

Nor can we feasibly claim indifference for the period leading up to the Dublin Rising. Perhaps the most overlooked and undervalued fact is that Home Rule was actually put on the statute book by Asquith in September 1914, against the bitter opposition of Unionists and at some considerable political risk to his own position. The goal of O'Connell, Butt and Parnell had been won; constitutional nationalism had been vindicated. And far from laying the groundwork for the Rising, its suspension was followed by some 150–200,000 Irishmen signing up to fight in France (remember that only 1,500 Volunteers took part in the Rising). This underlines the point that before 1916, and perhaps for some time afterwards in many regions, Redmond and constitutional Nationalism remained in control of Ireland.

The charge of neglect ultimately rests upon the outbreak of the Rising in 1916. Yet in two significant respects such a claim appears groundless. Firstly, because the rising took everyone by complete surprise. Despite vague intelligence snippets, both the military and political arms of British rule in Ireland were unanimous in perceiving no serious threat to civil order. This was reinforced by Sir Roger Casement's earlier arrest off the Kerry coast and failure to land arms for the Volunteers, without which a 'practical' rebellion was impossible, just two days before Eoin MacNeill, president of the Volunteers, called off the movement's Easter manoeuvres. Thus, when Pearse and friends marched into the GPO on Easter Monday they did so to the astonishment not just of the British, but of many leaders of the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Sinn Fein, including the likes of MacNeill, Hobson and Griffith. And yet with hindsight it is difficult to imagine how the government might have obviated the very slim possibility of rebellion without slipping into coercive measures that could easily have generated the very thing they sought to destroy. In light of this the eventual scale of the Rising, so small in numerical, geographical and military terms, was surely testament not to Liberal indifference but to the relative success of a passive, non-confrontational Liberal policy.

Secondly, the galvanisation of Irish popular opinion against British rule was less the product of the Rising than of the way in which the British authorities regained control – in particular, the imposition of martial law, evidence of atrocities that gained popular

infamy, such as the Sheehy-Skeffington incident, and the manner of the subsequent executions of the rebel leaders. In other words, what roused Irish opinion towards more extremist Nationalist forces, and Sinn Fein from 1917 onwards, was a shift in policy and approach *away* from Asquith's more low-key and non-interventionist line. Interestingly, many commentators have long speculated that a more liberal reaction to the events of 1916, playing down their importance, resisting executions and restoring normalcy as quickly as possible, would have successfully alienated (if not belittled) the extreme Nationalists and Republicans, undermined what popular sympathy existed for physical force solutions and reinforced the position of the Irish Nationalists and their commitment to the constitutional path.

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At fault, then, was not the failure of Liberal policy but its abandonment during the Rising itself, when arguably the situation most obviously required just such a liberal approach. In its place policy was handed over to the military authorities under the command of General Maxwell, who believed the restoration of order came by unleashing a robust coercive regime. This was perhaps an inevitable shift in policy given the circumstances. But it also reflected wider political developments: the growing strength of Unionist forces within the Cabinet since their entry in 1915, and the mounting controversy over the issue of conscription. Given this drift, the Rising marked a formal shift to an approach towards which policy had been sliding since 1915. It would finally reach there in June 1916, when Lansdowne and Long obstructed Lloyd George's attempts to introduce Home Rule immediately, thereby arguably frustrating the last hope of a peaceful resolution of the Irish problem, and leading directly to the strife and civil war of 1919–22.

Dr Jeremy Smith is Lecturer in Modern History at University of Wales, Lampeter, having previously taught at London Guildhall, LSE and Exeter. His book The Taming of Democracy: A Study of the Conservative Party 1880–1931 is due for publication in July 1996.

Labour, the Liberal Party and the Great War

The Great War laid many of the foundations for Labour's supplanting of the Liberals in the subsequent decade.

Mark Egan describes the relationship between the two parties during the war.

Looking back at the spectacular collapse of the Liberal Party during the 1920s – from being perhaps the dominant party in Britain's two-party system to its relegation to the margins of that system – it is surprising that the relationship between the Labour and Liberal Parties was relatively calm during the First World War. Some Labour activists opposed Britain's entry into the war; many opposed the government's handling of the conflict. However, after 1915 the Labour movement was for the first time represented in the Cabinet, and the Labour leadership neither opposed Britain's involvement in the war nor employed the internationalist socialist perspective on the conflict and its aftermath which some activists urged upon it. The harmony between the Liberal and Labour

Parties during the Great War was a sign of Labour's youth, and its continuing dependence upon its older, larger progressive partner. Nevertheless, the seeds of Labour's post-war growth were sown during the war, especially after 1917, and that growth stifles the Liberal Party to this day.

Arthur Henderson entered the Cabinet in May 1915 when Asquith formed an all-party coalition to prosecute the First World War; he was later to serve as the representative of labour in Lloyd George's coalition. Although Henderson was the first Labour MP to reach Cabinet level, the appointment was not controversial. The Liberal Party had operated an unofficial electoral pact with the Labour Party since 1903, a pact which ensured that in areas of

Liberal weakness, especially in Lancashire and London, Labour candidates would fight solely against Tories, their election buttressing the Liberal government's majority. This arrangement was especially important after 1910. There had been rumours that Ramsay Macdonald would be invited into the government then, and a formal offer of a Cabinet seat was made to Macdonald in 1914.

