

# Lloyd George and the Conservative Party

As politicians today grapple with the so-called 'Third Way,' perhaps they should consider the lessons of the past. By *Jim Thorne*.

---

A prime minister accused of governing in a presidential manner; ambitions to reach beyond party boundaries in an effort to build consensus at the centre ground of British politics; a disunited and directionless Conservative Party. Sounds familiar? Each of these statements reflects upon the premiership of David Lloyd George.

It is common to associate Lloyd George with Welsh radicalism, or to regard him as the New Liberal (and yes, the emphasis at the time was on 'New') whose social reform was representative of the political sea change that finally brought the Labour Party to power. In fact, as historians of the Liberal Party of course know only too well, Lloyd George was Prime Minister of a Conservative-dominated government for nearly six years between 1916 and 1922.

This remarkable marriage, consummated by the formation of a coalition government in the name of national unity, was a crucial factor in the decline of the Liberal Party and the rise of Labour. The historiography of this transformation in party politics tends to concentrate upon the contrasting fortunes of these two parties. This essay tries to convey the suggestion that by his actions Lloyd George unwittingly saved the Tories from the fate that actually befell the Liberals.

There can be no doubt that the parameters of British politics in the Edwardian period were changing rapidly and that the existing political parties needed to adapt to them. The formation of the Labour Representation Committee (later to become the Labour Party) in 1900, aiming to represent in parliament its affiliated trade unions and socialist societies, was an obvious indication of the social changes which had been gradually altering politics at grassroots level. Historians of the Labour Party have argued that Liberal decline was the in-

evitable result of the extension of the franchise in 1918, and not the result of the political experience of war.<sup>1</sup> Implicit in this argument is the notion that the Liberal Party was unable to compete successfully on the political battlefield of the left.

Without stepping too heavily into this particular arena of debate, this essay focuses instead upon the political battlefield of the right in an effort to show that there was no inevitability about the decline of the Liberal Party. Although the Liberals did lose some ground to the Labour Party before the Great War, it was the Conservatives who had most to fear from the rise of the labour movement. The Tories had no chance of competing in the struggle to win the progressive left-wing vote, and an extension of the electoral franchise loomed ominously on the horizon for them.

By 1918, therefore, the real political battle from the Conservative perspective was the one for the domination of the moderate right-wing vote, and this was a prize the Liberal Party seemed well disposed to win. As late as October 1919 the Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law confided to his colleague Arthur James Balfour, 'I am perfectly certain, indeed, I do not think anyone can doubt this, that our party on the old lines will never have any future again in this country.'<sup>2</sup> And by the time this statement was made, the Conservatives were the dominant party of government, and the Liberals were hopelessly divided. As Martin Pugh has written, the wartime coalition of 1916 created a vacuum on the left that enabled the Labour Party to 'occupy the role played by the Edwardian Liberals in social reform, while the Liberal Party itself moved to the right.'<sup>3</sup> The Conservative Party's association with Lloyd George was a dangerous gamble, because while it exacerbated Liberal divisions it also watered down the traditional distinctions between Liberalism and Toryism.

The collapse of the last Liberal government on 25 May 1915 was the first of three critical wartime blows to the Liberal Party. The second blow came in December 1916, when Lloyd George replaced Asquith at the head of the coalition government, and the third in 1918 when it was decided that this alliance would fight the election under the 'coupon' arrangement. Each of these blows, which helped to consign the Liberal Party to third-party status after the war, resulted from decisions taken and circumstances at the highest levels of politics. The Liberal Party was critically split in December 1916, but its constituents at that time were not. Ultimately this was a division caused by a clash of personalities, not principles or objectives.

