Liberal Prime Ministers

A comparison of PMs' political skills; by Alan Mumford

The Political Skills of Four Li
Part 2: Asquith and Lloyd Ge

THIS ARTICLE AIMS to analyse the leadership qualities of the last four Liberal prime ministers, through an examination of the extent to which they possessed six crucial skills. Part 1, published in *Journal of Liberal History* 129 (winter 2025–26) looked at Lord Rosebery and Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. Part 2 similarly assesses H.H. Asquith and David Lloyd George and also provides a comparative review of all four Liberal Prime Ministers.

Herbert Henry Asquith

Herbert Henry Asquith, home secretary under Gladstone and chancellor of the exchequer for Campbell-Bannerman was, on 5 April 1908, appointed prime minister with the blessing of the dying Sir Henry, and the approval of his colleagues and King Edward VII.

Selecting the cabinet

Asquith had no rivals, no factions to placate, no political debts to consider. His closest

Herbert Henry Asquith (1852–1928) (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

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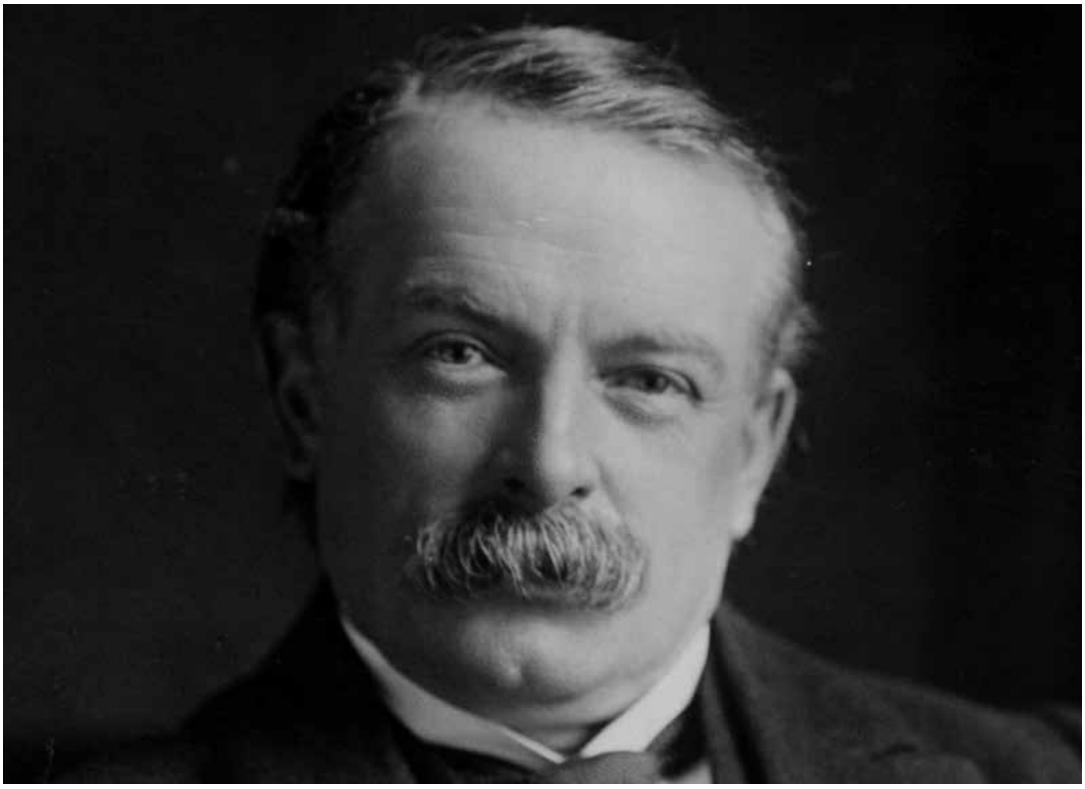
friends Grey and Haldane were in jobs they enjoyed. He demonstrated skill in giving the hungriest young ministers, Lloyd George and Churchill, meaty jobs (chancellor of the exchequer and president of the Board of Trade) in which they developed a radical social agenda. His later choice of Churchill for the Home Office and Admiralty recognised that the value he gave to those jobs was more important than the time he devoted in cabinet. Asquith kept the majority of CB's cabinet. He removed only two non-performing peers.

The big changes happened when Asquith took the decision to bring in Unionists in April 1915. The difficulty in removing Kitchener led to a skilful partial remedy: Lloyd George was given the task of heading a new Ministry of Munitions. Asquith, less concerned with the commitment of Unionists to the war than with his political interests, then kept them out of the most

David Lloyd George (1863–1945) (© National Portrait Gallery, London)



significant jobs, an exercise in partisan power not skill.

Asquith wrote to the king's secretary that competence was not the only criterion – some were safer in than out of office. Unionists decided that Haldane (lord chancellor) and Churchill had to go. He showed no skill in agreeing to sack Haldane, and even less in carrying it out. Jenkins' verdict: 'It was the most uncharacteristic fault of Asquith's entire career. He capitulated sadly and self critically.'[1] It would indeed be uncharacteristic if Asquith was self-critical.

Managing the cabinet

As UK involvement in a European war grew near, Loulou Harcourt, colonial secretary, calculated that there were potentially ten members of a peace party in cabinet on 27 July; but only two cabinet ministers resigned in August 1914 over the war – Morley and Burns. Asquith persuaded others, even Simon to stay – a major demonstration of his skill. (Only Simon, Carson and Churchill resigned during the war.)

