seemed to characterise Asquith's management of the war effort. The Unionist leadership shared these frustrations, and in December 1916, Lloyd George, Bonar Law, and the Ulster leader Sir Edward Carson presented

Asquith with what was effectively an ultimatum, demanding that he turn over responsibility for the day-to-day running of the war to a small executive 'war committee'. Asquith regarded this as an unacceptable challenge to his authority as prime minister and a political power struggle broke out, which ended with Asquith resigning and the king inviting Lloyd George to form a new government. The senior Liberal ministers from Asquith's cabinet followed their chief onto the Opposition benches in the House of Commons, and the new administration formed by Lloyd George was dominated by Unionists. To his Asquithian critics, Lloyd George's betrayal of both his principles and his party now appeared complete.

However, Lloyd George remained able to mount several lines of defence against the charge that he had cast aside his Liberal principles. The first and simplest was the argument that, precisely *because* war was inimical to Liberalism, any steps that might hasten victory should be welcomed by Liberals. According to this reasoning, as Michael Bentley has observed, even 'conscription could be defended on "Liberal" grounds as being the most effective expedient available to bring to an end the war that was making Liberalism impossible'.[18] In his memoirs, Lloyd George lamented the resentment provoked in some Liberal quarters by his efforts at the Ministry of Munitions, and expressed contempt for those of his colleagues who had embraced the self-defeating logic that 'War is a hideous thing. You must show your aversion by waging it half-heartedly.'[19]

At the same time, Lloyd George rejected the accusation that he had been uniquely culpable in the supposed sacrificing of Liberal principles, pointing out that many of the most controversial wartime measures expanding state control or restricting the liberty of the citizen had been enacted not under his premiership but under Asquith. It was Asquith who, as prime minister, had overseen the introduction of the Defence of the Realm Act in 1914, which laid the groundwork for, among other things, the wartime system of press censorship. It was Asquith who, to the dismay of many of his colleagues, had dissolved the last Liberal government in May 1915 and invited the Conservatives to join him in a coalition administration. And it was this government, under Asquith, which in January 1916 introduced the Military Service Bill that would implement a system of conscription – a Bill that passed the House of Commons with the support of a sizeable majority of Liberal MPs. It is notable that McKenna and Runciman, the leading voluntarists in Asquith's cabinet, based their opposition to compulsory service on grounds of practicality rather than principle, warning that conscription would break the British economy. Only Sir John Simon, the home secretary, was ultimately prepared to resign from the government in protest at its acceptance of military compulsion.[20] Lloyd George even argued that Asquith had shown himself willing to assent to a 'Protectionist Budget' in 1915, thereby casting aside the Liberal commitment to free trade.[21] Of course, many Liberals acquiesced in measures such as conscription only reluctantly and out of necessity – either military necessity or political, since it was feared that the failure of controversial legislation might bring down Asquith's government. But this left Lloyd George able to maintain that the real difference between himself and his rivals in the cabinet was not the latter's strict fidelity to Liberal orthodoxy but merely their record of 'waging war nervelessly'.[22] As Kenneth Morgan has suggested, in this respect, the Liberal schism was arguably 'a matter of temperament rather than ideology'.[23]

More controversially, Lloyd George argued that the policies he had pursued in the prosecution of the First World War were themselves not intrinsically incompatible with Liberal values. This claim was less laughable than it might at first glance appear. A. J. P. Taylor suggested that Liberals struggled to respond effectively to the challenge of the First World War because of their commitment to 'free enterprise' and 'laissez faire' principles.[24] But the Liberal Party

of the early twentieth century had never been strictly committed to laissez faire governance. In the years following their great general election victory of 1906, the Liberals had pursued (however haltingly and piecemeal) a striking agenda of collectivist social reform. This had included the introduction of old age pensions, national insurance against sickness and unemployment, and the first steps in a Lloyd George-led land campaign, looking at questions of urban housing and rural conditions of labour, as well as new experiments in progressive taxation in the famous 'People's Budget' of 1909.[25] The 'New Liberalism' that had sought to advance and provide an intellectual underpinning for this collectivist and redistributive approach existed in tension with a more established Gladstonian Liberal orthodoxy, whose adherents were alarmed at what they perceived as the emergence of a 'socialistic' tendency within their party.[26] Space thus existed within Liberalism, even before the war, for a sincere debate about the proper scope and powers of the state.

After August 1914, some of Lloyd George's parliamentary supporters, in particular the members of the pro-conscription Liberal War Committee, argued that Edwardian experiments in social policy, as well as longer-established precedents in compulsory taxation and education, served as proof that the principle of state compulsion was in no way antithetical to Liberalism.[27] Lloyd George himself, during a debate on the second Military Service Bill in May 1916, declared himself unconvinced that military conscription was 'inconsistent with the principles of either Liberalism or democracy'.[28] This rhetorical juxtaposition of 'Liberalism' and 'democracy' was significant. Rejecting the association of military conscription with 'Prussianism', Lloyd George presented it as an essentially 'democratic' and egalitarian wartime measure. He characterised his voluntarist critics as inflexible and dogmatic – 'men brought up on the peace-loving precepts of Cobden and Bright and Gladstone', who remained wedded to a mid-Victorian strand of Liberalism that could offer no solutions to the existential challenge of total war.[29] Against this, he sought to root his own support for military compulsion in an older and more timeless tradition of 'liberty and true democracy', arguing that conscription had been a weapon wielded in defence of democracy throughout history, from Ancient Greece, through the *levée en masse* of the French Revolution, to Abraham Lincoln's efforts to save the Union and defeat slavery during the American Civil War.[30]

Needless to say, not all Liberals accepted Lloyd George's elastic interpretation of Liberal and democratic principles, nor did all agree with his reading of history.[31] Many continued to regard conscription as 'a paradigm of the very system they believed themselves to be fighting'.[32] But it is striking that, even in December 1916 when he supplanted Asquith as prime minister, Lloyd George was able to carry the support of a significant portion of the Liberal parliamentary party, including talented and progressive administrators and reformers such as Christopher Addison and H. A. L. Fisher, as well as radical journalists such as C. P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*.

It is also striking that one of the defining controversies in Lloyd George's own wartime premiership came in the realm of civil–military relations, in his bitter feud with Sir Douglas Haig, the commander-in-chief of the BEF, and Sir William Robertson, the chief of the Imperial General Staff. During 1915, Lloyd George had found himself closely aligned with the military leadership in his support for conscription. However, he quickly grew disillusioned by the heavy casualties suffered in the BEF's offensives on the Western Front and became increasingly sceptical about the ability of Britain's military commanders to secure victory at an acceptable cost in British lives.

As prime minister, Lloyd George sought to undermine Haig and Robertson's operational autonomy, first by attempting to subordinate the BEF to the overall command of the French commander-in-chief Robert Nivelle, and then, in November 1917, through the creation of a new inter-allied body, the Supreme

War Council, which was intended to coordinate Allied action on the Western Front. In February 1918, Lloyd George manoeuvred Robertson into resigning over the proposed creation of an Allied general reserve, which Lloyd George wanted to place under the control of an executive war board chaired by the French general Ferdinand Foch. In May, however, Lloyd George's struggle with the soldiers was renewed when Major-General Frederick Maurice, a close ally of Robertson who until recently had served as director of military operations at the War Office, published a letter in the press accusing the prime minister of starving Haig of reinforcements and misleading parliament about the strength of the BEF on the Western Front in the lead-up to the great German Spring Offensive.

