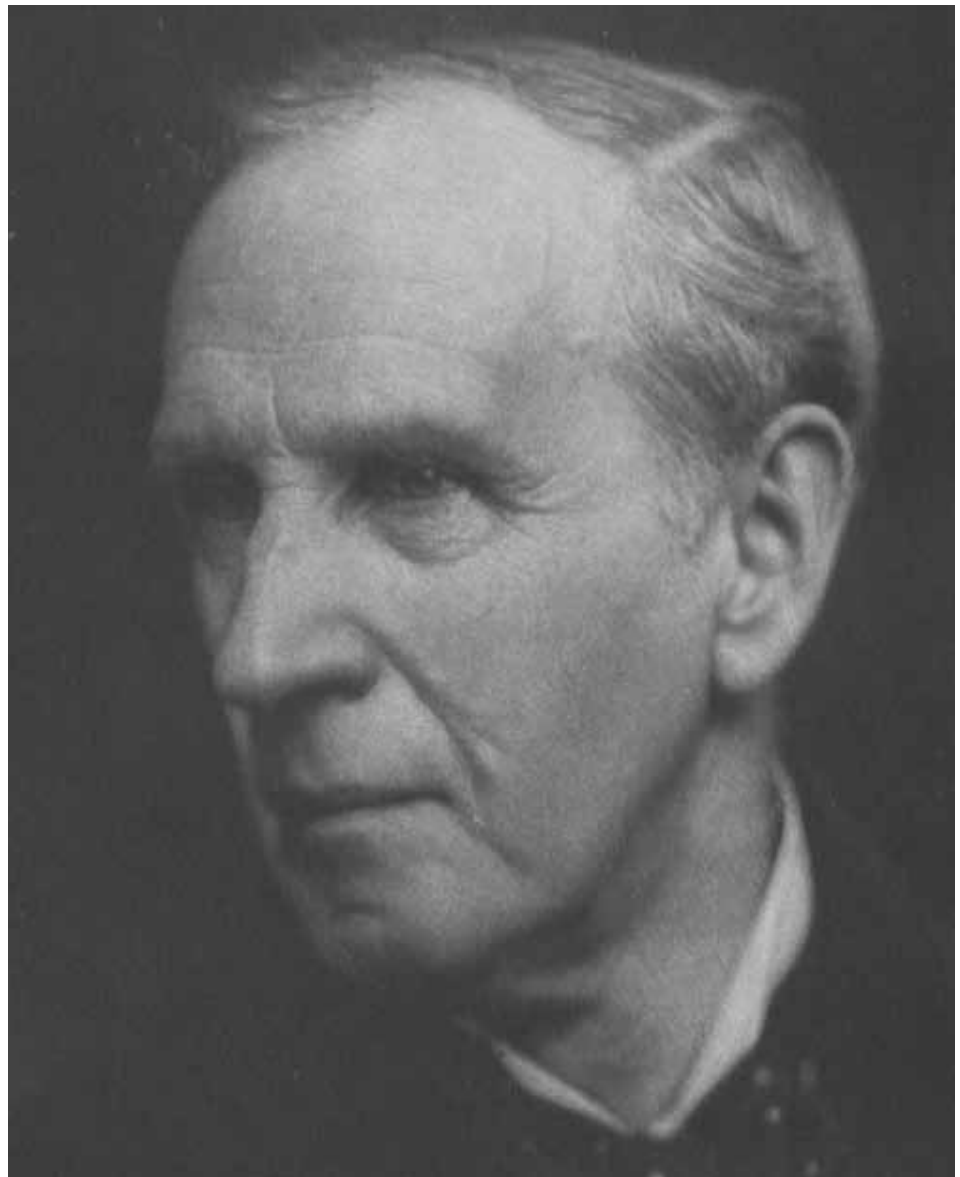


# JOHN MORLEY'S RESIGN

This article supplements the account in *Morley of Blackburn*<sup>1</sup> of John Morley's resignation from Asquith's cabinet on the outbreak of war in 1914. Writing such an article is not easy because of the unceasing flow of books and articles about the origins of the war, and the need to maintain a reasonable level of objectivity about an event that, even after a hundred years, arouses powerful emotions. In one of the last articles he wrote before his death, **Patrick Jackson** analyses the reasons for Morley's resignation and challenges the views of those who ascribed it solely to his optimism about Germany and his pessimism about Russia.



