

Asquith

How did Liberal Prime Minister Asquith's friendships and relationships affect his political decisions? By Alan Mumford.

Asquith: Friendship



, Love and Betrayal

ASQUITH'S QUALITIES AND effectiveness as Prime Minister in peace and war are well known. Three passages in his life, also well known, have been recorded as wholly separate events. This article establishes a connection between them which adds a different dimension to a review of his character.

Friendship and betrayal: the Relugas Compact

Edward Grey, Richard Burdon Haldane and Herbert Henry Asquith were leaders of the Liberal Imperialist Group within the Liberal Party during the Boer War. Asquith had been Home Secretary under Rosebery, Grey a junior Foreign Office minister; Haldane had never been in government. They believed the war was justified and important for the maintenance of Britain's position in Africa. They also disagreed with the leader of the Liberal Party, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who spoke for probably the majority of Liberal MPs who opposed both the war and methods used in it, described by Campbell-Bannerman as methods of barbarism.

On 7 October 1903 Grey had written to Asquith: '... under no circumstances would I take office with CB as Prime Minister in any govt. in which CB was leader in the House of Commons.'¹ Haldane went further – he would not serve under Campbell-Bannerman either as Prime Minister or Leader in the Commons. When it became clear that the problems faced by Balfour and the Unionist government in 1905 were likely to lead to a general election, these three met at a house owned by Grey in Relugas in Scotland in September. The evanescent Rosebery was no longer an alternative leader. The three agreed that Campbell-Bannerman, although he should become Prime Minister, should not lead from the House of Commons, but should rather do so from the House of Lords. Asquith would take over as leader in the Commons as well as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Grey would go either to the Foreign or Colonial Office and Haldane would become Lord Chancellor. This was to be a mercy

killing, not an assassination. Haldane was asked to use his contacts with the king's advisers to persuade him to accept the idea and even to suggest it to Campbell-Bannerman.

The essence of the compact was that the three would not serve in a new government except on these terms. In fact, before Balfour took the decision to resign and force the Liberals to form a new administration, Campbell-Bannerman took the initiative, perhaps having been warned what the trio had agreed. He called Asquith in for a meeting on 13 November 1905 and asked him what position he would like in a future Liberal government, suggesting 'The Exchequer, I suppose.' Asquith said nothing. 'Or the Home Office,' continued Campbell-Bannerman. Asquith said, 'Certainly not.' Campbell-Bannerman then remarked, 'I hear that it has been suggested by that ingenious person, Richard Burdon Haldane, that I should go to the House of Lords, a place for which I have neither liking, training or ambition.'² They also discussed alternative positions for Haldane whom Asquith proposed for Lord Chancellor and Grey for the Foreign Office. (It should be noted that here as elsewhere in this article Asquith's version of what happened does not come direct from him but is Margot's report of what he told her. Only in his letters to Venetia Stanley are they his unfiltered words.)

Balfour resigned on 4 December 1905, and Asquith and separately Grey had further discussions with Campbell-Bannerman. Asquith had concluded, following his previous discussion with Campbell-Bannerman, that he would not be able to force him into a new arrangement. On 7 December, he set out to Grey the reasons why he could not decline to take office – that he would thereby have either prevented the formation of a Liberal government or created a weak Liberal government. Not only did he explain his own position but he urged Haldane to accept the War Office. Grey in fact had returned to see Campbell-Bannerman on 7 December and had told him that unless Campbell-Bannerman went to the Lords he, Grey, would not accept office – although he knew Asquith would not similarly refuse. Grey

H. H. Asquith (1852–1928), Leader of the Liberal Party 1908–26, Prime Minister 1908–16

Asquith: Friendship, Love and Betrayal

wrote to Asquith: 'If you go in without me eventually I shall be quite happy outside & I shan't think it in the least wrong of you to go in.'³ In further discussion with Campbell-Bannerman, Asquith had again emphasised that given Campbell-Bannerman's age and health no one would consider him the worse for moving to the Lords. Asquith spoke also about Grey who 'was his dearest friend as well as supporter, and to join a government without such a friend would be personal pain to him, as they had never worked apart from one another.'⁴

This expression of the potential personal pain was not accompanied by 'and therefore I could not accept the Chancellorship'. Campbell-Bannerman was determined not to go to the Lords, offered Haldane the post of Attorney General but finally deputed Asquith to tell Grey that he could have the Foreign Office. (Campbell-Bannerman's offer of that post to Cromer had been rejected.) Haldane would go to the War Office. Asquith also saw Grey, who was still fully determined to carry out his declared intention to refuse office.

Grey's decisiveness was overturned in a meeting with Haldane, at which it was agreed that it was Grey's duty to accept office provided Haldane was included in the Cabinet. With this confirmed by Campbell-Bannerman the Relugas Compact was finally buried.

Asquith presented no ultimatum on behalf of himself or Grey and Haldane if Campbell-Bannerman refused. Campbell-Bannerman was speaking as if he assumed Asquith would take the job; Asquith offered nothing to disabuse him and therefore implied that he would accept. Campbell-Bannerman needed Asquith, but could do without Grey and Haldane. Asquith, the obvious successor to Campbell-Bannerman, had most to lose and clearly betrayed the terms of the compact. He had not, after his first interview with Campbell-Bannerman, discussed with his colleagues the reasons why he felt that he would have to accept office. He assured them that he was working hard on their behalf in terms of the offices they might hold, but he took what he wanted most himself with no certainty that Grey would be offered the Foreign Office, and the likelihood that Haldane would not get what he most wanted. Haldane's relationship with Asquith was extremely close. He had been Asquith's best man at his wedding to Margot, they had shared their early legal experiences as they trained to be barristers. Haldane was a frequent and very welcome visitor to Asquith and his family during his first marriage. On top of that they shared political beliefs as expressed through Liberal Imperialism. His relationship with Grey, though similarly strong in relation to Liberal Imperialism, was not as deep at the personal level as was that with Haldane.