The political crisis of May 1915, like the crisis of December of the following year, was driven primarily by a desire to improve the way in which the war was being run. There is little evidence to suggest that the Asquith coalition itself caused any lasting damage to the Liberal Party. On the contrary, it was the Con-

servatives who had most cause for complaint in 1915. Although, in agreeing to a coalition Bonar Law had averted a likely election, which many Conservatives agreed would be disastrous for the nation and the party, he also stifled opposition to the still predominantly Liberal government. Furthermore, the few concessions won by Bonar Law in terms of Tory cabinet positions in 1915 'underlined for the Conservatives that it was not a genuine coalition but a triumph for Asquith.'<sup>4</sup> It did not become apparent that the Conservatives had made any political headway during the war until the 'palace revolution' of December 1916.

There still remains much confusion as to the intentions and roles played by the protagonists who ousted Asquith from office on 5 December 1916. Opinions differ as to whether Lloyd George conspired to replace Asquith himself. Robert Blake claimed that 'Lloyd George had nothing to do with the article' leading in *The Times* on 4 December which apparently encouraged Asquith to resign,<sup>5</sup> while Viscount Samuel recalled in 1945: 'Confident that his own qualities would make him a better war premier than Asquith, [Lloyd George] no doubt felt that he was not merely justified but under a duty to overthrow his chief and replace him.'<sup>6</sup>

In his biography of Bonar Law, Blake absolves the Tory leader from having had any intention of removing Asquith from the premiership.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, there is the suggestion that Lloyd George's rise to

power was in fact the result of a Conservative-inspired conspiracy. Martin Gilbert has expressed the view that the Tories were in too volatile a state under Bonar Law to have made the removal of Asquith anything more than an accident.<sup>8</sup> Yet a reference in the diary of Christopher Addison, dated 7 April 1916, commenting on a letter Lloyd George had apparently received from the Conservative Arthur Lee, suggests that the Tories were capable of more sinister undertakings than Gilbert gives them credit for:

It was a long typewritten document in the form of a draft, full of verbiage, innuendoes and suggestions and practically inviting L.G. to ally himself with one or two Tory leaders and 'go for' the P.M. ... This document made me more suspicious of the pressure that is being brought to bear upon L.G. than anything he has hitherto told me. One hardly likes to write these things, but I could not avoid the suspicion that it was part of a game by a feeble section of the Conservatives to get him out of office and force an election on a Tory issue, which would result in bringing them in with the Liberal Party hopelessly divided.<sup>9</sup>

Addison's evidence suggests that at least some Conservatives saw Lloyd George as their possible redeemer months before Asquith was finally removed. This questions Bonar Law's motives for refusing to form a government on 5 December when asked to do so by the King. But there is little reason to doubt Bonar Law's own explanation that he only saw possible benefit in forming an administration if both Asquith and Lloyd George agreed to serve in it.<sup>10</sup>

By 1917 many Tories perhaps felt that the decision to join forces with their arch-enemy of old was justified. There were calls for the arrangement of a negotiated peace from men as eminent as Lord Lansdowne; Tsarist Russia had collapsed; and industrial unrest in Britain, particularly severe in Clydeside, seemed to threaten the war effort itself. The Conservative Party was able to ride



the problems it could have been left to face alone during the war on the crest of Lloyd George's unassailable popularity.

The Liberal Party, although critically split, was not permanently damaged by the coalition until the general election of 1918. It was decided in the summer of 1918, before the end of the war, that the Conservatives would fight the next election in collaboration with Lloyd George. The Asquithian Liberals were not prepared to join a Lloyd George-led coalition, and Lloyd George was not about to renounce his premiership and return to subordination under Asquith. For Lloyd George the alternatives were to fight the election independently, or remain with the Conservatives. Since 1910, when Lloyd George had first floated the idea of coalition government to overcome party differences during the constitutional crisis, he had had 'an abiding passion for a kind of supreme national synthesis that would soar above petty political partisanship.'<sup>11</sup> This style of government had proved to be successful during the war, and there was every reason to suppose it could be work in peacetime too.