# NATION IN AUGUST 1914

SOME COMMENTATORS HAVE NO doubt that Britain was right to join France in a war justified, despite an appalling cost in human lives, by the need to safeguard Europe from German domination, just as it was right to resist Nazi aggression twenty-five years later. For those who take this view, Morley's motives are of little significance. His inability to recognise self-evident truths must be attributed to declining powers, and he can be written off as 'yesterday's man', an elderly icon of obsolete Gladstonian morality who failed to understand the new realities of twentieth-century power politics. David Hamer writes almost despairingly in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography that Morley 'did not even [my italics] find a *casus belli* in German aggression against Belgium.'

On the other hand, for those of us who believe that more could have been done in July 1914 to prevent the Balkan crisis from escalating into a catastrophic world war (regarded by all the participants as defensive or preventive), and who find the case for British involvement inconclusive, Morley's resignation raises significant questions. Why did he fail to ensure that the cabinet explored the key issues adequately before reaching its precipitate decision? Why did he refuse to speak out publicly against the war? Admirers who remembered

John Morley, 1st Viscount Morley of Blackburn (1838–1923)

his resounding denunciation of the Boer War fifteen years earlier were disappointed if they hoped for a similar declaration in 1914. Instead Morley opted out of his share of responsibility for the war by retiring quietly to the well-stocked library of his home in Wimbledon Park. Nevertheless in private he remained certain that he had been right to resign, and that the leaders of the Liberal government, particularly Asquith and Grey, bore a heavy responsibility for what had gone so disastrously wrong. As he told Rosebery in November 1920, amid the clamour over German war-guilt, 'I do not let go my obstinate conviction that the catastrophe ... was due to three *blunderers*, the Kaiser and a couple of Englishmen whom I'd as lief not name with the proper adjectives.'<sup>2</sup>

## The international background

Despite a general rise in economic prosperity during the early years of the twentieth century there was a widespread feeling of insecurity as the great powers jostled for competitive advantage and prestige. Britain's vulnerability, as an over-extended maritime empire, had been painfully exposed in the Boer War; and Russia, despite huge natural resources, had been similarly humiliated by Japan. France still resented the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871, and the ramshackle 'dual

monarchy' of Austria-Hungary felt threatened by militant Slav nationalism. Germany feared encirclement by Russia and France. Behind the strident nationalism there was a deep-seated fatalism about the inevitable decline of older regimes and their evolutionary replacement by rising races, a struggle for the survival of the fittest in which war played a natural part. Some of the European powers sought greater security in alliances that were regarded by the participants as defensive but by opponents as threatening.

Britain had traditionally favoured a policy of isolation, relying on naval supremacy to avoid entanglements in mainland Europe, but when the Liberals came to power in 1905 the foreign secretary, Edward Grey, inherited British membership of a new entente designed to end the imperial rivalry with France. Liberals were uneasy about the implications of the alliance between France and tsarist Russia, and feared that the strategic conversations between army and naval officers would commit Britain to a policy of hostility towards Germany. In 1871, after the Franco-Prussian war, Morley had welcomed 'the interposition in the heart of the European state system, of a powerful, industrious, intelligent and progressive people, between the Western nations and the half-barbarous Russian

swarms.<sup>3</sup> The following decades saw a growing antagonism between Britain and Germany, but Morley, like many Liberals, continued to believe that German militarism was a temporary phase better dealt with by conciliation than by confrontation. The tensions reached a climax in 1911, after a German infringement of French colonial pretensions in Morocco. Morley urged caution on Asquith, 'I utterly dislike and distrust the German methods ... But that is no reason why we should give them the excuse of this provocation.'<sup>3</sup> He recognised the dangerous instability of the kaiser, but argued that 'the way to treat a man who has made a fool of himself is to let him down as easily as possible.'<sup>5</sup>

