Liberal Prime Ministers

A comparison of PMs' political skills; by Alan Mumford

The Political Skills of Four Li
Part 1: Rosebery and Campb

THESE FOUR PRIME ministers have been chosen for study not simply because they are the last Liberals to hold that post but because their varying skills illuminate and help to explain one of the great periods of radical reform in this country.

In the introductory chapters of *British Liberal Leaders*,[1] the authors identify five criteria for assessing leaders:

- Communication and campaign skills
- Ability to develop and articulate a vision
- Ability to manage their party
- Achieving the objectives of Liberalism
- Leaving the party in better or worse shape.

Furthermore, Professor Peter Hennessey, in his outstanding book *The Prime Ministers*, produced what he called 'ingredients for assessment for premiership performance'. This was based on his study of prime ministers since 1945 and totalled, again under five main headings, sixteen skill requirements.[2]

This article offers a more focused assessment which differs in two ways from the *British Liberal Leaders* review. First, it is about

Archibald Philip Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery (1847–1929) (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

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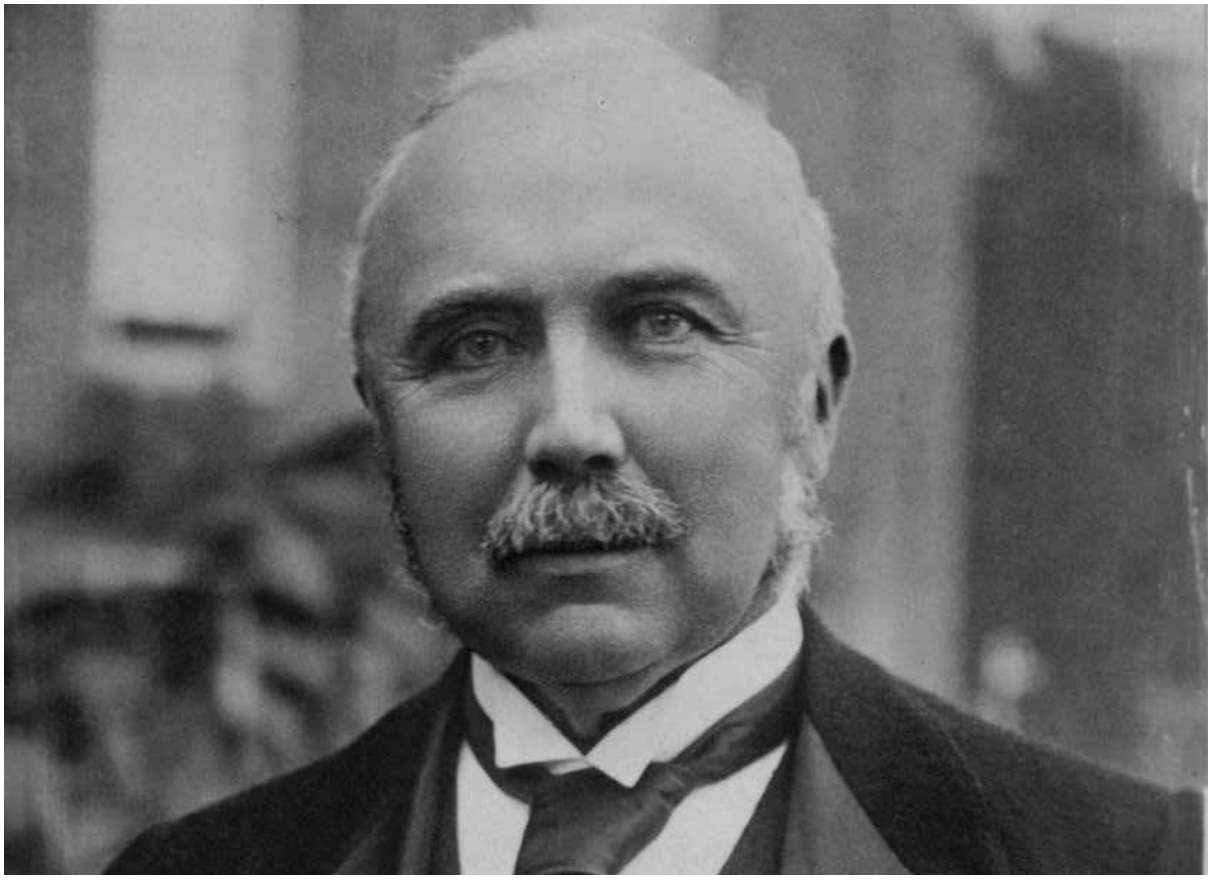
prime ministers and not about leaders. What skills did they deploy, or not deploy, in meeting the demands of their role as prime minister? Not all the relevant profiles in the *Leaders* book actually give clear answers to the criteria the editors set out, let alone to the sharper list of skill requirements as set out below.