This feud with the generals placed Lloyd George in a vulnerable position. Robertson and Haig enjoyed the support of the king, the Tory press, and much of the Unionist Party in parliament, including Lord Derby, the war secretary. Robertson's cause was also taken up in the House of Commons by Asquith, who in May 1918 forced a debate over the substance of the Maurice letter, in his most direct challenge to Lloyd George's authority since resigning as prime minister. Lloyd George survived this challenge by presenting his struggle with the generals not simply as a disagreement over strategy between a civilian 'amateur' and military 'professionals' but as a question of confidence in his leadership of the nation. He later went so far as to accuse Robertson of having conspired to overthrow the government and institute a 'military dictatorship'. Such a charge undoubtedly overstated the case, but it allowed Lloyd George to present himself as upholding the 'Liberal' and constitutionally proper position of insisting on civilian political control over the army, while Asquith had been willing to serve as the instrument of the 'military clique' in parliament.[33]

These episodes, and the ways in which Lloyd George sought to defend his actions both at the time and in later years, reveal much about the wartime Liberal crisis and about Lloyd George's own political trajectory. The idea that Liberalism was fundamentally unable to develop a response to the challenge of total war is too simplistic, as is the claim that Lloyd George and those Liberals who followed him abandoned their Liberal principles wholesale. It would be more accurate to see the Liberals as being pulled in different directions after August 1914, divided over how best to balance individual liberty and collective endeavour, and perhaps ultimately disagreeing over what actually constituted core 'Liberal' and 'democratic' values. Lloyd George undoubtedly moved a considerable distance away from orthodox Liberalism during the war, but he retained his radical instincts, and was at pains to justify his actions by appeals to 'democracy' as well as to military exigency.

The idea that Liberalism was fundamentally unable to develop a response to the challenge of total war is too simplistic, as is the claim that Lloyd George and those Liberals who followed him abandoned their Liberal principles wholesale.

There are, of course, obvious reasons for refusing to accept Lloyd George's self-justifications uncritically. He was a skilled and persuasive politician, and his *War Memoirs* were published at a time when he was desperately trying to rehabilitate his own reputation in order to effect a return from the political wilderness. Nevertheless, his arguments about the moral imperative of a war against 'Prussian militarism' carried real force, and his framing of his own actions in pursuit of victory both as necessary and as in keeping with 'democratic' ideas of citizenship and robust state action was by no means intellectually incoherent.

To acknowledge this radical dimension to Lloyd George's wartime politics is also to understand a vital aspect of his relationship

with the Unionist Party during and after the conflict. That relationship was never seamless. Lloyd George's coalition government from the very start represented a coming together of discrete and distinct political factions. Like all coalitions, it was subject to strong centrifugal forces, although it enjoyed some advantages in this respect over its Asquithian predecessor. Asquith in May 1915 had hoped to muzzle Unionist criticism of his government by binding them with shared responsibility for the prosecution of the war (in the process avoiding the prospect of a wartime general election). But he had little respect for the Unionist leadership – he once compared debating with Bonar Law to wrestling with a chimney sweep – and even less interest in sharing real power with them.[34] Accordingly, the coalition administration formed by Asquith kept almost all the key offices of state in Liberal hands.[35] There was little sense of a shared strategic or political vision within the new cabinet. The administration was essentially an artificial and unbalanced stitching together of rival parties, and never established itself as a 'National Government' in any meaningful sense.[36]

The coalition formed by Lloyd George after he succeeded Asquith in December 1916 was both more stable and more cohesive. It rested on a narrower and therefore less fractious parliamentary base, the Asquithian ministers having departed for the Opposition benches (although Lloyd George did retain the support of Arthur Henderson and the Labour Party). Above all, its existence was based on a shared commitment to the vigorous prosecution of the war and the pursuit of military victory. This unity of purpose was a source of significant political strength, but it also meant that the cohesion of the government was to a considerable extent contingent on the crisis of the First World War. Once the war was over, what would hold the coalition together?

In the event, the end of the war came abruptly and somewhat unexpectedly in late 1918. The failure of the German spring offensive, and a successful Allied counterattack launched in August, the Hundred Days Offensive, convinced the German authorities to seek peace. An armistice was signed on 11 November, on terms set by the victorious Allies. The Lloyd George government announced a general election almost immediately after the signing of the armistice. Lloyd George's Liberal ministers met on 12 November and agreed to fight the election as a coalition, but an attempt (of uncertain sincerity) to reconcile with Asquith, to whom Lloyd George offered the lord chancellorship, was rebuffed. The Labour Party also withdrew from the coalition. The 1918 election thus formalised the split in the Liberal Party between supporters of Asquith and Lloyd George. Around 150 of the latter were issued with the coalition 'coupon', a letter of endorsement signed by both Lloyd George and Bonar Law. The election resulted in a landslide victory for the coalition, with the Conservatives providing by far the largest cohort of its strength in the new House of Commons.

The record of Lloyd George's peacetime administration between 1918 and 1922 – its achievements, scandals, and its foreign and domestic policy missteps – is examined in closer detail by other contributors to this issue. The immediate challenges facing the government after December 1918 included the drafting of a peace settlement with the defeated Central Powers, the problem of Ireland, where Sinn Féin had now firmly established itself as the dominant force in Irish Nationalism, and the demobilisation and reintegration into civilian society of millions of British soldiers. Over the longer term, the coalition was anxious to confront the threat of 'socialism' and the rising power of the organised working class. These fears were driven in part by the recent Bolshevik coup in Russia. Closer to home, the government was worried about the electoral advance of the Labour Party, which had now formally committed itself to 'socialism' (even if this was not precisely defined), and the growing power of the trade unions, whose

membership doubled between 1914 and 1920. The war years had seen a sharpening of class tensions, and in particular an increase in middle-class resentment of the working classes who, they believed, had sought to shirk military service (as members of 'reserved occupations') while using the threat of strikes to extract higher wages at a time of national emergency.[37]

In this context, as Kenneth Morgan has observed, the central objective of the coalition government after 1918 was to keep the class war at bay.[38] Many in the Unionist Party leadership regarded Lloyd George as essential to this task. Indeed, Austen Chamberlain wanted not merely coalition with Lloyd George but 'fusion' between the Conservative and Liberal parties in order to contain the Labour threat.[39] The problem was that, in his ideological outlook and political instincts, Lloyd George remained a world away from the Conservative backbenchers and local constituency associations on whose support his government depended. Lloyd George certainly showed himself capable of pursuing illiberal policies during his peacetime premiership, most notoriously in the government's suppression of industrial unrest from 1919 and its toleration of indiscriminate military 'reprisals' against the IRA in Ireland.[40] But in key areas of policy, Lloyd George simply did not think or act like a Conservative. He quickly showed himself ready to resume some of the unfinished business of pre-war Liberalism, including disestablishment of the Church in Wales and the question of land reform, with the Land Settlement (Facilities) Act in 1919 providing smallholdings to ex-servicemen. The tension between Lloyd George and Conservative opinion was particularly evident in the Unionist outrage at the Anglo-Irish Treaty which the prime minister signed in 1921. But this tension was also profoundly destabilising to the government's attempts to pursue a domestic policy agenda that would enable it to retain the support of the cross-class electoral coalition that had returned it to power in 1918.

