



Leaders of the split: Asquith and Lloyd George

Even during its periods of greatest success, the Liberal Party suffered many splits, but that occasioned by the First World War proved to be the most damaging. The contradictions evident in explaining the ideological foundations of the dispute help explain why it is more usually depicted as a clash of personalities than of strategy. **Martin Farr** examines what happened in December 1916.

If the fate of the Liberal Party, early in the twentieth century, was to lose its interventionist left wing to the Labour Party, its libertarian right wing to the Conservative Party, and in so doing render itself flightless (if not, quite, like the dodo), then the split between the Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith, and the Secretary of State for War, David Lloyd George, in 1916 can be seen as the moment when that which was merely possible became that which was really quite likely. How far a process of natural selection had been operating remains unclear at the time of writing.

The episode has featured prominently in the study of the decline of the Liberal Party.¹ The immediate appeal is obvious. The circumstances surrounding the events of the first week of December 1916 possessed the gruesome attractions of a bad

novel: there was drama, with strong personalities intriguing against a dramatic backdrop, ostensibly citing great issues of state; there was comedy, with a Whitehall farce of gossip and briefings, golf and bridge parties, scurrying and scribbling wives and mistresses, and a pervasive theatricality; and there was tragedy, with the deadening knowledge of the ultimate futility of everyone's endeavours, as the party was lost through the dispute and its aftermath, and the field of battle left to the enemy. To exacerbate the frustrations, both protagonists were surrounded and distracted by lesser men, many without a liberal bone in their bodies, and most of whom owed such positions of influence as they occupied, or were to occupy, to the patronage of the Right Honourable members for East Fife and Caernarvon.²

LEFT, RIGHT

DECEMBER 1916:

THE FORWARD MARCH OF LIBERALS HALTED

The personally political has remained the main appeal of the subject.³ In the seductiveness of engaging with personalities rather than policy, the ideological significance of the split has been marginalised as one of largely academic interest, in both senses.⁴ Insofar as ideas have registered, the split is held to have marked the breaking of a party which, despite the efforts of some before the war to engage with the challenges of industrial democracy, was squeezed by left and right, failing to recognise the necessity of organisation and intervention, or to at least mouth the rhetoric of belligerence. Both Labourism (notwithstanding the opposition of some of its leading figures, such as Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald) and Conservatism, in their different ways, recognised the importance of a strong state in wartime, and of subordinating other matters

to that end. The contrast with liberalism, as caricatured by the popular press and opposition politicians, was thought to be clear: Liberals were antediluvian quasi-pacifists wedded to narrow partisan advantage, resistant to the requirements of 'total war', and who had to be dragged from office by men of action. To that extent, the hardy perennial of exam questions – 'To what extent did war revolutionise or merely hasten existing trends?' – is well suited to the Liberal Party.⁵ If the party had been managing, relatively comfortably, to accommodate New and Classical Liberals, Pro-Boers and Liberal Imperialists, why could it not agree over the prosecution of a war that most supported? It appeared to many that the 'New' failed fully to overcome the 'Old': the interventionists stymied by the libertarians, the left thwarted by the right, as it were. By failing

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to hang together, the political liberals and the economic liberals thereafter hanged separately.

The ideological division was closely bound with the personal disagreements that split the Liberals during the war and subsequently: it was on the rock of personality that principles broke. This has left philosophical analysis of this climactic episode in Liberal government relatively poorly served. Students still cling to 'Liberal' as a synonym for 'laissez faire', with Liberals airily conducting war policy as 'business as usual' on 'limited liability principles'. While the personal disagreements are well known, the ideological split is often misunderstood, being both exaggerated in substance and compressed in form by the usual simplicities of party political philosophy. If aphoristic definitions for 'left' and 'right' might be, respectively, freedom

LEFT, RIGHT

through control, and freedom from control, the dilemma for Liberals in a wartime and post-war world was obvious. The popular desire – or perhaps need – to label policies or politicians as being of the left or the right that still besets Liberals early in the twenty-first century can be seen to have its roots early in the twentieth. Though conventional political discourse requires it, however, the 1916 split cannot satisfactorily be explained in such stark terms. That such an ideologically polarised approach is not helpful does not necessarily mean it is not interesting.

