

role in reinforcing these themes. To keep inflation in check, it called for a statutory wages and prices policy and a special surcharge on employers. The manifesto also reprised familiar policies from the Grimond era, such as employee participation in companies, to help smooth over workplace disharmony. The elite media, such as the *Financial Times*, praised the Liberal programme. As well as having an appealing theme, Thorpe and his party were able to pick up and run with a credible alternative programme. During the course of the campaign Liberal support trebled, reaching over 20 per cent in some polls.

In addition to a certain amount of luck, the Liberal Party at last seemed to have its policy and its strategic houses in order. But Stockley concluded by pointing out two major ironies. When Wilson called a new election for October 1974, the Liberals largely re-used their February manifesto. With a strong showing in February and still achieving more than 20 per cent support in the polls, they were now much more relevant than at any time for a generation. Yet the Liberal manifesto still offered no answer to the most important question the party would face: with whom and on what terms would the party take part in a coalition? (Or, on what basis would it decide?)

Second, the Liberals had now succeeded in striking a popular chord. They had some distinctive policy ammunition with which to fight their campaign. But they were really promising to maintain the economic status quo and preserve the post-war consensus. Far from offering a radical departure, the Liberals were appealing to 'small-c conservatism' in an increasingly anxious electorate. And, he asked, could anyone say that the policies they offered to tackle inflation and right the economy, were really 'liberal'?

The meeting provided a lively and interesting canvass of the

challenges facing Liberal and Liberal Democrat campaigns. A great deal had changed with the advent of television and the internet. The constant difficulties were the need to overcome the fatal 'wasted vote' argument and the Liberals' sheer lack of resources compared to the funding, personnel and technology available to the Conservative and Labour parties. The

importance of having a credible, effective communicator as leader cannot be overstated; neither can the need for a distinctive, relevant and clear campaign message. And it seems to have been only in very recent times that Lib Dem campaigns have assembled all the pieces of this multi-dimensional jigsaw and given the party its strongest voice.

The Fall of the Lloyd George Coalition

Evening meeting (joint with the Conservative History Group), July 2003, with Margaret Macmillan, Andrew Thorpe, John Barnes and Stuart Ball

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

It is always fascinating to hear historians talk about history. Introducing the meeting, the Conservative MP for Mid Norfolk, Keith Simpson, who is also Chairman of the Conservative History Group, reminded us that Arthur Balfour is reputed to have said that 'history does not repeat itself, historians repeat each other'. What we were about to hear, however, was four different interpretations of the reasons for the downfall of the last Liberal prime minister.

David Lloyd George became prime minister in December 1916. There had been a Liberal-Conservative coalition in office under Asquith since May 1915, but doubts over the prosecution of the First World War produced dissatisfaction on both Liberal and Unionist benches. As A. J. P. Taylor pointed out, 'Bonar Law could destroy the [Asquith] Coalition. What would be its successor?'¹ There was no longer enough support among the Tories to sustain an Asquith government but nor was there sufficient support among Liberal rebels to put in an administration led by Austen Chamberlain or Bonar Law. Lloyd George

saw to it that he emerged as the only candidate who could keep the Coalition together, keep the increasingly influential Labour Party on board and convince the backbenchers that he was the man who could win the war.

If the influence of Andrew Bonar Law was crucial to the rise of Lloyd George, it was equally central to his fall from office six years later. In October 1922 the Conservatives met at the Carlton Club to decide whether the party should continue to support the Coalition. With Bonar Law's backing they voted to pull out of the government. Lloyd George resigned three hours after the vote, and, at the general election that followed soon after, the Conservatives won a majority of over 100 seats. Bonar Law became prime minister. Neither Lloyd George nor the Liberal Party were ever to return to office again.

As the chairman explained, it had been hoped to hold this joint meeting at the Carlton Club itself but they were unable to make a room available. In any event, it would not have been the actual building in which the famous meeting took place, so what

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better location for our seminar than the Lloyd George Room at the National Liberal Club?

