

General Strike

On the centenary of the General Strike of 1926, David Yates examines the impact it had on the Liberal Party and the feud between Asquith and Lloyd George.

Asquith's Resignation, Lloyd George and the General Strike of 1926

A CENTURY HAS PASSED since Herbert Asquith (Lord Oxford and Asquith) resigned as leader of the Liberal Party, in circumstances which can only be described as controversial. The resignation has been attributed to several factors, including his deteriorating health and the long-standing conflict with David Lloyd George that was exacerbated by the fallout at the time of the general strike.

In his resignation letter dated 14 October 1926, Asquith wrote:

It was no action of mine which made this ground of controversy within the Liberal ranks, but my public declarations were met with a challenge from a quarter which was impossible for me to disregard, coupled with a refusal to meet me in Council.¹

The inference can be validly drawn that 'health' was not his stated primary driving force – the 'ground' being the general strike and the 'quarter', Lloyd George. Asquith seems to validate that inference by observing that:

'Though my health is now restored ... I cannot and will not take part, direct or indirect in sectional controversies.'²

Whilst the resignation has been scholastically noted in the historiography relating to Asquith and Lloyd George, the prime purpose

of this article is to remind readers of the reasons behind that resignation. Was it in fact based on his unquestionable deteriorating health, or was it due to a further political spat with Lloyd George, the final one in a long-running catalogue of dispute which had severely fractured the Liberal Party? Was his disagreement with Lloyd George a 'smokescreen' for his ill-health?

On 15 October 1926, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter (Asquith's daughter) made a speech at the Scottish Liberal Federation meeting at Greenock following her father's resignation. With her father and other senior Liberal parliamentarians present, who had all travelled from London, she said as follows:

My father is not an ill man, and he will never be an old man. If things had been different and if there had been real unity behind him, he could have carried on for many years giving devoted service to the Party, but as things stand, under existing conditions, in the teeth of existing odds, it is a risk and strain which he could not be asked to face and endure. We who love him best reluctantly believe that he is right in the course he is taking tonight.³

What did she consider to be 'those things' and 'existing conditions and odds' with reference to 'lack of unity'? There are two strands of reasoning in play: personal illness and political



conflict or, possibly, a combination of both. However, to understand the rationale behind Asquith's resignation and specifically the controversial political background, it is necessary to reflect upon a chronology of events and the animosity between Asquith and Lloyd George.

Perhaps a useful starting point is when Lloyd George displaced Asquith as prime minister in 1916, followed by Lloyd George aligning himself with the Tories during the following six years. It is generally accepted that, whilst Asquith was incompetent as a war leader in 1916, having been in post for eight years, Lloyd George had also spawned critics of his own for his criticism of Grey's foreign policy as Foreign Secretary leading up to the 1914 outbreak of war, and having been enmeshed in scandals involving money and other inappropriate activity. Whilst, in any event, the displacement of Asquith was welcomed generally, the choice of Lloyd George was conceivably no better. The petty refusal of Asquith to serve ministerially under Lloyd George in 1916 also exacerbated the situation,

which was repeated later by Churchill in the late 1930s. The failure of the Liberals in the 1918 general election and again in 1922 added to party woes and whilst there was a quasi-reunion between the two of them into a regenerated, albeit fragile party, this was based on the political necessity of having both come to the defence of free trade, in the light of the 1923 election.

The general election of 1922 was an unseemly affair with those who supported Asquith fighting in a third of the constituencies against so-called 'Coalition Liberals'. Liberals had been split into two factions, with Asquith and Lloyd George at each respective helm. The official party manifesto had labelled the coalition an 'abandonment of the principles of Liberalism' and a substitution of autocracy for parliamentary government, with Asquithians gloating over the defeat of their rivals (including Churchill), branding them as 'renegades'. Such was the rancour and bitterness that the National Liberal Club saw members cheering on election night when the

Tories took Frederick Kellaway's Bedford seat, which he had held since 1910, a cabinet member as the current postmaster general. This was matched only by cheering at Churchill's loss of Dundee.⁴ Even after defeat, Coalition Liberals clung to the belief that they should remain aligned with the Conservatives and did so during 1923. In the two years following the 1922 election, there were two ministries: the first led by Bonar Law until May 1923, with Stanley Baldwin following. An election in December 1923 saw the seeking of a mandate for moving to a 'protectionist trade policy' for imperialist preference.

The October 1924 election saw the Tories winning by a significant margin, securing 415 seats as against the 258 the previous year, with the Liberals losing 124 seats from their pre-existing total, being reduced to a rump of 40 seats. Setting aside the Speaker and three university seats, eighteen of the seats came from Wales and Scotland in predominantly agricultural constituencies. 'Asquithian Liberals' lost significantly, whereas followers of David Lloyd George fared less badly. Most of the remaining MPs that had survived did so because they had no Tory opponent, with old Coalition Liberals being able to negotiate local political deals. The election destroyed the parliamentary Liberal Party as an effective force, 'removing Asquith from its ranks and placing what had remained of it at Lloyd George's feet'.⁵ Asquith lost his seat but was elevated to the Lords, retaining his status as titular leader of the party, with Lloyd George effectively leading in the Commons. This situation was reminiscent of the disastrous period thirty years earlier when, in 1894/5, Rosebery led from the Lords, obstructed by Harcourt in the lower chamber. Given the rancour between Asquith and Lloyd George, the repeat was doomed to fail from the outset.

