

THE WONDERFUL LLOYD GEORGE

David Lloyd George enjoyed an unusually long political afterlife following his ejection from the premiership in October 1922.¹ Only 59 years old when he left Downing Street, he remained a member of the House of Commons for twenty-two years before accepting a peerage in the autumn of 1944. In the history of the twentieth-century premiership only Arthur Balfour exceeded Lloyd George's experience, resigning as Prime Minister in December 1905, but remaining active in politics until shortly before his death in 1930. **David Dutton** tells the story of Lloyd George's last years.



WIZARD AS WAS E, 1931 – 1945

BALFOUR'S LATER CAREER included a ministerial reincarnation. Appointed Foreign Secretary at the formation of Lloyd George's own government in December 1916, he also filled a number of non-departmental posts in the Conservative governments of the 1920s. By contrast, Lloyd George's career after leaving Downing Street was spent entirely in the ranks of opposition.

In October 1922 few informed observers would have foreseen this outcome. While some said he would be back in office in six months, others in two years, Lloyd George himself suggested that the Tories would now be in power for twenty years.² Notwithstanding two brief interludes of Labour government, it proved to be a remarkably accurate prediction. But if Lloyd George never returned to power, he was at least a major player in the political game over the following decade. Unable to overcome the political handicap, which had begun in 1916, of not having behind him a political party – or at least one large enough to return him to office by conventional means – Lloyd George benefitted from the peculiar electoral and parliamentary circumstances that characterised the 1920s. For a brief period of transition Britain experienced a genuine three-party system, very different from the duopoly which existed during the rest of the century. Such a situation encouraged calculations of political movement and realignment which left the Liberals a significant factor in the country's electoral

Left: Lloyd George at his farm at Bron-y-de, Churt, during the 1930s

arithmetic, despite their relegation to third-party status in 1922. Indeed, on two occasions, following the general elections of 1923 and 1929, the Liberal Party held the balance of power in the House of Commons. And there was always the possibility that electoral reform might further entrench its position as a crucial force in national politics. Some historians have even written the political history of these years with Lloyd George at the very centre of the stage, while other leaders, with larger party forces behind them but lacking the Welshman's dynamism and intellectual energy, worked out how best to keep him consigned to the political wilderness. According to Kenneth Morgan, 'it is clear that the politics of the 1920s were in large measure a reaction against Lloyd George, a reaction in which the Conservative and Labour parties made common cause'.³

The situation after 1931, however, was completely different. That year witnessed a dramatic change in Lloyd George's personal fortunes. In the spring he appeared still to be the arbiter of national politics, on the verge of an astonishing comeback into government. Though the surviving documentary record is fragmentary, it appears that Lloyd George was in secret negotiations with Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government, which might have led to his appointment as Leader of the Commons and Foreign Secretary or Chancellor in a Lib-Lab coalition.⁴ But Lloyd George's sudden illness in the summer left him

a largely helpless observer of the events which led to the formation of the National Government in August, a government from which it would have been almost impossible to exclude him had he been fit. Had Lloyd George been in a position to lead the Liberal Party in the inter-party negotiations, it seems probable that he would have driven a harder, and for Liberals more advantageous, bargain than proved to be the case, including perhaps the introduction of the Alternative Vote. It is even possible that he would have shown the flexibility to negotiate a compromise agreement with the Conservatives on tariffs.⁵ As it was, even the marginalised Lloyd George seemed to rank among the political heavyweights. MacDonald wrote to express his dismay at Lloyd George's indisposition and came to Churt to seek his endorsement. Herbert Samuel, the acting Liberal leader, and Lord Reading, Liberal leader in the Lords, also made their way to the Welshman's country home, ostensibly to ensure that they were in step with his wishes. Less benignly, the Conservative backbencher, Cuthbert Headlam, judged it imperative that the government should go to the country under MacDonald's leadership. Otherwise it would be said that the Tories had broken the National Government, and 'LG and his friends would once again get away with it – and anything might happen. What an unmitigated curse to the country LG is'.⁶

The National Government's decision to follow Headlam's wishes and fight an election in

October transformed Lloyd George's position. He recognised that the likely Conservative majority would not only lead to the introduction of tariffs, but also destroy the residual power which he and the Liberal Party enjoyed in a hung parliament. He was particularly opposed to the idea of a deal with the Conservatives – 'he would sooner have half the present number of Liberal MPs than have an arrangement with the Tories'⁷ – and never forgave Samuel and his colleagues for giving in to Conservative pressure. Lloyd George used a radio broadcast during the election campaign to complain that 'under the guise of a patriotic appeal a Tory majority is to be engineered. Patriotism is everywhere exploited for purely party purposes.'⁸ His worst forebodings proved justified. The election produced a Conservative majority unmatched in the entire twentieth century. Sixty-eight Liberal MPs were swamped by the massed Tory ranks and in any case teetered on the verge of a decisive split between the followers of Herbert Samuel and those of John Simon. Meanwhile, Lloyd George stood at the head of a tiny band of just four MPs – himself, his children, Megan and Gwilym, and Gwilym's brother-in-law, Goronwy Owen. He was understandably bitter:

When I was stricken down ... we had complete control of the Parliamentary situation ... We had over 5,000,000 of electors. Where are they now? I have never seen a case of more complete disaster following promptly on fatuous and pusillanimous leadership.⁹

If Lloyd George had now taken the opportunity to turn his back on the whole political scene, no one could have blamed him. He had, after all, achieved everything in terms of personal ambition to which a politician could reasonably aspire. One of his many biographers has described the 1920s as a period in which Lloyd George was 'genuinely seeking work'.¹⁰ In the following decade, however, was this any longer the case?