Lloyd George commanded such political influence in 1918 that the benefits of continuing their relationship with him were obvious to all Conservatives. Had the Tories separated from Lloyd George after the war, the Conservative Party could well have emerged from the 1918 election a far smaller and more reactionary party than it did. Despite having some reservations, Bonar Law was keenly aware of the benefits his party could accrue from remaining in coalition. As he explained to Balfour,

[Lloyd George] would secure a greater hold on the rank and file of our party and he would also be so dependent on that party after an election that he would permanently be driven into the same attitude towards our party which [J.] Chamberlain was placed in before, with this difference — that he would be leader of it. That would,

however, I am inclined to think, be not a bad thing for our party, and a good thing for the nation.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, it was accepted that the Liberal Party would be decisively split as a consequence of an electoral alliance between the Conservatives and Lloyd George.

The 'coupon' arrangement agreed by Freddie Guest and Sir George Younger is itself worthy of some attention here. In terms of their share of parliamentary seats, the Liberals (ignoring their divisions) did badly out of the deal. It provided them with only 159 'coupons' against the 364 given to the Tories,<sup>13</sup> despite the fact that each party had won 272 seats at the previous election. The Liberals were very under-represented in the coalition that campaigned in December 1918 as the group that had steered the nation to victory. While these figures highlight nothing more than how disadvantaged the Liberals were by their split, they also show that the Conservatives were able to rise to a dominant electoral position on the basis of the distribution of 'coupons'.

In fact, because Lloyd George had no real party apparatus to work with, the Tories in effect sacrificed many constituency organisations under the 'coupon' arrangement by handing them over to the Liberals. In this way they were arguably making concessions that their Coalition Liberal partners were in no position to make in return. This was certainly how many Tories perceived the arrangement,<sup>14</sup> perhaps unaware of the long-term benefit that sacrificing some seats to keep the Liberal Party divided would bring to their party. As Viscount Samuel wrote at the time, a divided party meant that: 'At this election, in the eyes of the masses of the people, official Liberalism stood for nothing in particular.'<sup>15</sup>

A significant feature of the coalition after 1918 was its anti-Labour stance. The Russian Revolution and the new Labour Party constitution of 1918 had greatly altered the liberal-minded perception of the Labour threat, which was now positively socialist. Furthermore, the

growth of Labour's constituency organisation and its determination to contest every seat made this threat real and all-encompassing. Before the war, the Liberal Party had been largely concerned with consuming Labour votes, but by 1918 most Liberals and Tories alike were conspicuous in their anti-socialism. This certainly encouraged the continuation of the post-war coalition after 1918. The anti-strike measures against railwaymen (in 1919) and miners (in 1921), the disavowal of Sankey's coal nationalisation proposals and the military intervention in Russia were all instances which seemed to justify the feeling that, 'for the left, the coalition had been a time of class war [and] of anti-Bolshevism run mad.'<sup>16</sup> Yet the prolongation of the coalition in 1918 created a moderate niche into which Labour could expand, because of the electoral weakness of a divided Liberal Party.

The part played by Lloyd George in the Conservative survival was significant, if for no other reason than it meant he kept the Liberals divided. Even in 1922, however, the role that the Conservatives were going to play in the future was by no means clear. It is only possible to speak in terms of the party (in its traditional form) being 'saved' because the relationship with Lloyd George was ended. This was certainly how Stanley Baldwin saw the situation in October 1922 when he famously warned a meeting of Tories at the Carlton Club that Lloyd George was a 'dynamic force' who was in danger of causing the old Conservative Party to be 'smashed to atoms and lost in ruins.'

Baldwin's argument won the day, of course, and the decision to end the coalition split the Conservatives, with Austen Chamberlain (party leader at the time) remaining loyal to Lloyd George. But by repudiating Lloyd George the Conservative Party instantly discredited him, leaving those within the party who rejected the Carlton Club decision — such as Austen Chamberlain, Balfour and Birkenhead — somewhat isolated figures. Thus Bonar Law's accession to the premiership in Octo-



ber 1922 was a unifying factor for the Conservative Party, even if this was not immediately obvious to all those involved. The Carlton Club meeting was the defining moment for the Conservative Party in its relationship with Lloyd George. Although Lloyd George seemed to have taken the Tories to the brink of their own disaster by 1922, the balance of power in the relationship between the two changed completely overnight. The Conservative Party had amassed as much benefit as was possible from Lloyd George without causing its own meltdown, and it emerged from the relationship scathed, but far stronger than it had been at its outset.