In reviewing the biographies of these four, it became clear that some elements of the *Liberal Leaders* list are less important for a prime minister. For example, assessment of whether a prime minister has left the party in better or worse shape does not tell us anything about how that was achieved, and how relevant that actually is to performance as a prime minister. Similarly, the leader's role in party management is of course important, but less so in terms of a prime minister, who has to manage his cabinet. Detailed examples of the demonstrated skills and behaviour of the prime ministers, taking readers beyond a simple tick box, provides an improved basis for judgements about them. This author has identified the following list of skills:

Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman (1836–1908) (© National Portrait Gallery, London)



- Selecting the cabinet
- Managing the cabinet
- Decision making
- Developing effective relationships
- Communication skills
- Changing the framework for operating as prime minister
- Vision

One skill was missing in all four prime ministers reviewed (Rosebery, Campbell-Bannerman, Asquith and Lloyd George). Reflection on the performance of self and others (the former more difficult) can, if reflection includes not just criticism but action to improve, lead to improved effectiveness.

A diary is one way of achieving this. Only Rosebery followed Gladstone's example –but not his moral and physical self-flagellation. (No other British prime minister subsequently kept a diary until Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan.) He also wrote memos explaining, apparently to himself, his actions. Nor did those studied here use communication with others for this purpose. Asquith thought introversion was a dangerous and debilitating habit. His 560 letters to Venetia Stanley, to whom he proclaimed his love and commented on his personal and political life, contained very little self-criticism. He did however write, on 14 October 1914: 'I have always hated "having it out with people" and believe from that kind of passive cowardice have more than once failed in my duty'.[3]

Nor did Lloyd George in letters or discussion with Frances Stevenson, his personal secretary and mistress, reflect on his performance. While critical of others, he revealed no doubt about his own actions, except about the battle of Passchendaele.

Two questions of terminology need to be clarified. Conservative Liberal opponents until 1921 were most often described as Unionists. Lloyd George is treated as a Liberal prime minister, although his enemies within the Liberal Party would probably say that he was no longer a proper Liberal by 1918. However, education and housing policies pursued from 1920 were definitely Liberal in objective.

Earl of Rosebery

Lord Rosebery, foreign secretary when Gladstone resigned in March 1894, was chosen by Queen Victoria as his successor. She liked Rosebery and disliked the better qualified chancellor of the exchequer, Sir William Harcourt, who was disliked even more strongly by his peers in the cabinet.

Rosebery protested his unsuitability for the post (as he had done previously when appointed as foreign secretary). He said he wanted to stay in the Foreign Office: 'I know nothing of the other aspects and should be in every way unsuited.'[4] However, he backed into the limelight believing it his duty to accept.

Selection of cabinet

Rosebery complained to the queen that he inherited both policies and cabinet from Gladstone and implied there was nothing he could do about either. Harcourt remained as chancellor: Rosebery resisted his attempts to secure more authority. He chose Kimberley to succeed himself in the Foreign Office as he believed, correctly, that Kimberley would carry on his policies. He moved Fowler to the India Office to replace Kimberley. John Morley, ambitious for the Foreign Office, did not get it and stayed, unwillingly, to look after Ireland.

Managing the cabinet

Within a few months, most of Rosebery's colleagues, had become disenchanted with him; Acland and Asquith as well as Morley had become particularly disenchanted. Rosebery, in turn, was upset that he received much less support than he expected from them.

The relationship between Rosebery and his chancellor of the exchequer Harcourt set a standard of dysfunction met subsequently

only by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Harcourt's agreement with Rosebery that he should have frequent contact with foreign issues worked to the extent that he sent 119 letters to Kimberley in fifteen months, but he also complained vigorously when he felt insufficiently consulted, for example on issues over Belgium and Uganda. Harcourt told Morley that 'it was not for him to dry nurse the helpless infant that we had begotten' (i.e. Morley and colleagues)[5] and claimed to be philosophically indifferent to the fate of the government.

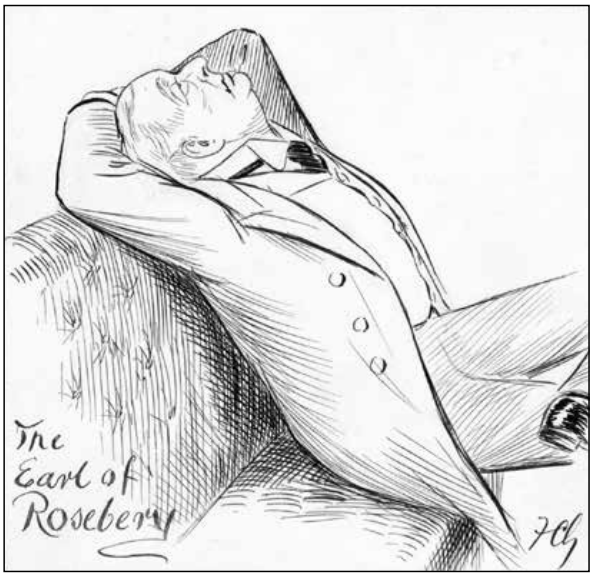
The periods in which Rosebery was ill with influenza, mental prostration and sleeplessness meant a lack of direction. Not much skill could be implemented on two hours sleep; cabinet meetings were no longer held. He made no attempt to bring the cabinet together on crucial issues. A treaty with Belgium was concealed from the cabinet; policy over Africa, particularly Uganda, was discussed only reluctantly. The first major shock of his premiership for his cabinet colleagues was his sudden pronouncement in the House of Lords on 13 March 1894 that Irish home rule was subject to more than a veto by the House of Lords. England 'as the predominant partner of the partnership of the Three Kingdoms will have to be convinced of its justice and equity'.[6] This statement, though realistic, was unacceptable to both his Irish supporters in the Commons and to many Liberals. Even more egregious was his announcement in a speech at Bradford that the House of Lords would be the main issue at a future general election. Moreover, the immediate action would be the submission to the House of Commons of a resolution about the powers of the House of Lords. The cabinet was indignant about his proposition without any prior discussion, and he had to drop it due to their lack of support.