In August 1911, when it emerged that plans had been finalised to transport British troops to France in the event of war, Morley secured a ruling that no firm commitment should be incurred without prior cabinet approval. During the next two years Grey encouraged a series of initiatives designed to relieve Anglo-German tensions. During Haldane's mission to Berlin in February 1912, it became clear that the Germans would not renounce their competitive programme of warship building without a reciprocal British undertaking to remain neutral in a continental war. Discussions took place over colonial policy when Lewis Harcourt, negotiated with his German opposite number an agreement for the partitioning of Portugal's African colonies in the not unlikely event of financial default. The agreement was initialled in October 1913, but not published. In June 1914 agreement was reached on the vexed question of the Baghdad railway project: the Germans agreed to terminate the line at Basra and to consult the British government before any subsequent extension. Scholars differ about the significance of these initiatives, but they show that Grey did not regard Germany as an implacable aggressor with whom improved diplomatic relations were not to be contemplated. Plans for a secret mission to Berlin by his private secretary Sir William Tyrrell were aborted by the outbreak of war,<sup>6</sup> but in July 1914 relations with Germany were better than they had been for over a decade. On 23 July (less than a fortnight before war broke out) Lloyd George told

the House of Commons that 'the two great Empires begin to realize that the points of cooperation are greater and more numerous than the points of possible controversy.'<sup>7</sup>

### **A wasted month: 28 June – 24 July 1914**

Accounts of the events leading to the outbreak of the war tend to underestimate the seriousness of the delay in responding to the assassination at Sarajevo on 28 June. Nearly a month of inactivity followed, with no determined diplomatic attempts to defuse the dispute between Austria-Hungary and Serbia before the other major European powers were dragged in. In Britain, politicians and the press were preoccupied by the situation in Ireland resulting from the militant refusal of Ulster to accept subordination to a home rule authority in Catholic Dublin.

A conference of the conflicting parties at Buckingham Palace collapsed in failure on 24 July. On the following day, when news broke of the harsh Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, nearly four weeks after Sarajevo, *The Times* belatedly acknowledged the existence of these wider problems: 'England cannot suffer the failure of the Home Rule Conference ... to divert her attention from the grave crisis that has arisen in Europe within the last thirty-six hours.' John Morley had been particularly preoccupied by Ireland: the third Home Rule Bill was the climax of a political career that had begun nearly thirty years earlier when he had acted as Gladstone's deputy in introducing the first home rule legislation.

For many British people Sarajevo, and Belgrade the Serbian capital, were distant places in which it was hard to detect any direct national interest. Many would have agreed with John Burns, the president of the Board of Trade who later resigned from the cabinet with Morley, when he robustly declared, 'Why 4 great powers should fight over Servia no fellow can understand.'<sup>8</sup> C. P. Scott's *Manchester Guardian* took a similar view: Manchester cared about Belgrade as little as Belgrade cared about Manchester. However none of this provides any satisfactory explanation for Grey's failure to act as soon as he

heard about the assassination. After nearly nine years at the Foreign Office, making him the most experienced foreign minister in Europe, Grey was well aware of the precarious balance of power in the Balkans. He must have realised that the murder of the heir to the imperial throne, with the suspected connivance of Belgrade, would provoke a violent reaction in Vienna, and that the Austrians would seek a preliminary guarantee of support from their German allies just as the Serbs would appeal for help from Russia. When the crisis finally ended in a world war, Grey claimed that he had worked tirelessly for peace; but most of his initiatives took place in the final days of frantic activity that followed the Austrian ultimatum, and by that stage they were all 'too little, too late.'

When Grey was warned on 6 July by the German ambassador Lichnowsky that Germany would support an Austrian attack on Belgrade he seems to have remained complacently confident that the balance of power would work to achieve a peaceful settlement. Germany could be relied on to restrain Austria (rather than urging her to act quickly before Russia was ready to retaliate), and France would similarly restrain Russia. Poincaré, the French president, was due to pay a crucially important state visit to St Petersburg from 20 to 23 July; but Grey had no idea whether Poincaré's aim was to be conciliatory, or whether he would be mainly concerned to stiffen Russian resolve.<sup>9</sup> A *Times* leading article on 23 July expressed the hope that the state visit would 'operate as a salutary warning to the "war parties" in all the great countries against the danger of playing with fire.'

This reflected Grey's wishful thinking. His over-optimism arose partly from his acknowledged success during the previous year, when he had chaired an ambassadorial conference of the six major European powers (France, Russia, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy and Great Britain) which achieved a provisional settlement of the first Balkan War: the Treaty of London, signed on 30 May 1913. However, this diplomatic coup makes it all the more surprising that Grey did not reconvene the conference immediately after Sarajevo, in an attempt to secure international agreement

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about the terms that it would be reasonable to impose upon Serbia. Instead he waited until 27 July, when the Austrians were about to attack Belgrade (after an ultimatum that shocked him by its severity) before proposing a four-power ambassadorial conference. Austria-Hungary and Russia, the two major powers involved directly in the dispute, would be excluded from the conference and thus in effect subjected to arbitration. Grey explained to the House of Commons that, as long as the dispute had involved only Austria-Hungary and Serbia, 'we had no title to interfere.' When it became obvious that Russia would intervene, the short time available had forced him to take the risk of 'making a proposal without the usual preliminary steps of trying to ascertain whether it would be well received.' Unsurprisingly the extraordinary proposal was rejected, although *The Times* applauded the way in which Grey had taken such prompt action, 'with characteristic indifference to considerations of personal and national *amour propre*'.