Asquith and Lloyd George were successive Chancellors of the Exchequer, pioneering that office into the engine of government it has remained. Ideological change would find its expression there more than elsewhere, yet their policies marked a coherent philosophical progression. What was different – significantly, as far as Liberals at war were concerned – was that there had been a dramatic escalation of both rhetoric and ambition under Lloyd George by the time the war broke out. With the most notable exceptions of John Burns and John Morley, the party went to war united, if less enthusiastically than most of the population, but that lack of evident enthusiasm, even on the part of Liberal Imperialists who could hardly be described as pacific, remained a crippling handicap. Some German-speakers, such as R. B. Haldane and Prince Louis of Battenberg, were vilified for it and perished; others, like Reginald McKenna, were vilified but survived, forced into harrying dachshunds during the spy hysteria.⁶

It was only when those errors and accidents inevitable in so unprecedented an undertaking were exploited by opponents well aware that the government required a fresh mandate even without a great national crisis that a reconstruction of the

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ministry was necessary. Of course, in times of crisis, coalitions may be desirable even when they are not necessary, though there were not then such precedents (although, in the curious circularity of the period, Lloyd George had tried to organise a coalition in 1910, and in so doing infuriated many of his colleagues, instilling in some the distrust of his methods and motives that proved insurmountable in 1916). Asquith's May 1915 coalition was a tactical triumph but a strategic misjudgement. While Tories had been denied the main offices of state, their approach to the conduct of the war – that of an unlimited commitment – could no longer be denied. Moreover, the surrender of government, though necessary even by the peacetime electoral timetable, smarted for many Liberals, some of whom saw it as a betrayal by Asquith; that they tended also to be those who would come to hold Lloyd George responsible for the December 1916 split illustrates how fractured the factions would become. Any move to the right, therefore, could thereafter appear as a political defeat, which any Liberal concerned with liberal principles might feel inclined to resist. The fear of emboldening opponents served to hinder clear action, and make change appear to be more resisted than it was.

The issues around which this analysis can be based soon arose, and went beyond the circumstantial (such as the mental wellbeing of Admiral Fisher, the number of faulty shells at the front, or the topography of the Dardanelles) which helped derail what proved to be the last Liberal government. Unfortunately for Asquith, the divisions wrought by the necessary escalation in the war effort were felt most by the still-ascendant Liberals. Compulsion in general, and conscription in particular, was advocated by a group which, though few in number, were loud in voice, with Lloyd George as its mouthpiece. In this, Lloyd George was opposed

by Asquith's leading lieutenants in the three great offices of state: the Home Secretary, Sir John Simon; the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey; and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, McKenna – and, indeed, by the majority of the ministerial Liberals. Whatever the Liberals' numerical superiority, a relentless intensification of the conflict as advocated by Tories became increasingly hard to deny, both politically and militarily. Conceived of as the panacea for the western front, conscription proved to be the single most controversial issue on the home front, and, as is often the way with divisive issues, had neither the disastrous consequences feared by opponents nor the transformative effect proclaimed by its advocates. In what could be described as the first December crisis, of 1915, Simon, Grey, McKenna, and the President of the Board of Trade, Walter Runciman, resigned from the Cabinet over the issue. Grey, McKenna, and Runciman then changed their minds. The government remained intact, and conscription was introduced in January 1916.

The animosity caused by the debates over conscription, as well as those concerning war strategy and even the language of politics, festered. This, together with the growing military impotence and political anxiety of the French and the Russians,⁷ the economic influence of the Americans,⁸ and a Tory party and press revitalised by its apparent success in accelerating the war effort, produced the second December crisis, the political manoeuvrings of which led to Asquith's resignation and Lloyd George's accession. The real division had been over strategy: whether the war should be long or short, of subsidies or armies, or whether the risk of achieving German capitulation was preferable to the slow erosion of British economic power and diplomatic autonomy: whether it was worth gambling all on a 'knock-out blow' when that blow might prove to be

only glancing. That debate was rendered practically irrelevant by increasingly desperate representations from both Paris and Petrograd, the failure of the 1916 summer offensive, and the portentous flexing of muscles in Washington and New York. The German U-boat offensive in the spring of 1917 brought the Americans into the war, and their implicit underwriting became explicit participation. External pressures and internal compromise had ensured that by the time of the split, there were little grounds for disagreement amongst Liberals; another irony.