The consequences of his decision were beneficial for the creation of an effective Liberal government but the way Asquith behaved carries

no credit in relation to his deep friendship at this time with Haldane and Grey. He recognised his debt to Haldane who had facilitated Grey's change of mind. 'No words of mine can express what I feel, by your action during the last two days, you have laid the party, the country and myself (most of all) under an unmeasured debt of gratitude.'⁵ Haldane and Grey did not express feelings of betrayal in 1905, or twenty years later in their memoirs.

Friendship, buttressed by a formal agreement for action, was surrendered to the recognition of the realities of Campbell-Bannerman's position. Asquith in 1928 looked back on 'the whole affair in which from first to last there was nothing in the nature of an "intrigue"'.⁶ Haldane bizarrely reduced its importance by describing it as 'a private, agreement of a purely defensive character'.⁷ Is it right to see this as betrayal, especially since Haldane and Grey neither in 1905 nor later said they had been let down? Grey got the job he wanted, Haldane secured an important Cabinet post – so it is less surprising they did not apparently feel aggrieved. But they had not achieved the main overt purpose of the compact – the elevation of Campbell-Bannerman to the Lords – and it was Asquith's failure, without consultation with Haldane and Grey, to use the threat of resignations which betrayed the strategy the three had agreed.

Love and betrayal

From 1912 Asquith and his closest circle came to resemble the participants in a play. Asquith himself, aged 59, was a successful Prime Minister but with a sometimes-transgressive interest in young women. His second wife Margot (aged 48) was dedicated to her husband's political interests, but often outspoken (or rude as some saw her) in a way which did not serve him well. Their married life was inhibited by their doctor's instruction that she should have no more children.

Violet, one of Asquith's five children from his first marriage, disliked Margot. She was also involved in assisting in Asquith's political life and was passionately fond of her father. She had become emotionally involved with Maurice Bonham Carter (Bongie), her father's private secretary.

Edwin Montagu was a frequent visitor to Downing Street and to the Asquith's country or holiday homes. He had been mentored by Asquith from the beginning of his political career, had served him as his parliamentary secretary and then as a minister. He was in love with Venetia Stanley. Montagu was the son of the strictly observant Jewish Lord Swaythling. Edwin unsuccessfully proposed marriage to Venetia. Venetia rejected him largely apparently because she felt no physical attraction to him (he was indeed regarded by many as ugly) but he did not give up. Asquith frequently used deprecating remarks about Montagu often referring to him as the

From 1912 Asquith and his closest circle came to resemble the participants in a play. Asquith himself, aged 59, was a successful Prime Minister but with a sometimes-transgressive interest in young women.



Asquith and Venetia Stanley in 1910

Assyrian – probably an oblique reference to Montagu’s Jewishness.

Venetia, Violet’s best friend, was also frequently a guest of the Asquiths but increasingly the initiator of Asquith’s visits to her family homes. In 1912 Venetia was 25. She was the daughter of Lord Sheffield and member of a well off aristocratic family. A close friend described her as dark eyed with aquiline good looks and a masculine intellect.⁸ In old age, Violet, when informed through Jenkins’ biography that her father had had an intimate relationship with Venetia, denied it saying, ‘But she was so plain.’⁹

This was the context in which Asquith fell in love with Venetia. ‘Suddenly, in a single instant, without premonition on my part or any challenge on hers, the scales dropped from my eyes; the familiar features & smile & gestures & words assumed an absolutely new perspective; what had been completely hidden from me was in a flash half revealed, and I dimly felt hardly knowing, not at all understanding it, that I had come to a turning point in my life.’¹⁰ This was Asquith’s recollection in April 1915 of how he came to recognise his love for Venetia Stanley in February 1912 following a trip to Sicily in which Asquith, Edwin Montagu, Venetia and Violet had enjoyed themselves.

It is not surprising that Asquith should seek relief in some form from the pressures of political life. Prime Minister since 1907, he had passed through the travails of Lloyd George’s budget, House of Lords reform, home rule and the direct personal and political pressures involved in

handling Lloyd George and Rufus Isaacs over the Marconi affair. There was more pressure caused by Germany’s ambitions to become a real imperial rival to Britain. The number, variety and constant turbulence of these problems were greater than those faced by any Prime Minister since Pitt.

Michael and Eleanor Brock were given access by Venetia’s daughter to the complete archive of more than 560 letters from Asquith to Venetia Stanley. The volume increased from 51 in 1913 to 279 in 1914 and 200 in 1915, obviously reduced following her decision to marry Edwin Montagu. (The Brocks published 425.) The letters demonstrate the importance of Venetia to him – the demands on his emotional resources and the actual time he expended in writing to her. Two or three letters in a day was not unusual, but several times he wrote four letters in one day. The myth that many of them were written in Cabinet was demolished by the Brocks and Buczacki confirms this. Fourteen were written while he was in meetings or on the front bench in the Commons.¹¹ (His revelations of military secrets was, however, another betrayal.) Perhaps as significant in terms of the time demands on him were his receipt of letters from her, which are unfortunately unavailable. But there are a number of references to him not merely reading but rereading her letters, for example: ‘My darling – you will never guess how many times I read over and over (on a very busy day) your precious letter of this morning’ (29 September 1914).¹²