Asquith was described by colleagues as well organised personally, but this skill did not extend to the way he managed the cabinet. There was no agenda and he exercised little control. (His answer to Bonar Law's suggestions for improvement in February 1916 was that this was a counsel of perfection.) He was initially described by Hankey as an admirable chairman of the cabinet. But a good chairman usually does more than sum up discussions. Austen Chamberlain, who joined the coalition cabinet in 1915, gave the most detailed criticism of this. Asquith 'failed to direct (the cabinet) discussion or to show the qualities which the chairman of any committee be it the cabinet or a board of guardians must possess if its discussions are to be business-like.' Probably as a result, Chamberlain explained that 'when he at last intervened with a statement that "now that is decided we had better pass on to …", there would be a general cry "but <u>what</u> has been decided" and discussion would begin all over again.'[2] Other cabinet ministers felt the same: Hobhouse, Crawford, Haldane, Lloyd George wrote similar criticisms.

Hankey (secretary to the imperial war cabinet and then the war cabinet) recorded few interventions by Asquith, who himself recorded few in his letters to Venetia Stanley. Charles Hobhouse, a junior cabinet minister, kept diaries and observed Asquith in cabinet from 1911 to 1915.[3] Analysis by this author of the Hobhouse diaries shows that in the period 1912–15 he records twenty-three interventions by Asquith in cabinet, with a slightly higher proportion from July 1914. There may have been more interventions not recorded, but this figure shows the lack of direction of discussion, confirmed by Asquith's letters to Venetia Stanley. Hobhouse recorded a meeting on 24 June 1913 in which Churchill spoke on education, finance, the navy, aviation and electioneering. Asquith commented to Venetia that Churchill's views were pure cynicism defended by sophistry – but he had not intervened. Asquith wrote that Churchill took up two and a quarter hours of a three-hour cabinet on 8 December 1913. After years of his complaints about Churchill's behaviour, not to Churchill himself, but in letters to Venetia, he wrote that he had to talk to him for his own good – a task that he said he did not relish or excel at. This is also a very rare example of Asquith observing himself in action.

Silence was a feature of his management, intervening at the end of discussions with his conclusions. Churchill wrote that 'in council he never spoke a word if he could get his way without it. He sat like the great judge he was, the case deployed on every side, now and then interjecting a question.' Without evidence, Churchill claimed that Asquith 'gave matters a turn towards the goal he wished to reach'.[4] Asquith's letters to Venetia Stanley do not indicate such actions. Churchill referred to cabinet debate on naval estimates in 1914

when he received Asquith's strong silent support (an illogical conjunction).

In a cabinet full of politicians of substance and ability there were sometimes strong differences – for example in 1914, over the number of dreadnoughts to be built. Threats of resignations from Morley (frequently), Lloyd George, McKenna and Churchill sprang up from time to time, but Asquith resolved them all. Although his interventions were few, he secured cabinet support over the 1909 Budget, the 1912 Parliament Act and declaration of war in 1914. Asquith believed he was effective at securing necessary compromises, devising a form of face-saving words.

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His non-interventionist style worked well with effective ministers before the war, dealing with often familiar though very difficult problems. It did not work when coordinated action was needed in the novel circumstances of war. Delegation is a crucial managerial skill; Asquith carried it to excess.

When appointing Churchill to the cabinet, Asquith had quoted Gladstone as saying that 'the prime essential for a prime minister is to be a good butcher.'[5] Asquith was rarely a butcher. After the first cabinet selections, only Bryce and Seeley were removed. Churchill himself and Haldane suffered the cleaver. Asquith was fortunate that high-quality ministers made butchery unnecessary.

Decision-making

In making decisions Asquith was rarely burdened by having formed his own views in advance. Contemporaries noted that he relied on others for ideas. He decried the likelihood of conflict as late as 24 July; but was finally firm in his decision to declare war. In the early days of the war, Hankey was very much impressed by his clear, orderly mind, coolness, courage and ability to seize on essentials.

His management during the war grew increasingly flaccid. 'Wait and see', a specific response during a home rule debate, became characteristic of his approach. Lloyd George told Riddell that the prime minister was treating the war just like peace-time issues. He recorded discussions in his letter to Ventia Stanley, but not any reflection on how decisions might have been improved. Asquith wrote, in a rare example of reflection, about conscription to Sylvia Henley (the epistolary replacement for Venetia Stanley): 'Things have now straightened out, as they generally do, if you give them time and don't strike before the hour.'[6] But self-congratulation is not a useful form of reflection. This philosophy was inappropriate over the creation of peers in 1909 and did not work in Ireland.

Bonar Law rarely offered advice, but the best was when he wrote, in a letter to Asquith in February 1917, that in war it is necessary not only to be active but to be seen to be active. There was no response. Asquith's self-description before the war had been that he concealed energy under lethargy – it was indeed well concealed.

Lloyd George originally thought Asquith unequalled at giving speedy and accurate decisions but later compared him unfavourably with A. J. Balfour who 'possesses a searching, probing and penetrating mind – always probing here and investigating there – very different from Asquith whose mind is entirely judicial'.[7] The requirements in war made his approach more injurious. Balfour saw him as

an arbitrator, never heard him originating or suggesting.