Between 1918 and 1920, the Lloyd George administration pursued an ambitious programme of social reconstruction, including housing measures, an expansion in national insurance, and the deliberate encouraging of a post-war economic boom, which facilitated the absorption of ex-soldiers into the civilian workforce. However, this entailed levels of taxation and inflation that were simply unacceptable to much of the suburban, salaried, and professional middle class who formed the bedrock of the Conservative Party's electoral support. The result was a middle-class revolt – manifest in the emergence of groups like the Anti-Waste League, which ran candidates against the coalition in a series of by-elections in 1921 – that sufficiently alarmed the government that it eventually, and somewhat reluctantly, embraced a policy of austerity and retrenchment: the famous 'Geddes Axe'.[41] This victory for austerity and the embracing of a deflationary political economy which prioritised the interests of the Conservative middle class at the expense of higher unemployment and an attack on social spending on the workers was also, ultimately, a defeat for the logic of a cross-class coalition against socialism led by Lloyd George.[42]

Despite the ideological compromises he had made during the war and the Liberal shibboleths he had cast aside in pursuit of victory, Lloyd George remained a radical in his temperament, his ideological outlook, and even in his pragmatism. This fact represented a significant structural weakness in his post-war administration, especially once the government was forced to mediate the competing economic demands of different elements in the electoral coalition that had supported it in 1918. Lloyd George retained the loyalty of (almost all) the Unionist leaders who sat with him in cabinet, even in 1922. Yet he never developed any significant depth of loyalty in the wider Conservative Party. After 1918, Conservatives acknowledged Lloyd George's achievement as 'the man who won the war'. But ironically, without the crisis of the First World War to

give it cohesion, the coalition government's foundations were soon revealed to be dangerously shallow.

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7 D. Lloyd George, *Through Terror to Triumph: Speeches and Pronouncements of the Right Hon. David Lloyd George, MP, Since the Beginning of the War* (London, 1914), pp. 10–11.

8 Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. i, p. 448. [Italics added]

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10 M. Johnson, 'Leading from the Front: The "Service Members" in Parliament, the Armed Forces, and British Politics during the Great War', *English Historical Review*, 130/544 (2015), pp. 613–45, at p. 624.

11 D. French, 'The Rise and Fall of 'Business as Usual', in K. Burk (ed.) *War and the State: The Transformation of British Government, 1914–1919* (London, 1982), pp. 7–31.

12 National Archives, CAB 37/124,40: 'Some further considerations on the conduct of the war', memorandum by David Lloyd George, February 1915.

13 Ibid., pp. 807–9; C. Wrigley, 'The Ministry of Munitions: An Innovatory Department', in K. Burke (ed.) *War and the State: The Transformation of British Government, 1914–1919* (London, 1982), pp. 46–51.

14 National Archives, CAB 37/124,40: 'Some further considerations on the conduct of the war', memorandum by David Lloyd George, February 1915.

15 McKenna, Runciman, John Simon, and Sir Edward Grey all threatened to resign from Asquith's cabinet in late 1915 if conscription were introduced (although, as noted below, only Simon followed through on this threat in the end). See J. Turner, *British Politics and the Great War: Coalition and Conflict, 1915–1918* (London, 1992), p. 73.

16 Ibid., p. 73; J. Grigg, *Lloyd George: From Peace to War* (London, 1985), pp. 326–32.

17 *The Nation and Athenaeum*, 22 Jan. 1916, p. 604.

18 M. Bentley, *The Liberal Mind, 1914–1929* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 34.

19 Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. i, pp. 444–5.

20 M. Johnson, 'The Liberal War Committee and the Liberal Advocacy of Conscription in Britain, 1914–1916', *Historical Journal*, 51/2 (2008), pp. 399–420, at p. 415.

21 Ibid., vol, i, p. 449. In September 1915, Reginald McKenna, the Liberal chancellor of the exchequer in the coalition government, had introduced a raft of duties on luxury imports. Lloyd George probably overstated the 'Protectionist' character of McKenna's budget, but it did represent a controversial watering down of the Liberal commitment to free trade.

22 Ibid., vol. i, pp. 444–5.

23 K. O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918–1922* (Oxford, 1979), p. 14.

24 A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914–1945* (Oxford, 1965), p. 34.

25 Searle, *A New England*, pp. 366–406.

26 Ibid., p. 395.

27 Johnson, 'The Liberal War Committee', p. 413. It should be noted that leading New Liberal theorists such as J. A. Hobson were fiercely opposed to military conscription during the First World War. See M.

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).

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

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

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

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38 Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity*, p. 76.

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41 McKibbin, *Parties and People*, pp. 48–9.

42 R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), p. 267.

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

Continued from page 17

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

6 See Kenneth O. Morgan, '7 December 1916: Asquith, Lloyd George and the Crisis of Liberalism', *Parliamentary History*, 26/3 (2017), pp. 361–71.

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13 Thomas Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, vol. iii, ed. Keith Middlemas (Oxford University Press, 1971); *Memorandum* by Ian MacPherson, 20 Dec. 1920, Bodleian library, ms. Eng.Hist.c. 190, 180–30.

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

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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.

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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.

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THE GREAT IMPROVISER.

Coalition politics

On 15 November 2021, **Alistair Lexden** delivered the following address at a meeting of the Lloyd George Society at the National Liberal Club in London.

A Prime Minister of the Left in Coalition with the Right: Lloyd George and the Unionists, 1918–22

David Lloyd George was the first left-wing prime minister in British history to be sustained in office by right-wing votes in the Commons. There has only been one other: Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour head of a government, formed in 1931 and dignified with the title of National, but it was a government completely dominated by his political opponents. Lloyd George headed a serious coalition, even though the two main elements within it differed greatly in size. The section of the Liberal Party which stood with Lloyd George in 1916 had much talent but came nowhere near the numbers needed to keep a stable administration in power.

There would have been no Lloyd George coalition before, or after, the 1918 election without the support of Unionist MPs (as the Conservatives were generally known between the late-1880s, following the first Irish home rule crisis, and the years of the Lloyd George coalition itself when the Conservative label started to be used to some extent once again, though it was not employed universally until after the Second World War).

Lloyd George's reliance on the Unionists became even more marked after the 1918 election. He had the support of 133 Liberal MPs. Unionists officially approved by the coalition had 335 seats, and around another fifty MPs, returned without the coveted coalition 'coupon', quickly joined their ranks in the Commons. The parliament elected in 1918 had a massive Unionist majority. Some three-fifths of MPs backed the coalition. Its most effective opposition came from sixty-three Labour MPs, portents of things to come.

So, Lloyd George, one of the greatest radicals of all time, continued to govern Britain after 1918 because the historic opponents of radicalism willed it. Few of them doubted that the man who had won the war with their enthusiastic backing should also shape the peace after 1918 in their company, creating a much better Britain than had existed before 1914. That was the clear demand of all sections of society, particularly ordinary working families who now counted for much more in national affairs, following a threefold increase in the size of the electorate in 1918. For the

first time in its history, Britain could now be regarded as a fully-fledged democracy.

Everyone looked to Lloyd George and his ministers to rebuild Britain and make it a place fit for the heroes of war. Though Unionist criticism of the coalition was never entirely silent and grew ever stronger as time passed, no serious, responsible Unionist even dreamed before 1922 of an alternative government under another premier – Bonar Law, the Unionist leader and the only serious possibility, having ruled himself out.

Posterity has tended to regard Bonar Law as a lightweight. His contemporaries never made that mistake. Lord Crawford, a fellow Unionist member of the coalition, extolled his leader's merits in his diary on 17 March 1921: 'His debating power, his conciliatory attitude, his candour and disinterestedness, all combined to make him an invaluable asset.' Only an exceptional man could have said, as he did in January 1921, that 'he had never written a line of any speech he had delivered in the twenty years he had been in the House of Commons'. He mentioned this casually in a private conversation, not boastfully in public.

The case for the complete reconstruction of the party-political system to perpetuate the Lloyd George coalition indefinitely appealed strongly to some of the best minds in the Unionist Party – and among their coalition partners too. In retrospect, the failure of the much-discussed plans to unite the two wings of the coalition into a new party under Lloyd George came to seem inevitable. That is not how it appeared at the time. In the spring of 1920, the plans teetered on the brink of success. Everywhere 'fusion', as it was called, was the dominant theme of political discussion.

A rare misjudgement by Lloyd George – withholding in a key speech to his own Liberal supporters any firm indication of progressive policies to come – killed the party-political realignment for which so many yearned. The prospect of Lloyd George as leader of this enlarged Unionist Party, almost certainly under a new name, filled Bonar Law with no great foreboding at this time. He said privately that it 'would not be a bad thing for our Party and a good thing for the nation.'

Of course, Left and Right had come together before. Joe Chamberlain, with whom Lloyd George was widely compared in this period, had become Lord Salisbury's coalition partner in the 1890s. Lloyd George's predecessor, Asquith, a close colleague who later became his implacable foe, also united himself with the Unionists, but the circumstances were very different. For seven years Asquith had governed without them, enjoying a comfortable parliamentary majority, thanks to Irish Nationalist and Labour MPs, the latter at that time being little more than a Liberal appendage. Asquith strengthened his political position, and answered a widespread call for national unity in time of war, by forming a coalition with the Unionists in 1915. Lloyd George, by contrast, relied on the Unionists for his majority. When he forfeited their support in October 1922, his premiership – one of the most important in British history despite some serious setbacks after 1920 – immediately collapsed.

Lloyd George's Welsh-speaking private secretary, A. J. Sylvester, recorded the scene at No. 10 when news of what had occurred at the famous Carlton Club meeting on 19 October 1922 arrived. 'L.G. stood playing with his pince-nez, twisting them round and round on their black silk ribbon. The telephone bell rang. J. T. Davies picked up the receiver. The Conservatives at the Carlton Club had decided to end the coalition and fight the election as a party. 'That's the end,' was the only comment L.G. made as he walked out of the office. That afternoon he went to Buckingham Palace and tendered his resignation to the King.'

Sylvester added: 'I had grown to admire and love L.G. and the work I had done for so many years for him.' These sentiments were shared by many Unionists, particularly by the most senior figures in the party who worked with Lloyd George, day in and day out, as leading cabinet ministers: Arthur Balfour, a former prime minister and an admired intellectual; Austen Chamberlain, the coalition's chancellor

of the exchequer until he succeeded Bonar Law as Unionist leader in 1921; and F. E. Smith , Lord Birkenhead, the youngest lord chancellor since the seventeenth century, a brilliant, reckless politician – the best after-dinner speaker of his time, drunk or sober (frequently the former) – and the most eloquent public advocate of Lloyd George's indispensability to the nation. All Birkenhead's speeches in defence of the government had the same theme: that the country faced problems far too serious to risk going back to party government; only a sustained national effort, embodied in the coalition, could pull the country through. He spoke for the very large number of Unionists who found it impossible to believe that Britain's destinies would be safe in hands other than Lloyd George's.

It is true that the Unionist foreign secretary, George Curzon, a man of immense self-importance and pride, had no love for Lloyd George, who rarely bothered to consult him about the area of policy for which he was responsible. The series of international conferences in the early 1920s, in which Lloyd George had a starring role, left Curzon on the side lines, feeling deeply upset. He complained that the prime minister had 'no regard for the conveniences and civilities of official life', treating as him as 'a valet and a drudge'. He frequently handed in his resignation and then withdrew it, which only diminished Lloyd George's regard for him still further.

Curzon was the exception. Until the last months of the coalition, all the other Unionist cabinet ministers happily sang the praises of their prime minister, at least for most of the time.

Until 1921, the country's most important Unionist, Bonar Law, united to Lloyd George by the closest ties of friendship, was his staunchest supporter of all. Lloyd George loved teasing this superb player of chess and bridge about his complete indifference to literature and culture. Bonar Law's resignation, purely on grounds of ill health in March 1921, was one of the most grievous misfortunes that befell Lloyd George during his tumultuous years as prime minister. Two months later, Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George's mistress, noted in her diary that 'since Bonar Law left he has lost an ideal companion with whom he could laugh & joke and enjoy himself.'

The affection that had so long existed between them came under the severest strain later in 1921 when Bonar Law returned to politics, but not to the government. He expressed grave reservations about aspects of Lloyd George's negotiations with Irish republicans which broke Great Britain's union with all of Ireland bar six Ulster counties under the Anglo-Irish Treaty, whose centenary falls next month. The treaty, which apart from Versailles was Lloyd George's greatest achievement, could hardly have been secured without the support of his formidable Unionist cabinet colleagues, who backed the settlement which gave Dominion status to most of Ireland in the teeth of opposition from a significant minority of Unionist MPs.

After much anguish, Bonar Law finally became his old friend's public adversary for the first time at the Carlton Club meeting the following year – the dramatic event which ended the unique partnership between Left and Right which Lloyd George's coalition embodied.

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The achievements of this unique partnership were rarely recalled after October 1922. Some even denied that anything worthwhile *had* been achieved. That was largely because, Ireland aside, the coalition's really productive work of long-term significance in domestic affairs was confined to its first two years; thereafter its ardour for reform was sapped by the state of economic crisis into which the country fell and remained, following the end of a post-war economic boom in 1920.

Heavy cuts to public spending were believed to be essential to deal with the crisis. That was the economic orthodoxy of the time,

which Lloyd George himself would challenge later in his career. Famously – or, rather, infamously – Sir Eric Geddes, a Unionist cabinet minister and hard-hearted former industrialist (described by Frances Stevenson as 'the most aggressive and pushful personality I know'), swung his notorious axe in 1922, cutting savagely into vital public services, like education which hitherto had represented one of the coalition's many successes. Axed, too, in the process was much of the coalition's hard-won reputation as the successful architect of national reform and reconstruction after the end of the war. Ironically, Geddes himself had been prominent in the coalition's productive earlier phase, which began immediately after the 1918 election.

Lloyd George allowed his ministers no rest. He set a cracking pace. Here is the entry for 27 February 1919 in the diary of Thomas Jones, deputy secretary of the cabinet and one of Lloyd George's favourite Welsh cronies. 'Through the week the P.M. has been magnificent – full of energy himself and speeding up everyone else. Eric Geddes's new Ministry [Transport] has been launched and Addison's Health Bill. Early next week we shall have the Land Acquisition Bill, the Land Settlement Bill, the Housing Bill, the Electricity Supply Bill, and, perhaps, an Anti-Dumping Bill before the Cabinet.' Only the last of these measures could be considered remotely right-wing, yet they all had full Unionist blessing.

So too did government spending – now over five times higher than in 1914 – and unprecedented levels of taxation (including steadily increasing rates of estate duty, normally a great bugbear of the Right) to pay for it and bring down the national debt, a constant source of alarm since it had increased elevenfold since 1914. Not for the last time the party of the Right set aside its traditional commitments to low taxation and public spending, though the Geddes axe marked something of a return to tradition.

Lloyd George did not find himself in league with a band of Unionist reactionaries, intent on curbing his zeal for progressive reform. Bonar Law set his party on a new course, suitable for the post-war world. Writing to Balfour in 1919, he said: 'I am perfectly certain, indeed I do not think anyone can doubt this, that our Party on the old lines will never have any future again in this country.'

What did Bonar Law mean by this? The joint manifesto that he issued with Lloyd George for the 1918 election – much of it drafted by Bonar Law – made the position clear. It stressed that every government's 'principal concern' must now be 'the condition of the great mass of the people who live by manual toil'. No Unionist leader had said that before 1914. The manifesto went on to give a firm pledge on housing, now recognised for the first time as an indispensable element of social reform. The document stated that 'one of the first tasks of the Government will be to deal on broad and comprehensive lines with the housing of the people … upon which the well-being of the nation so largely depends.' Unionists, just like Lloyd George, were particularly concerned to honour that commitment.

