George, was more to blame for the party's demise. In fact his position is more complicated. Whilst recognising the abilities of both men, he points out that neither were at their best when it came to piloting the Liberal Party through the war years. Asquith is presented as wishing to remain in office at any price, and making a series of debilitating concessions to Unionist opinion throughout the final period of his premiership – though other commentators, notably Roy Jenkins, have seen this as skilful politicking on Asquith's part. Neither does Wilson have any plaudits for Lloyd George. His political manoeuvring is described as hopeless – for example, alienating Bonar Law in 1915 when he favoured McKenna rather than the Tory leader for the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer. Wilson's view is that if Lloyd George had been more politically adept he could have become Prime Minister twelve to eighteen months earlier than he did.

The greatest strength of this book is that it is a joy to read, particularly if the reader already has a firm grasp of the framework of events and personalities. Its is a study focused on parliamentary politics and laced with quotations and comments from often minor, but nonetheless idiosyncratic and entertaining, figures involved in the Liberal Party's decline. One particularly good example of this is the meeting at the Reform Club immediately after Asquith's resignation from the premiership on 8 December 1916. Wilson describes how a taxi had drawn up at the club containing Josiah Wedgwood, MacCallum Scott and Winston Churchill. Stemming from different background within the pre-war Liberal Party; all three had gone their separate political ways by 1924.

Another interesting point Wilson makes is that Asquith does not move into opposition to Lloyd George after December 1916 while the war continues. He does not oppose the government on such potentially Liberal issues as the attempt to introduce conscription to Ireland, or to support the Lansdowne negotiated peace initiative. Similarly Lloyd George acts in March 1917 to prevent a Coalition Liberal being run against an official Liberal at the Aberdeen South byelection. As late as 1918, Wilson considers that Lloyd George could have put his weight behind Liberal reconciliation, as the party was not split into two hostile camps at that point in either Parliament or the country. The war was therefore not something that split the party irrevocably, but rather an event which destroyed long-standing Liberal verities and removed the party's self-confidence that it had a role to play in postwar Britain – only partially restored by free trade in 1923 and *We Can Conquer Unemployment* in 1929. Many Liberals began to see that the inexorable logic of the two-party system most saw as axiomatic led them towards joining either the Labour or the Conservative Parties.

Despite its thirty-year age, Trevor Wilson's book has a number of interesting things to say about the Liberal Party and the war years. Most notably, it focuses on the ideological impact of the Great War, rather than its effect on any weaknesses in the Liberal position which already existed in 1914. In that respect, it is part of the historiography of Liberal decline which blames the war rather than looking for sociological explanation or the politics of the 1920s. In Wilson's view, the party was fatally wounded by the 1918 election, and as such his study is still of value to anyone interested in the story of the party's shift from government to the margins of British politics.

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Asquith and Lloyd George: Common Misunderstandings

The rivalry between Asquith and Lloyd George grew out of the Great War. ***John Grigg*** *argues that the points of similarity between the two were at least as important as their differences.*

H.H.Asquith is often described as the last Liberal Prime Minister, and so is David Lloyd George. Both statements are true, though in different senses. Lloyd George was the last Liberal to be Prime Minister of Britain, as the leader of a coalition. Asquith was the last head of a Liberal government.

It is also repeatedly said that the split between Asquith and Lloyd George at the end of 1916 contributed to, if it did not wholly cause, the destruction of the Liberal Party as one of the alternating parties of government (under our peculiar electoral system), and its relegation to third-party status. This is true as well, though it needs to be explained that the characters of the two men, and their relationship with each other before 1916, have been gravely misunderstood and misrepresented since their time.

Rival historiographical camps have sustained a tedious feud in which the truth has been obscured. It has become normal to expect any book with good things to say of Asquith to rubbish Lloyd George, and vice versa. A recent example of the former is Professor George Cassar's *Asquith as War Leader*, in which the author is fair to Asquith but shows himself incapable of giving any credit at all to Lloyd George. But there are plenty of examples of the opposite distortion, deriving in part from Lord Beaverbrook's preemptive treatment of the subject.