Asquith’s 1915 lyrical description of his feelings in 1912 comes from what Asquith described as an

According to Asquith his relationship with Venetia was not simply one of love, but one in which he sought her counsel: 'every hour I think of you and refer things big and little to the unseen tribunal of your wise and loving judgement' (25 July 1914).

autobiography and sent to Venetia. It is interesting from several points of view. It clearly cannot have been really intended to be part of a published autobiography since he cannot have wished to publicise his affair with Venetia. But this account of his feelings about Venetia in 1912 seemed to be contradicted by Venetia's account of time she spent with him a few weeks later. She wrote in a letter to Montagu in 1912 after spending most of the week at Downing Street with Violet, 'do you remember saying how much he varied in his liking for me, and that sometimes he quite liked me and others not at all? Well this was one of the not at all times. He was horribly bored by my constant presence at breakfast, lunch and dinner.'¹³

There is also the question of why Asquith wrote this, and then why he sent it to Venetia. Perhaps it started as a reflection by him in glowing terms of the origins of his love for her, and then became a way of reminding her of the length and depth of his love.

Asquith was a frequent correspondent to a number of women before and after Venetia; for example, he wrote over 300 letters after the break up with Venetia to Venetia's sister Sylvia, and a large number to another correspondent, Mrs Harrison. There was an element of similarity in that in all cases he was fulfilling some need to record to someone else what was happening in his life, but they were dissimilar in the degree of his passionate involvement with Venetia nor was there any potential political impact as with Venetia's ending of their affair. In all cases, there were elements of seeking solace. In Venetia's case, he also thanked her for the counsel and advice she gave him about the political problems he faced. His letters to Venetia are in part a release from pressures in his political and social life but the passion he expressed may also have been a form of epistolary masturbation. That passion was expressed dramatically and frequently. The most revealing letter was written on 8 March 1915: 'My love for you has grown day by day and month by month & now year by year til it absorbs and inspires all my life. . . . It has rescued me from sterility, impotence, despair.'¹⁴ (This was not likely to be a reference to sexual impotence).

According to Asquith his relationship with Venetia was not simply one of love, but one in which he sought her counsel: 'every hour I think of you and refer things big and little to the unseen tribunal of your wise and loving judgement' (25 July 1914).¹⁵ On 30 March 1915, 'I cannot tell you my best beloved how wise I thought all you said in your letter today in these subjects: especially in relation to the personal qualities of Winston and McK'.¹⁶

There is very little to show us the frequency or content of her counsel, since none of Venetia's letters are available. What we have are references to her advice on a new Lord Lieutenant for Ireland and the appointment of Neil Primrose to the India Office and a new Viceroy of India. The most

significant politically was a letter on 18 March 1915 (marked 'Most Secret'): 'I may create a new office for Ll George, (Director of War Contracts or something of the kind) and relieve him of some of his present duties. I shan't do anything without consulting you, wh makes it all the more necessary that we shd spend tomorrow aft together.'¹⁷

Was Asquith's expressed love for Venetia just a fantasy? Surely the frequency and intensity of his declarations of love, and the indications in his letters of Venetia's response proclaim that he was indeed in love with her. Page after page declare his passion, a lava-like flow of love. (We do not have her letters to confirm or otherwise the intensity of her feelings for him.) There is no doubt that Asquith's involvement with Venetia was a betrayal of his marriage to Margot. That betrayal can be defined first in terms of their marriage vows. The 1662 Marriage Service, which would have been used in 1894, required of the prospective husband that he should 'love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live.'

Biographers of Asquith have chosen not to comment on the morals involved – neither the morality of the difference in power and status of this elderly man's relationship with the much younger Venetia, nor the morality of his betraying his wife. (Venetia's moral position is not germane to this article.) They have chosen rather to become detectives about whether or not they had full sexual congress (echoes of Clinton). Koss says yes, and Jenkins no. More extended arguments are provided by Judge Oliver Poplewell, who creates a lawyer's circumstantial case for yes,¹⁸ while Buczacki emphasises the lack of written evidence and the impracticality of full sexual contact.¹⁹

Perhaps for some people full sex is vital if they are to accept the word 'betrayal'. The view taken here is that it is not crucial, that the volume, the language, the frequency and the content of the letters breach Asquith's commitment to his wife, although he continued to proclaim to Margot his love for her. For this author, but not for biographers, they engender also a feeling of pity for someone so gripped by his infatuation.

Margot knew that Asquith liked the company of young women – she referred to them as his 'little harem'. She needed reassurance on this. She wrote to him on 30 December 1912, 'My darling, do write just one line, quite short, you've made me so unhappy – I am also miserable at having been sulky to you. Forgive me your loving'. Asquith's response was to return the note with 'Darling – why should you be unhappy? I love you and only you. Your H.'²⁰

However, Asquith had other feelings about her. He told Violet on 19 May 1915, 'I have sometimes walked up and down that room till I have felt as tho' I were going mad. When one needed rest, to have a thing like the Morning Post Leader flung at one – the obvious reasons for and against

things more controversially put even than by one's colleagues.²¹

Margot had become increasingly aware that her husband's involvement with Venetia was a threat to her relationship with him. It was another aspect of the tangled connections, the drama of the Asquith marriage that she confided her fears to Montagu. Although Margot described the situation as a trifling domestic discouragement, she expressed concern to Montagu about her husband's relationship with Venetia (the 'play' now verging on French farce). Montagu's reply on 8 March 1915 was, 'How amused you can afford to be at his relaxation. Those who know you both would laugh at a comparison between your relations with him and those of any other woman in the world. ... Show him you acknowledge his right to any amusement he chooses in order that he may give every ounce of himself for the struggle.'²² Margot also wrote to him on how every Friday she 'suffered tortures' during her husband's afternoon drives with 'the deceitful little brute', 'she is even teaching Henry to avoid telling me things. ... I am far too fond of Henry to show him how ill and miserable it makes me, it would only worry him at a time he shd be free'. As a final touch, 'Good God! To think you proposed to her.'²³

