

# Reports

## Asquith vs. Lloyd George

Evening meeting (online), 1 February 2021, with David Laws and Damian Collins MP; chair, Wendy Chamberlain MP

Report by Katheryn Gallant

CHAMBERLAIN OPENED THE meeting by saying that Asquith's serving between 1886 and 1918 as the Liberal MP for East Fife had no bearing on her views. Laws joked that, despite Chamberlain's being 'a scrupulously independent chairman', he took her role as the Liberal Democrat MP for North East Fife as a half vote for Asquith.

Laws stated that there is a fair claim for Asquith and Lloyd George to be considered (after Gladstone) the greatest Liberal prime ministers. Asquith and Lloyd George worked together closely until the midpoint of the First World War, after which their conduct and attitudes diverged remarkably.

Asquith was born and raised in England and was from a relatively privileged background; Lloyd George was born in England, raised in Wales, and from a less privileged background. Asquith was restrained, measured, conciliatory; Lloyd George was emotional, provocative, divisive. Asquith was a lukewarm supporter of the Boer War; Lloyd George opposed the Boer War. Asquith was a natural centrist who opposed votes for women; Lloyd George was far more radical. Asquith appointed Lloyd George to the key role of chancellor of the exchequer and protected him during the Marconi share scandal of 1912.

Both progressives, together they advanced the first British state pension. Both Asquith and Lloyd George had moved beyond nineteenth-century Liberalism, with its focus on legal rights and protecting citizens from an overmighty state.

There could have been a split at the start of the First World War. Many of the Liberal cabinet were unenthusiastic about the prospects for war in July 1914, but the German invasion of

Belgium helped to keep Lloyd George in the cabinet.

A final element in the similarities between Asquith and Lloyd George is their personal lives. Kitchener as war minister refused to share military secrets with the entire cabinet, saying to a friend of his that the cabinet ministers would all tell their wives, except for Lloyd George, who would tell other people's wives. However, Asquith, while prime minister, fell in love with Venetia Stanley, who was thirty-five years Asquith's junior. Asquith wrote Venetia 600 letters over a period of five years, a number of those while chairing meetings of the cabinet and War Council. Those letters, which Asquith sent in the Royal Mail to Venetia, contained secret details of military operations that were yet to take place.

Asquith's management of the First World War had begun well. He appointed Kitchener, one of the most popular field marshals in the country, as war minister. In August 1914, recognising that the war would be long, Kitchener added troops. In 1915, there was an ill-judged intervention in the Dardanelles engineered by Winston Churchill (First Lord of the Admiralty) but supported by many senior people in the government, including Kitchener and Asquith. There was a stalemate on the Western Front and the risk that Russia would collapse against Germany in the East, and there was a shortage of shells, bullets, and equipment. These tension points converged in the spring of 1915, when General French, commander of the British forces in France, leaked some of the information to British newspapers, blaming Kitchener and Asquith for the shortage of shells that French claimed was impeding his operations on the

Western Front. French was angry that some of his forces were being sent to the Dardanelles, rather than being retained on the Western Front. The issues of the shell shortages and the Dardanelles created a crisis which led Asquith to bring Conservatives into the government, thus creating a coalition. Churchill left and Lloyd George became munitions minister. The government had already put in place many of the steps needed to fight war on a bigger scale, but many of the problems the British had in 1915–16 were common to all armies fighting in the First World War and not something that the British government was to blame for.

But style in politics counts for a lot, and Asquith's leisurely style of being prime minister counted heavily against him. Asquith failed to note the warning by the coalition joint leader, Conservative leader Bonar Law, in February 1916: 'In war, it is necessary not only to *be* active, but to *seem* active.' That criticism felt by Asquith's cabinet colleagues gradually permeated to parliamentary backbenchers and into the media.

In June 1916, Lloyd George was to have joined Kitchener on a secret mission to keep Russia in the war, but, at the last moment, Asquith asked Lloyd George to go to Ireland to tackle the aftermath of the Easter Uprising. Asquith saved Lloyd George's life. However, it also put paid to Asquith's career because six months later Lloyd George was joining with the Conservative Party in a coup that forced Asquith out of government.

Asquith was unsuited to be a war leader, but it is unclear how much difference the introduction of Lloyd George as prime minister meant. Had Asquith succeeded in clinging on to power in 1916, we probably would have seen a similar result when the war ended in 1918.

Collins sees Lloyd George as an unorthodox prime minister, someone who did not conform to the way business was done, who identified problems that needed resolution and brought energy and dynamism to that task. Collins sees Lloyd George as part of the Progressive Era, which flourished in the United States from the 1890s to

the First World War. Lloyd George was one of a generation of leaders who developed executive functions for themselves and brought progressive ideas to solving social problems.

Unlike any other prime minister before him, Lloyd George was the first ‘ranker’, as he described himself – the first prime minister not to go through the ‘staff college of the old universities’. Lloyd George feels like the first prime minister of the twentieth century: Asquith feels like the last Victorian prime minister.

As a social reformer, Lloyd George’s enemy was not so much the wealthy (Lloyd George had many wealthy friends who were self-made men) but the propertied class, the landlords whom Lloyd George opposed while growing up in a Welsh-speaking community in North Wales. Whilst Asquith regarded the People’s Budget as Lloyd George’s budget, no prime minister who was not completely committed to the People’s Budget would have given the support Lloyd George needed.

The challenge came for them in the First World War, which demanded a more dynamic form of leadership. Lloyd George realised that, after the invasion of Belgium and the denial of the rights of a small nation for which he had great sympathy (as Lloyd George had for the Welsh nation and for the Boer nation in South Africa), he had to support the war. Whilst Asquith was still prime minister, Lloyd George became the leading member of the government and pushed for conscription, opposing many leading Liberals such as Reginald McKenna, Lloyd George’s successor as chancellor of the exchequer.

As a wartime prime minister, Lloyd George lobbied to wait for the technological advances in tanks and mortar aircraft that would bring victory. Lloyd George executed influence over war policy to prevent the unnecessary sacrifice of soldiers for little gain until the UK had marshalled enough technological superiority to make the final decisive effort.

The fact that Asquith was not part of the government greatly damaged the Liberal Party. The split between

Asquith and Lloyd George into the 1920s was a major factor preventing the Liberals from emerging as a single-party government after the First World War. The postwar coalition government that Lloyd George led until 1922 faced economic difficulties due to the postwar crash, which saw his popularity with unions and working people diminish and added to the growing suspicion amongst Conservatives about Lloyd George’s policy decisions.

In the 1930s, Lloyd George was arguably the first Keynesian politician (despite Keynes’ own mixed views about Lloyd George). Lloyd George advocated for the New Deal reforms of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt to be brought to the UK. This led to the great error of judgment in Lloyd George’s later life: accepting the flattery of Hitler. This was because Lloyd George approved of the progressive domestic policy of Nazi Germany, which allowed Lloyd George to turn a blind eye to how the Nazis treated Jews. Concerning Lloyd George’s refusal to enter Churchill’s coalition government in June 1940, Collins believes that A. J. Sylvester, Lloyd George’s secretary, was right in saying that it was because Lloyd George would not accept (as Asquith had not accepted) serving under anybody else in a subordinate role.

Collins thinks that, despite Lloyd George’s many personal flaws and his massive risk-taking in his personal and political life, Lloyd George became prime minister because the nation required a dynamic leader. Although Collins is a Conservative MP, he considers that Lloyd George’s efforts during the First World War and as a progressive social reformer make him perhaps not the greatest Liberal prime minister, but definitely one of the greatest prime ministers of the twentieth century.

The question-and-answer session began with Laws being asked if he agreed with A. J. P. Taylor’s observation that Asquith had lost the confidence of many in the House of Commons and the media by 1916. Asquith’s selfish decision to cling to the Liberal leadership made the Liberal

split inevitable and condemned it to political irrelevance. Laws replied that Asquith thought the coalition Lloyd George had put together would crumble. Asquith made a profound misjudgment since Lloyd George was able to keep the coalition together for the rest of the war and marginalise Asquith. Laws thinks the first active split was Lloyd George’s, but the way Asquith dealt with it is fundamental to the Liberal Party split and Asquith bears at least partial responsibility.

The next question for Laws was whether historians with an awareness of mental health issues would link Asquith’s distraction with the loss of his son on the Western Front. Laws replied that Asquith’s relationship with Venetia Stanley was important to Asquith, who described it as a motivating force in his life. The blow of losing his son Raymond in September 1916 devastated Asquith. However, it was Asquith’s difficulty in dealing with the first two years of the First World War, combined with the fact that the skills and style he brought to the job of prime minister were unsuited to the expectations of a leader during wartime, that were more likely to be the factors that led to Asquith’s downfall — not the death of his son, or even the breakup with Venetia Stanley.

The third question for Laws was whether Asquith would have dealt with Ireland any differently than Lloyd George. Laws replied that, had Asquith still been prime minister after the end of the war, he would possibly have ended up with something like the Lloyd George solution.

Collins was then asked what Lloyd George could have done to prevent the decline of the Liberal Party. In Collins’ opinion, if Lloyd George had brought Labour into his government, it might have bought him time and made his government stronger. However, even if Asquith had stepped down from national politics and the Liberal Party had been united behind Lloyd George in 1922–23, Collins doubted that Lloyd George would have been successful in boosting the Liberal ranks with moderate Conservative and moderate Labour MPs in order to lead the Liberals to government in the late 1920s.

## Report: Asquith vs Lloyd George

How would Asquith and Lloyd George have fared in modern politics and who would be the modern equivalents of Asquith and Lloyd George in British politics? Collins replied that Lloyd George's personal life and financial affairs would be more scrutinised today and he would not have got away with today what he did over a century ago.

When Laws thinks of more recent Liberal Democrat leaders, it is Charles Kennedy and Paddy Ashdown who have a lot in common with Asquith and Lloyd George. There is much in the energy, assets, and liabilities of Lloyd George that Laws recognises in Paddy. There are also many of the extraordinary skills and abilities, but also some of the weaknesses, of Asquith that Laws recognises in Charles's time as leader.

Replying to a question about how factionalism might have affected the Asquith–Lloyd George split, Laws stated that it was the operation of war-time government, the nuts and bolts

of getting shells to the frontline that Asquith and Lloyd George fell out over, rather than a difference in political philosophy.

A final question for Chamberlain was about any remaining memories of Asquith in Fife. Chamberlain stated that she has seen a plaque commemorating Asquith outside the Masonic Hall in Ladybank because Asquith frequently made speeches there. Asquith would undoubtedly be happy to have a Liberal again representing North East Fife, but Asquith and Chamberlain would disagree about universal suffrage. In 2018, while standing for election as the first female MP for North East Fife, Chamberlain discovered that suffragettes had chased Asquith off golf courses many times in the constituency, which is the home of golf.

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came from the grassroots, with university Liberal clubs in particular often playing an active part in by-election campaigns. Similarly, and although it was patchy and tended to encourage mavericks who could damage the party's reputation, local council activity increased in the 1950s, especially in places such as Liverpool and Rugby.

Secondly, these revivals encountered great challenges with, for example, the party winning a by-election, but finding itself unable to repeat this in a subsequent election. Nevertheless, during each revival new members joined the party, often remaining actively involved for many years.

A third feature of these revivals was the importance of the party's leadership. In particular, Egan argued that the leadership provided by Jo Grimond, with his ability to inspire members, was crucial.

A fourth, and final, feature was the importance of ideas. In the 1940s, the Liberal Party was largely marked by a commitment to free trade and by not being the Labour Party. Subsequently, however, a commitment to other causes, such as support for membership of the Common Market and opposition to Britain's possessing an independent nuclear deterrent, became more important.

However, despite the positive aspects of some of these features, Egan went on to note a number of missed opportunities for the Liberal Party during these revivals. Firstly, the task of turning success at the local and municipal level into success at Westminster proved elusive. Secondly, the party found itself dependant on 'big moments', such as by-elections. Thirdly, general elections were often seen as a binary choice between Labour and Conservatives and, as evidenced by the 1959 and 1964 general elections, the Liberal Party suffered as a consequence. A strategy to prevent this 'squeezing' eluded the party. Fourthly, there were huge fluctuations in the memberships of Liberal Associations and the number of votes the party received during this period.

Overall, although there was much positive sentiment towards the Liberal Party, transforming this into

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## Back from the dead: the Liberal Party in the 1950s

Conference fringe meeting (online), 19 March 2021, with Dr Mark Egan and Lord William Wallace; chair: Baroness Liz Barker.

Report by Daniel Duggan

**A**LTHOUGH ACKNOWLEDGING THAT the same number of Liberal Members of Parliament were elected in 1964 as in 1945, Dr Mark Egan, Greffier of the States of Jersey and author of *Coming into Focus: The Transformation of the Liberal Party, 1945–64*, began the meeting by challenging the idea that there was one Liberal Party revival between 1945 and 1964, arguing that there were, in fact, three revivals during this period. The first, he suggested, was in the late 1940s and centred on the efforts of the Liberal Party's headquarters to establish Liberal Associations in the country. These efforts were particularly successful in universities and there was a large increase in the number of

Liberal Party candidates standing in the 1950 general election as compared with the 1945 general election. A second revival occurred in the mid-1950s and was marked by an impressive performance at the Inverness by-election in 1954 and a win at the Torrington by-election in 1958. Such success was reflected in the opinion polls and, Egan suggested, gave hope to the Liberal Party. A third revival occurred from 1959 onwards when Jo Grimond became leader and produced victory at the Orpington by-election in 1962.

After outlining the above revivals, Egan highlighted a number of their features. Firstly, they were very much grassroots-led. The idea, for example, of campaigning in by-elections