The struggle for control of the party, between Asquith and Lloyd George, continued – with Lloyd George determining policy,

financing the 'Coalition Liberals' and seeking to bring about a change of direction. His first step was taken in late 1924 when he assumed chairmanship of the party, despite attempts by some of Asquith's followers to block the appointment. One serious issue was the lack of suitable people presenting themselves as candidates for election, coupled with the failure of the party to raise significant funds both nationally and locally. The discontent among Liberal parliamentarians rumbled on throughout 1925; and, against this backdrop, Lloyd George was busily forming a political structure that ran parallel to that of the recognised Liberal Parliamentary Party led by Asquith. Lloyd George established a separate organisation termed 'Land and Nation League' with London headquarters in Old Queen Street, vital to the invigoration of Liberal spirits and building up his private political funds.⁶ Those funds had mainly accumulated with the sale of political honours, enabling the financing of his chosen candidates, keeping his following independent of the Asquithians, who had no access to those funds. This caused deep resentment on the part of the Asquithians, given both the immoral basis of those funds and that their inaccessibility was damaging to the wider party's interests.

During the two-year period leading up to the May 1926 strike, there were, in essence, two separate organisations; but, as indicated, there were occasions on which they worked together, albeit reluctantly, when it suited both their interests to do so. Notably, when Lloyd George launched his Land and Nation League in 1925, following the publication of reports relating to land reform policies, one of which addressed rural land (the 'Green Book'). Asquith did secure the support of the National Liberal Federation (NLF) in backing Lloyd George's proposals with modifications in early 1926.⁷ Given this cooperation, it is surprising that a profound split should have occurred only some three months later and that, in any

event, this precipitated such a long-standing division within the Liberal Party.

Asquith failed to appreciate, or chose to dismiss, both the rising tide of acclaim for Lloyd George and the hostility to new ideas and lack of any form of dynamism that was hastening the decline of the party. Asquith was still steeped in pre-war Edwardian policies, drinking heavily and focusing on writing personal correspondence to Venetia Stanley. Failing to acknowledge that the social fabric and political landscape had changed dramatically, he regarded what was happening, somewhat naively, as 'transient and peripheral in nature'.⁸

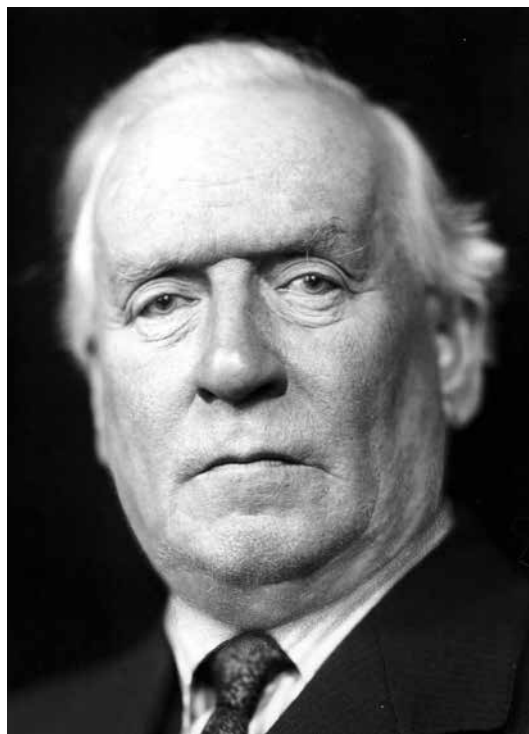
The origins of the general strike arguably lay in April 1925, when Churchill, newly appointed by Baldwin as Chancellor, put Britain back on the gold standard, restoring sterling to the pre-First World War parity with the US dollar. This indirectly reduced many workers' wages by about 10 per cent, but also made Britain less competitive in its exports, notably coal. Mine owners and mine workers became involved in disputes over pay and working hours following Churchill's decision. The mines had already been running at a significant loss since the end of the First World War and the owners wished to reduce pay and increase working hours. This was not only to increase productivity, but, as Herbert Samuel's report recognised (see below), to protect the smaller mines whose closure would lead to an increase in unemployment. Furthermore, subsidising of the mines was inequitable in the government's view. Not only was there an ideological perspective relating to 'state intervention', but other labour-intensive industries did not have subsidies, despite high unemployment. There was also a policy of fostering the closure of some of the larger inefficient mines, enabling and encouraging workers to move to other parts of the country, where light industry job opportunities lay. This policy was not welcomed by the

miners' union, who saw their membership levels falling.

In July 1925, the mine owners, who were relatively small private enterprises, demanded pay cuts resulting in the Miners' Federation appealing to the Trades Union Congress, which threatened a general strike. On 30 July, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin agreed to a government subsidy for nine months to support the mine owners and commissioned Herbert Samuel to carry out an investigation of the industry. Samuel had been a previous Liberal government minister – no longer holding office – and an adherent of 'New Liberalism' on the progressive wing of the party, having settled colonial disputes and been responsible for drafting and progressing social reform. He was widely accepted as being an impartial person to chair such a commission.