Margot was frequently physically ill, and often at the same time depressed. Asquith concealed his betrayal, as many before and since have concealed infidelities from their wives. It is however, painful to read his declarations of love for Margot, in response to her demands for reassurance. She wrote to Asquith in mid-April 1915, 'I told him how much I loved him and how well I knew that I was getting older – that I was irritable – that there were other females in the world etc., that I had no common jealousy that would deprive him of unshared leisure or pleasure.' Asquith wrote an immediate reply: 'My own darling, Your letter made me sad, and I hasten to tell you that you have no cause for the doubts and fears which it expresses, or suggests. But you would have just reason for complaint, and more, if it were true that I was transferring my confidence from you to anyone else. My fondness for Venetia has never interfered and never could with our relationship.' He refers to his occasional irritation and impatience, 'but believe me darling it has not been due to want of confidence and love. Those remain and always will be unchanged.'²⁴ (Mandy Rice Davis and Viscount Astor's denial of a relationship with her came to mind: 'He would say that wouldn't he'.)

Margot sent Asquith's letter on to Montagu, but added that she wondered if Venetia 'hadn't ousted me faintly – not very much – but enough to wound and humiliate me.' She went on to claim that Asquith 'shows me all his letters and all Venetia's and tells me every secret.'²⁵ Any letters Asquith showed her must have been very carefully selected, since otherwise she would have been in no doubt about the betrayal.

It may be that the weight put upon Venetia by the increasing volume and emotional intensity of Asquith's letters persuaded her to bring the relationship to an end. He received her letter announcing her decision to marry Montagu on 12 May 1915. (The letter has not survived.) Venetia finally decided to accept him, after several previous rejections, and to agree the concomitant requirement to convert to the Jewish faith, thus enabling Montagu to receive his inheritance from his father. Asquith was no longer in a play, but in an opera as he hit the high notes in his anguished response:

Most loved
As you know well, this breaks my heart
I couldn't bear to come and see you
I can only pray God to bless you – and help me

Although Asquith had apparently been feeling for several months that she might decide to get married he had no thought at all that she would make the decision so suddenly, and moreover to marry Edwin Montagu – his ex-protégé. When he told Margot, he presented it as concern for Venetia, not his own loss. He wrote more honestly to Sylvia Henley, Venetia's sister, 'I don't believe there are two living people who, each in their separate ways, are more devoted to me than she and Montagu; and it is the irony of fortune that they two shd combine to deal a death blow to me.'²⁶

There was a splendid irony in Asquith's letter to Venetia of 10 May, after a conversation with Montagu. 'I don't honestly believe that, at this moment, there are two persons in the world (of opposite sexes) from whom I cd. more confidently count, whatever troubles or trials ahead to encounter, for wholehearted love & devotion than you & he: of course, in quite different ways & senses.'²⁷

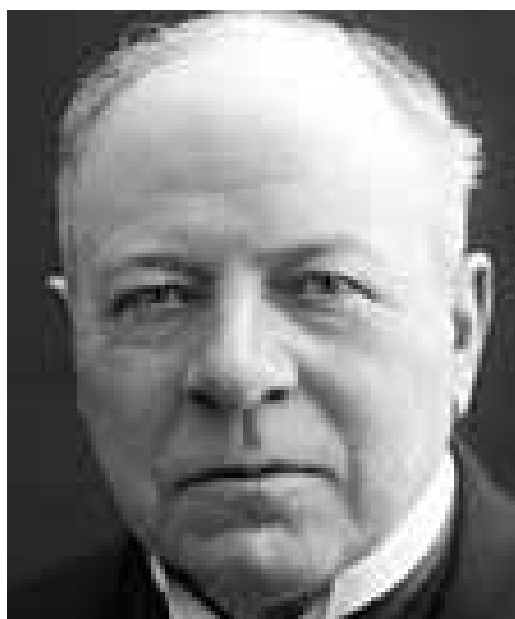
In a letter to Sylvia Henley on 12 May, Asquith revealed that Venetia wrote 'at the end of a sadly meagre letter today: "I can't help feeling after all the joy you have given me, that mine is a very *treacherous* return." Poor darling! I wouldn't have put it like that. But in essence it is true: and it leaves me sore and humiliated'.²⁸ In June, he told her she had been the centre and mainspring of his life.

There was one further betrayal, thirteen years later – this time of Venetia. There was no mention of her, however anodyne he might have made it, in Asquith's *Memories and Reflections* published in 1928. The letters he wrote to her were used but not identified as to her, unlike the recognition he gave to the letters to Sylvia Henley and Mrs Harrison.

Haldane betrayed again

Asquith declared on 12 May 1915 in the House of Commons that there was no question of forming a coalition. But on 17 May he agreed immediately

It may be that the weight put upon Venetia by the increasing volume and emotional intensity of Asquith's letters persuaded her to bring the relationship to an end. He received her letter announcing her decision to marry Montagu on 12 May 1915.