Of course the powers might have similarly rejected a much earlier initiative to recall the full six-power conference, but at that stage Grey would have had time to consider alternative initiatives. Perhaps the king might have been persuaded to suggest to the kaiser a conference in Berlin, attended by the tsar and the Austrian emperor with all their senior advisers. Although notoriously unpredictable, the kaiser was susceptible to flattery and ambivalent about Britain, his mother's country. As it was, no attempt was made to take advantage of the imperial family relationships until 1 August, when the king was awakened by Asquith in the early hours of the morning to send a message to his cousin, the tsar, in a belated and predictably futile attempt to delay Russian mobilisation. Another possible initiative during the period immediately after Sarajevo might have been to invoke the good offices of the United States President Woodrow Wilson, who was to play a key role in the setting up of the League of Nations after the war. When he offered to mediate, on 2 August, it was far too late, but he might have responded to an earlier approach. On 25 May 1914, his representative

Colonel House had described the European situation to him as 'jingoism run stark mad.' Unless someone acting for the president could 'bring about a different understanding there is bound some day to be an awful cataclysm.'<sup>10</sup>

Grey was respected for the honesty of his motives, but he lacked the imagination to seek new ways of filling the gaps in the international negotiating machinery. Instead he pursued a policy that seemed sometimes to consist of little more than drifting, hoping for the best of both worlds by enjoying the security of the entente while avoiding its aggressive commitments and seeking to remain friendly with Germany. During the final days of July it became increasingly clear that the two aims were incompatible. However, if Grey failed to seize the diplomatic initiative during the crucial weeks after Sarajevo, it has to be said that Morley and those who were to oppose British involvement in the conflict showed little greater awareness of the urgency of the situation. In 1911 Morley had spoken out about the dangerous implications of the entente, but in 1914 he waited until 24 July for Grey to raise the crisis in the cabinet. The delay was disastrous.

### The final days

During the days after 28 July when Austria declared war on Serbia and Russia embarked on partial mobilisation, the focus of the crisis shifted with dramatic suddenness to the prospect of an impending continental war in which none of the European powers could avoid entanglement.

In Britain the shift was especially remarkable: by the bank holiday weekend of 1–2 August, when the decision to go to war was reached, the issue was widely seen in terms of Britain's moral obligation to support France (and incidentally Belgium) against unprovoked military aggression. The fact that France had knowingly placed herself at risk by the alliance with Russia no longer seemed relevant except to Morley and a minority who still thought in these terms.

The changing perspective can be seen in successive leading articles in *The Times*. Although nominally Conservative, the paper was a

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strong supporter of Grey's policies and was regularly briefed by Tyrrell. On 29 July a leader ('Close the Ranks') insisted that there could be no question of a change in political control involving the replacement of Grey. This same article emphasised the need to be faithful to allies: 'England will be found as ready to stand by her friends today as ever she was aiding Europe [to] fling off the despotism of Napoleon.' However the article reiterated that Britain had no direct interest in the Balkans, and there was as yet no suggestion that Germany was the only threat, even though powerful pressures were being brought to bear to overcome the 'pacific leanings' of the kaiser. By 31 July any remaining balance in the assessment of the situation had disappeared:

We must make instant preparations to back our friends, if they are made the subject of unjust attack. ... The days of 'splendid isolation' ... are no more. We cannot stand alone in a Europe dominated by any single Power.

On Saturday 1 August the tone of self-righteous emotional conviction persisted: for Britain this would not be a war of national hatred, since we had 'nothing to avenge and nothing to acquire.' Our only motives were 'the duty we owe to our friends and the instinct of self-preservation.' There was no serious examination of essential questions such as the exact nature of the supposed threat to British interests, and the arguments for and against British involvement in a continental land war rather than relying upon traditional naval power. The absence of any rational discussion of the case against British participation was partly offset by the publication on the same day of a long letter from Norman Angell (whose *The Great Illusion*<sup>11</sup> had strongly influenced the international peace movement) and of a pro-German manifesto signed by a group of academics. Angell repudiated the suggestion that neutrality would result in dangerous isolation: on the contrary it would mean that, while other nations were torn and weakened by war, Britain 'might conceivably for a long time be the strongest Power in Europe.' Conversely British involvement would

ensure the supremacy of Russia ('two hundred million autocratically governed people, with a very rudimentary civilization, but heavily equipped for military aggression'), rather than a Germany 'highly civilized and mainly given to the arts of trade and commerce.'