Asquith partisans have tended to depict their man as noble, 'Roman', patrician, and free from base motives, while they have presented Lloyd George as a crude demagogue and relentless self-seeker. On the other side, Lloyd George's dynamism and modernity have been contrasted with Asquith's caution, lethargy and essential conservatism. Yet the reality of both men is far more interesting, and their points of similarity are at least as important as their differences.

Of course they were different in a number of obvious ways. One was English (of Yorkshire extraction), the other Welsh. One was a classical scholar, a prize product of Balliol College, Oxford; the other had little Latin and no Greek, and never went to a university. Asquith enjoyed London dinner parties and weekends spent in large country houses. He married (as his second wife) an upper-class woman, and another became his close confidante. Lloyd George steered clear of high society, and resisted the aristocratic embrace, literally and metaphorically. Both his wife and his mistress were middle-class. Asquith had (like Gladstone) a certain contempt for businessmen, and a strong distaste for the

press. Lloyd George was quite at home with both, and made good use of them. These are a few major respects in which the two men differed, and one could add to the list.

But now consider what they had in common. Both were essentially self-made men, and both came from Nonconformist backgrounds. Asquith's father was a small employer in the Yorkshire wool trade. He was brought up as a Congregationalist, and his childhood was spent at Morley, near Leeds. But when he was twelve his maternal uncle paid for him to live in London as a day boy at the City of London School. From there he won a classical scholarship to Balliol. Lloyd George's upbringing was in North Wales, where his maternal uncle and guardian (his father having died when he was an infant) was also a small employer – the master cobbler in the village of Llanystumdwy, near Criccieth – as well as being a minister in the small Baptist sect known as the Disciples of Christ. In this sect Lloyd George was raised, but he nevertheless went to a village school run by the established church. He left school before he was 12, and at 14 passed the Law Society's preliminary examination, on his way to becoming an attorney.

Clearly Asquith was the better educated of the two, but Lloyd George was less disadvantaged in mental training than might appear. He was well taught at school, and at home was given every encouragement to read. His father, a schoolmaster, had bequeathed a small library of books, which included major works of history and literature. Thanks to this Lloyd George certainly read far more in his early years than (for instance) the apparently far more privileged Winston Churchill.

The fact that he and Asquith both came from Nonconformist homes is obviously important, but it is even more so that they both reacted strongly against the restrictiveness of their upbringing. Neither was a natural puritan, and both had a powerful urge to escape from the limitations of their early environment. The boredom that Lloyd George admitted to feeling during his childhood at Llanystumdwy was matched by the boredom felt by Asquith when, as a schoolboy, he lodged with a doctor's family in Liverpool Road, Islington. Lloyd George remained for the whole of his life ostensibly Nonconformist, and was genuinely attached to two aspects of the chapel worship he knew, Welsh hymns and sermons. Asquith gradually drifted away from Nonconformity into a vague Anglicanism, and in any case was never regarded by Nonconformists as their supreme political champion, as Lloyd George was. But the two men were alike in abandoning Nonconformist orthodoxy, both in belief and practice. They became essentially free-thinkers, and equally free from sexual inhibition. Lloyd George, however, though by no means a total abstainer, remained a far more moderate drinker than Asquith.

Both were lawyers, a professional group never anything like as dominant in British politics as in American. Asquith as a barrister, and Lloyd George as a solicitor, belonged to different branches of the profession; but since in Wales a solicitor could appear in court to plead for his client the difference was to that extent less marked in their case. The political careers of both men were boosted by lucky forensic breaks. Asquith's appearance as junior counsel before the Parnell Commission of Enquiry in 1889 brought him to wide public notice, and the previous year Lloyd George's star performance in the Llanfrothen Burial Case had made him a household name in Wales. Asquith was already an MP, having been elected in 1886 at the age of 33. Lloyd George joined him in Parliament in 1890, at the even earlier age of 27.