After attacks on the government from Labouchere and Dilke in the House of Commons, which he saw as an attack on himself, he called a cabinet meeting on 19 February 1894 and suddenly read a statement saying that 'no one had spoken in my defence' in a debate in the House of Commons. He said he had never sought to be prime minister and 'I renounce it to say the least without regret.'[7] The cabinet were taken by surprise but unanimously declared their support and said the government could not go on without him. Colleagues added to this by writing letters of support to him and even Harcourt said, at a meeting with Rosebery, that he would do anything to help. On 21 February, Rosebery quietly told the cabinet he had reconsidered, following 'assurances'. He wrote later that he knew he could not resign but this was a way of restoring discipline, which on the whole succeeded. Whether this was really his motivation cannot be known, though colleagues certainly thought that he meant the threat.

Although Rosebery claimed that he had a cabinet split on a number of issues, this seems a characteristically self-pitying overstatement. Some colleagues gave him credit for keeping the cabinet together, but Morley saw there was really no threat to it breaking apart because Harcourt, despite his lack of belief in Rosebery, did not want to bring the cabinet down, although he said he would not be displeased if this were to happen – a different proposition.

The cabinet did not get involved in the details of Harcourt's budget although some had qualms about the taxation of property. Perhaps they were in the same position as Rosebery feebly claimed for himself when writing his memorandum to Harcourt about it: '… my opinions may not be of great value; I only give them for what they are worth'.[8]

Members were divided on whether to abolish the Lords or reform it, as Rosebery wanted. His general election manifesto without discussion in cabinet promised Welsh disestablishment, curtailment of the liquor trade and one man one vote, but not action on the House of Lords. 'Rosebery talked about his



Rosebery: drawings by Sir Francis Carruthers Gould, 1890s?, and Harry Furniss, 1880s–1900s (both © National Portrait Gallery, London)

colleagues a good deal. He felt that they stood too much aloof from him, and that the cabinet did not cooperate enough. Each member went his own way.'[9] He seemed not to feel that he had a responsibility to draw them together.

Decision-making

He was not a good decision maker. On some major issues, he was forced in effect by the cabinet to retract what he wanted to do – over Egypt, over home rule, over the House of Lords.

The most crucial decision was required when Campbell Bannerman lost a vote in the House of Commons on the obscure issue of cordite supplies and was determined to resign. The vote could have been overturned but Rosebery decided his government should resign after fifteen months rather than dissolve or hold another vote. For once supported by Sir William, he persuaded his colleagues that a resignation en masse was the best course. This enabled Salisbury to take over on a temporary basis and to appear at the general election as the prime minister and win. (Rosebery's mistake was repeated by Balfour in 1905.)

His decision-making was affected by a number of personal defects of skill and behaviour: impatience, lack of proportion in dealing particularly with small issues, sensitivity to any criticism, dislike of any opposition to his views and yet a tendency towards hesitation as to what to do and an overall level of self-doubt. The latter was no doubt emphasised to him frequently by observing the ebullient and clear minded Harcourt in cabinet.

Developing effective relationships

It was of course crucial to have effective relationships with his cabinet colleagues, who had found him pleasant although somewhat distant as foreign secretary. Rosebery did not meet Harcourt outside cabinet meetings at all, until Rosebery proposed to resign. Similarly, colleagues who tried to invite him to spend time with them over lunch were rebuffed. He complained that ministers never came to see him but, if they did not take that initiative, he should have done.

The general view was that he was shy, aloof, and unwilling to see colleagues one to

one. His own sensitivity to criticism made it difficult to discuss problems with him. Rosebery had no close relationship with anyone in his cabinet with whom to mull over problems.

Rosebery in a characteristic witticism had said that he would 'rather serve under Harcourt than over him'.[10] His comment on the experience was: 'Sir William is not only not behaving like a colleague he is not behaving like a gentleman'.[11] They very rarely had significant disagreements face to face, largely because they rarely met individually. The most substantial disagreement was over Harcourt's famous 1894 budget in which he increased death duties and introduced the idea of differential rates on property values. Rosebery disagreed with the new property tax at death on the grounds that it would break up British society, would finally end the prospect of landed peers ever voting for the Liberal Party, and would do nothing for the working class. Rosebery's mild memo expressing these views was received with contempt and insult by Harcourt, who implied that Rosebery knew nothing about taxes, that he was speaking from self-interest as a landowner and was adopting Tory attitudes. The verdict of history has been that the only significant achievement of Rosebery's government was Harcourt's budget – a sour result for Rosebery.