In his justly acclaimed account of the post-war coalition, *Consensus and Disunity,* Ken Morgan (Professor Lord Morgan as he now is) explains in detail why its ambitious plans to build houses for the nation's heroes put new, modern roofs over the heads of comparatively few of them. The driving force, the Liberal Christopher Addison, had a burning sense of mission. A phrase that would become famous – 300,000 new homes a year – began with him. 'Never had the state intervened so directly in controlling housing as a nationally run service', Ken Morgan writes. But intense commitment to sweeping improvement did not bring Addison his just reward. Local councils, which were placed under a legal obligation to produce housing plans, too often set themselves unduly modest targets; massive delays occurred in securing materials and mobilising workmen; costs soared far beyond all predictions.

Cartoon by David Low (1919). Low, the cartoonist for *The Daily News* and *The Star*, often portrayed the coalition as a two-headed ass.

By 1921, the coalition's housing programme, in which such high hopes had been vested, was widely judged to have been an expensive disaster, not least by a hostile press ('there is scarcely a newspaper which attempts to give its readers the government case', Lord Crawford noted in his diary). So deafening was the criticism of this central element of the coalition's agenda for social reform that it became almost impossible to get a serious hearing for its many successes in other areas.

Ken Morgan reminds us of them: 'the implementation of universal state unemployment insurance, the new expenditure on pensions and social security, the creation of the Ministry of Health, the assistance to agricultural labourers, the educational programme launched by the Fisher Act [of 1918] were in themselves a formidable list of achievements.' Even in housing, the coalition's work turned out to be a turning point in British politics; the governments which succeeded it, Labour and Tory, drew on its pioneering initiatives.

Many heroes got their homes, if rather belatedly. Some four million houses were built during the interwar years under Tory governments, which held fast to the kind of progressive policies with which they had been associated in Lloyd George's coalition. Their chief proponent after 1922 was Neville Chamberlain, the greatest of all Conservative social reformers, a man who loathed – and was

loathed by – Lloyd George. The two people who did most to advance the welfare state in the first half of the twentieth century could not stand the sight of each other.

Harmony, however, was not disrupted among Unionist and Liberal members of the coalition, of which Neville Chamberlain was not a member, fortunately for his half-brother, Austen, who lacked his great ability. In Ken Morgan's words, 'Lloyd George's Cabinet was an exceptionally united one … it conducted its operations in a remarkably harmonious fashion in which the party bickerings of the past were subsumed.'

That of course is why the Unionist members of the coalition wanted it to continue, even as more and more of their followers in parliament and particularly in the country – where the Unionist rank and file had never taken Lloyd George to their hearts – called for the party's withdrawal from the coalition as 1922 wore on, and criticism of Lloyd George's conduct of political affairs at home and abroad mounted.

Unionist cabinet ministers insisted that the alarming challenge presented by the rapidly expanding Labour Party – riding high on a series of by-election successes – could only be defeated by perpetuating the alliance between Labour's principal opponents, led by Lloyd George; a swelling chorus in the party at large demanded separation from him.

No one resisted that swelling chorus more firmly than Austen Chamberlain, to whom Bonar Law had passed the party leadership the previous year. In a speech on 16 October 1922, he said that the coalition must be maintained in the face of the 'common foe'. No question of principle, he asserted, divided Lloyd George's Liberals from Unionists, and it would be 'criminal' to allow personal and party prejudices to prevail 'at a moment of national danger.' He tried to make spines shiver by adding that if those who believed in the existing social and political system did not stand together, Labour would win, and it would 'not be the moderates of the Labour Party who would prevail.' They would be face to face with the red revolution.

Could Chamberlain successfully use this dramatic threat – far removed from the promises of reconstruction and reform given at the 1918 election – to bring his divided and disaffected party together to fight again under Lloyd George's coalition banner? That was the question which Chamberlain summoned his MPs to the Carlton Club to decide on 19 October 1922. He chose that day because he expected a by-election at Newport in Wales on the 18th, with Unionist, Labour and Liberal candidates, to bring a Labour victory, and so underline the danger that would arise if the coalition broke up.

But the Unionist candidate won this three-sided contest. That, coupled with a bad speech by Chamberlain and Bonar Law's rejection of the coalition after a powerful attack on Lloyd George by Stanley Baldwin, settled the issue when the meeting took place. It took no time for a full account of the meeting to reach No. 10. Thomas Jones, then as so often, at Lloyd George's side, noted the main points in his diary. 'Vote largely determined by Bonar Law's speech and by the victory of the Conservative candidate at the Newport by-election announced this morning, and partly by Chamberlain's clumsy, unsympathetic and unhumorous handling of the meeting itself.'

A motion, passed by 185 to 88 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. The Unionist cabinet minister, Lord Crawford, was sure that the vote meant that 'never again should Lloyd George be our leader. The controversy really pivots around his mercurial personality.'

At No. 10, Lloyd George accepted his fate with good grace. He told Thomas Jones that 'the moment he had learned the result of the Newport election and heard definitely that Bonar was going to the meeting, he had told Stamfordham [George V's private secretary]

that he would be resigning in the course of the day.' Having done so, he remained in Downing Street until 23 October when Bonar Law was ready to take over. Jones recorded in his diary for the 23rd that 'at 4.00 he motored away with his son Gwilym to Churt, smiling to the last.' Frances Stevenson's natural cheerfulness deserted her. The previous day Jones had 'found her burning papers in the fireplace, and looking sadder than I have ever seen her.' Did she perhaps sense that the man she loved would never hold office again?

So, a unique experiment in British politics ended. Never again would a prime minister from the Left be the predominant figure in a coalition that relied on the votes of the Right. Unlike MacDonald after 1931, Lloyd George did not take orders from the Tories. He remained very firmly in charge of a cabinet in which all the leading Unionists worked closely with him. In a letter written on 6 February 1921, Austen Chamberlain said: 'when the history of these times comes to be written can you doubt that he will stand out like the younger Pitt.'

It was with reluctance and regret that Bonar Law finally decided in October 1922 that the time had come to end the coalition, headed by a man he never ceased to regard as a friend. But the party at large rejoiced at freeing itself from someone who in 1922 was widely seen as an incorrigible rogue, responsible for debasing the standards of public life. In retrospect, the Tories came to regard the post-war coalition with embarrassment and distaste, almost writing it out of their history. Lloyd George, as always, took it all in his stride. He told Thomas Jones that there was only one of his Unionist colleagues whom he disliked, and declined to name him. Through all the vicissitudes of his long and remarkable career, this great man invariably retained his high spirits – smiling to the last, as he did on his departure from No. 10 in October 1922.

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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

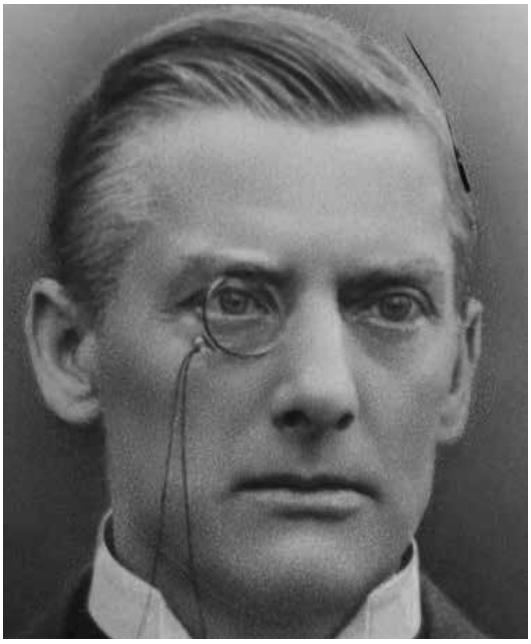
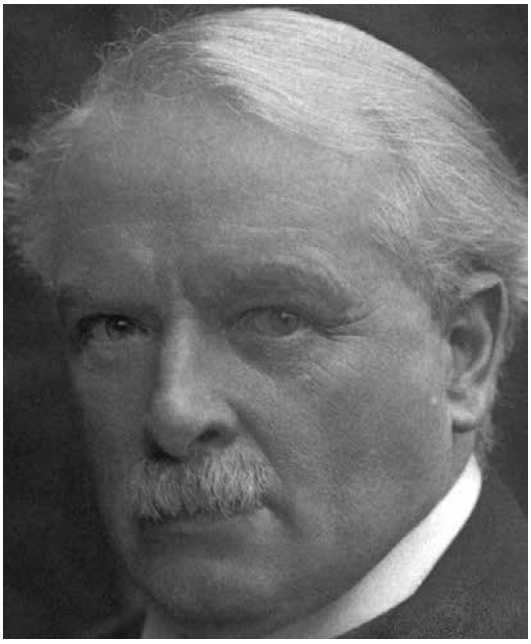
The Odd Couple

