

# LLOYD GEORGE /

David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill were the two most important political figures in twentieth-century British political history, a status that derives substantially but not wholly from their positions as war leaders.<sup>1</sup> Comparing their experiences in the First and Second World Wars raises questions which go beyond the matter of who had the greater personal leadership ability. It provides us a lens with which to examine key issues such as state capacity, civilian–military relations, the relationship between parliament and the executive, and the construction of historical memory. By **Richard Toye**.



**I**N BRITAIN, THERE has already been published a flood of books surrounding the hundredth anniversary of the war's outbreak, and there has been a great deal of public discussion. Gary Sheffield has claimed: 'Like all wars, it was tragic, but it was certainly not futile.'<sup>2</sup> Max Hastings has argued: 'The [British] Government has not uttered, and apparently does not plan to utter, a word about the virtue of Britain's cause, or the blame that chiefly attaches to Germany for the catastrophe that overtook Europe.'<sup>3</sup> These historians seem to suggest that there is a historical consensus that the Germans were chiefly at fault in 1914 and the government is being pusillanimous in

failing to articulate this view themselves. In fact no such consensus does exist. Given that fact, the British government may well have been right to insist that the officially sponsored centenary events should involve commemoration but not interpretation.

Nevertheless, it is true that the Second World War tends to be seen in Britain as 'the good war', in contrast with the First World War, which, even if it is not viewed exclusively negatively, is certainly much more contested. On this basis it is hardly surprising that, in Britain, Churchill is viewed overwhelmingly positively whereas Lloyd George fails to benefit from having been 'The Man Who Won

# AND CHURCHILL AS WAR LEADERS

the War'. Undoubtedly, First World War revisionists are correct that the 'lions led by donkeys' caricature is unsatisfactory. Still, there is a risk in going too far in the opposite direction. An understanding of the war based on the works of the poets Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen is obviously insufficient. But a perspective that simply discounts their viewpoint is obviously wrong too. It is quite right to point out that millions of people in 1914 regarded the conflict as a fight for national honour, but that does not mean that we, too, are bound to accept that verdict, which at any rate oversimplifies the way the public related to the war. Vocal patriotism could combine with subtle acts of resistance to authority.

This article's comparison of Lloyd George and Churchill as war leaders will consider firstly their interactions with one another throughout their careers, but particularly during the two world wars, and secondly their capacities as military strategists and their attempts to enforce civilian control of the military.

## The personalities of Lloyd George and Churchill

We may begin by noting that the two men had very different personalities. Lord Hankey, the most influential civil servant of the age, summarised the difference between Lloyd George and Churchill as follows: 'Imagine the subject of balloons crops up. Winston, without a blink, will give you a brilliant hour-long lecture on balloons. L.G., even if he has never seen you before, will spend an hour finding out anything you know or think about them.'<sup>3</sup> When war broke out,

**'L.G. was born a cad and never forgot it; Winston was born a gentleman and never remembered it'.**

Lloyd George and Churchill were already closely associated with one another in the public mind on account of their political alliance that developed after Churchill joined the Liberals from the Conservative in 1904. To their political opponents during the Edwardian constitutional crisis, they were peas in a pod – dangerous quasi-socialists determined to stir up class hatred for their own political ends. Long after they had gone their different ways politically, they were still lumped together by those who distrusted them. Talking privately in 1937, Stanley Baldwin, the Conservative prime minister, repeated with approval a saying he had heard: 'L.G. was born a cad and never forgot it; Winston was born a gentleman and never remembered it'. In the same year Neville Chamberlain referred to them as 'These two pirates'.<sup>5</sup>

But in spite of the perception that they were thick as thieves, the relationship between the two men was not always warm and comfortable. They themselves created a powerful mythology that suggested that, as Lloyd George put it in 1936, 'in spite of the fact that we have fought against each other on many occasions there has never been an occasion when I could not call Mr. Winston Churchill my friend and I think that he could do the same'.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Lloyd George and Churchill did not always feel affection towards one another, and at crucial moments the relationship broke down. One such crucial moment came when Churchill's career hit the rocks in 1915 as the Gallipoli disaster unfolded. After Asquith demoted Churchill from his position at the Admiralty, the latter complained bitterly at Lloyd