Venetia Stanley
(1887–1948)

Edwin Montagu
(1879–1924)

R. B. Haldane
(1856–1928)

to a coalition when the proposition was put to him by Bonar Law with the support of Lloyd George but without consultation with Cabinet colleagues – a quick decision unlike his normal deliberative process. No ‘wait and see’ this time. The full story of the creation of the coalition is not told here, only the impact on Haldane. The most dramatic decisions were about Winston Churchill and R. B. Haldane. The Unionists in addition to their dislike of the ex-Unionist Churchill had grounds in weaknesses in his actions at the Admiralty. There were no performance issues with Haldane – only a response to a press campaign. Asquith circulated a letter to his Cabinet asking for their resignations and referring to the real pain he felt in parting with colleagues.

The first question which arises is whether Asquith’s decision was influenced by the termination of his relationship with Venetia. There is no direct evidence to show that it was. Of course, he made no suggestion to Margot or Violet that his decision was affected by Venetia’s defection. The Brocks thought not. Of his two main biographers, Jenkins comments on the unusual speed with which he made the decision. While he says nothing directly about the impact of Venetia’s letter, he describes Asquith as ‘Throughout the crisis he was preoccupied by private suffering.’²⁹ Koss takes a contemptuous view of the possibility of Asquith being affected, saying that he had in all areas of his life been able to separate the personal and the political. He said that ‘It is outrageously melodramatic to say – as one recent historian has done – that these convulsive struggles were those of a man enduring a private torment’. The anonymous historian was Cameron Hazelhurst – who had been critical of one of Koss’s books.³⁰

Perhaps Koss, the Brocks and others have themselves been too detached emotionally from the reality of Asquith’s involvement with Venetia and what he felt about the ending of it. He spent hours discussing it with Margot, without her apparently recognising that his anguish was about more than an inappropriate marriage to a Jew. Venetia was partially replaced by her sister Sylvia Henley. (Asquith wrote to her frequently with similar terms of endearment, and kissed and groped her. The betrayal continued.) He expressed his devastation in three letters to Sylvia on 12 May, before his decision on 17 May to form a coalition. So, had his despair been transformed into a wholly controlled decision on 17 May? On the 14 May he wrote to Venetia, ‘This is too terrible. No Hell can be so bad’.³¹ On the day he decided to form a coalition he wrote to her about her ‘most revealing and heart rending letter’. You were the centre & mainstay of my life; everything in it hung on you. There was not an act or a thought (as you know well) wh I did not share with you’.³²

It has been argued that Asquith’s decisions after 17 May about the composition of the new Cabinet and particularly his decision to place the

Unionists only in subordinate roles indicate that he was in full possession of his normal approach to political business, in this case to keep power in his own hands, and to preserve the most important jobs for Liberals. Some have argued that although his decision to act narrowly in this way was wrong, it was a consequence of a well-considered approach. Whatever the strength of these arguments, they do not apply equally to the decisions he made about Haldane. Perhaps it was emotional dislocation which reduced his capacity to fight for Haldane, and to fail to communicate with him.

The issue that seems not to have been considered is what was missing – the advice that Venetia might have given him both about the original decision and then about the composition of the Cabinet. Certainly, on the second he had been quite free in discussing potential appointments with her before, and there is every reason to think that he would have done so on this occasion. Of course, we do not know what her advice might have been and whether he would have taken it.

In his *War Memoirs*, Lloyd George says that the Unionists blamed Haldane for not warning the Cabinet about German preparations for war. 'All these criticisms were in my judgement fundamentally unjust, and inflicted a deep wrong on a man whose patriotic energy had rendered greater service to the nation in the reorganisation of the Army than any War Secretary since the days of Cardwell. However, temper was bitter and unconscionable on this subject, and Mr Asquith and Sir Edward Grey sacrificed friendship to expediency. ... Mr Asquith saved [M'Kenna] and sacrificed Haldane. Lord Haldane was not qualified to fight a personal battle for himself. Mr M'Kenna was. So, Lord Haldane was driven in disgrace into the wilderness and Mr M'Kenna was promoted to the second place in the Government.'³³ (Lloyd George's spelling of McKenna.) He does not suggest he spoke on Haldane's behalf then. It should be noted that Lloyd George's statement was written sixteen to seventeen years after the event. Moreover, he had fought during this time long, hard battles with Asquith and Grey about the Liberal Party.

The Conservative veto on Haldane was firmer than that on Churchill; they would not serve in a Cabinet with him, and Grey, when he tried to intervene found them quite unshakeable on the point. 'But to Haldane he neither wrote nor spoke'. (Margot claimed differently – see below). 'It was the most uncharacteristic fault of Asquith's whole career.'³⁴ However, Jenkins' comment is seen in the context of a biography which is generally favourable to Asquith. The criticisms made by these two writers is based on different aspects of Asquith's decision. Lloyd George is critical of the act of removing Haldane, Jenkins is critical of the failure of Asquith to soften the blow by personal condolence.