Our first speaker was Margaret Macmillan, Professor of History at the University of Toronto and author of the prize-winning book about the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, *Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*. Professor Macmillan opened by making some remarks about the uses of history and its potential to act as a key to understanding the present and to raise interesting parallels and questions. The period at the end of the First World War, Professor Macmillan believed, was vital to understand if we are to make sense of the world today. Her intention was therefore to describe the international situation between the end of the war and October 1922 and so set the context for the fall of the Coalition.

Why did the Coalition fail?

But first, in asking why the Coalition failed, the easy answer was that coalitions usually do. They have been put together by people in disparate groupings for their own purposes and at a certain point they run out of steam. Professor Macmillan identified the various factors that made the Coalition work in the first place and that then contributed to its failure. The first thing was the times themselves. It is difficult from the perspective of the present day to imagine what it must have been like to live in those days at the end of the Great War. It was a time when people in Europe, in Britain and to a lesser extent in North America felt that the very foundations of their world had been shaken. As Bolshevism spread from Russia and appeared to be taking root elsewhere, as empires fell and political, economic and social structures were turned upside down, there was a feeling that the world was in a process of being remade, cut adrift from its moorings, and no one was entirely



certain what was going to happen next. This made for a very dangerous but also a very exciting period. There was also an optimism that the world could be turning into a better place and that the tremendous sacrifices of the First World War must mean something.

These pressures at first consolidated and sustained the Lloyd George Coalition. Just as Woodrow Wilson was acclaimed in Europe for trying to build a new type of international relations, domestically there was a feeling that perhaps a new type of politics could be emerging. This was based on more than a fear of Bolshevism or revolution; it was based on a feeling that the war had meant something and that 'something' included the fact that the old ways of doing things did not work. Lloyd George and some of those close to him in the Coalition sensed this themselves and there was some discussion about forming a new centre party. Indeed, there was talk of this both before the coupon election of 1918 and again in 1921. Professor Macmillan thought that this represented more than

From left: Andrew Thorpe, Margaret Macmillan, Keith Simpson MP, Stuart Ball, John Barnes (Photo: Martin Ball)

just cynicism or an effort by Lloyd George and friends to hold on to power. It was picking up on a more general attitude – one that cut through all sections of society and from right to left across the political spectrum – that new structures and institutions were needed to address the problems of the post-war world, economically, socially and in international affairs.

There was also a very strong feeling that David Lloyd George was the man who could do it. He was the man who had won the war, something that was recognised and appreciated across the whole of society. He was perceived as someone who had introduced new ways of doing things, new styles of administration – he ran a great deal out of his own office, including key areas of foreign policy – and people believed he was going to use this new approach to be the man to win the peace. It was both this belief in the stature and personality of Lloyd George, and the fit between his approach and style and the needs of the times, which won the Coalition the 1918 election and sustained it through the

immediate aftermath of the war. In the longer run, however, the same factors would serve to pull the Coalition apart and cause it and Lloyd George to fall.

As the Paris Peace Conference failed to settle some of the major problems in Europe and within international relations, there set in a sense of disillusionment. The new ways of doing things were not working either. Professor Macmillan's view was that the Conference and the resulting Treaty of Versailles attempted to shape a world which at that time simply could not be shaped. The international situation did not lend itself to the construction of a lasting peace. There were too many unresolved issues. The new states emerging in central and eastern Europe, often in conflict with one another, were very difficult to accommodate in the European system. The new Soviet Union showed very little interest in participating in the normal system of states. Germany was highly resentful about the way in which it lost the war and could not come to terms with any peace settlement. In Professor Macmillan's opinion, the Treaty of Versailles was not as harsh as it has been painted – either later or as it was at the time by J. M. Keynes. But that was not reflected in contemporary feeling, and what people feel, and what they think as a result, is perhaps more important politically than the truth.