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

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 steadying 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 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]

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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

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 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 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 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 stepmother. '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

> 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

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 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 longstanding 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

Leadership brought out the least positive features of Chamberlain's character. 'He had quite a good opinion of himself,' judged Leo Amery.

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

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 'diehard' 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.

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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WORK FOR ALL.

Prime Minister. "COME ON, EVERYBODY, AND LEND A HAND. THIS ISN'T A ONE-MAN JOB!"

The Coalition record

What did the Lloyd George governments achieve for labour and industrial relations policy? By **Chris Wrigley**.

The Lloyd George Coalition Governments: Labour and Industrial Relations

The wartime and post-war years of Lloyd George's premiership were frequently turbulent. *Tempestuous Journey*, the title of Frank Owen's 1954 biography of Lloyd George, also fits the industrial strife that his governments faced in 1916–22. The Lloyd George coalition governments usually were adroit and flexible in handling major strikes. Approaches ranged from conceding much, as in the case of the 1917 engineering strikes, to resolute toughness, as in the crushing of the 1919 police strike, sacking participants regardless of their years of service.

The First World War created huge demand for labour in the UK and other belligerent countries. During the war, 5,670,000 men joined the Army, Navy and Air Force from an adult male labour force of 18,234,000 (in 1917): 31.1 per cent. In industrial relations, labour is in a strong position in upturns in the economy. With the reduced labour force plus the huge demand for engineering products (including ships and coal), labour was strong, and employers were relatively weak. This strength in the labour market was offset by the widespread commitment to winning the war.

During the war, most strikes in the UK took place in metals, engineering, shipbuilding and coalmining. In 1917, these sectors experienced half of all strikes. The war skewed industrial output away from consumer goods toward munitions (in the broadest sense). Engineering employment grew despite overall falls in labour (notwithstanding the replacement labour of women and the return of expatriates). The strikes that most threatened the government's ability to prosecute the war were the May 1917 engineering strikes in the main industrial centres other than the Clyde, which had been the centre of engineering unrest in 1915–16. The level of discontent revealed by these strikes forced the government to alter many domestic policies before worse unrest happened.

At the heart of the discontent was resentment at the perceived unfairness of the Munitions of War Act, 1915, to the workforce. Engineers felt that there were restrictions on them that benefited employers still carrying out private work; in particular, there was the extension of dilution (whereby the easier parts of skilled work were done by semi- or unskilled workers, including women) to private work, and the leaving certificates which employers could agree to or withhold before workers could move to another job. There was also outrage that the newly agreed trade card scheme, whereby skilled engineers (who were in short supply for war work) would not be conscripted, was proposed to be scrapped. Different engineering areas had different additional grievances. However, behind the

specific industrial grievances was increasing war weariness, which was affecting all the belligerents, with notable bitterness at profiteering. The May engineering strikes involved 200,000 men and lost 1,500,000 working days.

The government took a variety of approaches towards resolving the dispute and mitigating its consequences. A major response to wartime industrial unrest was to muster moderate opinion among trade unionists and the public against strikes. This was partly done by bringing Labour Party MPs into government under both Asquith and Lloyd George. Arthur Henderson, Labour's leader (as chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party) held two ministerial posts under Asquith but was there to troubleshoot for the government in industrial relations. Under Lloyd George, who needed Labour's support for his coalition government, Henderson was given a place in the war cabinet, initially of five members, where again he often acted to resolve industrial disputes. Lloyd George also appointed Labour MPs to new ministries in areas of special interest to Labour: John Hodge to the Ministry of Labour (from 10 December 1916 until 17 August 1917, then Minister of Pensions until January 1919), George Barnes to the Ministry of Pensions (from 10 December 1916 until 17 August 1917 and then war cabinet and cabinet until 27 January 1920), and J. R. Clynes later to the Ministry of Food Control (as parliamentary secretary, July 1917–July 1918, then as food controller).

The Lloyd George coalition governments usually were adroit and flexible in handling major strikes.

The government continued its policy of trying to negotiate only with trade union officials, not with shop stewards or other representatives of rank-and-file movements. During the engineering unrest on Clydeside in 1915–16, Lloyd George had met the Clyde Workers' Committee despite statements saying he would not. In May 1917, ministers made much of the militant workers being in revolt against the trade union officials. Henderson told a conference of representatives of the Engineering and Shipbuilding Federation on 10 May:

> … the government would be prepared to go to … any reasonable length with you to stamp this pernicious influence and policy out of the ranks of organised labour, because it is going to be disastrous to the country and to organised labour. I have set my face like flint against anything that is going to undermine the discipline and executive authority of the respective trade unions. [1]

The government asserted again that it would not negotiate with unofficial strike bodies. This was got round by Dr Addison, the Minister of Munitions, negotiating with representatives of the unofficial strike committee with the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) executive present.

Negotiations were backed by willingness to make use of legal powers under the Defence of the Realm Acts or the Munitions of War Acts. On 17 May, seven strike leaders were arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act and were put in Brixton Prison. Lloyd George agreed to withdraw the charges against the arrested men when they undertook to adhere to the agreement Addison had made with the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. Such legal action was likely to gain public support in wartime. However, the danger of legal action exacerbating a strike was recognised. The government's overriding need was to maintain munitions output for the forthcoming battle (to be known as Passchendaele). Henderson said of the May Engineering strikes that 'no more serious situation has arisen since August 1914'.

The government was aware of a wide range of social issues behind the discontent. Like other belligerent countries, there was war weariness, the nature and extent of which

was shown in the reports of the Commissions on Industrial Unrest. Lloyd George set up the Commissions on Industrial Unrest to report within four weeks, as he feared rising food prices would lead to further unrest. The UK and its allies had benefited from bumper cereal crops in the US, Canada and Argentina in 1915, with the total cereal production going up 18.3 per cent over the average for 1910–14. However, in 1916, the cereal production of these countries fell by 20.3 per cent from the output of 1915, a very serious matter given the UK's dependence on imported food, as Lloyd George warned in the House of Commons in February 1917, with 70–80 per cent of cereals imported. Cereals, along with potatoes, were the major sources of cheap carbohydrates for working people. All were in short supply. Later, in October, big food queues formed in parts of London and cities were moving to sugar rationing.[2]

There was great concern over food supplies and prices well before the May engineering strikes. There was fear of a return to the food shortages and price inflation of the Napoleonic wars. The major government measure to boost domestic output of cereals and other foodstuffs was the Corn Production Act, 1917 which had its first reading in the House of Commons on 5 April. before the May strikes. As well as increasing the acreage under arable cultivation, food control achieved a greater volume of grain for bread by better extraction rate for flour from grain as well as by mixing into wheat flour, flour from other grains and potatoes. High food prices and unfair food distribution was deemed to be the strongest underlying cause of discontent. Such discontent was exacerbated by widespread awareness of profiteering in food. It has been argued that in Germany profiteering, and the black market played major roles in causing food shortages for working people in the war.[3]

Clearly, the government feared that industrial unrest could escalate into wider social unrest which could undermine the war effort. Lloyd George commented, 'If we are to bend all our energies towards winning the war, and winning it in the shortest time possible, it is the duty of the government to do all they can to secure peace and contentment at home.' The level of concern was not only indicated by the number of regional commissions (eight) and the four-week deadline for reports, but by the government stating in advance it would act on the findings.[4]

While the reports revealed regional variations in the causes of discontent, there were several common reasons besides food. Other major grievances included restrictions on mobility for skilled engineers (notably the leaving certificates from employers if men were to be allowed to leave for other work), the working of the Military Service Acts and, in several areas, inadequate housing, inadequate supplies of beer, failure to issue war pensions in a fair manner and fatigue from working long hours without respite. As well as trying to remedy these matters, the government was keen to support the setting up of local joint committees of employers and employees, which could marginalise militant shop stewards.