Asquith and Grey in their memoirs twelve years later placed all the responsibility on

The issue that seems not to have been considered is what was missing – the advice that Venetia might have given him both about the original decision and then about the composition of the Cabinet.

insistence by the Unionists that Haldane had to go; he with Churchill was part of the price of Unionists agreeing to enter into a coalition. As we will see below, this version is largely supported as far as Asquith is concerned by the comments he made to Margot as recorded in her diary. However, Koss provided a different view when he found a diary entry written by Austen Chamberlain on the 17 May. He was not at the meeting but presumably wrote this following discussions he had had with either or both of Balfour and Bonar Law. Although second hand, it has at least the merit of being contemporaneous. In this Chamberlain recorded that it was actually Asquith who proposed the removal of Haldane at the first meeting with Bonar Law and A. J. Balfour on 17 May.³⁵ Adams, in his biography of Bonar Law, says merely that 'surprisingly the Prime Minister also seemed willing to include Carson but to exclude Curzon and to accept the Unionist blackballing of Haldane.'³⁶

Margot recorded herself as asking Crewe to intervene on Haldane's behalf as on 21 May 'I sat next to Crewe at dinner and begged him to join Grey in telling Henry [i.e. Asquith] that they would neither of them serve under Henry if Haldane was ousted by Bonar Law. He said he would do his best. I appealed for dear Haldane to whom we owe our whole army. (Letting him go looks terribly like giving way to Press and Rumour and Lies.)'³⁷

Margot recorded Asquith's view of his big meeting on 21 May with Bonar Law and Arthur Balfour with Lloyd George and 'by an accident McKenna'. Asquith said, 'I began quite informally saying this was the most painful position any public man could be put into – the knocking out of your oldest, most faithful servants to put in new men. They agreed. ... I began with Haldane. I said he was my oldest friend, that he had been subjected to a press campaign, led by Morning Post, etc., of the foulest, lowest, most mendacious character fostered by the anti-German mania; and to exclude him just now would not only be personally painful to me but would look as if we had given way to the Press, as well as to pressure. I said Grey felt it so strongly that he had told me that he would rather not join and altogether I made a very serious appeal to both of them. B Law was a little moved, and Arthur very much, but BL said that feeling on this side was so strong that it would be quite impossible to enter into a coalition at all if he was kept.' Asquith indicated when they moved to discuss Simon that 'I had asked Simon to succeed Haldane, you know, and he refused.' This shows that Asquith had in fact already given up the fight for Haldane before this meeting at which he made his grand appeal.³⁸ There is no indication of support for Haldane from Lloyd George, Crewe or McKenna at this meeting.

Of course, this account was written by Margot following her husband's version of what happened at the meeting. Knowing as he did her

Could it have been otherwise? Most historians are agreed that Asquith had little choice when Unionists and particularly Bonar Law put it starkly that they would not join the government with Haldane in it.

sympathies in relation to Haldane, and perhaps having reserves of guilt about the treatment he proposed for him, he no doubt emphasised how hard he fought for Haldane and the statement by Bonar Law of Haldane's total unacceptability. It was also far too late in the process of determining Cabinet appointments.

Bonar Law's personal views about Haldane are unknown, but some backbenchers had made their opposition to him plain, largely centred on the baseless accusations about his supposed love for Germany as described in the press. Bonar Law could give them the main victim they sought, Churchill, since Asquith actually agreed that he ought to be moved. Haldane was an additional item to show to Bonar Law's backbenchers as part of the price Asquith had paid for the Unionists joining in a coalition. Bonar Law wanted to avoid open conflict in the House of Commons, and to get a more effective prosecution of the war. Haldane was an easy additional target since, in his role as Lord Chancellor, he had little impact on the running of the war. While attention has often been directed to whether Asquith showed supreme political judgement or lack of personal ethics in disposing of Haldane, no attention has been paid to whether Bonar Law should have stood out against his backbenchers since the case against Haldane was, as he knew, invalid. But then, if Asquith offered no real defence other than his personal embarrassment, why should Bonar Law stand out against his colleagues?

Margot reported on 21 May that 'H [Asquith] was more shattered by his talk to Haldane this afternoon than by anything else in this crisis. All Haldane had said, when H told him that B Law would not have him, was 'I owe you everything. I would not have gone to the War Office but for you; I would not have gone to the Woolsack but for you; I have nothing to complain of.'³⁹ She does not report Asquith as making the obvious response of how sorry he was about the decision.

It is unclear when the executioner's axe finally descended on Haldane. Haldane received a scribbled note on 17 May. There has been no revelation of its content. It may merely have confirmed that Haldane had to go. It seems certain that it contained no deep sense of regret. It is true that in those days there was no routine arrangement for an exchange of letters between Prime Minister and departing, even if sacked, colleague as there is nowadays. Thus, departed Asquith's oldest friend.

Could it have been otherwise? Most historians are agreed that Asquith had little choice when Unionists and particularly Bonar Law put it starkly that they would not join the government with Haldane in it. Bonar Law's biographer, Adams, and less reliably Beaverbrook, both emphasise that Bonar Law's policy throughout was driven by his wish to create a more effective government to win the war, and that he was prepared otherwise to surrender party interests to that end. This was evidenced by his acceptance of

Asquith's arrangement to exclude Unionists from all the most important posts and specifically to give Bonar Law the unimportant Colonial Office. Would he really, given that policy, have refused to join the government if Haldane was included? Yet the complementary view is that Asquith was also intent on a patriotic arrangement, not just survival as Prime Minister, and that therefore Haldane was a necessary gift to the Unionists. Asquith's decision to sack Haldane reminds one of Jeremy Thorpe's sardonic reaction to Macmillan's 'night of the long knives' when he sacked a large number of his current Cabinet – 'greater love hath no man than this that he lays down his friends for his life.'⁴⁰

Should Asquith's decision have been different because he was a friend? Asquith had grown to be less tolerant of some of Haldane's political views and perhaps more importantly his inability to express them in a way which created less opposition or confusion. In the letter he wrote to Venetia on 26 February 1915 'classifying' his Cabinet members, Haldane came ninth. Perhaps Lloyd George had it right: 'There is no friendship at the top'. However, surely the Unionist demand based on uninformed prejudice and a campaign in the Press should have been rejected for any minister. Friendship added to the betrayal. Of course, there had been no promise to keep Haldane in office, any more than would have been likely for any other minister. Asquith had attempted no prior defence of Haldane against the press attacks based on his supposed friendship for Germany. Indeed, he and Grey had explicitly refused to allow the publication of material which would have removed at least one of the charges against Haldane. Nor had Asquith complimented Haldane on his work as Secretary of State for War, which had made the British Army much more effective. In fact, only Churchill had spoken in Haldane's defence during 1915.