Harcourt's attitude conveyed directly and through his son Loulou was that he had been cheated out of the role by someone who was incompetent. According to Birrell, 'he did not swallow the bitter pill he chewed it'.[12]

Although Harcourt's behaviour was racked by envy, ego and a desire to wound, Rosebery lacked the willingness and ability to at least try and create a better relationship. Perhaps he feared that he was inferior to Harcourt in everything except good manners. It required a fuller understanding of Harcourt's position, denied the premiership by a less qualified man; it was not enough simply to see him as an ill-mannered ungentlemanly bully. Rosebery ought to have demanded more meetings with Harcourt in which he should have exercised flattery. He needed to speak and listen with more empathy. Discussion with Harcourt and others before Rosebery promoted the House of Lords as the lead item in the next general election campaign might have avoided the demise of Rosebery's proposals.

The only other colleague with whom Rosebery had significant problems was John Morley, who bitterly regretted having been 'forced' to stay responsible for Ireland. He initially wrote a petulant letter to Rosebery saying that he would have nothing to do with anything except Irish business in the Commons, and would make no contribution outside the House. Rosebery's response to this was to write that he was being let down by his close political friend.

When Asquith remarked, to Rosebery, obviously with reference to Harcourt, that though touchy and difficult to manage Morley was at least a perfect gentleman, Rosebery retorted that he was 'not sure that perfect lady would not best describe him'.[13] Morley's frequent correspondence with Rosebery continued despite the early frostiness; of the 600 letters Morley wrote to him, 85 were sent while Rosebery was prime minister.

Whereas one problem of Rosebery's relationship with Harcourt was that they never met and conversed, Rosebery met and wrote to the queen frequently, asking for sympathy and to calm her objections. It is difficult to find a Liberal policy of which she approved, and there were many that she explicitly opposed. Rosebery had one policy to which he was personally attached: reform (not abolition) of the House of Lords. She was scandalised by his proposal. She wrote of it that 'she was pained to think that without consulting her, not to speak of not obtaining her sanction',[14] Rosebery had advocated such a change in the British Constitution. When Rosebery politely denied that she had the power of sanction,

she elevated the disagreement to a claim that he could not submit a resolution of that kind without the dissolution of parliament. Again, Rosebery denied this.

She was next appalled by the proposal for Welsh disestablishment. She refused to deliver the sentence in the Queen's Speech on this. When he said he did not want to be in conflict with her views, her response was, 'she does not object to Liberal measures which are not revolutionary.'[15] (She thought the death duties aspect of Harcourt's budget revolutionary). Rosebery even went so far to tell her that he did not agree with Harcourt's budget.

There is no indication that the queen read Bagehot's injunction in 1867 – that the monarch had the right to be consulted to advise and to warn. She acted outside these rights.

Communication skills

It is a relief to be able to record one skill of which Rosebery was fully seized. He was, his contemporaries thought, a great orator and, indeed, this was demonstrated by his ability to draw big crowds. Crewe described his oratory as: 'the earnestness, the humour, the inflexions of voice, most of all perhaps the answering thrill running through the audience like an electric current.'[16]

His wit got him into difficulty, especially with Queen Victoria. Her response was, 'he should take a more *serious* tone and be, if she may say so, less jocular which is hardly fitting a Prime Minister.'[17] His close confidant, Sir Edward Hamilton (a senior Treasury official), recorded a conversation with Rosebery in which he told Rosebery in relation to a particular speech, 'that he must try and drop the flippant style as Prime Minister, and also references to his holding the office of prime minister "unworthily", which have the appearance of mock humility. … He admitted the force of the criticism and took my remarks very well.'[18]

The House of Lords, where he had the support of a small minority of Liberal peers, was a less successful environment. It was, perhaps, his lack of experience of combative debate that caused him to make the debilitating error in responding to Salisbury on home rule referred to earlier.

The paradox about his oratorical skill, highly rated and important as it was at that time, is that he claimed to derive no pleasure from his success in it and frequently tried to avoid public meetings, though equally often finally agreeing to perform.

Changing the framework

He did not change the way in which the cabinet or individual ministers or other party of government carried out their duties. There was still no formal record of cabinet discussions or decisions, though these were revealed in part in his weekly letter to the queen.

Vision

There is nothing to show that Rosebery had any longer-term view than that embodied in his initial belief that he should help the Liberal government to survive. His Liberal Imperialist views, supported by a minority of cabinet, were not of a new future, but of modest expansion of Britain's interest in Africa. He developed no detailed policy or practical strategy on the House of Lords. He had no clear ideas on what should be done about Ireland except that nothing could be done without a majority of English MPs. What President George Bush, many years later, described as 'the vision thing', was not something to which Liberal or Unionist politicians subscribed – you had to be a Socialist to be interested in propounding a different future. When his proposal about the House of Lords sank into the sands of indifference, his declared future priorities were Welsh disestablishment, temperance reform and one man one vote – pragmatic single policies.