For a war in which Britain chose to fight, the principal political issue was and remained the extent to which choice was summarily subordinated to the national interest. Organisation would be the key to prevailing in what would be an industrial war against Germany, and German organisation had been a model for many New Liberal ideas of the period. Nevertheless, the Liberals were held to have failed since they feared Prussian methods in a war against Prussianism. The extent to which this canard has remained is one of the enduring fascinations of the war.⁹ The clarion 'War Socialism' was, after all, uttered by a Liberal, albeit so irregular a Liberal as Winston Churchill (who thus demonstrated that not all converts to Conservatism were libertarian). In the spirit of the New Liberal reforms of the Edwardian period, the government had by the summer of 1915 already overseen the introduction of what at the times were draconian measures, dramatically imposing itself on areas of public life hitherto untouched by central control. Left and right, as it were, were united, and no more starkly than Lloyd George and Ernest Benn in harness at the Ministry of Munitions. The Defence of the Realm Act, the Munitions of War Act, and related measures further contributed to the subordination of the individual which may

be seen both as necessary precursors for the exercise of compulsion more generally, and conscription in particular, as well as of a continuation of pre-war Liberal policy. This is a fact often overlooked. The second December crisis was a matter of degree and a matter of motive. In this light, 'business as usual' takes on a new meaning.

The notion that December 1916 marked no significant change in policy is perhaps best illustrated by the single most controversial measure of the war: conscription. Conscription is as central to the concerns of this article as it is to much else, for the division over conscription was a left/right issue, if not for the reasons given at the time. The opposition of Liberals to conscription tended to be twofold: from a libertarian objection to the assault on the freedom of the individual, in that a person should not be compelled to fight, such as that which Simon or F.W. Hirst presented; or an economically liberal view, in that conscription could not be afforded, which was McKenna's and Runciman's position. Yet where the former was a stance from which it was difficult to retreat, from the latter position compromise was quite possible, and compromise McKenna and Runciman did. For the Chancellor and his friend and adviser, John Maynard Keynes, it actually offered new opportunities and firmer ground for opposition to the conduct of the war favoured by Lloyd George and the Conservative Party, but by then the political momentum was lost.¹⁰

The next best indication of a policy already admitted yet which was claimed to proffer the parting of the ways, was free trade. It was, among other reasons, for the continuance of free trade, and the assuaging of its adherents, that Asquith gave the Treasury to the once Secretary of the Free Trade Union, McKenna, and the Board of Trade to another genetic laissez-fairer, and scion of shipping,

Runciman, and it followed that they were also two of the leading opponents of conscription. Yet it was the free-trader Chancellor who, in what became almost his only popular historical footnote, introduced tariffs, in September 1915. The McKenna Duties were essentially symbolic, but even a symbolic surrender to protection could be seen as handing over the keys to the fortress. McKenna faced pronounced criticism from Liberals, and he offered a variety of explanations, tailored to the critic in question. To F.W. Hirst, of *The Economist*, for whom almost every aspect of the financial management of the war was an affront to Liberalism, they were presented as a temporary gesture; to C. P. Scott, of *The Manchester Guardian*, riding the Liberal tiger more effectively than most, they were a practical necessity. Of course, no number of compromises could atone in the eyes of critics for the occasional applications of traditional Liberal principle, a late example being the sale of enemy property in East Africa: the Nigeria debate in November 1916, like that of Norway in May 1940, being a proximate cause of the collapse of a national government.

The split did not lead to opposition as such, official or otherwise. Notwithstanding the geography of the chamber of the House of Commons, Asquith and his Liberals were often not even metaphorically two swords' lengths away, and did not formally oppose Lloyd George over the remaining controversial issues of the war, such as conscription in Ireland, or a negotiated peace (the need for which, for many Liberals – and the odd Tory – was desperate). When they did, as in the Maurice debate of May 1918, the party remained divided, and prey to the instincts of its opponents. Similarly, after the crash of the 1918 general election, the dispersal of Liberals in the wreckage was far from ordered.¹¹ Principle played a part in where they fell, as did practice, and the

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desire to practise in government marked many defectors as being more pragmatic than their erstwhile colleagues, or more hungry than their erstwhile leader. Yet another irony, or yet another tragedy, was that the most pragmatic and most hungry of all, Lloyd George, within four years never practised again. The immediate victor was therefore also the ultimate loser, and a man of the left. The Liberals with nearly as far to fall – Asquith, Grey, Haldane – were on the right of the party. Their political fate was comparable, suggesting the role of ideology was less important than that of tactics, personality, the electoral system, and age, of which Grey's blindness was the most poignant representation.