Even at this early stage, Lloyd George regarded Baldwin as being cowardly, with his government being 'afraid of cold steel', and claimed that, when Tories went into the voting lobbies, they did so under pressure from the mine owners.⁹ Whether Lloyd George had the fullest sympathy for the miners is questionable; but at every opportunity he could not resist criticising the government, and Churchill in particular, for telling the House that postponing the crisis would enable the government to deal with it more effectively, when it was plain that 'sooner or later the question has to be fought out by the people of this land'.¹⁰ It was obvious that the government was planning to stockpile material resources for the inevitable industrial action.

Samuel reported on 6 March 1926, recommending reorganisation of the coal industry, and believed that pay cuts must follow – which the mine owners seized upon, demanding reintroduction of an eight-hour working day. The Miners' Federation rejected the proposal, refusing to negotiate: 'Not a minute of the day, not a penny off the pay'.¹¹ On 29 April 1926, with the opening of the TUC conference, the



Liberal rivals: Herbert Henry Asquith in 1923; David Lloyd George in 1924 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

miners handed over the conduct of negotiations. The following day, the mine owners' proposals were rejected, but by this time there was already a lock-out, with miners being prevented from working in the absence of any agreement to accept reduced pay. On 1 May, the TUC conference authorised a general strike to commence at midnight on 3 May. Despite talks continuing involving the government, the strike took effect, ending on 12 May. How did these events relate to Asquith, Lloyd George and the Liberal Parliamentary Party?

On 1 May 1926, in a well-reported speech at Cambridge (copies of which had already been released to the press as was his custom), Lloyd George excoriated government ministers for their failure to act and accused them of 'all talking and no tackling'. By this phrase, it is surmised that although there was a lot of talking, little was being done in terms of action to resolve the dispute. An assumption can be made that Lloyd George believed that Balfour

had failed – and was continuing to fail – to facilitate real constructive negotiations with the parties concerned. To negotiate 'what' is something Lloyd George never set out in constructive terms. This was another example of a customary rhetorical approach by Lloyd George, who had a history of leaving options open to change direction as the political climate dictated. Lloyd George then went on to say that the merits of the dispute aside, every citizen would feel it his duty to support the government of the day in the maintenance of order and in the organising and facilitating of essential services. 'The country must come first, always and all the time'.¹² Matters were not helped when the *Daily Mail* printworkers refused to print an article, 'For King and Country' (written effectively by the government), which denounced the strike action. Baldwin severely criticised the printworkers by saying that the first active step towards a general strike was an attempt to subvert the press and

that the strike was not a form of collective negotiation but a 'state threat'. The cabinet, suspicious of the motives of the Trade Union Congress, had previously approved Baldwin calling off negotiations if the strike went ahead. Churchill, in his usual provocative manner, also added fuel to the fire by getting the *British Gazette* (a publication controlled by him) to print a government statement condemning the miners' actions.¹³

On 3 May, a meeting of the Liberal shadow cabinet was called, at which there was full attendance, including Asquith and Lloyd George, to discuss the industrial unrest. It was, according to Asquith, the 'united opinion' of the shadow cabinet that the proposed general strike was of 'such a nature that society was bound with all the resources of its command to make certain of victory over it'.¹⁴ The shadow cabinet endorsed the approach being taken by the government. There is no record of any dissent by Lloyd George to this 'united opinion', although Lloyd George had urged in the Commons that a negotiated settlement was needed. Asquith, in a letter dated 5 May but published in the *British Gazette* three days later, desired at the earliest moment the resumption of negotiations between the relevant factions to bring about peace and reconstruction of the coalfields. Others followed suit, with Viscount Grey endorsing this approach.¹⁵ The situation was further exacerbated when, on 6 May, Sir John Simon (a shadow cabinet member and leading barrister) declared in the House that the strike was in his opinion illegal and that the funds of the TUC should be confiscated.¹⁶ He declared in public that every trade union leader guilty of incitement to breach of contract (by workers) was liable to damages 'to the utmost farthing of his personal possessions'.¹⁷ Simon's view was disputed by Sir Henry Slessor (former Labour solicitor general) in a heated debate that followed.¹⁸ There is a argument to be made that Simon was seeking to displace Lloyd George

as an effective leader of the Liberal Party.¹⁹ However, what impact Simon's intervention in the dispute played any significant part in what happened afterwards is questionable, although Alfred Duff Cooper (a young Conservative member) found Simon's speech to be 'most important and impressive'.²⁰

This was followed by Churchill calling on his government to act, including the mobilisation of the military, 'to take any action that they might find necessary in an honest endeavour to aid the civil power'.²¹ This provocative statement prompted Stamfordham (the King's Private Secretary) to write: 'His Majesty cannot help thinking that this is an unfortunate pronouncement, already receiving adverse criticism'.²² No strong action by the police had been required, never mind using the king's soldiers.