The number of strikes in 1918 went up by 56 per cent, but the days lost because of strikes only went up by 4 per cent. 1918 saw large numbers of relatively small strikes compared to the May engineering strikes in 1917. Engineering and shipbuilding remained the most strike prone category with 36.1 per cent of the total, and mining came second again with 14.7 per cent of the total. Building saw more than a doubling (up 173.5 per cent) of days lost through strikes, with the number of strikes also doubling.

In January 1918, when speaking in the war cabinet of the war in the coming year, Lloyd George said that 'the great factor of the war this year would be either military or morale, and he was inclined to think it would be the latter. Food was the first line of defence.' He still feared working class disillusionment with the war, fuelled by food shortages. Anger at declining real wages grew during the year.

The government attempted to remedy skilled engineers' poor pay comparative to unskilled workers by a 12.5 per cent bonus (a grievance highlighted by the commissions of unrest after the May 1917 strikes). The bonus exacerbated pay differentials, setting off considerable unrest among pieceworkers and premium bonus workers. The government retreated before demands to extend a 7.5 per cent bonus to unskilled engineers and to workers in allied trades.

The serious situation on the Western Front, especially with the successful German offensive of 21 March 1918, gave the government the popular support it needed to extend the ages at each end for conscription and to remove men from reserved occupations. This had an impact on munitions production, but the biggest impact was on mining. The removal of miners put the remaining miners in an even stronger bargaining position, gave them another grievance and had a very adverse impact on the vital output of coal, which would have had a serious impact on the economy had the war continued into mid-1919.

The overwhelming support for the war, albeit fraying at the edges after three years, ensured that labour rarely exercised its powerful position in the depleted labour market. With the armistice on 11 November 1918, such restraint went. In 1919, the number of strikes and went from 1,165,000 in 1918 to 1,352,000 in 1919, but the number of working days lost went from 5,875,000 in 1918 to 34,969,000. The engineering (24.7 per cent) and mining (18.5 per cent) categories remained most strike prone but otherwise the main feature was the numerous strikes across a wide range of sectors marking the pent-up grievances of the war years. There was a range of substantial strikes including on the London tubes, in textiles, clothing, electrical generating and building. The scale of strike activity, the threat of some major strikes to the established social order and the fears of Bolsheviks infiltrating the UK ensured that the government could not disengage from involvement in industrial relations. It was one of several areas where there could not be a quick 'back to 1914'.

The internal politics of the coalition government resulted in Lloyd George prioritising coalition Conservative concerns about Russia over working to keep Arthur Henderson in his government. Henderson was in effect constructively dismissed in August 1917 for wishing to attend a socialist conference in Stockholm which would have included socialists from the Central Powers. Henderson firmly believed that attending would help to keep Russia in the war. He was smeared by some Conservative politicians and much of the Tory press as a friend of the Bolsheviks. This was ridiculous. When Henderson had been in Russia, he had spoken publicly with Kerensky in support of the war and had denounced the Bolsheviks. Ousting and humiliating Labour's leader proved to be a costly mistake. After breaking with the government, Henderson spent less time in parliament in order to devote himself to overhauling the Labour Party's organisation, thereby facilitating its route to success in the 1923 general election and subsequently forming a minority Labour government in January 1924.

Lloyd George believed he needed to appease the Conservative Right by sacrificing Henderson and, also, thought Henderson was too ready to disregard cabinet collective responsibility. Lloyd George also misjudged the respect most of the Parliamentary Labour Party and trade union leaders had for Henderson when he thought of replacing him with George Barnes, who had not been a success as chair of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1910–11. The ousting of Henderson reinforced what was already happening in terms of the political trajectory of the Labour movement, which was going more in the direction of European socialists than towards the moderation of Samuel Gompers and much of US trade unionism.[5]

The British Labour movement was unusual in that there was no major split such as that between the SPD and USPD in Germany. Those on the Right, such as Lord Milner, did

their utmost to split 'patriotic labour' away from socialists in the Labour Party. Four coalition Labour Party ministers did not return to the Labour Party after the armistice but stood as National Democratic Party candidates and won, with George Barnes and George Roberts being ministers in the post-war coalition government. However, all the National Democratic or coalition Labour MPs bar one lost or had retired by the 1922 general election, and the last one, Roberts, lost as an Independent in the 1923 general election.[6]

The government faced big engineering disputes on Clydeside and in Belfast in early 1919. The end of the war saw great pressure for reduced working weeks as well as increased pay.[7] The Amalgamated Society of Engineers demanded in June 1918 a reduction of weekly hours from fifty-four to forty-four and negotiations secured a forty-seven-hour week, the first standard national week in engineering. The deal was endorsed by all the unions involved, including by 57 per cent of the members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers who voted. There was a short post-war depression as most war work ceased, and demobilisation quickened as unrest took place among soldiers and sailors. The threat of unemployment undermined support for the settlement especially in the big engineering works and shipyards on the Clyde and in Belfast. There was also great dissatisfaction with the deal involving a commitment to sustain output at the fifty-four-hour level, seen as excessive speeding up of work.

King George V told ministers that he feared revolution, perhaps partly because his anxieties had been increased by the Russian royal family being killed in July 1918. Robert Horne, minister for labour, and Lloyd George believed that the monarch, like much of the press, panicked unduly. The government and employers saw the unrest on the Upper Clyde as being directed against the unions which, other than the Electrical Trade Union, did not make the strike official. The government declined to negotiate with the strike committee other than through the unions. The strike was very popular, especially among skilled workers and unemployed soldiers. The strike spread outwards from the Upper Clyde to the Lower Clyde and the Forth with 36,000 Lanarkshire and Stirling miners and 10,000 iron moulders coming out in sympathy strikes. By 29 January, ministers had to accept that they could not avoid intervening.

Emmanuel Shinwell, chair of the strike committee, on 29 January took a deputation to the lord provost of Glasgow, presenting their demands and calling for Lloyd George and Horne to intervene. The next day, the war cabinet discussed its response to the deteriorating situation and Shinwell's threat that if the government did not respond, the strikers would go beyond constitutional methods. Brigadier General Borlase Wyndham Childs, director of personal services, whose responsibilities included the supervision of discipline in the army, told the war cabinet that, while soldiers had been used in past strikes, the situation had changed; then 'we had a well-disciplined and ignorant army, whereas now we have an army educated and disciplined.' Robert Munro, the secretary for Scotland and Liberal MP for Roxburgh and Selkirk, advised that Glasgow's 2,000 special constables should be used to maintain services as he believed that they 'might be more reliable and suitable than soldiers.'