As the early 1920s wore on, there continued to be problems and Lloyd George did not seem to be able to deal with them. In a way he brought this on himself. He conducted a very personal sort of diplomacy. He loved going to conferences and his personal success and failure was identified very much with the success or failure of these international events. In particular, Lloyd George failed to settle the reparations issue, the question of how much Germany should pay in compensation for the war. Also unresolved was the question of Turkey and the Middle East.

Lloyd George was widely seen as the man who had encouraged the Greek policy of seeking a presence in what became modern Turkey and when that went wrong, in particular over the Chanak crisis, he was blamed for it.

He tried to bring Germany and Soviet Russia back into the system of states, but his failure to make progress on this at the Genoa Conference of February 1922 was seen by many as evidence that the Coalition was not working. Lloyd George's personality was increasingly seen as autocratic rather than radical and he also seemed to be running out of steam, tired and unwilling to appear in the House of Commons. So, in conclusion, Professor Macmillan's view was that the factors that had helped Lloyd George in the first place – the idea that there was a new world order and he was the man to shape it – were by 1922 all seen as working against him, and caused the Coalition to fall apart.

Impact on the Liberals

The next speaker was Andrew Thorpe, senior lecturer in history at Exeter University and an authority on British politics between the wars. Thorpe's focus was on the impact of the fall of the Coalition on the Liberal Party and its development over the following years. The Coalition has been seen by many Liberals, both at the time and since, as a rather dark period in the history of British liberalism, unable to be forgotten or, for many, forgiven. The manner of the formation of the Coalition in December 1916, the decision to fight a general election in 1918 as a coalition, and the continuance of the Coalition through four years of peacetime, during which the split in the Liberal Party was intensified and consolidated – all of these factors created a situation in which Liberals felt deeply ill at ease and this discomfort took the form of disappointment with Lloyd George himself.

Thorpe quoted from the book *Mr Lloyd George and Liberalism* by J. M. Robertson, an Asquithian Liberal, published in 1923: 'Liberal leaders are to be chosen for right sagacity, for right judgment, for self-control, for rectitude, for political science and these qualifications Mr George lacks. To lack them, when all is said, is to lack the character needed in a political leader. And in a comprehensive sense it may justly be said that there is an insurmountable objection to him as a leader, at least for Liberals. With Conservatives indeed, it is otherwise.'

Many Liberals were delighted to see Lloyd George brought down in October 1922, yet paradoxically the fall of the Coalition presented the Liberal Party with a huge and ultimately insuperable problem. What Thorpe then suggested was that, in many ways, it might have been better if fusion between the Coalition Liberals and the Conservative Party taken place, as some had hoped would happen in 1920. This would have left the remaining Liberals to plot their own course, independent of the taint both of Lloyd George and of coalitionism, which in reality followed it after 1922. Thorpe argued that the fall of the Coalition has been seen as bringing the Liberal Party real benefits. These included a strengthening of personnel, stronger party organisation, better policy and strategy. His own view, however, was that, on balance, the Liberal Party did not benefit from reunion post-1922.

As regards personnel, apart from Lloyd George himself, most of the Coalition Liberals who came back to the party were fairly undistinguished. The other prominent Coalition Liberal was, of course, Churchill, but he lost his seat in Dundee in 1922, was out of Parliament for two years and then returned as a Conservative, being made Chancellor of the Exchequer by Baldwin. Although he was a towering figure, Lloyd George himself was such a controversial character

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that, even after he became leader of the reunited Liberals in 1926, many leading personalities in the party like Grey and Maclean, mostly with an Asquithian background, hurried to support the Liberal Council with the aim of getting rid of him.

In terms of party organisation, the return of Lloyd George brought one huge benefit, the Lloyd George Fund. This is the bind that the Asquithians could not get out of. Asquith himself was desperate not to reunite with Lloyd George and many of his supporters were also determined to resist reunion, but the party was very short of funds and had no obvious way of raising extra money, so the Lloyd George Fund proved irresistible. However the use of the fund soon became problematic. Firstly, Lloyd George retained personal control of the money and was chary about dispensing funds. In addition, the existence of this vast treasure chest disinclined Liberals on the ground from doing the fundraising needed to develop the organisation and its electoral capacity. This was in contrast with the Labour and Conservative Parties at this time.