Grey thought differently: 'the inference that a man who is prone to put off decisions is incapable of making it [sic] is quite untrue of Asquith. He was not disposed to go and meet the occasion and take it by the forelock, but when it came to him, he faced and grasped it, and when a decision was taken there was no hesitation or compromise in announcing it, no wavering in standing by it.'[8]

Asquith's famous calm and imperturbability (or unwillingness to decide) were on full display when responding to the proposal from Lloyd George and Bonar Law, in November 1916, for a small war committee under Lloyd George. His response was that he was 'not altogether opposed'. Characteristically lethargic, he went off to Dover for the weekend and made no attempt to find out the views of Unionists other than Bonar Law. He finally rejected the proposal: he would not accept being an 'irresponsible spectator of the war'. Nor would he serve under Bonar Law, Lloyd George or Balfour.

Developing effective relationships

Jenkins, unusual among biographers in this, gives Asquith's comments on his main colleagues.[9] Following discussions with Montagu, he sent to Venetia, on 26 February 1915, a list ranking his cabinet ministers. Crewe was top, followed by Grey then McKenna. Lloyd George, Churchill and Kitchener followed. The ranking of McKenna, then in the Home Office, was extraordinarily high, compared with his assessment of him in 1912 and 1913. Since he rarely intervened to disagree with a colleague's view, he maintained pleasant relationships even with the rhetorical Lloyd George and Churchill. (Haldane described discussions with Churchill as like arguing with a brass band.) High-level self-belief sustained him, and most of his colleagues (except for Morley) were slightly in awe of him. Asquith's closest political relationship was with Grey. They were totally in tune on foreign affairs, and mostly on domestic issues. Asquith had said, while approaching the war, that if Grey resigned, he would go as well. He commented several times on the calm and good advice that Crewe gave him; but Crewe rarely disagreed with him. He probably consulted both Grey and Crewe before deciding on a coalition.

The close early relationship he had with Haldane diminished, though he supported Haldane in his crucial reforms of the War Office.

Asquith had an occasionally amused and sometimes annoyed reaction to the combative speeches of Churchill and Lloyd George. He admired Churchill's fecundity of ideas, but wrote that, for all his wonderful gifts, he would never get to the top because he did not inspire trust.

The relationship with Lloyd George was good up to the early months of 1915. Asquith admired his energy of mind, but thought him devoid of either perspective or judgement. Lloyd George was fulsomely grateful to Asquith for his support over the Marconi shares scandal, the 1910 Budget and insurance. He was grateful to Lloyd George's successful resolution of the rail strike in 1911. He was indifferent to the plots supposedly initiated by Lloyd George against him, though saying Lloyd George had given him more worry than any other colleague. He seemed unaware of the strength of Lloyd George's views about the conduct of the war until November 1916.

Before the war, Asquith tried to balance McKenna's wish for increased naval expenditure against the 'economists', including Lloyd George, in the cabinet who did not want to spend the money. In later years, he had a close a personal relationship with McKenna, perhaps difficult to understand in terms of McKenna's contribution, except that McKenna and his wife were highly valued social companions of himself and his wife Margot.

Asquith and Lloyd George as cartoonists saw them (by Sir Francis Carruthers Gould, 1900s or 1910s (Asquith) and Harry Furniss, 1880s–1900s (Lloyd George) (© National Portrait Gallery, London))

Unlike Rosebery, he had no male confidante to whom he wrote, and revealed little of himself to his colleagues. The exception was Edwin Montagu, whom he had mentored in his early political life, took as his parliamentary secretary, and placed in the cabinet. Montagu was a good source of information, though he concealed the intensity of his feelings for Venetia.

With Balfour he had a fairly cool relationship, with an element of admiration for Balfour's subtlety. There was no relationship with Bonar Law except mutual hostility until they were forced to engage with each other for the 1915 coalition. Asquith's low opinion of Law did not change (though Law until latter stages approved of Asquith as prime minister).

The overarching factor in all his political relationships was his belief in his own superiority, meaning he did not have to think too much about what other people thought. A comment about the effortless superiority of the Balliol man was felt by contemporaries to fit him.

Margot Asquith was strongly interested in political affairs, but created more stress for her husband than relaxation. Her occasional shafts of insight were probably overwhelmed by her other misdirected advice.[10]

His relationship with Venetia Stanley, an aristocrat thirty-five years younger than him, to whom he wrote about 560 letters between 1912 and 1915, was intense and probably therapeutic. He became obsessed with her. His occasional assertions that she influenced his decisions were romantic not factual. The canard, still frequently repeated, that he frequently wrote to her during meetings was discredited by the Brocks in their superbly edited collection. They recorded fifteen such letters over three years while on duty in the Commons or in meetings in cabinet.[11] He revealed not only his emotional dependence on her but secrets, dangerously so during the war. The letters can be seen either as a release from the realities of his political life, or as a distraction in terms of the efficiency of his working day. The letters frequently referred to the number of times during the day in which he thought about her, but he may well have been over stating this in order to emphasise

his attachment to her. This was in contrast to his avoidance of public display and a positive dislike for attempts to mould public opinion other than through logic and facts.

Asquith was deeply affected when she announced her engagement to Montagu. Whether the timing of this event – only a few days before he decided to enter into a coalition – influenced his decisions is a matter of dispute. The fact that Asquith engaged in an arrangement about government posts which wholly disfavoured Bonar Law has been claimed as evidence for the view that he was not badly affected. An alternative take is that the wholly uncharacteristic sudden decision to form a coalition, despite opposing the idea a few days earlier, and the fact that this wholly partisan rearrangement could have been approached in a far more collegiate way, suggests otherwise.