At all events, it would be difficult to describe the Lloyd George of the 1930s as a full-time politician. On occasions he seemed more like a

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full-time writer. His main task was to produce his long-anticipated *War Memoirs*, but before that he completed what was originally intended to be a long memorandum for submission to the international conference on reparations at Lausanne. In fact, it developed into a short book, *The Truth about Reparations and War Debts*, which was published at the end of March 1932. Thereafter his attention turned to his magnum opus. Progress was rapid. Two volumes covering Asquith's wartime government in just over 1,000 pages were published in September and October 1933. A further two of 1,500 pages, dealing with 1917, followed in September and October 1934, with a final two volumes of comparable length detailing the last year of the war appearing in 1936. It was hardly surprising, then, to find Lloyd George in September 1932 writing of his wish to be 'free to get on with my work' and not wanting to 'throw myself into active politics before 1934'.¹¹

Once the *War Memoirs* were out of the way, Lloyd George turned almost immediately to his account of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, published in two substantial volumes in 1938 as *The Truth about the Peace Treaties*. It amounted in total to an astonishing literary output on the part of a man now in his eighth decade. Nor was Lloyd George's involvement in the project purely nominal. The books were not ghost-written. Though his staff were employed to collect, sort and assemble the massive body of documentation upon which they were based, the writing itself bore Lloyd George's own unmistakable imprint. As Frances Stevenson recalled, 'the work went on apace ... He could never do anything except with the whole of his energy, and we were hard put to it to keep pace with his output.'¹²

Lloyd George's writing about the past was symptomatic of a deeper characteristic of the man at this time. The diaries of his two indispensable secretaries, Frances Stevenson and A. J. Sylvester – though their services to Lloyd George were inevitably very different – reveal someone with a strong disposition to live in the past.¹³ Lloyd George often seemed happier to reminisce about his struggles with Field Marshal Haig or his roots in the politics and religion of

North Wales than he was to engage with the contemporary political scene. Thomas Jones, accompanying him on his notorious trip to Germany in 1936, noted him 'fighting the campaigns of the Great War all over again with great animation'.¹⁴ Almost subconsciously, Lloyd George seemed to be laying the foundations of a later myth about his own career, that the politics of the 1930s were all about those lesser men, scarcely worthy of attention, who had excluded him from office but who could not stand comparison with the figures of an earlier, nobler era when Lloyd George himself had been at the peak of his powers.

It was also striking that Lloyd George began in the 1930s to take extended holidays in such distant locations as Ceylon and Jamaica. Rather like French governments in the dying years of the Third Republic, he developed something of a reputation for not being in place at moments of political crisis. His absence abroad was not unconnected with his literary preoccupations. Lloyd George increasingly found it necessary to remove himself physically from the distractions of British politics in order to give his full attention to his writing.

Frustration with the domestic political scene also encouraged a growing interest in agriculture. There was a political dimension here. His interest in the land, and his belief that in it lay the solution to most of the nation's troubles, went back to the earliest days of his political career. 'He says he has the land in his bones', noted Frances Stevenson in March 1934.¹⁵ By that time there was some suggestion that he might be brought into the National Government as Minister of Agriculture, and a variation of the same idea resurfaced during the first months of the Second World War.¹⁶ But Lloyd George's interest in the subject was also increasingly domestic and personal, focused on the experimental farm which he cultivated in Surrey. 'The farm itself was becoming to him more and more important and more and more of a solace against the bitterness of politics.'¹⁷ He once remarked that he was infinitely more interested now in apples than he was in politics or even in his writing.¹⁸ Even during his visit to Hitler in 1936, Sylvester received daily

telephone reports from Churt on the progress of Lloyd George's fruit farm – 'the weather, the yield of honey, the price got for fruit, sold at Harrods or Covent Garden, the takings of his shop in the village and so forth'.¹⁹ At one level there was something admirably balanced about all this. But it also serves as a revealing barometer of the extent of Lloyd George's commitment to the British political scene.

These preoccupations and distractions must be noted. But politics were also deeply ingrained in Lloyd George's make-up. There was a side to him which bitterly resented his exclusion from the corridors of power and from the sheer excitement of political life. En route to the East at the end of 1931, he wrote to his old friend, Herbert Lewis: 'As you know, I have always found it difficult to keep out of a "scrap", more particularly so when I find causes in which I am interested being so inadequately and ineptly defended.'²⁰ Similar sentiments lay behind remarks recorded a year later by the diarist, Harold Nicolson. 'One is never well out of it', insisted Lloyd George. 'One is just out of it.'²¹ Stevenson encouraged him to bide his time. 'Things are obviously going to get much worse', she predicted in December 1931, 'and they will want you then.'²² But she and Lloyd George appear to have underestimated both the government's competence and its hold over public opinion. 'I am sure it will not be very long', she reiterated the following May, 'before the people discover that this Gov. is *not* going to get them out of the mess – then they will turn to someone or something else.'²³ At the time of the general election, Lloyd George had decided upon a strategy 'to support Labour, but not definitely and deliberately, but by speeches in the House which will make them come over to him, rather than him to them'.²⁴ Now, however, Labour itself was reduced to a rump of just 52 MPs, constituting the weakest parliamentary opposition of modern times. At the same time, Lloyd George seemed determined to cut his formal links with the Liberal Party. On 3 November 1931 he wrote to Samuel to let him know that he would not be attending the meeting at the start of the new parliamentary session and declining to hold any further offices in the party's ranks.²⁵

Returning from a winter trip to Ceylon, Lloyd George made his first appearance in the new House of Commons on 17 March 1932, but did not speak there for a further three months. He was still capable of a stinging thrust at the expense of his political opponents. 'The government', he concluded at the end of a wide-ranging survey of the political scene on 12 July, 'is the most abject picture I have ever seen of statesmanship in a funk.'²⁶ But there were obvious limits to what he could achieve in a chamber where the government held around 90 per cent of the seats. Those who until recently had feared his impact upon British politics could now afford to treat him with something approaching contempt. 'LG is fair game for almost anyone in these new days', noted Cuthbert Headlam. 'How odd it seems when one remembers his position ten years ago!'²⁷