As Prime Minister, he had the responsibility of protecting Haldane because there is an implied contract between a Prime Minister and his ministers to defend them, particularly when no fault in performance can be attached to a minister. Asquith was prepared to defend his colleagues over the Marconi affair, not because of loyalty to them but in order to prevent a Conservative victory.

An additional betrayal was the failure to offer any condolence to Haldane after the event. This was even continued in Asquith's memoirs where only a couple of lines blaming the Unionists appeared, again without any reference to Haldane's contribution to the Liberal government. Jenkins, the admiring biographer of Asquith, gave his view that Asquith would have been expected to manage the attack on Haldane better, 'But he was not at his best. He capitulated, sadly and self-critically, but relatively easily.'⁴¹ Self-criticism is not evident in his sessions with Margot; there was rather extraordinary self-pity. 'No one knows

how much I have suffered,' he said to Samuel. 'Very gladly indeed would I have gone. No one has ever made a greater sacrifice than I have.'³²

It is difficult to understand why Asquith did not write or speak to Haldane. After all, he wrote letters of thanks to Crewe and Lloyd George for their efforts during coalition negotiations, and spoke emotionally to Samuel whom he had demoted. (There were several letters to Churchill as he tried to avoid demotion.) According to Margot, he was deeply upset about what he had to do both in general in forming the coalition and specifically about Haldane as described earlier. Perhaps he was unable to deliver a credible case on why he had to give way to the Unionists, and felt guilt about his surrender. (He did successfully ask the King to give Haldane the Order of Merit.) A further witness can be provided in the form of Violet Asquith who wrote that she saw her father in the Cabinet Room on the 16 May 'with a heavy look of unhappiness I have rarely seen on his face before. It rent me. Open beside him on the table was a letter from Haldane. I had a sudden flash of knowledge. "Father is it a Coalition?" "I am afraid so. All this butchery I've got to do." "Must poor Haldane go?" "Yes – one must harden one's heart about it."³³

The problem with this portrayal of Asquith's torment is that the diary was actually written on 22 and 23 May, and 16 May is the day before Asquith agreed to a coalition. Misplacing the day is understandable. More questionable is the reference to a letter from Haldane; there is no evidence elsewhere of Haldane writing to Asquith.

Fifty years after this diary entry Violet explained on BBC radio what she believed to be Asquith's inability to present his emotions to other people. This might seem a strange diagnosis in view of his letters to Venetia, but the circumstances are clearly very different. She attributed her father's silence 'not to lack of feeling but to its intensity. ... The Prime Minister was a shy man of strong emotions who often (to his detriment) left the deepest things he felt unsaid.'³⁴ Margot wrote that 'he and I cried together' on 18 May over the formation of a coalition. It is understandable that in discussion with his wife he should allow himself a purging of his emotions.

In July, a dinner was held at the National Liberal Club to enable 200 Liberal MPs to laud Haldane's services. Asquith was expected to be present, but did not go and instead sent a letter (finally!) read out for him. The letter has not been published.

The meaning of these episodes

There is confusion about what Haldane felt about his dismissal. We have seen earlier Asquith's account of Haldane's reaction, saying that that he owed everything to Asquith. The expectation apparently was that Haldane would be a gentleman and not kick up a fuss, which indeed turned

out to be the case. But what did Haldane actually feel about it? His first biographer Maurice is reported by Koss to have found no trace that Haldane bore any grudge.⁴⁵ Koss seems to accept this. Jenkins, without giving any references, says that Haldane 'went with some bitterness'.⁴⁶ Haldane wrote to Simon on 26 May 1915: 'as to myself I was not under the slightest illusions. If a Government was to be formed which was to have undivided public opinion behind it, I could not be there.'⁴⁷ In his autobiography, Haldane says that, when he got Asquith's circular letter asking for resignations of the Cabinet ministers, 'I made no difficulty'. Indeed, he felt that Asquith would have been worried about the necessity to remove him as they were 'very old and intimate friends'. 'So, I was concerned, but mostly on his account for the future.'⁴⁸ So far from looking back in anger when he wrote his autobiography twelve years after the event, Haldane was being very generous. His self-abnegation, however, does not excuse Asquith's action and inaction.

Historians and biographers have not seen Asquith's actions either as betrayals or as connected. They have not noted the similarity between Relugas and the sacking of Haldane. In both cases Haldane suffered because Asquith claimed he put party and national interests first – while securing the desired position for himself. Were Asquith's betrayals of Haldane only what any politician might do in those circumstances? This cynical view may be accurate, but it is equally possible to argue that something better should be expected of politicians, and that failure to meet higher standards must be identified.

Similarly, Asquith's betrayal of his wife can be viewed as only what many husbands do. Liberal leaders, most notoriously in Lloyd George, have given in to sexual temptation more often than Conservative and Labour leaders. Asquith's involvement with Venetia is an understandable escape from dealing with Margot. Again, are we to shrug our shoulders and excuse him?

This review of three unworthy engagements in a great politician's life is not just a piece of history. The questions it raises about Asquith's behaviour and appropriate descriptions of it are echoed in the constant repetition by the public of the view that politicians cannot be trusted.

Alan Mumford has written about Lloyd George and Churchill for this journal. His most recent book is David Lloyd George: A Biography in Cartoons.

Acknowledgement

This article is greatly indebted to the original work by M. and E. Brock on the love affair between Venetia Stanley and H. H. Asquith.

Fifty years after this diary entry Violet explained on BBC radio what she believed to be Asquith's inability to present his emotions to other people. This might seem a strange diagnosis in view of his letters to Venetia, but the circumstances are clearly very different. She attributed her father's silence 'not to lack of feeling but to its intensity. ... The Prime Minister was a shy man of strong emotions who often (to his detriment) left the deepest things he felt unsaid.'

Asquith: Friendship, Love and Betrayal

- 1 K. Robbins, *Sir Edward Grey* (Cassell, 1971), p. 109.
- 2 M. Bonham Carter (ed.), *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), p. 236.
- 3 Robbins, *Sir Edward Grey*, p. 121.
- 4 Bonham Carter (ed.), *Margot Asquith*, p. 239.
- 5 G. Stewart, *Friendship and Betrayal* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), p. 265.
- 6 The Earl of Oxford & Asquith, *Memories and Reflections*, vol. 1 (Cassell, 1928), p. 196.
- 7 S. Koss, *Asquith* (Hamish Hamilton, 2nd edn paperback, 1985), p. 67.
- 8 L. Jones, *An Edwardian Youth* (Macmillan, 1956), p. 214.
- 9 S. Buczacki, *My Darling Mr Asquith* (Cato & Clarke, 2016), p. 144.
- 10 M. and E. Brock (eds.), *H. H. Asquith Letters to Venetia Stanley* (Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 2.
- 11 Buczacki, *My Darling Mr Asquith*, p. 112.
- 12 M. & E. Brock (eds.), *Asquith Letters*, p. 255.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 466.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 523.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 488.
- 18 O. Poppellwell, *The Prime Minister and his Mistress* (Lulu Publishing Services, 2012).
- 19 Buczacki, *My Darling Mr Asquith*.
- 20 C. Clifford, *The Asquiths* (John Murray, 2003), p. 217.
- 21 M. Pottle (ed.), *Champion Redoubtable: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter 1914–45* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p. 55.
- 22 N. B. Levine, *Politics, Religion and Love* (York University Press, 1991), p. 210.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 236.
- 24 Clifford, *The Asquiths*, pp. 268–9.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 269.
- 26 M. & E. Brock (eds.), *Asquith Letters*, p. 596.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 589.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 596.
- 29 R. Jenkins, *Asquith* (Collins, 4th edn, 1988), p. 363.
- 30 Koss, *Asquith*, p. 186.
- 31 M. & E. Brock (eds.), *Asquith Letters*, p. 596.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 596.
- 33 D. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 1 (Odhams Press, 1938), p. 138.
- 34 Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 362.
- 35 Koss, *Asquith*, p. 191.
- 36 R. J. Q. Adams, *Bonar Law* (John Murray, 1999), p. 188.
- 37 M. and E. Brock (eds.), *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914–1916: The View from Downing Street* (Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 136.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 40 A. Jay (ed.), *Lend Me Your Ears* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 190.
- 41 Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 362.
- 42 Koss, *Asquith*, p. 196.
- 43 Pottle (ed.), *Champion Redoubtable*, p. 53.
- 44 S. Koss, *Lord Haldane: Scapegoat for Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 220.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 280.
- 46 Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 361.
- 47 R. B. Haldane, *Richard Burdon Haldane: an Autobiography* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1929), p. 286.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 285.

Report

Election 2017 – A Missed Opportunity?

Evening meeting, 5 February 2018, with James Gurling and Professor Phil Cowley; chair: Baroness Olly Grender.

Report by Neil Stockley

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS entered the 2017 general election campaign with high hopes. They had left behind the grim years of coalition and now, as the only major UK-wide party unequivocally to oppose Brexit, the party had a defining issue and the basis of a distinctive appeal to 'the 48 per cent' who had voted at the June 2016 referendum to remain in the European Union. With the Labour Party bitterly divided under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, the snap election seemed to present the Liberal Democrats with new opportunities.

But the results were a huge disappointment. The party won 7.4 per cent of the votes cast, a drop of 0.5 per cent from two years earlier and the lowest share for the Liberal Democrats or their predecessors since 1959. Twelve Liberal Democrat MPs were returned, representing a net

gain of just four seats compared to the previous general election.

Professor Phil Cowley of Queen Mary, University of London explained the full extent of the party's failure. If the 2015 general election was a catastrophe for the Liberal Democrats, he told the meeting, then 2017 was 'catastrophe-plus'. The party suffered a decline in its share of the vote in all parts of England, except for London, where it rose by 1 per cent, and the south east, where it was up 0.8 per cent. In Wales, the party won no seats for the first time since the formation of the Liberal Party. In Scotland, the Liberal Democrat vote was down 0.8 per cent, although the party made a net gain of three seats. A total of 375 Liberal Democrat candidates lost their deposits, well up on the historic figure of 341 at the previous contest.

Professor Cowley reported that there was a 'single magic number of four' to the party's showing: just four constituencies elected Liberal Democrat MPs at both the 2015 and 2017 general elections, which demonstrated that the dream of a resilient 'core liberal vote' was even more elusive than ever. The party's electoral base had changed significantly since its heyday under Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy, he said, and was now more focused on university graduates and the south east of England.

The meeting discussed why the party's hopes had been dashed so badly. James Gurling, chair of the Liberal Democrats' Federal Campaigns and Elections Committee, concentrated on the immense organisational and tactical challenges the party had faced during the campaign. James recalled how, unlike