Asquith dealt with two monarchs and had a good personal relationship with both, despite the difficulties arising from their conservative values and beliefs. His relationship with Edward VII, centred on the monarch's disapproval of Lloyd George's 1909 Budget and his unwillingness to agree even the prospect of creating enough Liberal peers to pass the Budget. Problems with George V arose from speeches made by Churchill and Lloyd George, particularly over the House of Lords. Asquith's commented, 'I have had considerable experience, perhaps a longer experience than any man in this House, of being taken to task for actions of those who were my subordinates or colleagues.'[12] Hobhouse noted that Asquith had said he had read a memo to George V about the monarchy distancing itself from political quarrels, especially on the Lords, and believed it had been effective.

Asquith's prevarication and dissimulation over the creation of peers in order to pass the 1909 Budget was not an example of political skill. George V wanted a general election to validate the proposed Home Rule Bill, a Unionist proposition that Asquith dismissed. Asquith described him as very pleasant to work with, though adding that it was unfortunate that he had had so little education.

Asquith, before 1914, had not had to deal with his generals or admirals. He felt he had to agree with their strategies because he had no knowledge with which to contradict them on the Western Front and the Dardanelles. Nor surprisingly the absence of serious challenge through analytical questioning led to an easy relationship.

Communication skills

Asquith was much admired as a speaker at public meetings and in the House of Commons, in set speeches and responding to debate. In speeches, his strengths were in his calm, logical, rational approach – he neither used emotion himself nor created it in listeners. His speech on the need to go to war to the House of Commons on 6 August received compliments all round, especially from A. J. Balfour. However, Lloyd George's Queen's Hall address on 9 September led to 2.5 million copies being produced. Asquith did not engage in the emotional hyperbolic language of Lloyd George.

He was not the author of memorable phrases: the main exception – 'wait and see' – became an unfortunate attachment to him.

His great failure in communication was in how he handled the press. He told Margot that he hated all journalists – 'a vile profession'. Lloyd George told Riddell that Asquith was contemptuous of journalists who he thought ignorant, spiteful and unpatriotic. He blamed them as one of the causes of his resignation in 1916. Margot's belief, in July 1916, when Asquith was under even heavier attack than usual in the press, was, 'I know that Henry is as indifferent to press as St. Paul's cathedral is to gnats.'[13] But his government needed effective treatment for the gnats' bites. He actually read only a few selected papers – *The Times*,

the Liberal-supporting *Westminster Gazette*, the *Daily News* and the *Daily Chronicle*. But according to Margot he did not read the leading articles.

Asquith had not taken on board the huge increase in literacy and the arrival of relatively cheap and less serious newspapers, with large circulations. For a long time, he gave practically no interviews to editors. He did meet Spender, the editor of the *Westminster Gazette* – a sympathiser and supporter. This had a tiny circulation compared with the *Daily Mail* or even *The Times*. When advised to meet Northcliffe, owner of the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*, in July 1914, his response was, 'I hate and distrust all his works and will never make any overture to him.'[14]

Changing the framework

To manage the war, he used initially the imperial war council set up by A. J. Balfour, and went through several alternative versions and titles. However, whether council or committee, the constant feature was that the membership was always too large, functions were undefined and that its remit was to produce recommendations to cabinet, not to enforce action. When Austen Chamberlain suggested the need to give power to a war committee, Asquith would have nothing to do with this proposal insisting that constitutionally responsibility must remain with the larger cabinet and was horrified at the idea of an outsider taking minutes.

This argument does not appear in his response to Bonar Law/Lloyd George's proposals in December 1916, where the determining issue was his own demand to remain in charge of the war rather than any constitutional imperative.

Vision

Jenkins, who found so much to admire in Asquith, wrote that 'it was not an adventurous mind which breached new frontiers.'[15] Morley said of him: 'although he discussed every proposition advanced by others with great intelligence and force … he never submitted ideas of his own.'[16] He had no grand picture of what he thought he should help to create, unlike Lloyd George's mission as chancellor to eliminate poverty in old age. He gave support to the welfare proposals of Churchill and Lloyd George, and to the transformative Budget of 1909, but they were not formed by his vision. He had no faith in Lloyd George's vision of an all-party government in 1910. He denied the merits of female suffrage.

David Lloyd George

Lloyd George's social origins, essentially working class, wholly differed from any previous prime minister. He had to be especially dextrous in dealing with ministers, all of higher social class. Lloyd George became prime minister on 6 December 1916 as a result of a unique concatenation of circumstances. Growing disbelief in Asquith's ability as a war leader led to Lloyd George's proposal, agreed with Bonar Law, in favour of a small war cabinet, with him (now war secretary) as chairman. Asquith rejected this and, faced with Unionist lack of support, resigned. Bonar Law was invited by the king to form a government but suggested in response that Lloyd George was likely to be a better war leader, Lloyd George accepted the offer delivered to him, uniquely by his opponents and about half his own party.

Selecting the cabinet

In contrast to Asquith's decision in 1915 to give Bonar Law an insignificant post, Lloyd George made him chancellor of the exchequer.

Unlike the pre-war cabinets of Campbell Bannerman and Asquith, there was constant movement of personnel and jobs throughout Lloyd George's premiership. Although Bonar Law successfully suggested that Balfour should be foreign secretary, there is little

other indication that either he or, later, Austen Chamberlain were involved in cabinet appointments. One Liberal, Addison, was given the significant post of Reconstruction and then Housing. Lloyd George's inclination to act despite tradition was exemplified in his later recruitment of Smuts, the prime minister of South Africa, to offer alternative strategic military thinking. Smuts' experience was, however, totally different to the conditions of the Western Front, and he quite often agreed with Haig. Other examples were the appointment of H. A. L. Fisher, the vice-chancellor of Sheffield University, as president of the Board of Education, and of Sir Eric Geddes, Greenwood and Horne who were not politicians but businessmen.