Behind the scenes, in a series of seven cabinet meetings on the ten days between 24 July and 2 August, ministers stumbled confusedly from the consideration of a distant crisis that no one regarded as calling for British participation, to the prospect of an unprovoked attack on France about which it was difficult for anyone to remain indifferent. By the end of the series of meetings only Morley and Burns, out of a much larger original number of dissenters, remained committed to British neutrality. It is not easy to follow the process by which this shift occurred, but no one reading the surviving accounts (there were no formal minutes of cabinet proceedings) can fail to be appalled by the inadequacy of the discussions. This was supposed to be a mature parliamentary democracy facing one of the most critical moments in its history and the failure to address many of the major questions was lamentable. Asquith and Grey must bear the main burden of responsibility, but Morley, too, failed to ensure that the cabinet considered the crucial issues adequately. What would be the probable outcome if Britain remained neutral? How serious would German supremacy in Europe actually be? Would it be possible to confine British participation to naval action rather than sending land forces to the continent? What would be the costs of involvement, in financial and human terms? Was it right to dismiss without further exploration the offers made by Germany in an attempt to secure British neutrality?

It became obvious at an early stage that the cabinet was deadlocked. Grey, inhibited by his assurance that the military discussions with France had not involved any firm commitment, failed to convince a majority of his colleagues that there was a valid case for British participation in the forthcoming war. But he threatened to resign rather than concede the demand for a declaration of unconditional neutrality. The two sides held firm

to their own positions and the discussions were patchy and perfunctory, with neither Grey nor Morley making any serious attempt to win the overall argument. Eventually cabinet agreement, of sorts, was reached on the peripheral questions of Belgian territorial integrity and the security of the Channel coast, rather than on the major questions that had gone unaddressed.

Morley's account of the cabinet meetings, in his *Memorandum on Resignation*,<sup>12</sup> is an essential source for anyone seeking to understand his role; but it is a flawed and frustrating record that reads at times like a later reminiscence. However the text was written within a few weeks of the events, and cleared with John Burns, who confirmed its essential accuracy and added a passage clarifying his own standpoint. In August 1928, Guy Morley, who had inherited his uncle's papers, decided that the work ought to be published. The *Memorandum* plunges straight into an account of the cabinet meeting on 24 July, the first since Sarajevo at which foreign affairs had been discussed. Grey startled his colleagues by disclosing the contents of a telegram from the ambassador in St Petersburg who reported that Russia and France were determined to react strongly to the Austrian ultimatum against Serbia, and that the Russian foreign minister was calling for Britain's support. According to Morley, Grey announced 'in his own quiet way' that the time had come for the cabinet to 'make up its mind plainly whether we were to take an active part with the other two Powers of the Entente, or to stand aside ... and preserve an absolute neutrality.' Morley was relaxed about the cabinet's likely response, and Asquith's account of the meeting (in a letter to his inamorata Venetia Stanley) reported that although Europe was 'within measurable ... distance of a real Armageddon ... Happily there seems to be no reason why we should be anything more than spectators.'<sup>13</sup>

During the next two meetings the impasse remained unresolved. After the 27 July meeting, Lloyd George told C. P. Scott that there could be 'no question of our taking part in any war in the first instance.'<sup>14</sup> However Grey continued to resist calls for a declaration that Britain would remain neutral,

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and after the 29 July meeting Burns reported that when the situation had been 'seriously reviewed from all points of view' it was 'decided not to decide.' Grey was instructed to tell the French and German ambassadors, Cambon and Lichnowsky (both increasingly frustrated by Britain's indecision) that we were unable to pledge ourselves in advance 'either under all conditions to stand aside or in any conditions to join in.' However Grey warned Lichnowsky, without cabinet authorisation, that if Germany and France went to war Britain might be forced to intervene.