Both world wars offered public figures undesirable but tenured positions as scapegoats, and after 1918 they tended to be Liberals. It was left to the rest to make sense of it as best they could, and in so doing demonstrated the unfamiliarity of the new landscape. Donald Maclean and George Thorne stayed with the Old Man; Hilton Young and Christopher Addison with the Son of the People. Some went with neither; Edwin Montagu with both. Sooner or later, to an extent lesser or greater, Haldane, Josiah Wedgwood, Francis Acland, E. D. Morel, R. L. Out-hwaite, H. B. Lees-Smith, Joseph King, C. P. Trevelyan, Christopher Addison, and Ernest's brother William Wedgwood Benn, veered left and found a more comfortable berth in the Labour Party, as did thousands of activists. Others, including, Churchill, McKenna, Simon, Runciman, Fred Guest, Alfred Mond, and George Lambert, either joined or at least endorsed the Tories, as did most of the electorate. Even here, however, the dichotomy is unsatisfactory. Churchill was no more reliable a Conservative than he was Liberal; and McKenna, though he endorsed Andrew Bonar Law, and consented to serve as Stanley Baldwin's Chancellor, advocated closer links with Labour, advised

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Ramsay MacDonald, and became a notably Keynesian banker in a time when there were no others, to be vilified anew. Even for those who remained at least nominally Liberal, identity could be indistinct. Far from dressing to either left or right, few Liberals were confessedly either Asquithian or Georgian, and for several years, their motion positively Brownian.

It is just as easy to over-dramatise as it is to maintain that the Liberal governments of 1905–16 represented the best chance of Liberalism providing progressive and effective government in the new mass democracy, and that their failure was due almost wholly to the split of December 1916. The reasons for the split were varied, and in many cases longstanding. There was a partisan aversion to conceding ground to Conservatives, as well as a fear of newly confident organised labour. In that the war promoted the general acceptance of intervention and organisation, it benefited both left and right, and, indeed, both Labour and Conservatives – the flat-capped and the hard-faced – benefited from the war. The Liberals, who had largely guided that advance, were broken, assisted by a more general cultural disengagement, with few Liberals other than Lloyd George conversant with the language of war, or, as was to be proved, of popular politics.

The second December crisis remains vital even as it is partially (or even mis)understood. For those without Liberal sympathies it may demonstrate the vitality of an adversarial system. It is certainly difficult accurately to colour the key political issues as either red or blue, even if, for the purposes of this special edition, it is in some way desired. For those with such sympathies, the episode remains distressing when its consequences are considered. That the principal party victors of the war were theoretically oppositionist, yet advocated a

similar approach, reinforced this point; the war marked a classic squeeze, the like of which would become all too familiar. Just as the personnel lined up personally rather than politically, the system required a governing party of the left and of the right. The 'system' may be a less engaging or animating concept than either politicians or ideology, but no less important, as (usually Liberal) efforts to reform it demonstrate.

The December 1916 cleaving did not split into left and right in any meaningful way, nor should it be expressed in such terms, even when the historian is charged with making sense of such things. In 1914 Lloyd George could be claimed for the left and Asquith for the right; four years later the former sat with the Tories with the latter contemplating association with Labour. The Liberal approach to the war was a consistent one – one which consistently moved with events. That is a better definition of governance than it is of indecision. 'Business as usual' did not evolve into 'War Socialism' as neither ever really existed, away from the dais. The way in which Liberals extemporised the management of 'total war' was quite laudable, but ensured that the partial fraud of the change of personnel in 1916 could come to be seen as all the more frustrating. Insofar as the political manifestation of the war was a muddle, it was therefore at one, for once, with the military; that the British system requires such contrapositional notions as left and right is not the least irony of the subject to Liberal history, and, in that, is as satisfactory a microcosm of liberalism in the twentieth century as one could hope to find.