Managing the cabinet

All prime ministers have to manage different personalities and opinions. The difference for Lloyd George (as for Asquith from 1915) was that he was managing a coalition – in this case dependent on the Unionist majority in the Commons. Lloyd George eliminated the complaints about Asquith's lack of control largely by bringing Maurice Hankey into the same role in the war cabinet as he had occupied in the imperial war cabinet. Hankey created and agreed an agenda with Lloyd George (not always followed), minutes of cabinet meetings and follow up memos and discussions with ministers. However, 'In theory the PM determines the agenda – but he is elusive and we have to interpret his mind not infrequently'.[17]

Churchill, once he joined the cabinet in July 1917, made fewer and shorter interventions in cabinet discussions, except on Russia. But he was still reprimanded by Bonar Law 'who cut in very sharply that while he was in the Chair, he would not allow such speeches as those Churchill was making and if Churchill didn't like the present system, he could leave it'.[18]

Hankey recorded in October 1918 that Lloyd George consulted his colleagues and got

Asquith, portrait by F. de Haenen, 1906; Lloyd George, 1910s (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

their general consent before action. It seems he changed over time, because Austen Chamberlain, in March 1922, said that the present system was an autocracy tempered by disorganisation. Hankey agreed that Lloyd George was taking too much responsibility, but not about disorganisation. Hankey's view was that Lloyd George was so convinced that he was right that 'he swayed his colleagues by sheer intensity of feeling to accept the solution he foresaw and desires'.[19] Montagu, a Liberal, resigned over policy on Turkey and Iraq in 1922, with a blast about the prime minister's style of government. Austen Chamberlain resigned as secretary of state for India in 1917, punctiliously accepting responsibility for failure in Mesopotamia. No skill was involved in choosing him for the exchequer in 1919 to replace Bonar Law.

Decision-making

Just as Asquith was faced with novel decisions about the war, Lloyd George also had to deal with previously unknown problems about peace. He only postponed a decision when opposition was so trenchant that he could not act immediately. He had converted enemies to supporters through his capacity to get things done; an example as prime minister was deciding in favour of the convoy system. Eventually, however, a strength became seen as a weakness – famously articulated by Baldwin who said a dynamic force was a very terrible thing.

He was an exemplar of the view that it was often not finding an answer that was the real problem: sometimes it was finding the right question. Offensives in France requiring more men for the mincing machine was the answer to the wrong question. The right question was how to win the war – thus his drive for an alternative strategy. In the absence of miliary advisers to support an alternative, he did not enforce any decision to change the strategy or to stop the offensives, especially Passchendaele. As a civilian, it was difficult to overrule his military commanders, and he lacked the courage to face reaction in the press and cabinet if he decided to sack Haig.

During the post-war general election of 1918, with some declarations of severe financial consequences for Germany, he offered a caveat – 'to the limits of her capacity'. In peace treaty discussions, his attempts to moderate Clemenceau's demand for punitive action showed flexibility at the price of consistency.

Ireland was a good example of changing the question, from how to beat Sinn Fein to how to negotiate peace. Cleverly, he brought Chamberlain, Birkenhead and Churchill – previous supporters of Ulster – with him to the negotiations.

However, he was unable to find a different question on how to deal with the recession from 1920. He accepted the normal Treasury advice to cut expenditure. Keynes's alternative had not yet been fully developed.

On Palestine, it was not so much the need for a different question: it was rather that only half a question was posed to the cabinet – should there be a national home for Jews. The other half of the question was never properly discussed – what to do about the Palestinians. Although there was a final sentence added to the Balfour Declaration that there should be no detriment to the existing inhabitants of Palestine, nothing had been done to identify what these rights might be. The only dissentient in the one discussion in cabinet was Montagu, the only Jew. But his concerns were not with the Arabs but with the diaspora of Jews.

Developing effective relationships

In response to a question from Violet Bonham Carter on what Lloyd George was like when he was alone, Keynes replied, 'When he is alone there is no one there'.[20] This implies the importance to Lloyd George of his relationships with other people.

Lloyd George had a number of skills which contributed to developing effective relationships. Most obvious was his skill in listening (discussed further later).

Lloyd George had to ride two horses at once in government, as shown in a cartoon by Raven Hill, 'The Distractions of an Indispensible', in *Punch*, 26 March 1919. Almost all the senior ministers were Unionists. The relationship with pre-war opponents was transactional, not ideological as would be the case in a single-party government. Senior Unionists originally accepted him as the man to win the war, then as the popular figure who kept them in power. There was no fissile opponent in the cabinet – the only alternative prime minister was Bonar Law with whom there was mutual respect. Law admired Lloyd George's prodigious energy, but disapproved of the shift to one-man management. Lloyd George's view of Bonar Law in his memoirs was that 'he had an incomparable gift of practical criticism which he (LG) always took into account.'[21] Perhaps overstated, this is more accurate than the untrustworthy Beaverbrook account of the relationship.[22] His contemporary comment was that he was made more cheerful by Law's gloom. Law always supported the final decisions made by Lloyd George, sometimes arrived at after quite fierce debates between them. Law much preferred Lloyd George's style to Asquith's stiffness and condescension. They met every morning at Number 11 – not Number 10 – another indication of an element of flattery. Law stepped out of front-line politics from ill health in 1921 and gave no warning to Chamberlain and Lloyd George of his position on the next general election in 1922.