George's failure to protect him. According to the diary of Lord Reading, 'W. says [he] has always supported L.G. through thick & thin but L.G. has now made his dispositions in such a way as to bring Winston down'.<sup>7</sup> Around this time Churchill wrote to a friend: 'Between me & L.G. tout est fini'.<sup>8</sup>

Another telling comment was made by Churchill in January 1916, when he was serving on the Western Front, having temporarily withdrawn from politics but hoping to make a comeback. He wrote to his wife that, although Lloyd George would not be sorry if he, Churchill, were killed, he would find it politically inconvenient. Therefore, even though her own severe criticisms of Lloyd George's personal disloyalty had much merit, she should stay in touch with him all the same – because he stood to be useful in the future. Yet at other moments the claim that political conflict had never descended into personal acrimony was politically convenient for both Lloyd George and Churchill; hence, in part, their displays of comradeship and protestations of mutual devotion.

This does not mean that we should treat their relationship cynically. Rather, we must be alive to its paradoxes. After Lloyd George succeeded Asquith as prime minister in 1916, he brought Churchill into his coalition government as soon as he judged it politically safe to do so. As minister of munitions, he may not have shown as much originality and flair as Lloyd George had previously done in the same role. But Churchill did demonstrate both efficiency and creativity and, furthermore, he demonstrated a growing political maturity. He largely kept his head

down and got on with the job at hand, and there were fewer flare-ups with Lloyd George than there had been previously. Still, Churchill resented his exclusion from the war cabinet, and during the four years of the post-war coalition the relationship again showed its characteristic alternation between conflict and cooperation. Key issues included the Russian civil war, the conflict in Ireland, British policy in the Middle East, and the 1922 Chanak crisis (which triggered Lloyd George's fall from power).

After the collapse of the coalition the two men's paths diverged politically and, during the 1930s, Lloyd George was of considerably less political relevance than Churchill was, even though both were 'in the wilderness'. As Churchill campaigned against the dangers of Nazism, Lloyd George made the gross error of visiting Hitler and showering him with fulsome praise. In spite of clear differences between the two men, Churchill was still tainted in some people's minds by his past links with Lloyd George. In his novel *Men at Arms*, Evelyn Waugh recounts the hero's reaction to the political changes of 1940: 'Guy knew of Mr Churchill only as a professional politician, a master of sham Augustan prose, a Zionist, an advocate of the Popular Front in Europe, an associate of the press-lords and of Lloyd George.'<sup>9</sup>

### The experience of the two world wars

Let us now turn to what Lloyd George and *C did* as war leaders. To understand this fully we should compare the strengths and weaknesses of their respective positions. They both succeeded once-popular figures who appeared to have failed to prosecute the war with sufficient vigour. Although they were both still distrusted by significant sections of opinion, in both cases their premiership appeared more or less inevitable. Both then had to deal with a predecessor viewed by loyalists as the 'king over the water' – although in this respect H. H. Asquith was more problematic to Lloyd George than Neville Chamberlain was to Churchill. Chamberlain of course remained in Churchill's cabinet, whereas Asquith insisted on staying outside. Actually, Churchill's

problem in the summer of 1940 was the upsurge of popular anti-Chamberlainite feeling, but when he wanted to – as a quid pro quo for getting Chamberlain's agreement to Lloyd George entering the war cabinet – he could pull strings to get the press campaign stopped, 'like turning off a tap'.<sup>10</sup>

To a much greater extent than Churchill, Lloyd George was obliged to improvise his own machinery of government. The Ministry of Munitions has already been mentioned. After Lloyd George entered 10 Downing Street there was a further wave of innovations. These included the introduction of a prime ministerial secretariat, a small executive war cabinet, and an array of new ministries under 'men of push and go' such as Sir Joseph Maclay, the shipping controller. There was also now a gradual move towards an efficient system of food rationing. Some of these developments had been anticipated under the previous government, and did not all take place overnight. There were further crises to come. Yet, as Churchill later wrote, the 'vehement, contriving, resourceful, nimble-leaping Lloyd George seemed to offer a brighter hope, or at any rate a more savage effort' than the staid Asquith regime.<sup>11</sup> The era of 'wait and see' was at an end.