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- 1 Michael Fry, 'Political Change in Britain, August 1914 to December 1916: Lloyd George Replaces Asquith: The Issues Underlying the Drama', *Historical Journal*, xxxi, 3 (1988), pp. 609–627; R. J. Q. Adams, 'Asquith's Choice: the May Coalition and the Coming of Conscription, 1915–1916', *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (July 1986), pp. 243–263; Richard Murphy, 'Walter Long, The Unionist Ministers, and the Formation of Lloyd George's Government in December 1916', *Historical Journal*, xxix, 3 (1986), pp. 736–745; Peter Fraser, 'British War Policy and the Crisis of Liberalism in May 1915', *Journal of Modern History*, 54 (March 1982), pp. 1–26; J. M. McEwan, 'The Struggle for Mastery in Britain: Lloyd George versus Asquith, December 1916', *Journal of British Studies*, xviii (1978), pp. 131–156; Martin Pugh, 'Asquith, Bonar Law, and the First Coalition', *Historical Journal*, xvii, 4 (1974), pp. 813–836; Stephen Koss, 'The Destruction of Britain's Last Liberal Government', *Journal of Modern History*, XL, 2 (1968), pp. 257–277; Barry McGill, 'Asquith's Predicament: 1914–1918', *Journal of Modern History*, 39, 3 (1967), pp. 283–303.
- 2 This has been touched on before on these pages. See John Grigg, 'Asquith and Lloyd George: Common Misunderstandings', *Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter*, 10, March 1996.
- 3 Martin Farr, 'Squiff, Liar George, and the McKenna: the unpersuasive politics of personality in the Asquith Coalition, 1915–1916', in Julie Gottlieb and Richard Toye (eds.), *Power, Personality and Persuasion: Studies in British Political History* (London: I. B. Tauris, forthcoming).
- 4 For government see Kathleen Burk (ed.), *War and the State: The Transformation of British Government 1914–1919* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982); for finance see Hew Strachan, *Financing the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); for politics see George Cassar, *Asquith as War Leader* (London: Hambledon, 1994), and John Turner, *British Politics and the Great War* (New Haven: Yale, 1992); for strategy see David French, *British Economic and Strategic Planning 1905–1915* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), and David French, *British Strategy & War Aims 1914–1916* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986).
- 5 The best outline is Michael Bentley, 'The Liberal Party, 1900–1939: Summit and Descent', in Chris Wrigley (ed.), *A Companion to Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 23–37.
- 6 Only a mild exaggeration. See David French, 'Spy Fever in Britain,

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- 1900–1915', *The Historical Journal*, 21, 2 (1978), pp. 355–370. More generally: A. J. A. Morris, *The Scaremongers: The Advocacy of War and Rearmament 1896–1914* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).
- 7 See Martin Horn, *Britain, France, and the Financing of the First World War* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002); Keith Nielson, *Strategy and Supply: The Anglo-Russian Alliance, 1914–17* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985).
- 8 See Kathleen Burk, *Britain, America, and the Sineus of War* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985).
- 9 Though it has been addressed before in this journal: Chris Wrigley, 'The First World War and Liberal Values', *Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter*, 10, March 1996.
- 10 See Martin Farr, 'A Compelling Case for Voluntarism: Britain's Alternative Strategy 1915–1916', *War in History*, 9, 3 (2002), pp. 279–306; Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes, Volume One: Hopes Betrayed 1883–1920* (London: Macmillan, 1983).
- 11 Some sifting has been done on these pages: Roy Douglas, 'A failure of leadership: Defections 1918–29', *Journal of Liberal History*, 25, 1999; Nick Cott, 'Liberal unity frustrated', *Journal of Liberal History*, 32, 2001.

'The Last of the Liberals' (concluded from page 29)

- 55 D. Abel, *Ernest Benn: Counsel for Liberty* (London, 1960)
- 56 For the classic Thatcherite interpretation see D. Willetts, *Modern Conservatism* (Penguin, 1992).
- 57 R. Cockett, *Thinking the Unthinkable* (London, 1994), p. 9–10.
- 58 W. Lippmann, *The Good Society* (Boston, 1937), p. viii. Lippmann's book also influenced the *Ownership for All* programme adopted by the Liberal Party in 1938.
- 59 For example W. H. Hutt, who Hirst had helped to write *The Philosophy of Individualism* in 1927.
- 60 Hirst was on the executive of the FTU until the late 1940s, overlapping with Arthur Seldon, for example.
- 61 Letter from Hirst to R. F. Harrod, 6 November 1946, refers to the 'so-called Liberal Party' and adds 'Tories are all for conscription and preferential protection. They are no more conservative than the Liberal Parties are Liberal'. See: <http://e-server.e.u-tokyo.ac.jp/Exhibition/keynes/gif/167-02.gif>
- 62 Hirst, *Money*, pp. 238, 247n; Hirst, *Principles*, p. 80–82. Gooch, *Friends*, p. 37.
- 63 Gooch, *Friends*, p. 17.
- 64 R. F. Harrod, *The Prof: A Personal Memoir of Lord Cherwell* (London, 1959), p. 243.
- 65 For example, he was elected 21st of 30 members at the 1943 Assembly. It appears that he did not seek re-election in 1945. *LPO reports 1937–47*.
- 66 Hirst, *Liberal Free Trade Committee*, pp. 31–32.
- 67 Hirst, *Money*, p. x.
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 Hoover and Hirst became friends before 1914 when Hoover worked as an international engineer and visited London where he was briefly a neighbour in Campden Hill. He looked after Hirst when he was taken seriously ill during a visit to the US in 1929. Hoover contributed to Gooch, *Friends* (see p. 45).

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