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When Austen Chamberlain became Leader of the Unionists in 1921 there was none of the warmth that Lloyd George had shared with Law, but a commonality of interest in sustaining the coalition. Chamberlain wrote that 'I had once seen him outside Cabinet after eight months as Chancellor of Exchequer'.[23] The relationship with Curzon, his foreign secretary, was bad: in Curzon's view Lloyd George wanted his foreign secretary to be a valet, almost a drudge. He constantly disparaged Curzon in and outside cabinet.

With the Liberal Churchill, the relationship was tetchy at times, especially over Churchill's wish to set up a major war in Russia. Lloyd George valued his energy and capacity to produce ideas and gave him a succession of jobs. H. A. L. Fisher gave Lloyd George good ideas and advice and a Liberal education policy.

Hankey accreted a great deal of power through his position as cabinet secretary and his ambition. He became an admirer of Lloyd George's strengths. He was not restricted to agendas and minutes but provided advice. Quite a lot was accepted, a realistic but also flattering response. Lloyd George and Hankey had an argument over whether Haig should be sacked in 1917. Hankey was against: 'I met him on every point and stuck to my guns. That is one special merit of Lloyd George that one can speak one's mind fearlessly and even if he was annoyed at the time he bears no malice.'[24]

Relations with his generals were nearly always bad, partly because of differences in social background, but also due to his lack of military experience and his impertinence in proposing different actions and strategies. He did not use his usual tool – flattery – in creating better relationships. Haig told the king (improperly) that Lloyd George was a calamity for the country.

On the peace treaty, he differed sharply with Clemenceau about the terms they wanted to propose for reparations and territory. Lloyd George had a great deal of respect for Clemenceau and did try to sustain a good balance. He went to the trouble of going to talk to Clemenceau on the fringe of meetings while contributions were being translated, flattering him by this effort.

Lloyd George had never met Wilson, the American president, who took the view that it was for him to determine the terms of peace based on his Fourteen Points. Lloyd George, while recognising the significance of the United States, had no respect for Wilson as a person. He thought he behaved like a missionary to heathens. Wilson strongly believed that his views came from the Almighty, the expression of which irritated both Clemenceau and Lloyd George. During the peace conference, Wilson urged Lloyd George to fight against a highly punitive decision on reparations and claimed that 'nothing would be finer than to be put out of office during a crisis of this kind for doing what was right.'[25]

While Lloyd George never made the sort of disparaging remarks that Asquith made about George V, he acted with no deference to him, ignoring some previous procedures, as well as his opinions. George V had complimented Lloyd George at the end of the war on his crucial contribution to it: no further commendations came. However, the king did make a pacifying speech (written with help of the prime minister's office) to the Ulster parliament in June 1921 which helped to contribute at least on the part of Ulster Unionists to an atmosphere appropriate to an agreement.

He had a doubly uxorious relationship with his wife Margaret and his mistress Frances Stevenson. Neither had significant influence on him politically.[26]

His relationship with Asquith was polite in public. There was no reconciliation with him or the Asquithian Liberals – McKenna a long-time enemy and Grey remained strongly opposed to him. As prime minister, he was not interested in a reunited Liberal Party, which he had declared to Riddell in 1917 had no future.

Communication skills

He had more opponents than supporters in the press. His attempt to keep Northcliffe away from the centre of power succeeded for seven months when he sent him to America to manage British activities there. But after this Northcliffe's various demands and press campaigns ensured that there was no relationship between them. Northcliffe attempted to influence the selection of the cabinet in 1918 and campaigned against the supposed moderation of Britain's position in the peace treaty. (He had not been appointed to the British team at the peace conference.) In a famous speech in the House of Commons in 1919 Lloyd George engaged in a nameless personal destruction of a man described as deluded with a diseased vanity. There was also a bad relationship with Beaverbrook for most of his premiership.

He did have a good relationship with Riddell, who had given him a house and a car before the war. He was effectively the owner of the *News of the World*, which had a very large circulation but was more interested in other things than politics. Riddell acted as a press liaison during the peace conference and for most of the subsequent conferences.

When Lloyd George declared that newspapers had to be 'squared or squashed', it seems that Riddell might have been an example of the former, and Northcliffe eventually of the latter. His main supporter in the press was originally C. P. Scott of *The Guardian*, who he saw frequently but who increasingly disliked the actions of the government. The somewhat critical editor of the Liberal *Daily Chronicle* was squashed by being removed from his post when Lloyd George effectively took control of the paper.