'Total war', it should be said, was not a fact but an aspiration, which was arguably never fully realised, even by 1918. (The failure to implement conscription in Ireland is clear evidence of this.) Nonetheless, the achievements were considerable; during the Second World War Churchill was able to benefit from lessons that had previously been learned. 'Lloyd George was finding his way through an untried field', noted Walter Layton, who had been a Ministry of Munitions official during the First World War. 'Winston Churchill was applying the lessons of the first war and adapting a highly developed apparatus of government.'<sup>12</sup>

This coincides with the arguments that David Edgerton has made in recent years. He argues that the now-dominant view of Britain's role in the conflict is one that suggests that the country was 'a faltering power in 1940, which in one last heroic gesture bankrupted

itself to save the world'. In contrast, he makes a persuasive case that in fact Britain was 'a first-class power' with impressive technical and scientific capacity and a position as 'an industrial giant which remained at the heart of the world's trade' – the idea that she was pacifistic and poorly prepared was a myth. He also makes a convincing effort to show why it was that the optimistic narratives that accompanied the end of the war were in time supplanted by 'declinist' ones that suggested that Britain had at best muddled through against its more technically sophisticated German opponents.<sup>13</sup>

Here we may digress for a moment to reflect on two diary descriptions, one of Lloyd George in the First World War, and one of Churchill during the Second World War. The second of these is well known but the first is not. It is from the journal of Cecil Harmsworth, a Liberal MP, who was the brother of Lords Northcliffe and Rothermere. In his entry for 22 May 1918, Harmsworth reflected his experiences working in Lloyd George's prime ministerial secretariat:

Those anxious radicals who have imagined L.L.-G. as dominated in Cabinet by the reactionary Tories – Curzon, Milner & Bonar – have been strangely mistaken. On the few occasions that I have been present at Cabinet the Wizard has ruled the roost with no appearance of challenge from any quarter. When, too, he has been absent in France or elsewhere it has been interesting to observe from the Cabinet ministers how many decisions have been deferred "until the Prime Minister returns". He is in truth the life & soul of the party in no merely conventional meaning of the expression. His vivid personality prevails in the Cabinet room as in the world outside. [...]

An easier chief to work with in some respects it would be difficult to find. He is wholly unaffected & unspoiled by enormous success. I knew him slightly in the dark days of the Boer War when he was certainly the most unpopular man in England. I see no change in his manner now when he is, I suppose, the most popular man in the whole great

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Alliance. I have often spoken to him more directly than I dare to my brother N. [Northcliffe] &, whether he has agreed with me or not, he has never resented anything I have said. The experience [...] of the other members of the Secretariat has been the same.<sup>14</sup>

Contrast that with the second of our entries, written by General Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) from 1941 onwards, who repeatedly denounced Churchill's behaviour in his diary. In 1944 Brooke wrote:

He [Churchill] knows no details, has only got half the picture in his mind, talks absurdities and makes my blood boil to listen to his nonsense. I find it hard to remain civil. And the wonderful thing is that ¾ of the population of the world imagine Winston Churchill is one of the great Strategists of History, a second Marlborough, and the other ¼ have no conception what a public menace he is and has been throughout this war. [...] Without him England was lost for a certainty, with him England has been on the verge of disaster time and again. [...] Never have I admired and despised a man simultaneously to the same extent. Never have such opposite extremes been combined in the same human being.