The government prepared to 'take firm action', instructing Lord Clyde, the lord advocate and coalition Unionist MP for Edinburgh North, to examine the legal grounds for the arrest of the ringleaders of the strike. On 31 January, Lloyd George, in Paris at the Peace Conference, warned that the case for arrests should stand up in a court and that the action should not be for striking but be 'on a charge of sedition, e.g. an attempt to use force'. That morning, mounted police charged a huge demonstration that was supporting Shinwell and his deputation when they went back to the lord provost of Glasgow for the response to the strike committee's demands. When this

police action was reported later in the day to the war cabinet, Munro said, 'it was … clearer than ever that it was a misnomer to call the situation in Glasgow a strike – it was a Bolshevist rising.' His colleagues were largely reassured by the information that 12,000 troops could be moved quickly into Glasgow and that six tanks and 100 armoured cars were going by rail from London that night. Bonar Law told his colleagues that Lord Clyde was going to Scotland 'to try quietly to set the people in Glasgow to work to get a voluntary organisation of citizens to form themselves against this movement.' After a show of military force in Glasgow, the strikes and unrest fizzled out.[8]

The situation in Belfast was as worrying as Glasgow for the government. Milner wrote in his diary on 31 January, 'Things are pretty bad at Glasgow and worse at Belfast'.[9] The press and some politicians referred to the Belfast strike committee as a 'Soviet', but the strike committee did not. Edward Shortt, chief secretary for Ireland and coalition Liberal MP, told the war cabinet, 'The workmen had formed a "Soviet" committee and this committee had received forty-seven applications from small businessmen for permission to use light.' Ian MacPherson, Shortt's successor as chief secretary and a Liberal MP, suggested to the war cabinet that civilians should be enrolled in Belfast, as had been done in Glasgow, to avoid using troops to run the gas and electric works.[10]

The use of volunteers against trade union action was notable in 1911–1926. The volunteers were mostly middle and upper class, working to maintain supplies and transport, intending to help their communities and to thwart trade unionism. Some 3,000 special constables had been enrolled in Liverpool in 1911. Volunteers worked in the Lister Street power station. They were protected by the army and by the presence of the battleship *Antrim,* which later was stationed in Archangel in 1916. Volunteers were also utilised against strikes in the docks, railways and coal in 1911–12 and in the Leeds municipal strike of 1913, as Liam Ryan has detailed.[11] Kenneth Morgan has argued that the Supply and Transport organisation was a milder response than might have been made:

> The more inflammatory alternatives, military intervention, citizens' guards and the like, were carefully ruled out … The emphasis would be on the government as the defensive organiser of essential supplies and services, not the aggressive party seeking a war with the unions.[12]

The sheer volume of strikes in 1919 pushed the government to mobilise moderate opinion in industry by devising the National Industrial Conference in February 1919. This followed on from the National Industrial Council of 1911, which had been suggested by the textile employer Sir Charles Macara, which was intended to bring together all those who shared the ideal of 'the substitution in the industrial sphere of cooperation for antagonism in relations between employers and employed.' In 1919, big claims were made for the National Industrial Conference (NIC) which first met on 27 February. It was called a parliament for industry and was complementary to the Whitley Committees (joint industrial committees). It was seen by many as a UK alternative to Lenin and Bolshevism. Henderson and Clynes were enthusiastic deeming the conference a means for avoiding serious industrial unrest. When addressing the NIC, Lloyd George exceeded even his normal flattery of those he was seeking to win over. He said:

> You are really a Peace Congress, you are settling the future of this country, but you may be doing more than that. … You may be making the model for civilisation which all lands will turn to and say, 'Let us follow Britain'.

While industrial strife was highly menacing, Lloyd George and his colleagues were clear that the recommendations coming from the industrial conference would be acted on. Once

the threat of mining and railway strikes had passed, so the government's support for the National Industrial Conference dwindled and all but evaporated by November 1919.[13] While, perhaps, it was an early example of corporatism, which was evident under Harold Macmillan in the early 1960s, it owed much to the joint committees in a range of industries from the late nineteenth century and which had impressed moderate Labour leaders such as Henderson and Clynes.

In the immediate post-war period, the government was faced with the prospect of a coordinated strike of miners, dockers and railway workers – a revival of the Triple Alliance of 1914. The miners were in an economically strong position during and after the war, up until late 1920. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) had called for nationalisation of the mines from 1894 and, at its 1918 annual conference in July, it was unanimously agreed that it was 'clearly in the national interest to transfer the whole industry from private ownership and control to state ownership with joint control by the workmen and the state'. State control in 1916 and 1917 had left ownership in private hands with guaranteed profits based on good pre-war years, but the state did very well from the soaring price of coal. The miners wished to avoid decontrol returning the industry to unsatisfactory private ownership. The MFGB conference had voted for their demands to be submitted within four weeks of the end of the war, but the MFGB delayed until after the general election. Lloyd George successfully stalled the issue further by setting up a Royal Commission under the high court judge Sir John Sankey. Lloyd George seemed to suggest that the government would accept its majority recommendation. When the majority recommendation of its members reported in favour of nationalisation, the government rejected it. Lloyd George told the war cabinet, that it was 'impossible to carry nationalisation in the present Parliament.' This rejection of the majority Sankey Report embittered relations between the miners and the Lloyd George post-war coalition government. However, after the Interim Report on wages and hours, the government did agree to a 20 per cent rise in wages and a reduction in hours of work from eight to seven.

The railway workers did not delay after the armistice. They submitted a demand for a range of improved conditions, nationalisation and a measure of workers' control. In late February 1919, they received substantially improved conditions of work but not nationalisation or any element of workers' control. Lloyd George was very adept at dividing J. H. Thomas, the leader of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR), from the miners and from ASLEF, the train drivers' union. However, when the railway workers went on strike on 26 September 1919, the government went all out to defeat them. They operated the Supply and Transport Committee, putting into operation plans developed since the 17 February, the government had the advantage of still controlling shipping and the wartime rationing machinery. It was also ready to direct propaganda internally, against the NUR, instead of externally against the Central Powers. Lloyd George attacked 'this anarchist conspiracy' and wrongly claimed the strike aimed for nationalisation. The NUR countered the government's cinema and newspaper adverts and won the battle for public opinion. The government settled the dispute.[14]

With such dissatisfaction on a range of issues, especially around Ireland, India and the former Ottoman Empire, it was less surprising that Lloyd George fell in October 1922, than that he survived from early 1921.

With the severe recession of 1921–22, the balance of power in industrial relations tilted heavily in favour of employers. The trade unions struggled – usually unsuccessfully – to hold on to gains made in 1915–20. The miners

were faced with wage cuts and a return of more hours of work in 1921 as the government decontrolled the mines early. The 1921 mining dispute was even more bitter than that of 1926. The engineers suffered a heavy defeat in 1922 in a lock-out in which the employers successfully asserted managerial prerogatives.

No longer fearing union power, many Conservative MPs saw no need to rely on Lloyd George or to work with the coalition Liberal MPs. Like most employers, they wished for a small state and little or no intervention in industrial relations. Sir Allan Smith of the Engineering Employers Federation commented at the National Industrial Conference on 27 February 1919 that 'the whole experience of the last twenty years has proved that if only the government will leave us alone, we are far better able to settle our differences than any agencies outside.' Austen Chamberlain, the chancellor of the exchequer, complained in the war cabinet on 28 January 1919 that the expectation that the government would intervene in industrial disputes resulted in strikes being prolonged as neither side would say their last word. The continuing involvement in industrial disputes alienated increasing numbers of Conservative MPs, some of whom had revolted against some domestic policies from early in the 1919 parliament. With such dissatisfaction on a range of issues, especially around Ireland, India and the former Ottoman Empire, it was less surprising that Lloyd George fell in October 1922, than that he survived from early 1921.

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The Odd Couple

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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.*