Lloyd George's role in providing a mainstream constituency for the Tories in what they had feared would be an alien political environment was inadvertently played. The Conservative Party was a somewhat fortuitous beneficiary of political circumstances that were largely beyond its control. In October 1918, for

with the Conservatives to facilitate their long-term survival at the expense of the Liberal Party.

In Lloyd George's eyes, a new consensus had been formed after the war, and the only anomaly was that Asquith refused to conform to it. Many notable Liberals were to drift into the Conservative Party after 1918 (several more joined the Labour ranks), including Greenwood, Guest, Hilton Young, Grigg, Mond, and, of course, Churchill. This drift illustrated the extent to which the impact of the Great War had pulled Labour and the Conservatives towards the centre ground of British politics. As Lloyd George was well aware, liberalism still survived within the ranks of the Conservative Party after 1918.

Within days of his resignation in 1922, Lloyd George's 'presidential' leadership and his impact upon the progressive forces at the political centre were forgotten as all around sought to distance themselves from him. Ultimately, Lloyd George's ex-

ample, Bonar Law had expressed a fear that '[Lloyd George] would like personally nothing better than that there should be a split in our party as a result of which a majority would support him,'<sup>17</sup> yet he proceeded to fight the election in tandem with Lloyd George. It is quite clear that Lloyd George did not intend his alliance

experiment with centrist politics failed because he was unable to unite these progressive groups under the Liberal banner. Events clearly showed that without the support of liberal-minded Conservatives, the effort to build consensus at the centre ground of British politics could not last.

*Jim Thorne worked in the House of Commons for Mark Oaten MP, and is shortly to become a law student.*

Notes:

- 1 See H.C.G. Matthew, R.I. McKibbin and J.A. Kay, 'The Franchise Factor in the Rise of the Labour Party', *English Historical Review* xci (1976).
- 2 Bonar Law to Balfour, 5/10/19; Balfour Papers pp. 272-80, as cited in K.O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: the Lloyd George Coalition Government, 1918-1922* (Oxford, 1979), p. 31.
- 3 M. Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1939* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1993), p. 172.
- 4 Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics*, p. 167.
- 5 R. Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister: The Life and Times of Andrew Bonar Law* (London, 1955), p. 328.
- 6 Viscount Samuel, *Memoirs*, (London, 1945), p. 120.
- 7 Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister*, p. 327.
- 8 M. Gilbert, *David Lloyd George: The Organiser of Victory 1912-1916*, (London, 1992), p. 387.
- 9 C. Addison, *Four and a Half Years: A Personal Diary from June 1914 to January 1919*, Vol. I (London, 1934), p. 190.
- 10 See Bonar Law Papers 85.A.1, as cited in Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister*, p. 337.
- 11 K.O. Morgan, '1902-1924', in D. Butler (ed.), *Coalitions in British Politics*, (London, 1978), p. 27.
- 12 Bonar Law to Balfour, 5/10/18, Balfour Papers; as cited in Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister*, p. 385.
- 13 C. Ponting, *Churchill* (London, 1994), p. 219.
- 14 i.e. Lord Salisbury; see Morgan, '1902-1924', p. 39. Also see Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister*, p. 393, for Younger's reaction.
- 15 H. Samuel to W. Runciman, 9/1/19, as quoted in Samuel, *Memoirs*, p. 133.
- 16 Morgan, '1902-1924', p. 49.
- 17 Bonar Law to Balfour, 5/10/18, Balfour Papers; as quoted in Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister*, p. 384.