A chance meeting with Stanley Baldwin in March 1933 left Lloyd George with the impression that the Conservative leader would 'like to work with him'.²⁸ For the time being, however, nothing came of this. Indeed, a year later, by which time he believed that Lloyd George had taken 'the wrong track' as regards policy towards India, Baldwin told the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* that, although he liked the 'little man', he could not work with him. But the heart of the matter, as Baldwin conceded, was that 'he does not, of course, count for much in this present House of Commons'.²⁹ Despite her earlier encouragement, Frances Stevenson began to doubt whether Lloyd George would be glad of the offer of a place in the National Government and, more importantly, whether he could 'sustain physically a job ... which demands concentration and continual attention'.³⁰ Reading the recently published diary of Lord Esher, with its account of Lord Rosebery's troubled retirement, helped reconcile Lloyd George to his own, 'which is so much happier and so full of interest'. The young Conservative, Harold Macmillan, many of whose progressive ideas chimed with Lloyd George's own, sought an interview at Churt, but Lloyd George was 'not very interested'.³¹ Nothing, he told Macmillan, would induce him to take office in the present government. He feared

that the Tories would simply make use of his name to bolster their own fortunes up to the next election. 'After the election they would throw him over, and his plans, and he would be left high and dry with no sort of political future whatever – much less than he has now.'³²

Yet, after that election, the situation might be different. Anticipating a greatly reduced government majority, Lloyd George began to think about consolidating a small block of progressive opinion. Twenty or thirty MPs might be enough to have a decisive impact. Then Lloyd George, 'with his little party, would be all powerful and could dictate policy, which is just what he would like'.³³ The approach of the election, and mounting evidence that the government was not confident of victory, served to revive Lloyd George's appetite for the political fray. In the autumn of 1934 he set up a new economic enquiry to produce a plan for a wide-ranging reorganisation of the British economy, designed to eliminate unemployment, then still standing at more than two million. 'The whole scheme is a bit loose and vague at present', admitted Frances Stevenson, 'but I expect it will materialise before the Election.'³⁴

But Lloyd George could never fully escape from the absence of party support. Conversations with his former ministerial colleague, Dr Addison, in November led to hopes of an electoral deal with Labour, but these were soon dashed when the Labour leader, George Lansbury, failed to persuade his party to come to a national agreement.³⁵ Briefly, a dramatic intervention in a Commons debate on defence later in the month restored Lloyd George to the political limelight. 'Some say that an entirely new political situation has been brought about', suggested Stevenson with forgivable exaggeration. 'They speak of a possible combination of S.B., Winston and D[avid]'.³⁶ But Baldwin knew that such a conjunction would result in 'the resignations of half the Cabinet on my hands'. Lloyd George was 'not a cohesive but a disintegrating force'.³⁷ As soon as the Conservative leader secured an overwhelming vote in favour of his Indian policy at a meeting of the Conservative Central Council on 4 December, any immediate need to go cap in hand to Lloyd George

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disappeared. ‘They’re safe now till ’36’, declared Lloyd George. ‘And that suits me.’³⁸ But in reality it didn’t. Time was against him. Lloyd George now approached his seventy-second birthday.

As he prepared to launch his British ‘New Deal’, his critics remained sceptical. After listening to this ‘tiresome little man’ in a debate on the Depressed Areas Bill, Cuthbert Headlam judged that his plan would be ‘very much on the old lines ... splash about as much as possible – spend money like water, etc., etc. ... He clearly anticipates a state of things after the next election of a similar character to 1929 and hopes to be in a position to be able to control the situation.’³⁹ Speaking in Bangor on his birthday, 17 January 1935, Lloyd George launched his proposals. Stressing that he now stood above party, he called for the creation of a national Development Council, with representatives from commerce, industry, finance, academia and the workforce, with the power, via a ‘Prosperity Loan’, to implement schemes of investment in housing, roads, the land and the regeneration of depressed industries. The government should be headed by a small cabinet of five ministers, mostly without departmental responsibilities and reminiscent of the War Cabinet he had created in 1916. Frances Stevenson was convinced that the speech marked a turning point in her master’s fortunes, with ‘much fluttering of the political dove-cotes as to D[avid]’s position, now and in the future’. There was no doubt, she insisted, that Lloyd George’s words had ‘caught on in the country. We are overwhelmed with approval from every quarter, and of every political complexion.’⁴⁰ Lloyd George himself was ‘staking everything on the results of the next few months. If he fails, he will devote himself to the farm and his writing for the rest of his life.’⁴¹ Others, though, were less enthused. Much of what Lloyd George had said merely reiterated his proposals of the 1920s. One sceptic wrote dismissively of ‘the Yellow Book with Trimmings’.⁴²

Nevertheless, Lloyd George’s restoration to front-line politics was a live issue in the first months of 1935. There would be advantages for both sides. Lloyd George in office would have the opportunity