Tacitus wrote about the Emperor Galba: 'by everyone's consent capable of reigning, if

only he had not reigned.'[19] Rosebery is the only relatively modern prime minister to proclaim beforehand his unfitness for the role – and moreover to prove himself right.

Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman

War secretary under Gladstone and Rosebery, C-B (his preferred nomenclature) led the Liberals in the Commons for eight years. Personally acceptable to Edward VII and to Liberal MPs, he was the inevitable choice to take over from Balfour when he resigned. He secured a massive majority in the subsequent general election. As leader of a fissiparous party, C-B faced the possible return of Rosebery, who, while saying he had no further interest in politics, kept reappearing with significant speeches. Home rule and the Boer War caused division with other Liberals, especially the group of Liberal Imperialists led by Asquith, Haldane and Grey; some wishing Rosebery to return. But these divisions did not in fact destroy C-B's government, as Balfour hoped.

Selecting the cabinet

Asquith, Grey and Haldane had met in September 1905 and agreed the Relugas Compact. This was a unique effort to persuade C-B to act as prime minister in the Lords. They agreed roles for themselves and believed he would not be effective in the Commons; they would not join his government unless he agreed.

C-B had been warned about the plot and told Asquith, 'I hear that it has been suggested by that ingenious person Richard Burdon Haldane that I should go to the House of Lords, a place for which I have neither liking, training or ambition.'[20] With his wife Charlotte's encouragement, he refused to move. C-B had decided early to make Sir Robert Reid lord chancellor – the role wanted by Haldane. Unlike Haldane, he was experienced in government and was a radical and close personal friend to C-B.

C-B first secured Asquith as chancellor of the exchequer, giving him time to develop reasons to accept, and then used Asquith as an intermediary with Grey and Haldane, who accepted the Foreign Office and War Office respectively. Haldane claimed of the War Office, 'it is exactly what I myself longed for',[21] apparently forgetting Relugas and what he had told his wife. C-B allowed himself mild enjoyment over Haldane taking the job 'nobody would touch with a pole'. Previous differences between Liberal Imperialists and C-B had no influence on selection.

So, was Regulas all sound and fury signifying in the end nothing? Haldane's view was, 'Asquith, Grey and I stood together, they were forced to take us on our own terms.[22] C-B did not go to the Lords. Asquith, C-B's choice for chancellor without the Relugas threat, did not become leader of the House of Commons and effectively joint prime minister. Haldane did not become lord chancellor (but was a great war secretary). The only success was Grey, not C-B's original choice, receiving the Foreign Office.

Asquith, in what one can only kindly presume was a fit of self-delusion in old age, claimed, 'looking back on the whole affair, in which from first to last there was nothing in the nature of an intrigue.'[23] In his biography of Grey, Otte bizarrely claims that 'it cannot be said that their plans had failed'.[24]

In contrast C-B's accurate comment after Grey's final acceptance was, 'so they all came in – no conditions – there they are'.[25] He had enhanced his authority, which they had tried to diminish. He did very little direct persuasion – he let them persuade themselves. But the greatest potential influence on the selection of a cabinet failed.

There were no other significant problems over the membership of the cabinet. Morley, who would still have liked to be foreign secretary, accepted the India Office. Rosebery received no discussion let alone an offer. Dilke, an amorous republican, disliked by C-B, was

the only significant omission. Two important appointments were John Burns as the first working-class member of a cabinet, and Lloyd George the fiery Welsh radical as president of the Board of Trade.

Managing the cabinet

Unlike Rosebery, who had a major and unreconciled rival, C-B had no rival constantly undermining him. To the contrary, he had three previous dissidents – Liberal Imperialists – working well with him. Disagreement on constitutional issues in South Africa revolved around the cabinet's lawyers, not Liberal Imperialism. Views on the likely competence of C-B as prime minister changed through experience. Haldane, who C-B had believed to be the origin of his problems in opposition, congratulated him on his success in September 1907, from the political grave in which C-B thought he had placed him.

Haldane wrote later, 'in truth in those days C-B neither much liked or understood me. Later on, I was to find him an admirable Prime Minister to work under.'[26] After C-B resigned, Grey commented, 'I have long recognised that the difficulties that I made when the government was being formed was short sighted and ill informed.'[27]

Haldane was critical of the way in which the cabinet worked. He wrote that the cabinet was:

> a congested body of about 20 in which the powerful orator secured too much attention. The Prime Minister knew too little of the details of what had to be got through to be able to apportion the time required for discussion. Consequently, instead of ruling the cabinet and regulating the length of discussion he left things too much to themselves. We had no Secretary, no agenda and no minutes.[28]

Although an accurate description, this was published after he experienced quite different arrangements under Ramsay MacDonald in 1924, following the Lloyd George cabinet reforms. He also thought that too much was left to individual initiatives. But Birrell, responsible for education, sought C-B's counsel frequently. This was a reflection of a style of C-B's which was, to some eyes, over-delegating, but to others was one of C-B's good features.