When looking at policy there is no doubt that Lloyd George brought dynamism to a party which desperately needed it, and one result was the various 'coloured books' of the mid and late 1920s. But at the same time there were other ideas around in the party which would have developed without reunion, and some of the policies which were introduced under Lloyd George's influence may not have been as appropriate for the times as were thought. The forward-looking policy on unemployment that formed the core of the Liberal platform in the 1929 election was an exciting, proto-Keynesian initiative, but whether it brought much benefit to the Liberals in terms of votes at that election, or the consolidation of Liberal support is, according to Thorpe, very much open to question. It certainly enabled

Baldwin and the Tories to attack the Liberals as irresponsibly radical, making promises to reduce unemployment which could not be delivered.

Thorpe's analysis of the Liberal position in the 1920s is of a stance that was increasingly misconceived. The Liberal Party was, from 1924, the third party in British politics – but a third party which still very much possessed heartland areas. There is a case for saying that the strategy of the party should have been to consolidate those areas. Instead, it continued to believe itself to be a potential party of government – an outlook that may not have been the best way forward for it – and the return of Lloyd George contributed to that ministerial mentality.

The final problem the return of Lloyd George represented for the Liberals was one of image. Although, in Thorpe's view, too much may often be made about the importance of image in politics, it was evidently the case that by 1922 Lloyd George had an image problem. There was a clear sense that both the Lloyd George Coalition and the prime minister had become sleazy and were not to be trusted. Echoing Harold Wilson's quotation that the Labour Party was a moral crusade or it was nothing, Thorpe felt that Liberals in the 1920s looked on their party in the same way as a moral, uplifting movement. The reputation of Lloyd George was damaging to that portrayal, as he was unable to present himself as a credible leader of a party with a moral purpose.

In Thorpe's view, the collapse of the Coalition brought benefits to the Liberal Party in the very short term: reunification, more money, policy ferment and a more dynamic leadership. As a result there was some achievement over the next ten years. Twice the Liberals held the balance of power in Parliament, in 1924 and 1929–31. They adopted a daring and innovative economic policy at the end of the 1920s. They got electoral reform

on to the legislative agenda in 1930–31 and there was a return to office as part of the National Government when it was first formed. But these achievements were, to Thorpe, ephemeral. The return of the Lloyd George Liberals in 1922–23 forced the Liberals to put off the day of reckoning and the need to come to terms with third-party status. Thinking did not occur until a generation later, in the 1950s, and from that point onward the party effectively repositioned itself to create a new type of politics and a new way forward.

Thorpe ended by reminding us that the fall of the Coalition had not been the responsibility of the Liberal Party. It was the decision of the Conservatives to end it. Yet it was the Liberals who were at the mercy of the fall-out from it.

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The Carlton Club meeting

It was then the turn of John Barnes, editor of the *Conservative History Journal* and co-author, with Keith Middlemas, of the 1969 biography of Stanley Baldwin. Barnes also started with a reference to historiography. According to Ambrose Bierce, God cannot change the past, which is why he connives at the existence of historians. Like Macmillan and Thorpe, Barnes sought to recreate a picture of what was happening in politics in the 1920s, as people thought about the massive changes that had happened in the world and tried to canalise them into the normal channels of party politics. It was important to remember that everything was thought to be up for grabs: the Liberal Party was still recruiting new Young Liberals; the party may have been declining in a relative way, but in absolute terms there were more Liberal voters in 1929 than there had been before the First World War, or in the early 1920s.