to implement at least some of his plans, while the Conservative-dominated government could help revive its credentials as a truly ‘National’ administration, while consolidating progressive opinion behind it in the run-up to the election. But there were dangers too. Lloyd George’s return to government would be bitterly opposed as an unnecessarily divisive step by a large number of Tories, not least the extremely influential Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain.⁴³ Meanwhile, in his gloomier moments, Lloyd George feared that ‘they will immediately have an election and then, having been returned for five years with my assistance, they will politely tell me to go to Hell’.⁴⁴ After considerable debate – and disagreement – inside the government, Prime Minister MacDonald invited Lloyd George to submit his plans for the relief of unemployment to a high-powered cabinet committee, consisting of MacDonald himself, Baldwin, Chamberlain, John Simon, Lord Hailsham, J. H. Thomas, Walter Runciman, Philip Cunliffe-Lister, Walter Elliot, Ernest Brown, Kingsley Wood and Godfrey Collins. Six meetings were held with Lloyd George between 18 April and 15 May. ‘They have given D[avid] such a chance’, judged Stevenson, ‘that with his political flair he will have the situation at his feet.’⁴⁵ In mid-April the journalist, Collin Brooks, heard that Chamberlain was now reconciled to the idea of Lloyd George’s membership of the Cabinet and that Simon would have to be elevated to the Woolsack to make room for him.⁴⁶ Lloyd George himself got the impression that the government wanted to make terms with him, but that ‘of course they want as cheap terms as possible’.⁴⁷ In conversation with Thomas Jones, which he knew would be reported to Baldwin, he stressed that he was less concerned with office for himself – ‘I should find the day-to-day responsibilities of office rather irksome now’ – than with the adoption of his programme. But he was ready to play such cards as he held as skilfully as he could, making it clear that his political fund was in a healthy state and that, should his proposals be rejected, he would be in a position to field up to 300 candidates at the election. ‘The result

of that would be to help the return of Labour in many constituencies.’ Indeed, ‘he himself might secure a following sufficiently numerous to reduce the Conservative majority to so narrow a margin as to make the life of the next Parliament very arduous and uncertain’.⁴⁸

In effect Baldwin, who succeeded the ailing MacDonald as Prime Minister on 7 June, called Lloyd George’s bluff. It became clear that negotiations with the cabinet committee would not lead to the Welshman’s return to government. The meetings were ‘studiously pleasant’, he noted, ‘but they knew in their hearts that they were going to knife me’. Ominously, he added: ‘What they did not know was that I too had a dagger in my sheath for them.’⁴⁹ Without waiting for the final meeting of the committee, Lloyd George issued a statement to the press, a ‘Call to Action’. Prompted by a ‘number of well-known Nonconformists’, he proposed a national campaign to ‘rouse public opinion on the issues of peace and unemployment’.⁵⁰ The result was a mass gathering of some 2,500 delegates at the Central Hall, Westminster, on 1 July. It was avowedly non-party, but in practice all-party, attracting the initial support of Conservatives such as Macmillan and Lord Cecil of Chelwood, Labour’s George Lansbury and Lloyd George’s old Liberal colleague, Lord Lothian. But, ever conscious of his own weakness in terms of organised party politics, Lloyd George also looked to the Free Churches as the best available vehicle to secure his political resurrection.⁵¹ The convention voted to set up the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction to advance his proposals. In one sense the Council was innovative and forward-looking, anticipating the non-party political activism of more recent times. But in its emphasis upon the Free Churches, Lloyd George was relying on a force that was already in decline. It was clear, noted the government minister Leslie Hore-Belisha, that he was ‘assuming the existence of a “Nonconformist vote” of the old kind’.⁵²

Seeking confirmation and encouragement from historical parallels – Gladstone at seventy had fifteen years of active political life ahead of him when he launched his Midlothian campaign – Lloyd George began to contemplate

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an unlikely return to power. No longer was it just a question of forcing his way into a reorganised National Government. Labour, he calculated, might win as many as 290 seats at the election and the Liberals 40, leading to the government's defeat:

Under those circumstances ... I would form a Government with Lansbury as nominal Prime Minister, but retaining the active leadership for myself. I would then proceed to formulate a devastating progressive programme, and go to the country again immediately upon it with a terrific campaign, and return with a majority of 150.⁵³

In practice, contemporaries – Lloyd George and cabinet ministers included – greatly exaggerated the electoral perils confronting the National Government. A number of by-election setbacks created an atmosphere of near-panic in Conservative Central Office which was scarcely justified. Over no sustained period were these defeats on a scale to suggest the loss of the general election itself. Indeed, modern psephologists might have pointed out that the size of the government's victory in 1931 was such as to render most unlikely a complete reversal of fortunes over a single parliament. Furthermore, the 'National' label continued to count. The government was still able to attract much of the 'Liberal vote' won over in 1931, partly through its ongoing partnership with Simon's Liberal Nationals and partly as a result of the 'liberal' credentials of Baldwin's own centrist brand of Conservatism. In this situation, Lloyd George's hopes were never likely to be realised. Even Stevenson soon concluded that the Council of Action lacked the necessary roots of popular support.⁵⁴

The nonconformist bandwagon failed to materialise. Many clerics, recognising that Lloyd George's actions were directed against the government and therefore politically motivated, soon withdrew their support. When the general election was called for November, Lloyd George was not ready for it. Drawing a parallel with the plight of Abyssinia in the face of Italian aggression, he claimed a rapport with the beleaguered Africans,

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'knowing that all the guns and ammunitions are with the other side – and the poison gas, too'.⁵⁵ Asked about the prospect of Council of Action or specifically Lloyd George candidates, Herbert Samuel thought there 'might be a few, but only a few'.⁵⁶ In the event, Lloyd George concentrated on sending out a questionnaire in an attempt to ascertain which candidates from all parties supported his proposals. The campaign did not go well for Lloyd George. Chamberlain ridiculed his pretensions, insisting that he represented only himself and could safely be ignored. Then the defection from the Council of Action of the Methodist leader, Dr Scott Lidgett, only days before polling, came as a bitter blow. Lidgett now urged his followers to support the National Government. Cuthbert Headlam, hesitating over whether to take any notice of the questionnaire, expected that Lloyd George was 'going to give us a lot of worry'.⁵⁷ His concern was largely unwarranted. Lloyd George had the capacity to irritate, but little more. The Conservatives had wanted to campaign on a proposal to put 100,000 men to work on the land over five years; Lloyd George talked in terms of a million. The Tories concluded that 'fantastic though [Lloyd George's] proposal is, it nevertheless seems to preclude us altogether from coming out now with a policy aimed at placing only 10 per cent of this number on the land during the next five years'.⁵⁸