Writing in 1909 Sir Almeric Fitzroy (secretary to the Privy Council) wrote, 'it is the opinion of those best qualified to judge that Asquith's control of the cabinet is less than Sir H Campbell Bannerman used to exercise.'[29] Wilson thought that C-B was more successful than Asquith in controlling his colleagues and preventing their differences getting out of hand. But he gives no references for this opinion.

Decision-making

We have only the recollections of Margot, Asquith's wife, as to Asquith's version of party discussions – recollections perhaps more dramatic and colourful than the reality. C-B's tactic of constantly using Asquith to pass his views on to Grey and Haldane, and of giving Asquith the task of actually finally offering them their jobs, was a particularly clever feature of his decision-making.

C-B's powers were considerably enhanced when the Liberals won a huge victory in the 1906 general election. But, in the Lords, there were 479 Unionist and Liberal Unionist peers against 88 Liberals, some, like Rosebery, of uncertain adherence. The majority had no hesitation in vetoing or emasculating a succession of Liberal bills.

C-B insisted that all the main elements of the constitution for South Africa previously devised by the Unionist government would be abandoned in favour of real self-government. He pushed his version through cabinet, rejecting the views of Asquith and a cabinet committee. There are different versions of how the constitution was agreed in cabinet.

Lord Riddell, speaking to Lloyd George in April 1913, asked rhetorically, 'Who was responsible? Campbell-Bannerman or Asquith?'. Lloyd George, 'Oh C-B he deserves all the credit. It was all done in a ten-minute speech at the cabinet – the most dramatic, the most important ten-minute speech ever delivered in our time. He brushed aside all the checks and safeguards devised by Asquith, Winston and Loreburn.'[30] Churchill agreed it was C-B whose views prevailed. Asquith's self-serving different version in 1912 was 'the notion that C-B was opposed in cabinet, or won it over in relation to the Transvaal settlement is a ridiculous fiction. ... Between ourselves he had little or nothing to do with the matter and never bothered his head about it.'[31]

In 1923 Asquith claimed that C-B had 'slept placidly' through the meetings at which South Africa's problems were discussed. C-B's version to Charlotte, 'Well ma'am they've agreed and I've got it through.'[32] Historians differ on C-B's role. It is possible to reconcile Asquith's demeaning comments about C-B: C-B had little involvement in the actual details of the later committee that subsequently worked out the constitution.

C-B had been suddenly decisive in forcing his own views on some bills. On the Trades Disputes Bill, for example, he stood up in the Commons and accepted an amended version of part of it, contrary to what his own minister had proposed.

He was in favour of women's suffrage and would have voted in favour on the Women's Enfranchisement Bill in March 1907. However, he could not commit the government, which was split on this issue – especially with Asquith an obdurate opponent. In May 1906 he had met a deputation of 300 women and told them that 'they had made out before the country a conclusive and irrefutable case' and 'should keep on pestering'.[33]

C-B had a long record of criticising the House of Lords as a Unionist weapon; and

Campbell-Bannerman: drawings by Sir Francis Carruthers Gould, and Sir Leslie Ward, 1890s–1900s (both © National Portrait Gallery, London)

accused Balfour of 'open treachery' in using it as such. The 'second chamber is being utilised

as a mere annexe of the Unionist Party.'[34] Balfour had responded to his defeat in the general election by saying that the Unionists should still control whether in power or opposition, the destinies of this great empire. C-B did not accept a cabinet committee proposal for joint sessions to resolve differences. His own proposal was for a suspensory veto – i.e. bills could be delayed for a period of time but eventually would go through on the Commons majority. There was no prospect of the Lords agreeing with this.

Increasingly war like statements from the Kaiser and others led to C-B authorising preliminary discussion between British and French generals about a possible joint action should Germany take offensive action, but he told the French prime minister that there was no agreement on what would happen in a war between France and Germany.

There were no proposals on Irish home rule – not even to take action step by step as he had indicated before the general election. He did enough through discussion to persuade the Irish Nationalists to continue to support him – for fear of something worse.

Those who had thought him indolent and therefore incapable of being a decisive prime minster must have been surprised by the interventions and decisions recorded above. The fact that he displayed willingness to compromise, having listened to others, was part of the skill through which he avoided not just confrontation but serious opposition by colleagues.

Developing effective relationships

C-B was bluff, kindly and affable. Relationships were also easier because he was more effective than his critics expected. Asquith had never been as critical of C-B as Grey and Haldane were, and C-B managed a potentially difficult situation very well. Asquith chaired cabinet when C-B was unable to do so. In March 1908, C-B told Asquith that he was a 'wonderful colleague, so loyal so disinterested, so able. … You are the greatest gentleman I have ever met.'[35]

Morley, the prickliest of his cabinet, developed a positive view. 'As head of a cabinet he was cool acute strangely candid attentive to affairs considerate.' He wrote further that C-B 'whilst capable of extremely shrewd criticism even on friendly colleagues and their infirmities, was spontaneously kind hearted and helpful.'[36] His view about the cabinet was 'we have been the most absolutely harmonious and amicable that ever was known.'[37] (Morley had been in cabinets under Gladstone and Rosebery.)