The diary, it should be stressed, was written in the heat of the moment, and after the war Brooke conceded that he had made insufficient allowance for Churchill's difficulties. 'I thank God I was given an opportunity of working alongside such a man,' he wrote.<sup>15</sup>

Arguably, Churchill was luckier than Lloyd George in his commanders. Brooke and many others may have been driven up the wall by Churchill's behaviour but they were not contemptuous of politicians *as a class*, in contrast to the way that Henry Wilson, as CIGS during the First World War, dismissed them as 'the frocks' (a reference to their frock coats). Lord Kitchener's appointment as war secretary in 1914 was symptomatic of a problem that was in evidence well before Lloyd George became prime minister. Kitchener commanded huge respect, and was in many ways

very able, but felt under no obligation to tell anyone else what he was doing. The earlier 'Curragh incident' (of March 1914), for example, was symptomatic of a wider crisis of civil-military relations which Churchill simply did not face. When Churchill perceived that generals such as Claude Auchinleck were underperforming or failing to communicate he simply got rid of them. We may do more than hazard that Lloyd George's problems in this regard were connected to the Irish issue, which in itself was also much more problematic for the British government as a whole during the First World War than during the Second. However irritating and inconvenient Irish neutrality was in 1939-45 it was nothing compared to the problems caused by the 1916 rebellion and its aftermath.

During the worst periods of the Second World War, Churchill was repeatedly urged to take the Lloyd George small war cabinet model as his own. In April 1941, Lloyd George argued in the House of Commons for a 'real War Council'. Churchill, he said, was 'a man with a very brilliant mind – but for that very reason he wanted a few more ordinary persons to look after him', independent people who would stand up to him. Churchill resisted such calls:

My right hon. Friend spoke of the great importance of my being surrounded by people who would stand up to me and say, 'No, No, No.' Why, good gracious, has he no idea how strong the negative principle is in the constitution and working of the British war-making machine? The difficulty is not, I assure him, to have more brakes put on the wheels; the difficulty is to get more impetus and speed behind it. At one moment we are asked to emulate the Germans in their audacity and vigour, and the next moment the Prime Minister is to be assisted by being surrounded by a number of 'No-men' to resist me at every point and prevent me from making anything in the nature of a speedy, rapid and, above all, positive constructive decision.<sup>16</sup>

This reminds us that up until this point, if not beyond, Churchill had been operating in Lloyd George's

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shadow. But by the same token he was able to learn from him, although without imitating him slavishly.

### Conclusion

Lloyd George's executive management of the war effort was in many ways very successful but this was combined with a 'presidential' political style that tended to marginalise parliament.<sup>17</sup> Churchill undoubtedly found criticism very irritating but to his credit he did not attempt to run away from it. He made a point of answering parliamentary questions even when he could have delegated the task to others. His willingness to answer 'as humbly as if he had been the youngest of Under-Secretaries' endeared him to MPs: he carried out the task 'dutifully, carefully, subserviently'.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Lloyd George during the First World War, he did not isolate himself from the Commons but took pains to present himself as its servant.

But if in some ways Churchill's war leadership was superior to that of Lloyd George, it was Lloyd George's own experience and efforts that helped make that possible. It seems impossible to say which of the two men faced a more difficult job as prime minister – which in turn makes it inappropriate to ask which was the greater war leader, as though this were a question that could be settled by awarding marks out of ten. The orthodox view is encapsulated in the phrase, 'Lloyd George was the abler politician, Churchill the greater statesman.'<sup>19</sup> This may seem superficially persuasive but it is perhaps too glib. It might be better to say that Churchill was the greater geopolitical (not military) strategist, but that Lloyd George had a more creative and inventive vision of the power of the wartime state.

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# CATASTROPHE

## THE 2015 ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND ITS OUTCOME

The 2015 election is the most catastrophic in the history of the Liberal Democrats and its predecessor parties; in no other previous election has the party lost such a high proportion of its votes and seats.