Out of a total of 1,348 candidates standing at the election, 362 received Council of Action endorsement and of these 67 were victorious at the polls – 11 Conservatives, 21 Liberals, 34 Labour and one Independent. It was a meagre return for the £400,000 Lloyd George was said to have spent from his political fund. Furthermore, neither at the election nor in the resulting parliament did these MPs constitute a political grouping. Just as importantly, the election confirmed the National Government in power. Granted the scale of the 1931 landslide, some loss of ground to Labour was inevitable. But, with an overall majority in the new House of Commons of almost 250, its position remained secure. It was difficult to see how Lloyd George could make any further progress. With the election he and his family group

rejoined the mainstream Liberal Party. But Lloyd George showed no interest in resuming the leadership of what was now a relatively unimportant parliamentary rump.

In the wake of the election Stevenson found him 'very cheerful' and intent on carrying on with the Council of Action. It was possible, she claimed, that in two years time he would have become a political force again. Yet her remarks also suggested an element of make-believe. The Council gave him 'a semblance of activity and so long as he has this he will be happy'.⁵⁹ The crisis over the Hoare-Laval Pact at the end of the year left him fulminating against Baldwin as 'a fraud and a humbug' who had deceived 'hundreds of thousands of decent Liberals'.⁶⁰ Objectively, however, it was difficult to escape the conclusion that the Prime Minister, whose position now seemed unassailable, had outwitted his old rival. An ill-judged telegram sent by Lloyd George to the Duke of Windsor at the end of the Abdication Crisis caused Headlam to seethe with contempt:

Always supposed to be a political wizard, he has proved himself quite incapable of playing his cards correctly. An old man in a hurry to regain power, he found himself up against a much more astute politician in the man whom he so foolishly underrated and despised – Mr B has beaten him to a frazzle.⁶¹

In the autumn of 1936 Lloyd George made his infamous visit to Germany where he met Hitler at the Berghof. This strange episode is discussed in detail elsewhere in this issue of the *Journal*.⁶² Many at the time thought the trip ill-judged, and it appears more so with the passage of the years. Lloyd George emerged from the meeting in a state of elation, convinced that the Führer was a man of destiny. True, it was Hitler's domestic achievements which prompted Lloyd George's admiration rather than his ideology. But more perceptive observers understood the impossibility of assessing the German leader without reference to the sort of regime which he had created. The visit seemed to justify Robert Boothby's statement to the Commons a few months earlier

that, however admirable his contributions to Britain's social services, Lloyd George had been a calamity as an international statesman.⁶³ In the present context it is worth noting that Lloyd George's performance in Germany was only likely to alienate many of those progressive young politicians who might otherwise have been inclined to rally to his standard.

In the last years of the decade Lloyd George's attendance at Westminster became 'a positive chore'.⁶⁴ When he made the effort, he could still put in a commanding performance. An attack on the government in June 1936 for abandoning sanctions against Italy prompted Churchill to speak of 'one of the greatest Parliamentary performances of all time', while a visibly shaken Baldwin was obliged to congratulate the Member for Caernarfon Boroughs on a speech which showed that he had 'not lost the least atom of vigour' compared with thirty years before.⁶⁵ Three years later, convinced that Neville Chamberlain's post-Prague foreign policy made no strategic sense, he told the Commons that without a Russian alliance the government's guarantees – or as he put it, 'the demented pledges' – to Poland, Romania and Greece represented 'the most reckless commitment that any country has ever entered into'.⁶⁶ But more commonly, Lloyd George tended to duck out of making promised speeches and no longer seemed capable of delivering the rapier-like responses in parliamentary debate that had once been his trademark. 'My summing up of LG's feelings these days', concluded Sylvester, 'is one of helplessness'.⁶⁷ At times he even seemed to have lost his nerve. He decided against attending the debate on the Munich settlement in October 1938, possibly because he was reluctant to reveal his broad support for the deal which Chamberlain had brought back from Germany, and he backed out of a debate on foreign affairs in July 1939, spending the day instead playing with Jennifer, his presumed daughter by Frances Stevenson.⁶⁸

Such interventions as Lloyd George did make appeared to be motivated by an increasingly negative mindset, especially once his arch-enemy, Chamberlain, became Prime Minister in May 1937. He was moved by little more than an

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unthinking conviction that matters had been better handled when he was in charge. A pointed passage in Chamberlain's speech during a debate on conscription in April 1939 got to the heart of the matter:

It is a fixed part of the practice of the Right Honourable Gentleman to belittle or pour contempt on everything that this Government does. The further in time the Government gets from the period when he himself was Prime Minister, the worse it gets in his estimation. I do not know whether he is going to speak in this debate. If so, it will be interesting to know whether he is in favour of a larger measure of conscription, or against conscription altogether. I am sure that he is agin the Government whatever they propose.⁶⁹

Lloyd George made no response. He was by this time perhaps privately aware that his own powers were failing. In July 1936, when he was seventy-three, he told his future biographer, Malcolm Thomson, that 'executive Ministers' should not be much over sixty.⁷⁰ Headlam, disgusted by Lloyd George's attacks on Chamberlain and convinced that this 'horrid little man' was already in his dotage, wished that he could be 'removed to another world, where he could go on telling all and sundry how much abler, and wiser, and braver he had been on earth than other men'.⁷¹ A. J. Sylvester was naturally more sympathetic, but his assessment was not entirely different:

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Ageing and isolated, Lloyd George was trapped in a state of political irrelevance. Only a crisis of monumental proportions could possibly restore him to power. That crisis, of course, arrived with Germany's invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 and Britain's declaration of

war two days later. Chamberlain tried, but failed, to construct an all-party coalition. In conversation with the former Cabinet Secretary, Maurice Hankey, he even discussed the possibility of including the war leader of 1916–18 in his administration.⁷³ In the event no offer was made. In all probability it was one which Lloyd George would have declined, even though he was disappointed not to receive it. With the outbreak of hostilities, Lloyd George offered the government one of his infrequent gestures of support. The government, he argued,

could do no other than what they have done. I am one out of tens of millions in this country who will back any government that is in power in fighting this struggle through, in however humble a capacity we may be called upon to render service to our country.⁷⁴

Before long, however, he reverted to his more typical stance. 'I would be happier', noted Sylvester, 'if I could see some drive in him, some fixity of purpose, some definite policy. His [attitude to the government] is merely guerrilla warfare with no application'.⁷⁵ Hostility towards Chamberlain seemed to blind him to the perils facing the country. 'What he really wants', judged Sylvester, 'is to bring this Government rolling down in the muck'.⁷⁶ By October he was trying to tap into the significant, but still minority, opinion in the country in favour of an early peace. While Chamberlain was making it clear that there could be no further negotiations with Hitler, Lloyd George staged a meeting of the Council of Action at the Caxton Hall, Westminster, where he suggested that Hitler should be invited to state his peace terms, a move which prompted a stinging rebuke from the *Sunday Pictorial*.⁷⁷ The reaction caused him to tone down a speech to his constituents on the same theme and thereafter his emphasis turned to maximising food production from domestic agriculture. In private, however, he remained convinced that the basis of a satisfactory settlement with Germany could still be found, as was apparent in an interview with Sumner Welles, the American Under-Secretary of State, in March 1940.⁷⁸

At a meeting in December 1939 with Churchill, now restored to office as First Lord of the Admiralty, Lloyd George got the impression that he might be brought into government when ministerial changes were made. Privately, however, he was deeply pessimistic about Britain's prospects in the war. A peace move in 1942 or 1943 might be the only alternative to military defeat:

People call me defeatist, but what I say to them is this: Tell me how we can win! Can we win in the air? Can we win at sea, when the effect of our naval blockade is wiped out by Germany's connections with Russia? How can we win on the land?⁷⁹

Logic may have been on his side, but things did not work out in the way Lloyd George envisaged. Nonetheless, the relative inactivity of the so-called Phoney War gave rise to increasing feelings that the war effort was not being effectively conducted and some critics looked to the dynamic leader of earlier years to provide an alternative, not least because he seemed the best placed figure to bring the Labour Party into a genuinely National Government. But Lloyd George himself remained cautious. 'It would have to be made perfectly clear', he advised Sylvester, 'that I could not bring about a decisive victory, as I did last time. We have made so many mistakes that we are not in nearly as good a position.'⁸⁰

As the ill-fated expedition to Norway hastened the crisis of Chamberlain's premiership, the usually well-informed National Labour MP, Harold Nicolson, noted that people 'are talking of Lloyd George as a possible P.M. Eden is out of it. Churchill is undermined by the Conservative caucus.'⁸¹ A lunch with J. L. Garvin of the *Observer* and the Tory MP, Nancy Astor, was designed, as the latter put it, to test Lloyd George's 'fitness to return to the helm of the ship of state'. But Thomas Jones got the impression that his former boss 'preferred to await his country's summons a little longer, but ... expected to receive it as the peril grew.'⁸² In reality, the politics of the situation demanded that any replacement for Chamberlain should come from the Conservative Party as still the overwhelmingly

strongest force in the House of Commons. But the crisis did at least afford Lloyd George the opportunity to deliver his last great parliamentary performance. He was at first uncertain whether or not to speak in the debate but, prompted by his daughter Megan, Boothby and the independent Liberal MP, Clement Davies, amongst others, Lloyd George returned to the Commons chamber to deliver a very pointed *coup de grace*. In a speech which, as one observer put it, lasted only ten minutes but contained the accumulated hostility of twenty-five years, he called upon the Prime Minister to make the ultimate sacrifice and give up the seals of office.⁸³ His parliamentary majority in the subsequent vote reduced to 81, Chamberlain resigned on 10 May, to be succeeded not by Lloyd George but by Winston Churchill.

There was no place for Lloyd George in Churchill's War Cabinet. Hopes that he might be put in charge of food production also came to nothing, not least because Lloyd George let it be known that he would want to retain the right to criticise the overall war effort – a virtually impossible condition for the new premier to accept. Lloyd George claimed not to be disappointed, making the composition of Churchill's government, in which Chamberlain retained high office as Lord President and virtually prime minister of the Home Front, his explanation. 'I would simply be there fretting and fuming and having no real authority ... Neville would have infinitely more authority than I would have, and he would oppose everything I proposed.'⁸⁴ When, at the end of May, Churchill did offer him a position in the War Cabinet, subject to Chamberlain's agreement, Lloyd George again took offence. Even when Chamberlain's agreement appeared to have been obtained, Lloyd George still declined to serve in a government in which the former Prime Minister was a senior member. By the time that illness forced Chamberlain's own resignation in October, Lloyd George had decided that he would prefer to 'wait until Winston is bust' before taking office.⁸⁵