But it was right for the Conservatives and Liberals to be worried about the electoral role of the working class, as there were



Andrew Thorpe, Margaret Macmillan and Keith Simpson MP (Photo: Martin Ball)

few seats where the middle class amounted to more than a fifth of the electorate. Barnes saw two answers to this problem for non-Labour politicians. On the one hand, there was the solution which Lloyd George had sought to cobble together in 1918: to unite the more progressive face of Toryism, the kind of people who made up the Unionist Social Reform Group before 1914, with his own (supposedly) progressive Liberals. In the early years of the Coalition, that recipe had certain attractions. But the first thing that went wrong was an onset of panic at the economic slump, which led to a move away from social reform and towards retrenchment, epitomised by the Geddes committee on national expenditure and the 'Geddes axe'. From that moment onward the progressive voices and tariff reformers in the Conservative Party began to suspect that the Coalition was no longer the answer to containing the rising tide of organised labour. It is no accident that Leo Amery was one of the chief conspirators in bringing down the Lloyd George Coalition: he was probably the most thoughtful of the younger tariff reformers, a man who hoped to enlist recruits from the trade unions behind a broadly

social-reform, tariff-reforming caucus. However Barnes re-emphasised that in the early summer of 1922, the Coalition appeared very secure. Even after the failure at Genoa there was really very little sign of trouble. Austen Chamberlain had routed the diehards in two debates in April and yet within months his own leadership of the Conservative Party was in question.

So what went wrong? Barnes identified four factors. By far the most important was the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson and the revival of violence and civil war in Ireland. It was in the aftermath of the debate on that issue in July 1922 that Baldwin and Amery (neighbours in Eaton Square) got together and decided to give the government some weeks to see if it could get its act together on Ireland, and build on Churchill's brilliant summing up in the debate during which he said that if the Irish could not settle their affairs then the British would help them to do so. Ireland is a very important theme in the history of the Coalition. Second, and following close afterwards, there was the honours scandal. Next, the diehards linked their fortunes to Lord Salisbury, probably the most prominent Unionist peer. Finally, there occurred a

little-known event at the end of July, when most of the Coalition Liberals failed to vote in favour of a duty on fabric grants, the first great test of the Safeguarding of Industries Act, and the first test of the compromise that had been reached around the issue of tariff reform. But if the Coalition Liberals would not even vote for that measure, what did the protectionist Tories have to gain from remaining any longer in the Coalition?

These four events taken together were fatal to the survival of the Coalition. However, nothing happens by accident, and it must not be forgotten that the downfall of the government was engineered – and by the 'second eleven'. These were men with their political futures still ahead of them who desperately wanted to be rid of Lloyd George. They believed that they would go down to defeat at the next election, tarred by what was seen as an autocratic and sleazy government. They were fearful that Labour would make headway and they needed a progressive answer, a moral answer and a challenging answer to the onset of socialism, and they thought that Lloyd George had become a hobble around their ankles, rather than the great saviour that he had seemed in 1918. This permeated to Cabinet level and to the debate in the Tory party about whether there should be an immediate election. Curzon and Baldwin became more important, along with less well-remembered figures such as Boscawen and Peel. Curzon is reputed to have said, 'When you begin to hear the death watch beetle in the rafters, then the end of the house is nigh.' It was.

Barnes identified Stanley Baldwin as the key figure, as he was able to act as a link between the junior ministers and Cabinet colleagues. Baldwin's reaction was both moral and constitutional. He had his policy concerns over Ireland and was, Barnes maintained, a tariff reformer. He was looking for a constructive answer

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to socialism but he had a personal revulsion to the sleaze that was increasingly taking over the Coalition and he had worries about matters of constitutional principle, such as Lloyd George's presidential style and the way he appeared to be neglecting Parliament. After the Chanak crisis, Baldwin came back from holiday in France to a Cabinet meeting on 1 October and to a government that did not know whether war was about to break out or not. Baldwin gained the impression that he was entering an engineered international crisis, one that would allow the Coalition to go into a khaki election. At first, Baldwin thought that he might resign and walk away from it; but then the dissident ministers began to meet, Baldwin was seized by a mood of resolution and the junior ministerial and Cabinet dissidents began to coalesce around him. Baldwin sat down with Sir Samuel Hoare and J. C. C. Davidson to go through Vachers Parliamentary companion, picking out the names of eighty Conservative MPs, chosen not for their views but for their reputations. Those MPs were then brought together. Sources conflict about how many actually met: one indicates thirty-five but Hoare himself (probably based on a diary) says seventy-four. But the

upshot of the meeting was that they wanted to go to the country as an independent party and they wanted a Conservative as prime minister. They acknowledged that coalition might be inevitable but, if so, they wanted it on their terms.