The fact that one followed the other as Prime Minister produced the phenomenon of a lawyer in the top political job for a continuous period of 14 years, an experience unknown since the younger Pitt. Since Lloyd George's fall in 1922 the only other lawyers to reach the premiership have been Clement Attlee (whose career as a barrister was very brief, comprising only four court appearances) and Margaret Thatcher (who practised, on and off, for five years as a barrister specialising in tax.)

Though not natural puritans, Asquith and Lloyd George were certainly natural rulers, sharing an exalted self-confidence and unlimited ambition. On policy there were some differences, though more of emphasis and specific judgment than of principle. For example, Asquith's support for the Boer War, and Lloyd George's opposition to it, are too often taken to indicate that the former was an Imperialist, the latter a Little Englander. In fact, Lloyd George believed in the British Empire no less firmly than Asquith – if anything more so, because he had visited Canada as a young man, and had been inspired by what he saw. He opposed the Boer War not because it was Imperial, but because he judged it to be a grave mistake, not least from the point of view of enlightened British Imperialism. Asquith judged the matter differently, though there was nothing of the jingo in his outlook.

On social policy, both were exponents of the New Liberalism, departing from the Gladstonian doctrine that the state should concern itself as little as possible with improving 'the condition of the people'. Old age pensions were announced by Asquith in his last budget, and then put through by Lloyd George when he succeeded as Chancellor of the Exchequer. In the Cabinet discussions on Lloyd George's epoch-making 1909 budget Asquith gave him solid support, as Lloyd George readily acknowledged, though in the ensuing controversy the Chancellor's colourful rhetoric was not always to his leader's taste. The idea that the two men were divided on the substance of social reform is largely illusory.

Though not natural puritans, Asquith and Lloyd George were certainly natural rulers, sharing an exalted self-confidence and unlimited ambition.

Another false contrast is between Asquith's supposed caution and Lloyd George's boldness. In reality both men were adventurers and, on occasion, gamblers. The words 'wait and see' used by Asquith in a Parliamentary answer in 1910 have stuck to him as evidence of a temporising and vacillating character. But, as Roy Jenkins cogently explains, in the circumstances they were used 'in no apologetic and hesitant way, but rather as a threat'. Though it can reasonably be argued that Lloyd George was the more dynamic of the two, there were many occasions when Asquith took masterful initiatives, including the coal dispute in 1912, the crisis leading to the declaration of war in 1914, and the formation of the first wartime coalition in 1915.

Beyond question Asquith was more suited to leadership in peacetime than in wartime, and this became increasingly apparent. As he said himself, he was not good at carrying 'the fiery cross'; his style of speaking was impressive rather than stirring. He also found it harder than Lloyd George to adapt himself to the demands of a war that was without precedent in British, or indeed world, history. But nobody should imagine that Britain's war leadership was transformed from fumbling incompetence to smooth efficiency when Lloyd George took over from Asquith. There were improvements, certainly, among which some were vital. But there

was also a debit side; Asquith, at any rate until his powers began to wane, was a better administrator than Lloyd George.

Together the two men achieved great things and, despite their differences of temperament and cast of mind, they normally got on well, unless and until mischief was made between them. During the eight years that they were next-door neighbours in Downing Street they met regularly, when Parliament was sitting, to discuss the day's business. Each recognised in the other qualities that he did not himself possess.

Unfortunately mischief often was made, particularly by Asquith's wife, Margot, and by one or two of his colleagues who detested or feared Lloyd George, notably Reginald McKenna, Lewis Harcourt and Walter Runciman. These people were forever planting in Asquith's mind the idea that Lloyd George was intriguing with journalists and other politicians with a view to taking his place. Of course Lloyd George was by no means incapable of complaining about his leader, but usually he did so in a momentary fit of impatience, not as part of any deliberate plan. In any case he was not the only member of the Asquith Cabinet to exploit contacts in the press, and those who accused him to Asquith were among the worst offenders. (A somewhat analogous situation existed later in the century when another Welsh Chancellor of the Exchequer, Roy Jenkins, was seen as a threat to another Yorkshire-born Prime Minister, Harold Wilson).