A shadow cabinet meeting was scheduled for 10 May but Lloyd George writing from his Churt home (Bron-y-de, near Guildford, Surrey) that same day to the chief whip (Geoffrey Collins), indicated in strong terms that he would abstain from attending the meeting. It was clear from the hand-delivered letter that Lloyd George was departing from the 'united opinion' expressed seven days earlier by alleging that the government was 'precipitate, unwarrantable and mischievous' and that he could not join in any declarations (by his shadow cabinet colleagues) that condemned the general strike. Furthermore, he regarded the government as equally, if not more responsible for the outright refusal to negotiate until the strike was called off. He argued that conciliation rather than force should be the way forward. 'If we support the Government in an absolute refusal to negotiate ... the struggle may be a prolonged one and the damage to the nation may well be irreparable'.²³ The somewhat lengthy letter was handed to the press that same day resulting in many mainstream Liberals writing to their local and national newspapers, supporting

the stance taken by Lloyd George. Whatever state of friction lay between Lloyd George and Asquith, this was exacerbated by the letter. Lloyd George's real intentions in declining to attend the meeting have never been properly explained. Was Lloyd George laying further groundwork for removing Asquith, or seeking to increase his personal party popularity by attacking the government?

Wednesday 12 May saw the TUC General Council deciding to end the dispute – acknowledging the 'Samuel Memorandum' as a basis for settlement. This envisaged essentially no wage cuts until progress had been made on reorganisation (as proposed by the commission earlier), coupled with an oversight board comprising representatives from all sides, with an independent chairman. Additionally, a national wages board was to be established with authority to settle pay levels – with government subsidy continuing in the meantime. Despite reservations the strikers accepted the proposals.

With the strike ending on 12 May, Asquith reflected on the Lloyd George letter and, on 20 May, wrote to him in strong terms expressing dismay and regret at the course of action that Lloyd George had pursued: 'an act of betrayal' undermining the credibility of his parliamentary colleagues, so soon after supporting the 'unity position' of 3 May. He reminded Lloyd George that the 'unity position' had been outlined in the Commons that same day and in the Lords, and that his actions were contrary to the obligations of political comradeship.²⁴ The 'gloves were off' and it did not help matters when it was disclosed that Lloyd George had made disparaging remarks about the state of the country to the American press and predicted a long duration for the conflict – the 'ultimate wearing down of the people's steadfastness' with trade being seriously affected. Lloyd George was reminded in robust terms that, as an ex-prime minister and chairman of the Liberal Parliamentary Party, his words had

exacerbated the situation, and that undermining Britain on the world stage was unacceptable. Prior to Asquith writing this letter, he had conferred with parliamentary colleagues on 18 May, and it was noted by colleagues that Asquith's indignance was greater than ever seen before. The view was taken by several colleagues that Asquith ought to have 'lanced the proverbial boil' six months earlier, when Lloyd George tried to implement policies using his own funds.

On 21 May, dining that evening with Frances Stevenson (personal secretary and mistress) in London, Lloyd George said excitedly that he had been expelled from the party because of the letter.²⁵ Was that Asquith's not so subtle intention, or to cause Lloyd George to step down? Lloyd George immediately acknowledged Asquith's letter, sending a hand-delivered reply dated 22 May and indicating that he would take two or three days to consider and consult with friends before replying because he was 'off to the north'. 'North' was in fact Manchester, where he met for dinner with C. P. Scott (*Manchester Guardian* editor) and Charles Masterman (former Manchester Rusholme Liberal MP), who both assisted Lloyd George in composing the reply. Scott notes that he 'cut out everything that was provocative and left it full of mildness and dignity; Lloyd George accepted the revision.'²⁶ A long rambling letter comprising ten typed sheets followed from Lloyd George to Asquith, posted in Criccieth on Saturday 23 May and arriving with Asquith on Monday 25 May. In principally defending his position, he asserted that for over two years he had endeavoured to 'effect reunion among the divided forces of Liberalism', attributing any current discord between Liberals as not of his own making. He went on to allege how difficult it had been for the last two years (following the 1924 election), trying to avoid tensions and to alleviate breakout but often at the cost of personal humiliation. There is no clear indication as to

what Lloyd George meant by 'alleviate break-out' but the writer assumes avoidance of an exacerbated division within the Liberal Party ranks. The overall tone of the letter was one of self-exculpation, placing blame for Liberal woes elsewhere, with a clear reference to Asquith.²⁷

Asquith impatiently, if not discourteously, did not await any promised reply and, after speaking with colleagues, released his own 20 May letter to the national press on Saturday 23 May. The press printed both Asquith's letter and Lloyd George's response. The baton was taken up elsewhere, not only in the press, but in a letter written on 1 June and signed by twelve members of the shadow cabinet, including Viscount Grey, Runciman, McKenna and Sir John Simon. The core of this letter was to give full support to Asquith, and it included some uncomplimentary commentary:

Lloyd George broke up the first Coalition, becoming Prime Minister playing many parts and when he rejoined you [Asquith] at the general election of 1923, it was obvious to everybody that nothing could be done to make the union effective. Mr Lloyd George has insisted upon retaining his own separate headquarters and a separate fund, discouraging more than 300 Liberal prospective candidates at the last election.²⁸