It was at this stage that Austen Chamberlain badly misplayed his hand. He took things personally, felt it was a matter of honour to continue to support the government as he had pledged to do, talked about betrayal and failed to take a strategic view of the longer term interests of the Conservative Party. He took what the junior ministers and the back-benchers were saying very much as an ultimatum and felt that all their criticisms of the government and of Lloyd George were actually attacks on him. In that view he was egged on by his evil genius Birkenhead, who took the view that he knew the electorate better than the Tory dissenters and wanted them to do their worst, feeling that they could never form or lead a government.

Baldwin knew he could not bring down the Coalition, even backed by the body of opinion in the party, without there being an alternative prime minister. He also knew that he was not prominent enough to be seen

as that leader and thus that, if Chamberlain and Birkenhead would not cooperate, another figure had to be identified. A crucial part of the strategy was therefore to encourage Bonar Law, who was hesitant to come back and show open disloyalty to the leadership, out of retirement. A succession of emissaries was despatched to try to tempt him and he finally allowed himself to be persuaded to come to the Carlton Club for the meeting. It is not clear whether he had made up his mind what to say, but for the rest the presence of an alternative leader was sufficient. In the end, Bonar Law made a rather confused speech. For the whole of the first part of it no one knew which way he was going to jump, but then he came down very firmly on Baldwin's side. Baldwin's own speech was described by Barnes as one of the most memorable eight minutes that have ever been delivered. As a hatchet job on Lloyd George it could not have been surpassed. But the work that Baldwin had done before the event was even more important. It was Bonar Law's presence and speech that swayed the day. In the view of the dissenters, if Bonar Law had not come to the Carlton Club and made his speech, they would have lost, the Coalition would have endured and Lloyd George would have remained prime minister.

'The Peacemaker'
– David Low on the Coalition's Irish policy, *The Star*, 1922. Lloyd George holds out symbols of peace, but is backed up by the threat of armed force. Low always portrayed the Coalition as a two-headed ass (here sitting on top of the tank).

Role of the Conservative grassroots

The last speaker was Stuart Ball, Reader in History at Leicester University and writer and commentator on the Conservative Party. Ball began by describing the fall of the Lloyd George Coalition as, without doubt, one of the most decisive events of modern British political history. It is one of the most dramatic and one of the most humanly enthralling as well. Ball drew attention to the work of a number of historians who have looked at the downfall of



the Coalition. In particular, he identified a pioneering study published in 1973 by Michael Kinnear called *The Fall of Lloyd George*. Yet despite this wealth of historical assessment, there are still neglected aspects of the fall of the Coalition and it was on one of these – in Ball’s view the most important of the under-appreciated areas, the role of the Conservative grassroots – that he chose to focus in his talk. By grassroots Ball said he meant the rank and file members in the constituencies and the country – not the Parliamentary party, or the backbenchers. The other speakers had covered thoroughly the background issues to the fall of the government but the actual mechanism through which the Coalition was ended was revolt within the Conservative Party, a revolt which not only swept away Lloyd George but, in an extraordinarily unprecedented manner, swept away the Conservative leadership as well. It was almost as if the first intention of the dissenters was to remove Austen Chamberlain, and it was simply as a consequence of this that Lloyd George was also removed. Lloyd George, of course, was not present at the Carlton Club; it was Austen Chamberlain who called the meeting, Austen Chamberlain who handled it and Austen Chamberlain who lost it. All Lloyd George could do was sit and wait until a white-faced Sir Philip Sassoon rushed from the Carlton Club to Downing Street to break the news that it was all over.