Entry into coalition with the Conservative Party in 2010 meant that the party always knew it would lose a good number of those who had voted for it in 2010, but Liberal Democrats hoped that they could replace at least some of them with new supporters who had not previously believed the party had a realistic chance of power. The party also assumed that the incumbency factor would save many of their MPs even though the national vote was falling. Neither of these things happened, despite a campaign that was generally recognised as well organised and well funded.

Discuss why everything went wrong with **Phil Cowley** (Professor of Parliamentary Government, University of Nottingham and co-author of *The British General Election of 2010*) and **Baroness Oly Grender**, Paddy Ashdown's second-in-command on the 'Wheelhouse Group' which ran the Liberal Democrat election campaign. Chair: Lord Wallace of Saltaire.

6.30pm, Monday 13 July

David Lloyd George Room, National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1

This study is not without merit, but it is far from 'scintillating' as the book jacket claims. Waterhouse is too ready to defend a man he clearly admires and is unwilling to mete out criticism. Grey's conduct during July 1914, his failures in wartime diplomacy, his failed mission to the America after the armistice and his work rate should all have been thoroughly interrogated. It is to be hoped we don't have to wait another forty years for a fresh assessment of Grey's life and career.

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- 1 For the full history of their relationship, see Richard Toye, *Lloyd George and Churchill: Rivals for Greatness* (London, 2007).
- 2 Gary Sheffield, 'A pitiful war, but not a pity', *The Guardian*, 18 Jun. 1913.
- 3 Max Hastings, 'Sucking up to the Germans is no way to remember our Great War heroes, Mr Cameron', *Daily Mail*, 11 June 2013.
- 4 C. P. Snow, *Variety of Men* (London, 1967), p. 94.
- 5 Thomas Jones diary, 11 Jan. 1937, National Library of Wales, Thomas Jones Papers, Class Z.
- 6 'Rough notes taken of speeches delivered on the occasion of a private dinner given by Messrs. Ivor Nicholson & Watson at the Reform Club on Thursday, October 29th 1936 in honour of the Rt. Hon. D. Lloyd George O.M. M.P., on the occasion of the completion of his "War Memoirs", Parliamentary Archives, Lloyd George Papers, LG/G/208/4.
- 7 Lord Reading diary, 27 May 1915, India Office Library, Lord Reading Papers, MS Eur/F118/152.
- 8 Winston Churchill to Archibald Sinclair, 9 June 1916, in Martin Gilbert (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill: Companion Volume IV, Part 1* (Boston, 1978), pp. 5–6.
- 9 Evelyn Waugh, *Men at Arms* (London, 1952).
- 10 Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 8 June 1940, in Robert Self (ed.), *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters: Volume 4, The Downing Street years, 1934–1940* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 538.
- 11 Winston S. Churchill, *Great Contemporaries* (London, 1937), p. 115.
- 12 'Commemoration of the Centenary of the Birth of David Lloyd George, 17th January, 1863: Prichard-Jones Hall, University College of North Wales, Bangor, Saturday, 30th March, 1963', Walter Layton Papers, Box 7/39.
- 13 David Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War* (London, 2011), pp. 1–2.
- 14 Cecil Harmsworth diary, 22 May 1918, University of Exeter Special Collections, Cecil Harmsworth Papers.
- 15 Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman (eds.), *War Diaries, 1939–1945: Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke* (London, 2001), pp. 590, 713 (entry for 10 Sept. 1944, and post-war comment).
- 16 Hansard, HC (series 5), vol. 371, cols. 880, 937 (7 May 1941).
- 17 Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Lloyd George's Premiership: A Study in "Prime Ministerial Government"', *Historical Journal*, vol. xiii, no. 1 (Mar. 1970), pp. 130–57.
- 18 Harold Nicolson to Ben and Nigel Nicolson, 21 Sept. 1943, in Nigel Nicolson (ed.), *Harold Nicolson, The War Years: Diaries and Letters 1939–45* (London, 1967), p. 320.
- 19 Earl of Swinton, *Sixty Years of Power: Some Memories of the Men Who Wielded It* (London, 1966), p. 38.