The letter, which reached the press, went on to comment that: 'they, with Asquith in the lead, have done their best in the interests of Liberalism to work, but we cannot be surprised that confidential relations are impossible with one whose instability destroys confidence'. 'Confidence' was a clear, unambiguous reference to Lloyd George and his relationship with the American press. Unsurprisingly, Viscount Gladstone, who was not among the so-called 'twelve apostles' but still an opponent of Lloyd George, added his own comments by alleging that Lloyd George 'was the architect of all the party's misfortunes'.²⁹ Gladstone's

antipathy towards Lloyd George had been exacerbated by the latter's refusal to release funds from his 'treasure chest' when Gladstone had approached him about a long-term donation to the Liberal Party in 1924. Was the real purpose of the 'twelve apostles' letter not only to deprecate Lloyd George, but also to encourage Asquith to step down and block Lloyd George's possible succession as leader, in favour of one of the apostles taking over, possibly Simon?

Having said that, Simon would not have been a well-favoured successor and the fracture with Lloyd George would have widened. In response to the letter written on 1 June (and to Simon specifically), Lloyd George acerbically said: 'in trying to unlock the enigma of Simon's personality there is no further to get'.³⁰ Lloyd George cannot have forgotten that, at a Liberal Club Meeting in April 1924, whilst Simon was advocating the need for Liberal unison, he was also cynically reminding his audience of Lloyd George's 'Coalition association' with the Conservatives. Simon and Lloyd George rarely if ever, spoke to each other at shadow cabinet meetings.

Liberal MPs met on 3 June, and it was obvious that Lloyd George had support. The following day, despite assurances given by Lloyd George that he would not align himself with others (namely the Labour Party), a meeting at the National Liberal Club saw speeches by not only Asquith, but his supporters who backed the published letters written to Lloyd George.³¹ The agreement reached was that the National Liberal Federation annual meeting in Weston-Super-Mare on 17 June would be the time for bringing it all out into the open. However, a rebuttal speech followed from Lloyd George at the Manchester Reform Club on 5 June. The press, who were always briefed by Lloyd George, fully reported what was happening and the credibility of the Liberal Party was called seriously into question by him. In Birmingham, on 11

June, the local Liberal Party urged the two combatants to come together in unity for the sake of the membership as a whole, with the newspaper editor A. G. Gardiner (*Nation*) addressing the meeting, having recognised the seriousness of the situation, saying: 'In the first place let us get rid of the notion that this is a trivial quarrel between Tweedledum and Tweedledee – it goes beyond the foundation of Liberalism'.³² What Gardiner meant by this phrase is unclear given that he was, and had been for many years, an avid supporter of Asquith, but was it to be construed as advocating a reconciliation between the two factions? If so, this was clearly wishful thinking and untenable given the long-running antipathy between them.

On 17 June, at the National Liberal Federation annual meeting at Weston-Super-Mare, there was an expectation, certainly within the Liberal press, that this would be a fiery affair with Asquith confronting Lloyd George publicly, but Asquith had suffered a stroke four days before, was seriously ill and could not attend. The NLF affirmed their confidence in Asquith as Leader but declined to comment adversely about Lloyd George. Many of the delegates rousinglly cheered Lloyd George's appearance.³³ To what extent Asquith's absence aided this expression of confidence spurred by a desire not to add to his troubles at a time of illness, is moot. Rowland Hunt (Sir John Simon's private secretary), after attending the NLF meeting as an observer, wrote as follows: 'Undoubtedly the desire of the delegates was that the recent public correspondence should not split the party and whilst reaffirming the confidence in Oxford [Asquith], the Conference was equally emphatic that Lloyd George must be associated with the party. How that was to be achieved I am afraid the delegates did not trouble to think about.' Hunt commented that the danger arising out of the current position was the retirement of Asquith.³⁴

Asquith was compelled, on medical advice, to step back from public duties and, despite the approach of the summer parliamentary vacation, matters continued to rumble into late June, with neither side seeming to give ground and with party lines being drawn up and becoming entrenched. By 23 June, at the National Liberal Club, Lloyd George in a vociferous and incandescent outburst said that he 'was not going to be hounded out of the Liberal Party – there may be 12 members of the Party [referring to the signatories of the letter supporting Asquith] who cannot work with me, but there are three million Liberals who can'.³⁵ On 27 June, addressing a large number in the London Welsh Baptist Church (after prewarning the press and supplying advance copies of his speech), he indicated that his shadow cabinet colleagues did not wish any form of reconciliation and wanted him expelled. Lloyd George, in the absence of Asquith, continued developing his own political strategy and indicated that he was not 'going to toe the party line'. Asquith from his own convalescence, could see that any form of attempted reconciliation was bound to fail, which in his view was attributable to Lloyd George's intransigence.