Ball felt that it was essential to look beyond the actions of the more visible players – the elite players at Cabinet, junior ministerial or backbench level – and to examine the role of the Conservative rank and file and the immense influence he believed they had wielded both over the parliamentary party and over Central Office and the machinery of the Conservative Party in the country. It was the rank and file who realised that the days of the Coalition

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were numbered and it is they who worked to persuade the leadership to catch up with that opinion on the ground. The decline in support for the Coalition in many areas, particularly in safe seats in the Conservative heartlands in southern England and the Midlands, brought considerable pressure to bear on Conservative MPs and prospective parliamentary candidates to adjust their position. Under this pressure, they sought to distance themselves from the Coalition – a coalition that was failing and in increasing trouble.

The clearest method for doing this was the promise, made sometimes privately to constituency executive committees and sometimes in public at constituency meetings, that when the election came the MP or candidate would stand as a Conservative pure and simple. This was a movement that built up momentum throughout 1922. J. C. C. Davidson (Bonar Law’s former Parliamentary Private Secretary) was one example of this in his Hemel Hempstead seat. Like Bonar Law, Davidson was not an out-and-out opponent of the Coalition in the months leading up to October 1922. But he was already under pressure in his constituency by January 1922. The minute book of one of the Ladies’ Organisations shows that he was asked if he was prepared to stand as an independent Unionist at the next election. At this stage Davidson hedged but, after being urged to answer definitively at several other meetings during the year, at a gathering in September he informed his membership that he would stand as an independent Conservative at the next election – an announcement that was received with great applause.

Davidson was just one of many under similar pressure and this is confirmed by Kinnear’s analysis of the pronouncements of Conservative politicians in the press and by Stuart Ball’s examination of constituency association minute books. Well before the calling of the Carlton Club

meeting in October 1922, a large number (possibly a majority) of Conservative MPs had already publicly or privately committed themselves against the Coalition. The vote at the meeting can be anticipated as a foregone conclusion and the emphasis in some studies on the influence of the speeches may be exaggerated. MPs went into the meeting not just with their minds made up but with commitments already made to the people who mattered in their constituencies and to their chances of being re-elected. It was this pressure from the constituencies that opened up cracks at the very base of the edifice of the Coalition. The pressure was being applied even before the summer of 1922 and the cracks widened and travelled upwards, undermining the whole structure.

Ball then went on to talk about the causes of the hostility that the Conservative grassroots felt towards the Coalition and to examine what motivated the unusual degree of dissidence and rebellion among the normally docile and deferential Tory rank and file. The first element he identified was the importance of what he described as ‘economy’. This was an issue linked to *the* economy and in particular to the collapse of the post-war boom in 1920: the combination of rising prices and heavy taxation that seriously squeezed two important groups for the Conservative Party: the middle classes, especially the professional classes in the towns and suburbs, and those who owned land in agricultural areas. But what the word ‘economy’ particularly meant in this period was the very high levels of taxation – both Imperial taxation to the national exchequer and local rates – which had risen massively as a result of the First World War and which were now affecting an increasingly large number of people. The ‘economy’ people were seeking was a cutback in government spending in order to reduce taxation in response to the depression that was hitting the country.

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There was vocal criticism of the ballooning of central government and of bureaucracy, of controls and wartime red tape, of the massive increase in the size of the civil service and the greater responsibilities that had been handed out to local government.

This volatile mixture of economic hard times and complaints about government restrictiveness and interference was stirred up by Lord Rothermere, the owner of the *Daily Mail*. Rothermere mounted his own campaign, the Anti-Waste League, and stood candidates in by-elections, winning two Conservative seats. This sent a shiver through the Conservative Party from top to bottom. Combined with this was the depression that agriculture, especially arable farming, went through in the 1920s. The Lloyd George Coalition had brought in a major measure, the 1920 Agriculture Act, that looked as if it would greatly benefit the farmers, but the government then found that it was too expensive and it became one of the victims of the Geddes axe. So the Conservatives got some of the 'economy' they were seeking but ironically at the expense of their own supporters, as subsidies for farmers were axed.