During the latter part of 1916 there was a growing consensus that Asquith was no longer equal to his task. His loss of vigour and grip was manifest. Many of his warmest admirers felt that he should, at the very least, devolve some of the practical work of war direction. It was also widely felt that Lloyd George should assume the effective day-to-day running of the war, and this feeling was shared by Lloyd George himself. Sadly it was not shared by Asquith, who continued to behave as though he had an almost divine right to the premiership (an attitude shown by some others who have occupied the post for a long time).

Both were great Liberals and formidable leaders, with far more in common than most people, even now, are prepared to admit. Both had outstanding records of achievement, and much of their best work was done in partnership.

Contrary to the mythology retrospectively fostered by both camps, there was no disagreement on war aims or the handling of peace initiatives. The notion that Asquith was for a compromise peace while Lloyd George was determined to fight through to victory is entirely without foundation. On this issue they were at one. Lloyd George was, indeed, hawkish about the prosecution of the war, but so too was Asquith – who shared the view that any compromise the Germans would agree to while still occupying Belgium and a substantial area of France would be the equivalent of a victory for them, or at any rate an armed truce very much in their favour. As he put it to the War Committee, 'to the Allies a draw was much the same as defeat'.

It is a very great pity that Asquith did not stand aside voluntarily at the end of 1916, offering to serve under another Prime Minister for the sake of national unity. The realistic alternatives were Lloyd George and the Conservative leader, Bonar Law. Law was not prepared to form a government without Asquith, and anyway regarded Lloyd George as the best man for the job. Asquith refused to serve under any other leader. So Lloyd George formed a coalition with Conservative and Labour support, but with only about half of his own party backing him. The Asquithians became a loyal and patriotic opposition, but an opposition nonetheless.

The evidence suggests that Lloyd George would have genuinely preferred Asquith to remain as Prime Minister, with himself as chairman of a new War Committee. Probably this would not have worked, and Asquith may well have been right to reject the proposal in the end. Whoever was running the war needed to be leader in name as well as in fact. But Asquith could have served under Lloyd George – say, as Lord Chancellor – and his presence in the government would have been a major asset. In somewhat comparable circumstances in the next war, Neville Chamberlain agreed to serve under Winston Churchill, with immense benefit to the country and, incidentally, the Conservative Party. Apart from the national loss caused by Asquith's attitude in December 1916, the Liberal Party was divided by it. Thus began the process whereby the Liberals lost their position as one of the two dominant parties in the state.

Asquith's resentment of the move by Lloyd George, Law and Edward Carson to force a change in the system of war direction was neither reasonable nor – in view of an episode earlier in his own career – morally consistent. In 1905 he, Edward Grey and R.B. Haldane had entered into a similar compact to force the leader of their party, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, to become a more or less ornamental Prime Minister in the Liberal government soon to come to power. The plan was that the three would refuse to take office under him unless he agreed to go to the House of Lords, leaving Asquith the effective head of the government as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons. In the event the plan came to nothing; Campbell-Bannerman, appointed Prime Minister, did not go to the Lords, and Asquith, offered the Treasury, promptly accepted it without consulting his colleagues.

The stand taken by Lloyd George, Law and Carson in 1916 was open and widely publicised. It was not, like the compact just described, a hole-and-corner affair. Moreover the trio demanding a change in the system of war direction did so because they believed, justifiably, that the nation's survival was at stake. When Asquith refused to meet the demand, Lloyd George resigned. Any moral difference between the two 'plots' seems very much in Lloyd George's favour.

Yet he is by no means blameless for failure to heal the Liberal rift at the end of the war. He should have pressed Asquith to join the British delegation to the peace conference, and should have gone out of his way to reconcile the separated brethren. Instead, he pursued the will-o'-the-wisp of a centre party involving his Coalition Liberals and moderate Conservatives. All in all, he and Asquith between them put the Liberal Party out of serious business for the indefinite future.

Both, however, were great Liberals and formidable leaders, with far more in common than most people, even now, are prepared to admit. Both had outstanding records of achievement, and much of their best work was done in partnership.

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