Asquith was now 75 years of age, but the point at which he decided to retire whilst convalescing is unclear. There is, however, an indication of what lay ahead. On 1 June, Asquith, prior to his partial stroke twelve days later, and after the exchange of letters with Lloyd George, raised the question of his own continuing position when writing to Collins, the chief whip: 'I will not continue to hold the leadership for a day longer unless I am satisfied that I retain in full measure the confidence of the party'.³⁶ Later, on 29 September, following his part-resumption of public duties and after meeting close colleagues in Grey's house for a 'welcome return lunch', he wrote that: 'I am quite resolved to no longer lead a squalid faction, so I shall faire mes paquets, for which

I have ample justification'.³⁷ Among archive papers is a hand-written memorandum dated 6 October 1926 from Asquith which indicates that 'any talk of Liberal Unity as a thing which either has been or has any fair prospect of being achieved, seems to be an abuse of language'.³⁸ Grey at the 29 September lunch gathered an intimation of pending resignation when a conversation revolved around disunity.

Whilst it may have been ill-health that underscored his decision to resign the leadership in October 1926, it is also the case that the prompt was his perceived inability to bring together a united party, following the general strike, and Lloyd George's 'mischief making'. Asquith remarked a few days after his resignation: 'The Liberal Party is dying, crushed between the upper and nether millstones'.³⁹ Lady Violet's statement, which identifies not ill-health but a division within the Liberal Party hierarchy (specifically alluding to Lloyd George) as causing her father's departure, bears more than a grain of truth.

However, even without the benefit of hindsight, it is remarkable that the conflict between Asquith and Lloyd George centred around a relatively minor matter concerning the general strike. The Liberal shadow cabinet and parliamentary party were in no way responsible for what had happened to bring about the industrial dispute, and in general terms, the 'united opinion' declared on 3 May was not inappropriate. From an objective viewpoint, Lloyd George had not departed from any party line in seeking to criticise the government's approach to the industrial action by the trade unions; that position had been consistent for many months. The attempt by the 'twelve apostles' at any form of perceived excommunication of Lloyd George, with 'confidential relations being impossible', had little real expectation of support from the parliamentary party and the wider national party membership. It was pure political

rhetoric; and the lack of support for any condemnation of Lloyd George, as National Liberal Federation meetings demonstrated, bore witness to the lack of any appetite for excommunication. Whilst political support for the leadership was manifest (as was to be expected during Asquith's absence through illness), this was coupled with expressions of regret such as 'viewing with profound dismay any intention to exclude Lloyd George from the Councils of the Party'.⁴⁰ A more apposite note was recorded at the NLF and Candidates Association meetings in September 1926. Whilst both meetings supported Asquith, they had little appetite for criticising Lloyd George and were supported by the Liberal press in this. Instead, they expressed a view that it was essential to retain the cooperation of all Liberals in pressing forward a vigorous and constructive policy of social and industrial reform.⁴¹ Lloyd George received a standing ovation at the Candidates Association meeting, which is significant, because this meeting was perhaps more representative of grass roots Liberals than the NLF. His approach to policy had echoes of 'broadminded and reasonable spirit'⁴² and gained the respect of the Association – 'the most representative of all organised Liberal bodies outside the NLF'.⁴³

The question remains as to why the parliamentary party and the wider membership continued to support Asquith for leader but declined to criticise Lloyd George in the furore following the events in May 1926. Perhaps there was a tacit acknowledgment that Asquith had made a political blunder and that Lloyd George's actions were reasonable in the circumstances. Why had Asquith chosen to openly confront Lloyd George, within the public arena of the press, given that there had been what can only be described as antagonism between them for several years, notably following the 1924 general election? Asquith had waited eight days after the ending of the general strike to write to Lloyd George, so why

the hurry to respond to Lloyd George's initial 'holding letter' written before he departed for Manchester? Poor political judgment on Asquith's part. Furthermore, would not a sounder political position have been to simply ignore the Lloyd George Churt letter, rise above it and dismiss it, and wait until later in May to address the situation privately and without press attention? In the hasty and ill-thought-out letter rebuking Lloyd George, Asquith had unwisely failed to give him an opportunity to privately fully explain his position.

This was an important opportunity that Asquith missed since it could have resulted in either a detailed explanation, an apology or some form of partial reconciliation of differing approaches. To criticise a shadow cabinet colleague in public, in such a petulant manner, for his failure to attend the 10 May meeting beggar's belief. Asquith had over thirty years of political experience behind him and was supposedly imbued with the Liberal Party tradition which embraced a broad church of political thinking. Laski wrote: 'I never thought that I should live to sympathise with Lloyd George, but here I think that Asquith has made a mistake in trying to impose standards of party orthodoxy by which no man can possibly be asked to conform'.⁴⁴

Set against the background of the general strike, the differences in policy terms between Asquith and Lloyd George were, by any analysis, relatively minor. Asquith's approach, endorsed by the shadow cabinet, was for a cessation of the industrial action, with Lloyd George calling a little later for continuing negotiation. A careful reading of the Lloyd George letter shows that he endorsed both a cessation and negotiation. He said he did not know what all the fuss was about. Asquith had misunderstood the point that Lloyd George was making, in that Lloyd George believed that the Baldwin government was responsible for laying the grounds for the industrial

action. In a parliamentary democracy, is it not the function of any opposition party to hold the government of the day to account for their actions? To his credit, from the time of his Cambridge speech, on 1st May, through to the Commons address on 3 May and his subsequent statements, Lloyd George, whilst acknowledging the need to protect essential services and not condemning the rights of the miners, upheld the principle that negotiation was the way forward rather than what he regarded as 'strong-arm tactics'. Ironically if not a paradox, according to A. J. Sylvester, (Lloyd George's Private Secretary), Asquith and the Shadow Cabinet expressed 'warm approval of the line which Lloyd George had taken' a few days earlier at Cambridge.⁴⁵