One of his major virtues was his willingness to listen to advice from unusual sources. Tom Jones, a member of the cabinet secretariat, recorded 'innumerable interventions that filled his days, cross examining ministers, experts, friends, visitors from the front or on missions from abroad. He was a listener but sometimes to second raters'.[27] 'He listened with patience, flattered the speaker by the attentive alacrity by which he seized a point, sharpened it and conceded essentials.'[28]

Hankey compared Churchill and Lloyd George: 'imagine the subject of balloons crops up. Winston without a blink, will give you a brilliant hour-long lecture on balloons. LG even if he has never seen you before, will spend an hour finding out anything you know or think about them.'[29]

It was his oral skill that created his charisma, but there was less chutzpah as prime minister. His speeches were carefully prepared. He would usually develop ideas, sometimes with the help of advisers, and then dictate a full speech. The speech itself might be rehearsed. But in replying in debate, he sometimes abandoned his original speech to produce an effective response from his own research. He told Riddell, in 1915, that he was going to follow Asquith's example and try reading his speech as it was so much easier. Bonar Law however gave him advice before a speech in February 1917: 'BL said he hoped I would not get into the habit of reading speeches as it took away so much of the effect.' His response was: 'I always feel inclined to throw away my notes but I find if one trusts to the audience, one is apt to be led away to say foolish things.' Bonar Law's reply was 'If you don't mind me saying so I think that fact has contributed in a large measure to the success of your speeches'.[30]

He used his face, body and different tones of voice to illustrate his passion, and used wit, invective satire and ridicule, a range unusual in his time. The occasional evisceration of others in speeches was less present as prime minister.

His normal day as prime minister began before breakfast with his official papers and the newspapers. He sought and responded to the information from a variety of sources which then contributed to what he wanted to say.

He had natural charm and sometimes chose to deploy it as a means of creating a good impression. His preference was for oral exchanges, but he received and read official material starting early in the morning. He was a frequent recipient of papers from Hankey.

Did he always tell the truth? Some enemies regarded the relationship between Lloyd George and truth as oxymoronic; it was certainly pragmatic not moral. In his view, politicians' lies are found out. Bonar Law, Birkenhead and Austen Chamberlain did not think him untruthful.

Changing the framework

There was a substantial increase in central power for the prime minister, directing more activity for the State. The main innovation that enabled this was the provision of an agenda and minutes and support through the creation of the cabinet secretariat. These innovations have lasted. Although he would have liked to retain it, the small war cabinet he set up only survived until October 1919, when the normal-sized cabinet (twenty-one people) returned following pressure from ministers outside the war cabinet.

An associated but separate feature was the creation of a separate group of advisers located in No. 10 garden; advice was given not to the cabinet but to the prime minister. It did not survive under Bonar Law.

There was a focus characteristic of his demands for action, on creating ministries or similar bodies to deal with specific issues such as shipping and food during the war. After the war there were new ministries, first

Reconstruction, then Health and Housing and Pensions.

Vision

Before the war he had a vision for reducing poverty, implemented through his welfare reforms. There was no new vision as prime minister. By 1910, he thought that the major problems of the country could be settled by drawing Unionists and Liberals together. He thought that the Liberal Party had no future in 1917, and his actions helped to ensure that that was largely true. He tried to fulfil his vision when, in 1920, he proposed the fusion of his Liberals and Unionists, but neither were prepared to accept this.

In March 1919, during the peace conference, he told Wilson and Clemenceau that the French proposals on boundaries and reparations would result in Germany exacting retribution from her conquerors – about which he was right.

Epilogue

In 1919, as he returned dismayed and enraged following his participation in the peace conference, J. M. Keynes wrote his philippic, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. It is useful to compare two sketches of Lloyd George penned by J. M. Keynes, written originally for that book but published at different times. The first has frequently been used by biographers and historians. It was a wonderfully coloured description worthy of a novelist, but it tells you nothing about the skills with which he performed his magic. In the first Lloyd George was this 'syren', 'this goat footed bard, this half human visitor from the hag-ridden enchanted woods from Celtic antiquity with final purposelessness'.[31] The second observation, very rarely quoted but important for this narrative, was that 'to see the British prime minister watching the company, with six or seven senses not available to ordinary men, judging character, motive, and subconscious impulse, perceiving what each was thinking and even what each was going to say next, and compounding with telepathic instinct the argument or appeal best suited to the vanity, weakness, or self-interest of his immediate auditor, was to realised that the poor president (Wilson) would be playing blind man's bluff at that party.'[32]

Comparing strengths and weaknesses

Selecting the cabinet

- Rosebery just continued Gladstone's cabinet and chose Kimberley for the Foreign Office.
- Campbell Bannerman's most important skill was in how he recruited Asquith as chancellor of the exchequer and then used that fact and Asquith's own inclinations to gain the adherence of Grey and Haldane. This was the most important demonstration of this skill by any of these prime ministers.
- Asquith took a risk with Lloyd George in making him chancellor of the exchequer. Much less skilful was his selection of first Seely then Kitchener for the War Office. He showed strength in not giving Bonar Law an important role in 1915, but weakness in taking a partisan decision instead of considering what would create the best cabinet.
- Lloyd George not only recognised pragmatically that he depended on Unionist support, but also that he had to provide the top jobs for them. The appointment of men with experience outside politics was mostly a success and showed his skill in thinking 'outside the box', quite unlike his predecessor.

Managing the cabinet

- Rosebery's inclination not to engage with his ministers, and to allow Harcourt total

control of financial issues, meant he was the least skilful of these prime ministers in this requirement.
- Campbell Bannerman also believed that his ministers did not need supervision or control. Sometimes, he did insist on his own views being implemented for example on South Africa. No prime minister after Campbell Bannerman had to replicate his skill in overcoming a major attempt to define his role and that of senior colleagues. He is also unique in exceeding the expectations of the opposition and senior Liberals regarding how he would perform.
- Asquith followed tradition in not interfering in the work of departments. His management of meetings was worse than Campbell Bannerman and Lloyd George. Faced with more difficult decisions than either Rosebery or Campbell Bannerman, he did manage to get the cabinet to unite on both the 1909 Budget and House of Lords reform, and enabled the evolution of a majority to declare war in 1914. Though complimented by Churchill amongst others on his judicial approach, no real judge would have allowed the prolonged interventions of Churchill himself – and nor did Campbell Bannerman or Lloyd George.
- Lloyd George's drive and eagerness for action were greater than his predecessors. Adoption of a formal agenda and minutes for cabinet meetings, and creation of a cabinet secretariat enabled greater involvement, where he chose, in departmental priorities. He became less consultative by the end of his premiership.