Grey said of C-B that 'he made no distinction in personal relations, between those who had helped him and those who had made difficulties for him'.[38]

Perhaps in response to Edward VII's concerns and perhaps because he felt that they had gone too far in their criticism of the Lords, C-B wrote mildly reproving letters to Lloyd George and Churchill (but he wrote to the king emphasising Lloyd George's skill in handling the rail strike in 1907). Churchill in December 1912 wrote that 'Campbell Bannerman's was a kindly manner which caused the applicant going away feeling that his request would if possible be granted and then if it was refused the Premier would regret refusal more than anyone else.'[39]

Outside cabinet, C-B's main relationship with a strong political effect had been with his wife Charlotte. C-B's declaration that he needed to get his wife Charlotte's approval as the 'final arbiter' on whether to go to the House of Lords may have been a convenient delay in responding to Asquith, or a reflection of a remaining uncertainty – or his real belief. Though this was the most memorable intervention by any twentieth-century prime minister's wife, she does not seem to have been a significant influence afterwards except unintentionally, in that her continued ill health

distracted him and in her final illnesses and death actually prevented him from fully acting as prime minister.

In terms of his officials, he talked most frequently to Sinclair, his parliamentary private secretary. This seems to be mostly a case of Sinclair listening and occasionally recording C-B's views rather than himself influencing C-B.

C-B had to deal with a less awesome figure than Queen Victoria in Edward VII, who involved himself quite properly in whether C-B should go to the House of Lords, which he favoured but did not pursue. While the king did not like the policies of the Liberal Party, he was never, unlike George V, in the position of actually having to have to sign a bill reducing the power of the House of Lords. His problems with C-B were often about communication, and he complained that C-B never consulted him. C-B's reports on cabinet meetings were certainly perfunctory, lacking detail to explain what happened. They differed on South Africa, the Trade Disputes Bill, education and suffragettes – perhaps the 'warn' part of his role.

C-B was characteristically emollient in dealing with the King's criticisms of speeches by Lloyd George, writing that they were after all responding to vehement Unionist comments – and that possibly Lloyd George had made his speech in Welsh and had been mistranslated. The king particularly objected to a Lloyd George speech asking whether the country was to be governed by the king and Lords or king and people. 'He objected to bringing the sovereign's name in these violent tirades.'[40]

He objected to some of C-B's nominations for peerages – but in the end accepted them. C-B recommended Florence Nightingale as the first female to receive the Order of Merit: the king delayed this.

The king had broken convention by attending Charlotte's funeral at Marienbad. He also broke normal bounds by visiting 10 Downing Street to see C-B in his dying days – he was told C-B was too ill to see him. And when he accepted C-B's resignation, he wrote that, 'It has always been a great pleasure and satisfaction to me to do business with you at all times.'[41]

Communication skills

One of the reasons the Relugas trio wanted to place C-B in the House of Lords was that he was a poor performer against A. J. Balfour, whose skills enabling him to show how many saints could dance on the point of a needle had often secured no successful response from C-B.

C-B impressed more as prime minister than in opposition, especially his performance in the House of Commons. Backed by a large majority of Liberal MPs (in contrast to his experience before 1906), he had a much more sympathetic audience. He responded brilliantly to Balfour's first intervention: C-B's unplanned but successful response was, 'The Right Honourable Gentleman is like the Bourbons. He has learnt nothing. He comes back to this new House of Commons with the same airy graces – the same subtle dialectics – and the same light and frivolous way of dealing with great questions.' C-B described the questions that Balfour posed as 'utterly futile, non-sensical and misleading. I say enough of his foolery.'[42] This attack was fuelled by C-B's dislike of Balfour. Turning Balfour's debating strength into a weakness was a masterly display of skill which ended Balfour's dominance.

He had few of the same platform arts to excite passion as Rosebery, Harcourt and, later, Lloyd George did. He used an accurate image in a speech on 12 February 1907 in which he compared the House of Lords to a watchdog which was sometimes somnolent and sometimes ferociously active. (Lloyd George later described the Lords as a poodle.) The Irish journalist and MP T. P. O'Connor wrote, 'despite his failings I know of no man in the House of Commons who can make a speech more lucid, more choice and lucid in diction'.[43]

Changing the framework

The most dramatic change to the framework of government would be revision of the powers and membership of the House of Lords. C-B's idea, of suspensory veto, was not acted on until Asquith's Parliament Act of 1911.

He required cabinet ministers to provide details of, and most to resign from, their directorships in companies, a potential source of corruption.

C-B and his cabinet agreed with the idea that MPs should be paid £300 a year, but they were told by the chancellor, Asquith, that there was no money available.

Vision

Haldane thought that C-B was 'not identified in the public mind with any fresh ideas for indeed he had none',[44] and described him as a dear old Tory; but other ministers did not take this view – which was contradicted by the policies he pushed.

C-B's view on the crucial issue of Irish home rule was that it should be put into effect through a sequence of steps towards a final achievement. This was not visionary; it was an accommodation of political reality in relation to the House of Lords.