Asquith's position was insecure in that elements of the Liberal press supported the view adopted by Lloyd George. '[Lloyd George's] behaviour during the strike was proof that it was actuated by the general impulses of Liberalism, displaying courageous wisdom'.⁴⁶ There had been a well-enshrined tradition within the Liberal Party, going back to the Victorian period, that latitude was afforded to Liberals to express their own beliefs without being ostracised. C. P. Scott in the *Manchester Guardian*, was certainly of that view.⁴⁷

Asquith had chosen very poor ground on which to confront Lloyd George; impugning the ability of the left and right wings of the party to engage in constructive, healthy debate. There was perhaps a prevailing attitude in the party in 1926 that the 'grandees' of the party were stuck in the past, with outdated attitudes left over from the First World War. Lloyd George considered Asquith to be 'hidebound and unadventurous', whereas he tapped into a postwar emerging generation that wished to bring about change.⁴⁸ Did Asquith and his followers have a fear of Lloyd George and the progressive radicalism among negative-minded men? 'If forced to choose

between Lloyd George, alive and eager to work for a better Britain and a group of men who had shown no interest in constructive work, choice could not be in doubt'.⁴⁹

Asquith was arguably, after so many years, unable to appreciate what was happening outside Westminster. He was now lacking both the vision and vigour to continue leading the party, short both of funds and of the ability to bring about restorative change. This was recognised by his shadow cabinet colleagues. To then seek somehow to use the events of May 1926 to bring about restoration of party fortunes by clipping Lloyd George's wings, and precipitating his resignation from the party, was the last straw. 'Asquith had terrible faults, very limited horizons, whilst generous and loyal, he was lazy, self-indulgent and lacked decisiveness, but at least he could be trusted and never charged with deception'.⁵⁰ Stephen Koss indicated that certain 'rich grandees' of the Liberal Party had supported Asquith in their bid to get rid of Lloyd George, saying to Asquith that: 'we shall not give a shilling to the Liberal Fund until you get rid of Lloyd George'. Margot Asquith also averred on 29 September that her husband regretted his actions, and that these assurances from the grandees prompted the May letter to Lloyd George.⁵¹

Speculation by historians is always conjectural: but for the fall out following the 1926 May general strike, would the 'dual leadership' of the Liberal Party have continued until Asquith's death a year or so later, subject to any further petty squabbles between them? Asquith had consistently failed to politically control Lloyd George, and had Asquith been able to attend the critical June NLF meeting, would his appearance have ensured that Lloyd George's ambitions were seriously curtailed? If such an outcome had materialised, which was unlikely given Lloyd George's grass roots support, then the 'illness factor' becomes even less relevant. Furthermore, the extent to which the resignation assisted Lloyd George

with his future political strategy is also questionable. The party's fortunes with Lloyd George at the helm, were never to recover, resulting in the May 1929 election producing only 59 Liberal seats, despite a perceived so-called rallying cry for unification of a seriously fractured party. ■

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- 1 See generally *The Liberal Magazine* for July 1926, vol. xxxiv, no. 394, pp. 353–380 and Nov. 1926, vol. xxxviii, no. 399, pp. 626–628, which both contain some contemporary accounts of the events and correspondence relating to Asquith, Lloyd George and the general strike. Asquith's resignation letter is set out in extenso in the Nov. 1926 edition, addressed to J. A. Spender (president of the National Liberal Federation) on 14 Oct. 1926. The letter had been released to the press late on 14 Oct. and news of his resignation appeared in the morning newspapers the following day.
- 2 *The Liberal Magazine*, Nov. 1926, vol. xxxviii, no. 399, p. 628.
- 3 *The Glasgow Herald*, 16 Oct. 1926.
- 4 H.H. Asquith, *Letters of the Earl of Oxford and Asquith to a Friend*, Second Series (London, 1933), p. 27.
- 5 *Manchester Guardian*, 17 Nov. 1922.
- 6 Welsh University Library, Aberystwyth, Lloyd George Papers, NLW 225/289.
- 7 See *Journal of Liberal History*, 81 (Winter 2013–14), p. 26, where Dr. J. Graham Jones sets out the background to the 'Green Book' and the implications that followed, particularly for rural Wales.
- 8 J. Campbell, *Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness, 1922–31* (London, 1977), p. 122.
- 9 Hansard, HC (series 5) vol. clxxvii, col. 1605, 6 Aug. 1925.
- 10 *Ibid.*, vol. clxxxix, col. 703, 26 Mar. 1926.
- 11 The origin of the phrase is uncertain but was used as a rallying cry by the mining communities, approved by the Miners' Federation in April 1926. A similar phrase was also used by the Tonypandy miners in the 1910–11 industrial dispute.
- 12 *Cambridge News*, 2 May 1926. See F. Owen, *Tempestuous Journey: Lloyd George, his Life and Times* (London, 1954), p. 703. According to J. A. Sylvester, *The Real Lloyd George* (London, 1947), p. 147, the shadow