It seems to have been at the 29 July meeting that the possible infringement of Belgian neutrality was first raised, but Morley insisted that the issue remained secondary to that of support for France. In the final days before the declaration of war, Belgium provided a highly emotional pretext for those previously opposed to British participation, but it remained a peripheral issue. Belgium had not always been a popular subject for radical sympathies, outraged by Morel's condemnation of colonial atrocities in the Congo. Moreover no one knew whether the German army would need to cross more than a corner of Belgian territory, and whether the Belgian government would actively resist the invasion rather than accepting a German offer to respect Belgian territorial integrity after the war.

Morley's account of the cabinet discussions during the last week of July is spasmodic, and the tone of his interventions is sometimes casual, almost as if he was taking part in an academic debate. He was clearly over-confident about the strength of support for a policy of neutrality, and seems to have had no expectation that the case for war would soon prove irresistible. When, on one occasion, Grey 'rather suddenly let fall his view ... that German policy was that of a great European aggressor, as bad as Napoleon', Morley merely replied that although 'I have no German partialities ... you do not give us evidence.' This was surely the crucial question upon which Grey should have been challenged. On another occasion Lloyd George 'furthered the good cause' by reporting that leading figures in the City and major manufacturers were

'aghast at the bare idea of our plunging into the European conflict.' However when Morley sought to raise this important question at a later meeting, Lloyd George replied 'rather tartly' that he had never said he believed it all. At another session Morley found his colleagues 'rather surprised at the stress I laid on the Russian side of things':

If Germany is beaten ... it is not England and France who will emerge pre-eminent in Europe. It will be Russia ... [and people] will rub their eyes when they realise that Cossacks are their victorious fellow champions for freedom, justice, equality of man ... and respect for treaties.

This little speech has a rather 'set piece' flavour, like the riposte when Grey extolled the contribution to peace of the balance of power. For Morley this was a euphemism for 'two giant groups armed to the teeth, each in mortal terror of the other, both of them passing year after year in an incurable fever of jealousy and suspicion!'

In contrast the *Memorandum* records John Burns's uncompromising stand against British intervention. Burns saw himself as a trustee for the working classes, and as such it was his 'especial duty to dissociate myself ... from such a crime as the contemplated war would be.' After the 29 July meeting, Burns told Morley 'with violent emphasis' that 'we look to you to stand firm'; but after a similar appeal on 31 July, Morley 'was not keen in response as to my taking any lead.' On 1 August there was no real progress and the cabinet remained deadlocked. In Asquith's account they came 'near to the parting of the ways,' with Morley still on 'the *Manchester Guardian* tack' of declaring that 'in no circumstances will we take a hand. This no doubt is the view for the moment of the bulk of the party.' Lloyd George, although 'all for peace' was 'more sensible and statesmanlike, for keeping the position still open.' Grey continued to insist that 'if an out & out ... policy of non-intervention ... is adopted he will go.'<sup>75</sup> The crucial decisions that led to war were reached on 2 August – the Sunday of a hot Bank Holiday weekend – when unprecedentedly there were two cabinet meetings. By the end

**Morley doubted what grounds there were 'for expecting that the ruinous waste and havoc of war would be repaid by peace on better terms than were already within reach of reason and persistent patience.'**

of the day Morley and Burns had resigned, but the way in which the final decision swung against them seems almost casual with none of the critical issues debated.

At the morning session Grey conceded that the entente entailed no formal commitment to support France, and that Britain was not 'bound by the same obligations of honour' as those that bound France to Russia. However he reminded his colleagues that, under the terms of the Anglo-French naval agreement, the French fleet had been deployed in the Mediterranean, leaving the Channel coast undefended. After a long and difficult discussion Grey was authorised to assure an increasingly agitated Cambon that the British navy would provide protection in the event of German aggression in the Channel. At this point Burns resigned (a blow that Asquith took 'a trifle too coolly'), since he regarded the decision as tantamount to a declaration of war. Morley was readier to accept it, and similarly he reported in an oddly relaxed way how the cabinet acquiesced in Grey's request to warn Lichnowsky that 'it would be hard to restrain English feeling on any violation of Belgian neutrality by either combatant.' In fact, a minute reproduced at the end of the published *Memorandum* reveals that this warning had been given to the German ambassador on the previous day, when Lichnowsky attempted to draw Grey into formulating the assurances, relating to French or Belgian territory, that would secure British neutrality. Grey had refused to consider any such bargain, and Asquith dismissed this 'rather shameless attempt ... to buy our neutrality' as an example of 'something very crude and almost childlike about German diplomacy.'<sup>76</sup> However Morley noted his view that it was a pity not to 'take advantage of the occasion for more talk and negotiation ... instead of this wooden *non possumus*.'