When he gained his huge majority in 1906, he did engage in something close to a visionary approach in one area, when he insisted that the arrangements with the various parts of South Africa should be based on the view that, if you were magnanimous, you were more likely to achieve a successful policy, and in addition there should be representative government even though that excluded the coloured population.

C-B was a politician interested in pragmatic approaches to the future, not a visionary about a new society. ■

Alan Mumford is the author of several articles in the *Journal of Liberal History*, including 'Five Liberal Women and politics' (issue 107, summer 2020), 'Asquith: Friendship, Love and Betrayal' (issue 99, summer 2018) and several book reviews. Part 2 of this article, on the political skills of Asquith and Lloyd George, will be published in our spring issue.

1 D. Brack, R. Ingham and T. Little (eds.), *British Liberal Leaders* (Biteback Publishing, 2015).

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6 L. McKinstry, *Rosebery: Statesman in Turmoil* (John Murray, 2005), p. 313.

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8 Ibid., p. 343.

9 D. Brooks, *The Destruction of Lord Rosebery: The Diaries of Sir Edward Hamilton* (The Hebridean Press, 1986), p. 243.

10 McKinstry, *Rosebery,* p. 287.

11 Jackson, *Morley*, p. 260.

12 P. Jackson, *Harcourt and Son* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), p. 249.

13 Jackson, *Morley of Blackburn,* p. 260.

14 McKinstry, *Rosebery*, p. 329.

15 The Marquis of Crewe, *Lord Rosebery,* vol. ii (John Murray, 1931), p. 443

16 Ibid., p. 663.

17 McKinstry, *Rosebery,* p. 422.

18 Brooks, *The Destruction of Lord Rosebery*, p. 185.

19 A. Jay (ed.), *Lend Me Your Ears* (4th edn., Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 304.

20 J. Wilson, *C.B.: Life of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman* (Constable, 1973), p. 432.

21 J. G. Hall and D. F. Martin, *Haldane* (Barry Rose Law Publishers, 2019), p. 185.

22 H. H. Asquith, *Memories and Reflections*, vol. i (Cassell, 1928).

23 A. S. Waugh, *Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman* (Austin Macauley Publishers, 2019), p. 211.

24 T. G. Otte, *Stateman of Europe* (Allen Lane, 2020), p. 240.

25 R. B. Haldane, *Richard Burdon Haldane: An Autobiography* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1929), p. 170.

26 Viscount Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, vol. i (Hodder and Stoughton, 1925), p. 697.

Continued on page 55

the curiosities of the scheme was how the guide for visitors made considerable reference to the long-demolished nearby Tudor great house of Gidea Hall, while all but ignoring its eighteenth-century neo-classical replacement.

That point is one of many snippets of information that constitute a particular delight of this book. We learn, for example, that Margot Asquith, wife of Liberal Prime Minister H. H. Asquith, commissioned the first barn conversion, in the modern sense of a repairing an agricultural building without much decoration or embellishment, for an outbuilding of the family's smart new home at The Wharf in Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire. We learn, too, that Margot, in her voluminous autobiographies and diaries, fails to mention the architect of both house and barn conversion, Walter Cave, with whom she must have collaborated closely. Architects remained tradesmen not artists.

To conclude, Professor Brittain-Catlin's enthusiasm for his subject is apparent and infectious. It is no criticism of his book to say it is discursive and thematic rather than an attempt to put forward a closely argued thesis or to write a comprehensive guide to the architecture of the period. It certainly inspired this reviewer to want to visit many of the buildings described here. Yet there disappointment lies. For the most part, the properties featured in the book, while generously proportioned and beyond the aspirations of most people, are homes not palaces, and remain in private ownership where they have not been converted to business premises or hotels. They will not be found in National Trust or English Heritage listings. This makes the reader grateful for the inclusion here of outstanding modern colour photography by Robin Forster, bringing the text vividly to life, enabling us to see what we are reading about. I am sure that any *Journal of Liberal History* readers whose interests stretch beyond political history to architectural, environmental and cultural topics will find this book a delight. ■

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'The Political Skills of Four Liberal Prime Ministers'
(continued from page 20)

27 Haldane, *Autobiography*, p. 216.
28 Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 500.
29 Ibid., p. 482.
30 Ibid., p. 483.
31 Ibid., p. 484
32 Ibid., p. 510.
33 Ibid., p. 563.
34 M. Asquith, *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith*, vol. ii (Penguin, 1936), p. 73.
35 J Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 432.
36 Ibid., p. 145.
37 Grey, *Twenty-Five Years*, p. 65.
38 Lord Riddell, *More Papers from my Diary* (Country Life, 1934), p. 109.
39 Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 556.
40 J. A. Spender, *The Life and Times of the Right Honourable Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman*, vol. ii (Hodder and Stoughton, 1923), p. 389.
41 Wilson, *C.B.*, p. 479.
42 Spender, *Life and Times*, p. 513.
43 Haldane, *Autobiography*, p. 156.
44 Ibid., p. 156.