- cabinet expressed warm approval of the line taken by Lloyd George at Cambridge.
- 13 *British Gazette*, 8 May 1926, (issue 1.) This was a single broadsheet not just 'controlled' by Churchill, but was a publication established by the Conservative government during the general strike especially to promote government policy and ran from 8 – 13 May 1926 (eight issues).
- 14 The bitter relationship between Lloyd George and Simon (who aspired to be the successor to Asquith) was always in evidence. Sir John Simon was a well-established 'Asquithian' and was Home Secretary in 1915. See D. Dutton, 'Lloyd George and John Simon and the politics of the Liberal Party, 1919–1931', in J. Loades (ed.), *The Life and Times of David Lloyd George* (Bangor, 1991), pp. 71–86.
- 15 Viscount Grey was a leading Liberal parliamentarian and the longest continuously serving foreign secretary in history, from 1905 to 1916. (Palmerston served longer but in three separate ministries.) He was a close ally of Asquith for over thirty years and was regarded as an 'Imperialist Liberal'.
- 16 Simon argued that, whilst any worker had the right to exercise strike action, the decision of the Trade Union Executive body to call for a general strike was unlawful. Baldwin and the cabinet did not endorse this view, but nonetheless legislation was passed in 1927 declaring any such similar strike to be illegal.
- 17 J. Simon, *Three Speeches on the General Strike* (London, 1926), pp. 2–3.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 5. See also, Lord Birkenhead, *Last Essays* (London, 1930), pp. 186–7 and A. L. Goodhart, *The Law Quarterly Review* vol. clxvii (July 1926), p. 289. Goodhart in his editorial took note of Mr Justice Astbury's Chancery Division judgment in *National Sailors' & Firemen's Union v Reed*, 1926, Ch. 536, which was reported in *The Times*, 11 May 1926.
- 19 See in particular A. Duff Cooper, *Old Men Forget* (London, 1953), p. 151. Duff Cooper was however, among several Liberals, no admirer of Simon. See J. Charmley, *Duff Cooper* (London, 1986), p. 236.
- 20 Duff Cooper, *Old Men Forget*, *ibid.*, p. 151.
- 21 *British Gazette*, 9 May 1926 (issue 3).
- 22 H. Nicholson, *King George V* (London, 1952), p. 318.
- 23 See *The Liberal Magazine*, July 1926, pp. 356–9.
- 24 R. Jenkins, *Asquith* (London, 1978), p. 515.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 516.
- 26 T. Wilson (ed.), *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott, 1911–1928* (London, 1970), p. 487.
- 27 P. Rowland, *David Lloyd George* (London, 1975), p. 267.
- 28 Reported in *The Times*, 12 June 1926.
- 29 *Westminster Gazette*, 5 June 1926.
- 30 *Birmingham Gazette*, 12 June 1926; *Nation*, 21 June 1926.
- 31 D. Dutton, *Simon: A political biography of Sir John Simon* (London, 1992), contains an extensive analysis of Simon's career, noting his political defects, albeit that he held four of the principal secretary-of-state posts.
- 32 Reported in *The Times*, 24 June 1926.
- 33 Reported *Manchester Guardian* and *The Times*, 18 and 19 June 1926.
- 34 J. Rowland Hunt, 20 June 1926, Simon papers, BodIn. Oxford, 60f. 104-7. Hunt was Simon's personal secretary, and I am grateful to Dr David Dutton for his contribution to this article in respect of Simon's political position in an exchange of correspondence on 8 December 2025.
- 35 See A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: twelve essays*, (London, 1971), p. 246.
- 36 Oxford Bodleian Library, Asquith Papers, box xxxv, fos. 241–4.
- 37 A. Spender, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith, Lord Oxford and Asquith*, vol. ii (London, 1932), p. 351.
- 38 Memoranda to Spender and Runciman. Asquith, 6 Oct. 1926 Spender MSS Add. Ms 43686 BodIn, Oxford.
- 39 See L. Masterman, *C.F.G. Masterman: A biography* (London, 1938), p. 137.
- 40 See *Manchester Guardian*, 18 June 1926, and *The Times*, 19 June 1926.
- 41 London Liberal Candidates Association, 3 Sep. 1926. See Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 526.
- 42 See Campbell, *Lloyd George*, pp. 143–45, where there is detailed commentary on the background.
- 43 See comment in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 11 Dec. 1925.
- 44 M.D Howe, (ed.), *Holmes-Laski Letters*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1952), p. 843.
- 45 A.J. Sylvester, *The Real Lloyd George*, (London, 1947), p. 147.
- 46 *Manchester Guardian*, 22 May 1926.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 19 Oct. 1926.
- 48 See T. Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914–1935* (London, 1966), pp. 334–336.
- 49 *Nation*, 20 Jan, 1927 - Ramsay Muir [well known post war Liberal writer and academic].
- 50 M.D. Howe, *Holmes-Laski*, p. 881.
- 51 S. Koss, *Asquith* (London, 1976), p. 281. Koss cites no evidence for either statement.