In his account of the morning cabinet, Asquith reckoned that Lloyd George, Morley and Harcourt were still opposed to intervention, as were three-quarters of the Liberal Party in the House of Commons. Asquith listed the points on which he was quite clear what was right and wrong: it was 'against British interests that France

shld be wiped out as a Great Power', as it was for Germany to be allowed 'to use the Channel as a hostile base.' But the employment on the continent of a British expeditionary force was seen by Asquith 'at this moment' as being 'out of the question.'<sup>77</sup>

In the *Memorandum* Morley described a lunchtime meeting of eight or nine cabinet ministers who opposed British participation in the war. These included Lewis Harcourt, who had organised the lobby with his usual diligence and deviousness, and Lloyd George who was still sitting on the fence. Morley offered the waverers a way to opt out:

Personally my days were dwindling. I was a notorious peace-man and little Englander. My disappearance would be totally different from theirs ... with their lives before them and long issues committed to their charge.

Morley left the meeting doubting whether 'the fervid tone' of these colleagues would last: 'I saw no standard bearer.' But he had few doubts about his own position, and during a period of quiet reflection at the Athenaeum he cleared his mind before returning for the evening cabinet. Morley doubted what grounds there were 'for expecting that the ruinous waste and havoc of war would be repaid by peace on better terms than were already within reach of reason and persistent patience.' He compared the gains of war 'against the ferocious hatred that would burn with inextinguishable fire, for a whole generation at least, between two communities better fitted to understand one another than any other pair in Europe?'

With a fleet of overwhelming power ... when the smoke of battlefields had cleared ... England might have exerted an influence not to be acquired by a hundred of her little Expeditionary Forces.

This was a powerful message and if delivered in parliament, or even in cabinet, it might have provided the leadership which the opponents of British participation so conspicuously lacked. But Morley no

longer had the mental or physical stamina to face the emotional turmoil. Instead he returned for the evening cabinet and told Asquith of his decision to resign with Burns. He agreed to remain until after the meeting on the following morning, Monday 3 August.

Morley was anxious not to spoil the occasion of this last cabinet, twenty-eight years after he joined Gladstone's third government in 1886. Asquith paid tribute to Morley as 'the senior of us all, the one who is the greatest source of the moral authority of the government.' He recognised that other members of the cabinet and many government supporters in the House of Commons shared Morley's views, and in normal circumstances this would impose on a prime minister the duty to resign. However Asquith said that in the present national emergency 'I cannot persuade myself that the other party is led by men ... capable of dealing with it.' This speech is a reminder that party politics remained an important consideration for many members of a Liberal government who were proud of its achievements. On the previous day Bonar Law had written to Asquith undertaking to provide Conservative backing for any measures the government decided to take 'in support of France and Russia.' This could be seen as a threat, as well as a promise.

Morley included in the *Memorandum* an extraordinary final exchange of correspondence with Asquith, who wrote at midnight on 3 August begging Morley 'with all my heart' to rethink his position before taking a step 'which impoverishes the Government, and leaves me stranded and almost alone.' Morley was touched by this uncharacteristically emotional appeal but reiterated the 'cardinal difference' on foreign policy which made his resignation necessary. It would be easy to judge Asquith's final approach cynically. The claim that he was being left 'stranded and almost alone' came oddly from a leader who had maintained party unity by isolating all those who opposed him, and who could rely on cross-party support in parliament. On 1 August 1914 he had told Venetia Stanley that 'we may have to contemplate with such equanimity as we can command the loss of Morley.'<sup>18</sup> Perhaps Asquith was

playing a last tactical card, relying on Morley's vulnerability to flattery and emotional blackmail to ensure that he did nothing to rock the boat. If that was the aim it was very successful.

### The closing of the ranks

On the afternoon of 3 August Morley did not go to hear Grey's House of Commons speech in which the decision to go to war was announced. He would have found the cheers from the Conservative benches depressing; but he might have been heartened to hear the strong case made by some of the Liberal dissenters, which showed that Morley's views on the war were not a personal eccentricity. Much of Grey's speech was devoted to an insistence that he had worked untiringly for peace and that, although Britain was not formally committed by the entente to provide armed support to France, there was a moral obligation:

If ... we run away from those obligations of honour and interest ... I doubt whether, whatever material force we might have at the end, it would be of very much value in face of the respect we should have lost. ... [We should be unable to prevent the whole of the West of Europe] falling under the domination of a single Power.