The historical parallel he drew now was with Georges Clemenceau, who had only taken office

at the end of 1917 after a string of lesser politicians had tried and failed to bring France to victory in the First World War. Yet a more accurate comparison was perhaps with Marshal Pétain, with Lloyd George playing the role of the realist who would step in to secure the best possible terms for his country once it was recognised that victory was unattainable. 'He is very conscious of his achievements in the last war', noted the newspaper proprietor, Cecil King, after meeting Lloyd George on 6 June, 'and considers he will inevitably be called on sooner or later in this one, even if it is only to sign the treaty of surrender to Germany.'⁸⁶ Stevenson and Sylvester both continued to encourage Lloyd George. 'Keep yourself fit', wrote the former on 26 September, 'for the time when it becomes quite clear that you will have to take a hand in things – which time is not so far off, I feel sure.'⁸⁷ But with hindsight she concluded that he had never intended to take part in the wartime government.⁸⁸ Somewhat sooner, Sylvester realised that Lloyd George was never going to act: 'he is just putting off, putting off. It used to be because Neville was in; now he is waiting, still waiting. Tactics, tactics, tactics.'⁸⁹

The somewhat unedifying spectacle of Churchill trying to coax Lloyd George back into office came to an end when the latter, ostensibly on his doctor's advice, declined the offer of the Washington embassy after the sudden death of Lord Lothian in December 1940. A final line was drawn with a bitter exchange between the two men in the Commons the following May. A characteristically defeatist contribution from Lloyd George was greeted by the Prime Minister's suggestion that it was 'the sort of speech with which, I imagine, the illustrious and venerable Marshal Pétain might well have enlivened the closing days of M. Reynaud's Cabinet.'⁹⁰ Coming from his oldest political associate, indeed friend, these words were meant to hurt Lloyd George; almost certainly they did.

Lloyd George died on 26 March 1945.⁹¹ The cancer which killed him had probably been weakening his constitution for some time. 'He faltered a lot in his conversation', reported Cecil King as early as October 1941, 'lost the thread of

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his remarks, fumbled for the right word, and spoke very slowly.⁹² Until January 1945 he had remained a constituency MP, albeit an increasingly detached one, for the Caernarfon Boroughs seat which he had represented since 1890. But in his later years Lloyd George's appearances in his constituency became increasingly rare. Sylvester noted discontent in the autumn of 1938 that he had not addressed a political meeting there since the election campaign of 1935.⁹³ Some of his parliamentary performances, such as his vote in support of conscription in 1939, did not go down well among radical Welsh non-conformists.⁹⁴ Indeed, the fear that Lloyd George, even if fit enough to campaign, might be unable to hold his seat in a post-war general election was a factor in his decision to accept a peerage to guarantee a new platform for his opinions on the coming peace settlement.

In political terms the last decade and a half of his life had proved relatively barren. Yet there were still times, particularly in the mid-1930s, when his return to high office seemed a distinct possibility. More generally, his influence lay largely in the minds of others – the impact he could still exert on policy, the mischief he could still create – a legacy of little more than memories of the supreme power he had once exercised. The lack of a strong party base, important since 1916, became an ever greater handicap. Only exceptional circumstances offered any chance to overcome this. In 1931 a stricken Lloyd George was the victim of sheer bad luck. In the exceptional circumstances of the Second World War, however, he miscalculated. His pessimism was in many ways justified. He did not foresee, and few could have confidently predicted, events such as the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which transformed Britain's strategic outlook. But Lloyd George's willingness publicly to contemplate defeat, or at least a disadvantageous peace, has served to tarnish his long-term historical reputation. It was a sad end to a distinguished career.

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- 1 The phrase 'the wonderful wizard as was' was coined by William Barkley in the *Daily Express*, 9 May 1940.
- 2 M. Thomson, *David Lloyd George: The Official Biography* (London, 1948), p. 23.
- 3 K. Morgan, *Lloyd George* (London, 1974), p. 170. See also J. Campbell, *Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness* (London, 1977), *passim*.
- 4 F. Owen, *Tempestuous Journey: Lloyd George His Life and Times* (London, 1954), p. 717; Thomson, *Lloyd George*, pp. 405–06; Campbell, *Goat*, pp. 293–94.
- 5 For an imaginative, but thoughtful, assessment of what might have happened had Lloyd George not been indisposed, see J. Reynolds, 'What if Lloyd George had done a deal with the Tories in 1931' in D. Brack and I. Dale (eds), *Prime Minister Boris and other things that never happened* (London, 2011), pp. 27–46.
- 6 S. Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Baldwin and MacDonald: The Headlam Diaries 1923–1935* (London, 1992), p. 217.
- 7 C. Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George: The Diary of A.J. Sylvester 1931–45* (London, 1975), p. 39.
- 8 Campbell, *Goat*, p. 302.
- 9 Lloyd George to Herbert Lewis 31 December 1931, cited in P. Rowland, *Lloyd George* (London, 1975), p. 695.
- 10 Rowland, *Lloyd George*.
- 11 Lloyd George to Frances Stevenson 23 September 1932, cited in A.J.P. Taylor (ed.), *My Darling Pussy: The Letters of Lloyd George and Frances Stevenson 1913–41* (London, 1975), p. 189.
- 12 Thomson, *Lloyd George*, p. 25.
- 13 In later years Stevenson and Sylvester (supported by their respective families) disputed their relative importance to Lloyd George. See, for example, 'Diary of a Principal Private Secretary', BBC Radio 4, 25 September 1984 and subsequent letter from Muriel Stevenson to the *Radio Times*. In support of Sylvester's importance as a witness to Lloyd George's political life, it may be noted that, as an award-winning practitioner of shorthand, he was well-placed to record his master's words. See also, J. G. Jones, 'Life with Lloyd George', *Journal of Liberal History*, 55 (2007), pp. 28–36.
- 14 T. Jones, *A Diary with Letters 1931–1950* (London, 1954), p. 247.
- 15 A.J.P. Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: A Diary by Frances Stevenson* (London, 1971), p. 262.
- 16 Jones, *Diary with Letters*, p. 123.
- 17 F. Stevenson, *The Years That Are Past* (London, 1967), p. 253.
- 18 Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George*, pp. 99–100.
- 19 Jones, *Diary with Letters*, p. 255.
- 20 Owen, *Tempestuous Journey*, p. 722.
- 21 N. Nicolson (ed.), *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1930–1939* (London, 1966), p. 123.
- 22 Stevenson to Lloyd George 16 December 1931, Taylor (ed.), *Darling Pussy*, p. 166.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 19 May 1932, Taylor (ed.), *Darling Pussy*, p. 180.
- 24 Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George*, p. 41.
- 25 Rowland, *Lloyd George*, p. 693.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 698.
- 27 Ball (ed.), *Headlam Diaries 1923–1935*, p. 233.
- 28 Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George*, p. 93.
- 29 A. J. P. Taylor (ed.), *Off the Record: W.P. Crozier Political Interviews 1931–1943* (London, 1973), pp. 26–27.
- 30 Taylor (ed.), *Stevenson Diary*, pp. 254–55.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 279.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 282.
- 35 The approach to Addison was somewhat quixotic granted their apparently irreparable dispute over housing policy in 1921.
- 36 Taylor (ed.), *Stevenson Diary*, pp. 293–94.
- 37 Jones, *Diary with Letters*, pp. 138–39.
- 38 Taylor (ed.), *Stevenson Diary*, p. 294.
- 39 Ball (ed.), *Headlam Diaries 1923–1935*, p. 317.
- 40 Taylor (ed.), *Stevenson Diary*, pp. 299–300.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 298.
- 42 A. J. Cummings, cited in R. Toye, *Lloyd George and Churchill: Rivals for Greatness* (London, 2007), p. 307.
- 43 Animosity between Lloyd George and Chamberlain went back to the latter's unhappy tenure of the post of Director-General of National Service in Lloyd George's wartime government, 1916–17.
- 44 Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George*, p. 118.
- 45 Taylor (ed.), *Stevenson Diary*, p. 302.
- 46 N. J. Crowson (ed.), *Fleet Street, Press Barons and Politics: The Journals of Colin Brooks, 1932–1940* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 101.
- 47 Taylor (ed.), *Stevenson Diary*, p. 307.
- 48 Jones, *Diary with Letters*, pp. 146–47.
- 49 Taylor (ed.), *Stevenson Diary*, p. 310; Owen, *Tempestuous Journey*, p. 729.