The Liberal strategy for dealing with the Labour Party at this time involved an attempt to integrate it into the political system as part of an anti-Conservative coalition led by the Liberals. Henderson's appointment to the Cabinet was necessary to ensure that the Labour movement was represented in the government's wartime decision-making mechanism, and confirmed the Labour Party's role as a minor party subservient to the Liberals. The Liberal Party was keen to ensure that the Labour leadership remained satisfied with this role. The only certain beneficiaries from a split between those two parties would have been the Conservatives. Consequently, prior to the outbreak of the war, the payment of MPs was introduced, and the Osborne judgement, outlawing the trade unions' political levy, was overturned. During the war, Asquith fought to retain Henderson within the government when the latter threatened to resign over the introduction of conscription, and Lloyd George expanded Labour representation in his government.

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Although friendly relations between the two parties helped strengthen the Labour Party in Parliament and hastened some policy reforms beneficial to trade unionism, many Labour activists were unhappy over their party's subservience to Liberalism. The Labour Party was split between the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the trades councils, with the former tending to be more concerned with ideological debates and opposed to the Liberals than the latter. This split, however, was easily containable because of the amorphous nature of the party. Macdonald resigned the party leadership because of his pacifist opposition to the war. He continued to play an active role in the ILP and led the faction of the party which consistently opposed the conscription, repression and censorship policies of the wartime government. It was from this quarter that active opposition to the Liberals came at a national level. ILP activists vehemently denounced much of the policy implemented by Henderson and supported by the more bellicose trade unions. That the Labour Party did not split irrevocably is a testimony to the delicate party management of Henderson, and the fact that the ILP was one of the few outlets of opposition to the government.

Debate within the Labour Party over the means and the ends of the war was intense during the 1914–18 period and led to the end of this period of Liberal/Labour cooperation. Henderson had already been unhappy with the drift of government policy on conscription and the suppression of certain labour journals when the matter of Labour representation at a conference of international socialists in Stockholm was raised in 1917. The idea of members of the British government hobnobbing with Bolsheviks and Germans was too much for Lloyd George's Cabinet to accept, and after the infamous doormat incident, when

Henderson was forced to wait outside the Cabinet Room while his fate was discussed, he resigned.

This issue united the Labour Party once more, and the party took a more critical stance of the government from then on. The Labour leadership threw itself into the task of freeing the party from its dependence on the Liberals. With the Liberal Party split over its attitude to Lloyd George's coalition, and the independent section of it offering no positive alternative to government policy, the Labour Party concentrated on enunciating its post-war aims both in foreign and domestic policy. In a manner similar to its activity during the Second World War, it formulated and publicised its election platform well before the 1918 contest was called. More importantly, Henderson tackled the organisational deficiencies of the Labour Party. The scattering of ILP branches and trades councils across the country was swiftly replaced by a more extensive network of Labour Party branches, each with individual membership and geared towards fighting the impending Parliamentary election. The uneasy relationship between socialism and trade unionism which characterised the Labour Party prior to 1918 was reformed and embodied in the 1918 constitution, which allowed the leadership to take a firmer grip on a more disciplined organisation.

At this time, no such efforts were made to strengthen Liberal organisation. Indeed, three factors served to weaken it. Whereas the Labour Party could rely on the aid of trade union labour employed domestically, the Liberal Party had no such standing organisation and many of its activists were at the front. Secondly, the Women's Liberal organisations were severely weakened by the Liberal Party's continuing ambivalence on the issue of universal adult suffrage. Finally, Liberal associations had often proved unwilling to adopt working men as candidates for Parliamentary seats, primarily because they could contribute no finance towards their election costs. This again tended to deter some potential candidates, activists and electors from supporting the Liberal cause.

Although for all but the final year of the First World War, the Labour Party lent support to the Liberals in government and in many constituencies, the war years were crucial in undermining Liberal strength and permitting Labour's rise towards power. As the Liberal leadership was discredited by splits and scandal, Henderson and his colleagues earned the Labour movement a respectability in government which was much required as Bolshevism rose to power in Russia. As Liberal associations crumbled, the Labour Party deliberately developed and streamlined its organisation. And as the Liberal government became tarnished with the illiberalism of censorship and conscription, and failed to develop a vision of the post-war world, Labour set out its support for a League of Nations and the reorganisation of industry. After the war, Liberals found that the old rallying cry of 'peace, reform, retrenchment' was devalued by changes in Ireland, in the electoral system and especially in industry, where wide-scale government control during the war had enhanced the credibility of Labour's nationalisation aims. In 1918 Labour stood for the first time on a wide-ranging platform entirely separate from the Liberals. Its success then, and in subsequent elections, reflected the failure of the Liberal attempt to integrate the Labour Party into their conception of the political system, that failure being the result of the war.

Mark Egan is a Ph.D student at Oxford University, and a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee.