



THE GREAT IMPROVISER.

Coalition politics

On 15 November 2021, **Alistair Lexden** delivered the following address at a meeting of the Lloyd George Society at the National Liberal Club in London.

A Prime Minister of the Left in Coalition with the Right: Lloyd George and the Unionists, 1918–22

DAVID LLOYD GEORGE was the first left-wing prime minister in British history to be sustained in office by right-wing votes in the Commons. There has only been one other: Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour head of a government, formed in 1931 and dignified with the title of National, but it was a government completely dominated by his political opponents. Lloyd George headed a serious coalition, even though the two main elements within it differed greatly in size. The section of the Liberal Party which stood with Lloyd George in 1916 had much talent but came nowhere near the numbers needed to keep a stable administration in power.

There would have been no Lloyd George coalition before, or after, the 1918 election without the support of Unionist MPs (as the Conservatives were generally known between the late-1880s, following the first Irish home rule crisis, and the years of the Lloyd George coalition itself when the Conservative label started to be used to some extent once again, though it was not employed universally until after the Second World War).

Lloyd George's reliance on the Unionists became even more marked after the 1918 election. He had the support of 133 Liberal MPs. Unionists officially approved by the coalition had 335 seats, and around another fifty MPs, returned without the coveted coalition 'coupon', quickly joined their ranks in the Commons. The parliament elected in 1918 had a massive Unionist majority. Some three-fifths of MPs backed the coalition. Its most effective opposition came from sixty-three Labour MPs, portents of things to come.

So, Lloyd George, one of the greatest radicals of all time, continued to govern Britain after 1918 because the historic opponents of radicalism willed it. Few of them doubted that the man who had won the war with their enthusiastic backing should also shape the peace after 1918 in their company, creating a much better Britain than had existed before 1914. That was the clear demand of all sections of society, particularly ordinary working families who now counted for much more in national affairs, following a threefold increase in the size of the electorate in 1918. For the

first time in its history, Britain could now be regarded as a fully-fledged democracy.

Everyone looked to Lloyd George and his ministers to rebuild Britain and make it a place fit for the heroes of war. Though Unionist criticism of the coalition was never entirely silent and grew ever stronger as time passed, no serious, responsible Unionist even dreamed before 1922 of an alternative government under another premier – Bonar Law, the Unionist leader and the only serious possibility, having ruled himself out.

Posterity has tended to regard Bonar Law as a lightweight. His contemporaries never made that mistake. Lord Crawford, a fellow Unionist member of the coalition, extolled his leader's merits in his diary on 17 March 1921: 'His debating power, his conciliatory attitude, his candour and disinterestedness, all combined to make him an invaluable asset.' Only an exceptional man could have said, as he did in January 1921, that 'he had never written a line of any speech he had delivered in the twenty years he had been in the House of Commons'. He mentioned this casually in a private conversation, not boastfully in public.

The case for the complete reconstruction of the party-political system to perpetuate the Lloyd George coalition indefinitely appealed strongly to some of the best minds in the Unionist Party – and among their coalition partners too. In retrospect, the failure of the much-discussed plans to unite the two wings of the coalition into a new party under Lloyd George came to seem inevitable. That is not how it appeared at the time. In the spring of 1920, the plans teetered on the brink of success. Everywhere 'fusion', as it was called, was the dominant theme of political discussion.

A rare misjudgement by Lloyd George – withholding in a key speech to his own Liberal supporters any firm indication of progressive policies to come – killed the party-political realignment for which so many yearned. The prospect of Lloyd George as leader of this enlarged Unionist Party, almost certainly under a new name, filled Bonar Law with no

great foreboding at this time. He said privately that it 'would not be a bad thing for our Party and a good thing for the nation.'

Of course, Left and Right had come together before. Joe Chamberlain, with whom Lloyd George was widely compared in this period, had become Lord Salisbury's coalition partner in the 1890s. Lloyd George's predecessor, Asquith, a close colleague who later became his implacable foe, also united himself with the Unionists, but the circumstances were very different. For seven years Asquith had governed without them, enjoying a comfortable parliamentary majority, thanks to Irish Nationalist and Labour MPs, the latter at that time being little more than a Liberal appendage. Asquith strengthened his political position, and answered a widespread call for national unity in time of war, by forming a coalition with the Unionists in 1915. Lloyd George, by contrast, relied on the Unionists for his majority. When he forfeited their support in October 1922, his premiership – one of the most important in British history despite some serious setbacks after 1920 – immediately collapsed.

Lloyd George's Welsh-speaking private secretary, A. J. Sylvester, recorded the scene at No. 10 when news of what had occurred at the famous Carlton Club meeting on 19 October 1922 arrived. 'L.G. stood playing with his pince-nez, twisting them round and round on their black silk ribbon. The telephone bell rang. J. T. Davies picked up the receiver. The Conservatives at the Carlton Club had decided to end the coalition and fight the election as a party. 'That's the end,' was the only comment L.G. made as he walked out of the office. That afternoon he went to Buckingham Palace and tendered his resignation to the King.'

Sylvester added: 'I had grown to admire and love L.G. and the work I had done for so many years for him.' These sentiments were shared by many Unionists, particularly by the most senior figures in the party who worked with Lloyd George, day in and day out, as leading cabinet ministers: Arthur Balfour, a former prime minister and an admired intellectual; Austen Chamberlain, the coalition's chancellor

of the exchequer until he succeeded Bonar Law as Unionist leader in 1921; and F. E. Smith, Lord Birkenhead, the youngest lord chancellor since the seventeenth century, a brilliant, reckless politician – the best after-dinner speaker of his time, drunk or sober (frequently the former) – and the most eloquent public advocate of Lloyd George's indispensability to the nation. All Birkenhead's speeches in defence of the government had the same theme: that the country faced problems far too serious to risk going back to party government; only a sustained national effort, embodied in the coalition, could pull the country through. He spoke for the very large number of Unionists who found it impossible to believe that Britain's destinies would be safe in hands other than Lloyd George's.

It is true that the Unionist foreign secretary, George Curzon, a man of immense self-importance and pride, had no love for Lloyd George, who rarely bothered to consult him about the area of policy for which he was responsible. The series of international conferences in the early 1920s, in which Lloyd George had a starring role, left Curzon on the side lines, feeling deeply upset. He complained that the prime minister had 'no regard for the conveniences and civilities of official life', treating as him as 'a valet and a drudge'. He frequently handed in his resignation and then withdrew it, which only diminished Lloyd George's regard for him still further.

Curzon was the exception. Until the last months of the coalition, all the other Unionist cabinet ministers happily sang the praises of their prime minister, at least for most of the time.

Until 1921, the country's most important Unionist, Bonar Law, united to Lloyd George by the closest ties of friendship, was his staunchest supporter of all. Lloyd George loved teasing this superb player of chess and bridge about his complete indifference to literature and culture. Bonar Law's resignation, purely on grounds of ill health in March 1921, was one of the most grievous misfortunes that

befell Lloyd George during his tumultuous years as prime minister. Two months later, Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George's mistress, noted in her diary that 'since Bonar Law left he has lost an ideal companion with whom he could laugh & joke and enjoy himself.'

The affection that had so long existed between them came under the severest strain later in 1921 when Bonar Law returned to politics, but not to the government. He expressed grave reservations about aspects of Lloyd George's negotiations with Irish republicans which broke Great Britain's union with all of Ireland bar six Ulster counties under the Anglo-Irish Treaty, whose centenary falls next month. The treaty, which apart from Versailles was Lloyd George's greatest achievement, could hardly have been secured without the support of his formidable Unionist cabinet colleagues, who backed the settlement which gave Dominion status to most of Ireland in the teeth of opposition from a significant minority of Unionist MPs.

After much anguish, Bonar Law finally became his old friend's public adversary for the first time at the Carlton Club meeting the following year – the dramatic event which ended the unique partnership between Left and Right which Lloyd George's coalition embodied.

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The achievements of this unique partnership were rarely recalled after October 1922. Some even denied that anything worthwhile *had* been achieved. That was largely because, Ireland aside, the coalition's really productive work of long-term significance in domestic affairs was confined to its first two years; thereafter its ardour for reform was sapped by the state of economic crisis into which the country fell and remained, following the end of a post-war economic boom in 1920.

Heavy cuts to public spending were believed to be essential to deal with the crisis. That was the economic orthodoxy of the time,

which Lloyd George himself would challenge later in his career. Famously – or, rather, infamously – Sir Eric Geddes, a Unionist cabinet minister and hard-hearted former industrialist (described by Frances Stevenson as ‘the most aggressive and pushful personality I know’), swung his notorious axe in 1922, cutting savagely into vital public services, like education which hitherto had represented one of the coalition’s many successes. Axed, too, in the process was much of the coalition’s hard-won reputation as the successful architect of national reform and reconstruction after the end of the war. Ironically, Geddes himself had been prominent in the coalition’s productive earlier phase, which began immediately after the 1918 election.

Lloyd George allowed his ministers no rest. He set a cracking pace. Here is the entry for 27 February 1919 in the diary of Thomas Jones, deputy secretary of the cabinet and one of Lloyd George’s favourite Welsh cronies. ‘Through the week the P.M. has been magnificent – full of energy himself and speeding up everyone else. Eric Geddes’s new Ministry [Transport] has been launched and Addison’s Health Bill. Early next week we shall have the Land Acquisition Bill, the Land Settlement Bill, the Housing Bill, the Electricity Supply Bill, and, perhaps, an Anti-Dumping Bill before the Cabinet.’ Only the last of these measures could be considered remotely right-wing, yet they all had full Unionist blessing.

So too did government spending – now over five times higher than in 1914 – and unprecedented levels of taxation (including steadily increasing rates of estate duty, normally a great bugbear of the Right) to pay for it and bring down the national debt, a constant source of alarm since it had increased elevenfold since 1914. Not for the last time the party of the Right set aside its traditional commitments to low taxation and public spending, though the Geddes axe marked something of a return to tradition.

Lloyd George did not find himself in league with a band of Unionist reactionaries, intent

on curbing his zeal for progressive reform. Bonar Law set his party on a new course, suitable for the post-war world. Writing to Balfour in 1919, he said: ‘I am perfectly certain, indeed I do not think anyone can doubt this, that our Party on the old lines will never have any future again in this country.’

What did Bonar Law mean by this? The joint manifesto that he issued with Lloyd George for the 1918 election – much of it drafted by Bonar Law – made the position clear. It stressed that every government’s ‘principal concern’ must now be ‘the condition of the great mass of the people who live by manual toil’. No Unionist leader had said that before 1914. The manifesto went on to give a firm pledge on housing, now recognised for the first time as an indispensable element of social reform. The document stated that ‘one of the first tasks of the Government will be to deal on broad and comprehensive lines with the housing of the people ... upon which the well-being of the nation so largely depends.’ Unionists, just like Lloyd George, were particularly concerned to honour that commitment.

In his justly acclaimed account of the post-war coalition, *Consensus and Disunity*, Ken Morgan (Professor Lord Morgan as he now is) explains in detail why its ambitious plans to build houses for the nation’s heroes put new, modern roofs over the heads of comparatively few of them. The driving force, the Liberal Christopher Addison, had a burning sense of mission. A phrase that would become famous – 300,000 new homes a year – began with him. ‘Never had the state intervened so directly in controlling housing as a nationally run service’, Ken Morgan writes. But intense commitment to sweeping improvement did not bring Addison his just reward. Local councils, which were placed under a legal obligation to produce housing plans, too often set themselves unduly modest targets; massive delays occurred in securing materials and mobilising workmen; costs soared far beyond all predictions.



Cartoon by David Low (1919). Low, the cartoonist for *The Daily News* and *The Star*, often portrayed the coalition as a two-headed ass.

By 1921, the coalition's housing programme, in which such high hopes had been vested, was widely judged to have been an expensive disaster, not least by a hostile press ('there is scarcely a newspaper which attempts to give its readers the government case', Lord Crawford noted in his diary). So deafening was the criticism of this central element of the coalition's agenda for social reform that it became almost impossible to get a serious hearing for its many successes in other areas.

Ken Morgan reminds us of them: 'the implementation of universal state unemployment insurance, the new expenditure on

pensions and social security, the creation of the Ministry of Health, the assistance to agricultural labourers, the educational programme launched by the Fisher Act [of 1918] were in themselves a formidable list of achievements.' Even in housing, the coalition's work turned out to be a turning point in British politics; the governments which succeeded it, Labour and Tory, drew on its pioneering initiatives.

Many heroes got their homes, if rather belatedly. Some four million houses were built during the interwar years under Tory governments, which held fast to the kind of progressive policies with which they had been associated in Lloyd George's coalition. Their chief proponent after 1922 was Neville Chamberlain, the greatest of all Conservative social reformers, a man who loathed – and was

loathed by – Lloyd George. The two people who did most to advance the welfare state in the first half of the twentieth century could not stand the sight of each other.

Harmony, however, was not disrupted among Unionist and Liberal members of the coalition, of which Neville Chamberlain was not a member, fortunately for his half-brother, Austen, who lacked his great ability. In Ken Morgan's words, 'Lloyd George's Cabinet was an exceptionally united one ... it conducted its operations in a remarkably harmonious fashion in which the party bickerings of the past were subsumed.'

That of course is why the Unionist members of the coalition wanted it to continue, even as more and more of their followers in parliament and particularly in the country – where the Unionist rank and file had never taken Lloyd George to their hearts – called for the party's withdrawal from the coalition as 1922 wore on, and criticism of Lloyd George's conduct of political affairs at home and abroad mounted.

Unionist cabinet ministers insisted that the alarming challenge presented by the rapidly expanding Labour Party – riding high on a series of by-election successes – could only be defeated by perpetuating the alliance between Labour's principal opponents, led by Lloyd George; a swelling chorus in the party at large demanded separation from him.

No one resisted that swelling chorus more firmly than Austen Chamberlain, to whom Bonar Law had passed the party leadership the previous year. In a speech on 16 October 1922, he said that the coalition must be maintained in the face of the 'common foe'. No question of principle, he asserted, divided Lloyd George's Liberals from Unionists, and it would be 'criminal' to allow personal and party prejudices to prevail 'at a moment of national danger.' He tried to make spines shiver by adding that if those who believed in the existing social and political system did not stand together, Labour would win, and it would 'not be the moderates of the Labour Party who would prevail.' They would be face to face with the red revolution.

Could Chamberlain successfully use this dramatic threat – far removed from the promises of reconstruction and reform given at the 1918 election – to bring his divided and disaffected party together to fight again under Lloyd George's coalition banner? That was the question which Chamberlain summoned his MPs to the Carlton Club to decide on 19 October 1922. He chose that day because he expected a by-election at Newport in Wales on the 18th, with Unionist, Labour and Liberal candidates, to bring a Labour victory, and so underline the danger that would arise if the coalition broke up.

But the Unionist candidate won this three-sided contest. That, coupled with a bad speech by Chamberlain and Bonar Law's rejection of the coalition after a powerful attack on Lloyd George by Stanley Baldwin, settled the issue when the meeting took place. It took no time for a full account of the meeting to reach No. 10. Thomas Jones, then as so often, at Lloyd George's side, noted the main points in his diary. 'Vote largely determined by Bonar Law's speech and by the victory of the Conservative candidate at the Newport by-election announced this morning, and partly by Chamberlain's clumsy, unsympathetic and unhumorous handling of the meeting itself.'

A motion, passed by 185 to 88 with one abstention, declared that 'the Party, whilst willing to cooperate with the Liberals, should fight the election as an independent party, with its own leader and with its own programme.' It was a vote for independence from Lloyd George, not a vote to strike out in a new right-wing direction, freed from Liberal constraints. The Unionist cabinet minister, Lord Crawford, was sure that the vote meant that 'never again should Lloyd George be our leader. The controversy really pivots around his mercurial personality.'

At No. 10, Lloyd George accepted his fate with good grace. He told Thomas Jones that 'the moment he had learned the result of the Newport election and heard definitely that Bonar was going to the meeting, he had told Stamfordham [George V's private secretary]

that he would be resigning in the course of the day.’ Having done so, he remained in Downing Street until 23 October when Bonar Law was ready to take over. Jones recorded in his diary for the 23rd that ‘at 4.00 he motored away with his son Gwilym to Churt, smiling to the last.’ Frances Stevenson’s natural cheerfulness deserted her. The previous day Jones had ‘found her burning papers in the fireplace, and looking sadder than I have ever seen her.’ Did she perhaps sense that the man she loved would never hold office again?

So, a unique experiment in British politics ended. Never again would a prime minister from the Left be the predominant figure in a coalition that relied on the votes of the Right. Unlike MacDonald after 1931, Lloyd George did not take orders from the Tories. He remained very firmly in charge of a cabinet in which all the leading Unionists worked closely with him. In a letter written on 6 February 1921, Austen Chamberlain said: ‘when the history of these times comes to be written can you doubt that he will stand out like the younger Pitt.’

It was with reluctance and regret that Bonar Law finally decided in October 1922

that the time had come to end the coalition, headed by a man he never ceased to regard as a friend. But the party at large rejoiced at freeing itself from someone who in 1922 was widely seen as an incorrigible rogue, responsible for debasing the standards of public life. In retrospect, the Tories came to regard the post-war coalition with embarrassment and distaste, almost writing it out of their history. Lloyd George, as always, took it all in his stride. He told Thomas Jones that there was only one of his Unionist colleagues whom he disliked, and declined to name him. Through all the vicissitudes of his long and remarkable career, this great man invariably retained his high spirits – smiling to the last, as he did on his departure from No. 10 in October 1922.

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