- 50 *The Times*, 5 June 1935.
- 51 S. Koss, 'Lloyd George and Nonconformity: the Last Rally', *English Historical Review*, LXXXIX (1974), p. 91.
- 52 Taylor (ed.), *Off the Record*, p. 49.
- 53 Taylor (ed.), *Stevenson Diary*, p. 312.
- 54 Stevenson to F. Brett Young 7 August 1935, cited in Toye, *Lloyd George and Churchill*, p. 311.
- 55 Taylor (ed.), *Stevenson Diary*, p. 318; Thomson, *Lloyd George*, p. 27.
- 56 Taylor (ed.), *Off the Record*, p. 50.
- 57 Ball (ed.), *Headlam Diaries 1923–1935*, p. 343.
- 58 Bodleian Library, Conservative Party Archive, CRD 1/64/12, report of Sub-committee B, July 1935. I am grateful to Chris Cooper for this reference.
- 59 Taylor (ed.), *Stevenson Diary*, p. 320.
- 60 Lloyd George to Margaret Lloyd George 18 December 1935, K. Morgan (ed.), *Lloyd George: Family Letters 1885–1936* (London, 1973), p. 211.
- 61 S. Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee: The Headlam Diaries 1935–1951* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 105.
- 62 See also A. Lentin, *Lloyd George and the Lost Peace: From Versailles to Hitler 1919–1940* (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 89–105.
- 63 House of Commons Debates, 5th Series, vol. 310, col. 1542.
- 64 Rowland, *Lloyd George*, p. 746.
- 65 Owen, *Tempestuous Journey*, pp. 732–33.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 743.
- 67 Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George*, p. 219.
- 68 *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- 70 Thomson, *Lloyd George*, p. 437.
- 71 Ball (ed.), *Headlam Diaries 1935–1951*, p. 148.
- 72 Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George*, p. 201.
- 73 S. Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets 1931–1963* (London, 1974), p. 413.
- 74 House of Commons Debates, 5th Series, vol. 351, cols 299–300.
- 75 Sylvester to wife, 20 September 1939, cited in Lentin, *Lost Peace*, p. 113.
- 76 *Ibid.*, 4 October 1939, cited in Lentin, *Lost Peace*, p. 115.
- 77 C. King, *With Malice Toward None: A War Diary* (London, 1970), p. 7.
- 78 K. O. Morgan, *The Age of Lloyd George: The Liberal Party and British Politics 1890–1929* (London, 1971), pp. 222–24.
- 79 King, *With Malice*, p. 13.
- 80 Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George*, p. 256.
- 81 N. Nicolson (ed.), *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1939–45* (London, 1967), p. 75.
- 82 Jones, *Diary with Letters*, p. 457.
- 83 D. Foot in *The Observer*, 29 October 1967.
- 84 Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George*, p. 261.
- 85 *Ibid.*, p. 281.
- 86 King, *With Malice*, p. 52.
- 87 Stevenson to Lloyd George 26 September 1940, Taylor (ed.), *Darling Pussy*, p. 234.
- 88 Stevenson, *Years That Are Past*, p. 261.
- 89 A. J. Sylvester, *The Real Lloyd George* (London, 1947), p. 275.
- 90 Owen, *Tempestuous Journey*, p. 753.
- 91 Many aspects of Lloyd George's final years have been considered by J. Graham Jones. See, *inter alia*, 'Keeper of Secrets', *Journal of Liberal History*, 44 (2004), pp. 24–29, and 'David and Frances: Lloyd George's Second Marriage', *ibid.*, 74 (2012), pp. 30–39.
- 92 King, *With Malice*, p. 142.
- 93 Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George*, p. 220.
- 94 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

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