On top of this catalogue of discontent and of government failure was heaped the rise of Labour, as evidenced in by-elections and local government elections. The growth of Labour led the Conservative rank and file to demand two things that the Lloyd George government had promised but was manifestly refusing to deliver. The first was House of Lords reform: revisiting the 1911 Parliament Act, which had always been said to be only a temporary measure, and restoring some powers to the House of Lords. Conservatives wanted this desperately because they were frightened by the prospect of a Labour majority in the Commons with no constitutional check upon it. The second, and linked, issue for Tories was the reform of trade union law: the

1913 Act, the question of contracting in and contracting out, the political levy – all bound up with the issue of the political role of the trade unions. Again the government had promised to do something about this and again it had let the Conservatives down. There was also the question of Ireland, where the government had swung from 'taking murder by the throat to shaking murder by the hand' in the phrase used by Unionists in this period. However, in Ball's view, because the position of Ulster had been safeguarded, with its own parliament, the issue of Ireland had lost resonance for many rank and file Conservatives.

To sum up, Ball reiterated that, while the anti-coalition pressure from the rank and file upon MPs and candidates varied across the country, it was most pressing in the Tory heartlands in the South, the Midlands and the suburbs. It was strengthened by the emerging role of women Conservative members as women gained the vote and began to play an increasing part in constituency political activity. The other critical element in the fall of the Coalition was the role of the National Union centrally, the representative institution of the Conservative rank and file. It was the National Union, under the chairmanship of Sir George Younger, which prevented the Conservatives from pressing for a general election in January 1922 because the issue of House of Lords reform had not been settled. When Birkenhead attacked Younger as the cabin boy trying to steer the ship, he made Younger the hero of the rank and file and the loss of support for the leadership in the National Union was a critical factor in the eventual downfall of the Coalition.

In conclusion, Ball reminded us that it was well known that the Carlton Club meeting was called by Austen Chamberlain as an offensive move. He intended to ambush his critics, to isolate and expose them. It was a tactic used more effectively and more

The Conservative grassroots did matter. If they had no influence, why would Chamberlain have needed to take the gamble of the Carlton Club meeting as a means to prevent the National Union conference from taking place?

cleverly by Stanley Baldwin twice in 1930 in the two party meetings he called in June and October of that year. Chamberlain's over-confidence led to his own downfall and then to the fall of the Coalition. But Chamberlain also had a defensive reason for calling the meeting and for calling it when he did. In a few weeks' time, the Conservative Party (National Union) annual conference was due to meet. It was evident even to Chamberlain that the conference would either overwhelmingly and publicly reject the Coalition in a way that would make it impossible for him to carry on leading the party, or would shatter the party from top to bottom. The defensive reason Chamberlain had for calling the Carlton Club meeting was to pre-empt and bounce the National Union conference. Chamberlain wanted Conservative MPs to back the leadership, back the Coalition and agree to fight a quick general election as Coalition MPs, with the result that the National Union conference would have been postponed. This move proved that the Conservative grassroots did matter. If they had no influence, why would Chamberlain have needed to take the gamble of the Carlton Club meeting as a means to prevent the National Union conference from taking place?

Overall, the meeting heard four different interpretations of the Carlton Club meeting, its impact and the reasons for the fall of the Lloyd George Coalition. In this joint event with the Conservative History Group the emphasis was upon the role of Conservatives, and an important element which was missing from the analysis and which should be addressed in a future meeting or *Journal* article was the role of Liberals in the fall of what turned out to be the last Liberal prime minister.

1 'Politics in the First World War' (1959) reproduced in *From the Boer War to the Cold War, Essays on 20th Century Europe* (Penguin Books, 1996)