Decision-making

- Rosebery lacked the strength of character and persuasive skills to push through his preferences on home rule, votes for women and the House of Lords.
- Campbell Bannerman, in contrast, pushed through his preferences on South Africa, and made a unilateral decision on the Insurance Bill.
- Asquith's reputation has been bedevilled by 'wait and see'. This became attached to his tendency to delay on both big and small issues. His strength was in his pursuit of logic in developing a decision. His delays in getting Edward VII and George V to agree what to do about the powers of the House of Lords, and on conscription illustrate his weaknesses.
- Lloyd George was the most effective decision maker. But he failed to stop the waste of lives on the Western Front. Productive of ideas himself he was also open to ideas from other people. It is unlikely that any of his Liberal predecessors once having adopted the aggressive approach to Ireland would have changed his mind.

Developing effective relationships

- Rosebery failed to make any attempt to create a working relationship with Harcourt (admittedly difficult), and he had no skill in thinking about relationships with his other cabinet colleagues and made no effort to do so.
- Campbell Bannerman's creation of a good relationship with the Relugas three is the most successful accomplishment of the four prime ministers.
- Asquith's occasional frustrations with Churchill and Lloyd George were, except in one instance, not relayed by him to them and therefore did not create an unmanageable difficulty. His failure to create a working relationship with Bonar Law, as Lloyd George did, or as Campbell Bannerman did with the Regulas three, requires a low mark.
- Lloyd George, in contrast, as prime minister showed how to manage his relationship with both Bonar Law and Austen Chamberlain. His belittling of Curzon was an outlier in his relationships – inappropriate and a

contributor to his eventual political demise. His claim that the Liberal Party had no future was obviously an element in his failure to attempt to engage with at least some Asquithian supporters, which would have been necessary if his idea of fusion was to have any future.

Asquith and Lloyd George were both lawyers, Asquith as a high-achieving barrister and Lloyd George as a modestly successful solicitor. The skills involved, particularly decision making, communication with clients and a jury, and working successfully with colleagues were all very relevant to the requirements of being a prime minister.

Communication skills

- Rosebery achieved high marks as an orator, like Asquith and Lloyd George, but failed otherwise.
- Campbell Bannerman, in contrast, was not a good platform speaker but was effective in the House of Commons as prime minister. He did so by making Balfour's dialectical skills look like a weakness, perhaps a greater achievement than the oratorical triumphs of Asquith and Lloyd George.
- Asquith exercised great command in both performances in public venues and in the House of Commons through his pounding use of fact on fact. He did not, like Lloyd George, use humour, metaphor or passion – the latter reserved in a different context for communicating with Venetia Stanley.
- Lloyd George delivered his speeches in a completely different style from his predecessors and contemporaries. Though wit and invective were used less frequently as prime minister, he could still be dominant in that vein. He was slightly less effective than Asquith in the House of Commons. He was more effective than predecessors one to one because he was a responsive listener. Unlike his predecessors, he sought to influence newspapers instead of ignoring them.

Changing the framework

- Rosebery had no idea that the framework for government needed change.
- Campbell Bannerman unsuccessfully proposed a suspensory veto as a control on the power of the House of Lords, an idea implemented by Asquith later.
- Asquith responded with horror to possible changes. He described the presence of a cabinet secretary in cabinet meetings as an offence to the constitution.
- Lloyd George, with the crucial assistance of Hankey, changed the nature of cabinet government, through the new post of cabinet secretary, the secretariat agenda and minutes. He also created a number of new departments.

Vision

- Rosebery, Campbell Bannerman and Asquith never articulated a vision.
- Lloyd George, in his battery of social welfare and financial reforms as chancellor, did have a vision of eliminating poverty. As prime minister, he produced the idea of 'a fit country for heroes to live in', which embodies some sort of vision for the future. His pessimistic vision of the future of Europe after the malevolent effects of the peace treaty showed a greater capacity to see ahead than anything offered by his predecessors.

The development of skills

- Rosebery was the least well equipped – as foreign secretary he had not developed Prime Ministerial skills.
- Campbell-Bannerman, on the other hand, did have experience not only as a cabinet

minister, but as leader of the Opposition, managing a group of often fractious colleagues. His decision making too had been tested in relation to Liberal imperialism, and the Boer War.

- Asquith, acting frequently as Campbell Bannerman's deputy had to use the skills which would later be essential as prime minister.
- Lloyd George honed his skills in four cabinet roles.

Asquith and Lloyd George were both lawyers, Asquith as a high-achieving barrister and Lloyd George as a modestly successful solicitor. The skills involved, particularly decision making, communication with clients and a jury, and working successfully with colleagues were all very relevant to the requirements of being a prime minister.

Their considerable success as prime minister might have hinted that a route to political office via the law would be an indicator of success as prime minister. However, no prime ministers with a legal background followed until Clement Attlee, and then Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. Is it a coincidence that together these comprise five of the six most significant prime ministers of the twentieth century? Until recently, there were no subsequent lawyer prime ministers to contradict such a connection. Perhaps Keir Starmer will. ■

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