Bonar Law assured the government of Conservative support, and the only immediate note of dissent came in a brief speech by the Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald. He dismissed the appeal to honour: throughout history statesmen had similarly justified their crimes. As for the special relationship with France, 'no such friendship ... between one nation and another could ever justify one of those nations entering into war on behalf of the other.'

An attempt by backbenchers to extend the discussion was frustrated by Asquith's vague promise of a full debate on some later date, but eventually they secured a two-hour adjournment debate at the end of the day's sitting. Many accounts pay insufficient attention to this debate, in which about twenty Liberals spoke forcefully against what they saw as Grey's precipitate

failure to explore the German offers to negotiate terms for British neutrality. Many of the speakers saw Germany as a less serious long-term threat than Russia, and they were unconvinced by the need to safeguard the territorial integrity of Belgium. The underlying cause of the war was 'a deep animosity against German ambitions ... [a] mad desire to keep up an impossibility in Europe.' It was not a people's war, but one brought about 'by men in high places ... working in secret ... [to preserve] the remnant of an older evil civilisation which is disappearing by gradual and peaceful methods.' The Conservative Balfour finally wound up the proceedings, contemptuously dismissing the arguments as 'the very dregs and lees of debate.' Asquith had secured majority support in the House of Commons, but at a heavy price.

On the following day, 4 August, *The Times* report of the debate was euphoric. The House of Commons had been 'at its best' in its reception of a speech 'destined to remain memorable in the history of the world', and the half-hearted voice of dissent 'served but as a foil to the general unanimity.' On 6 August, *The Times* reported that the House of Commons was 'maintaining its united front superbly': when the prime minister announced the resignations of Morley, Burns, and Trevelyan, 'nobody showed the slightest concern.' Even the *Manchester Guardian*, which had campaigned for British neutrality, was muted, although in one of the letters congratulating Morley on his resignation C. P. Scott said that it would have been dreadful if we had been 'dragged into a war for the balance of power without a single resignation from those who stand for the older Liberalism.'<sup>19</sup> One of the most moving of the letters was one from Grey:

My heart is too full of all the misery of the time to let me write what I feel. I am choked with it. But I think of you with much tender feeling & affection.<sup>20</sup>

The absence of any trace of triumphalism in this letter reinforced Morley's resolve not to make things harder for those left to bear the brunt of the war. He told Haldane

**Morley included in the *Memorandum* an extraordinary final exchange of correspondence with Asquith, who wrote at midnight on 3 August begging Morley 'with all my heart' to rethink his position before taking a step 'which impoverishes the Government, and leaves me stranded and almost alone.'**

that 'I part from my colleagues in more sorrow than I expected. The pang is sharp.'<sup>21</sup> Morley's stance was not a heroic one. He had always lacked the last degree of ruthlessness necessary for a political career, and by 1914 he was too old and tired to lead a crusade for peace. Even for a younger man it was not easy to stand out against the popular war fever. On 18 August 1914, Morley wrote to Rosebery, after reading a 'screed' in *The Times* about the war being 'long and very long', that 'the insanity of the hour would have seemed incredible a month ago.'<sup>22</sup> Lloyd George, who up to the eleventh hour had been doubtful about British participation, was soon producing speeches full of stomach-turning rhetoric: on 19 September he professed to envy young people their opportunity to share in 'the glow and thrill of a great movement for liberty.'<sup>23</sup> Almost paradoxically, the appalling level of casualties, instead of raising doubts about whether the corresponding benefits were proportionate, merely made it harder to admit that the slaughter might initially have been avoided.

It is only through occasional references in the letters written during the war that Morley revealed his feelings. The comradeship that he had established with John Burns in the stressful time of their resignations was reinforced over the years. On 9 July 1916, Morley wrote that he would not soon 'forget your visit here tonight ... the angry vision of this hideous war ... makes me proud that I hold the hand of such a comrade in a great piece of history.'<sup>24</sup> Morley enjoyed being entertained in one or another of Rosebery's great houses, and he kept in touch with some of his former ministerial colleagues. Sometimes he argued with them, but as he put it to Haldane in November 1914, the issues were 'too momentous ... to reduce them to mere cut and thrust. It is as if some blasting and desolating curse had fallen over the world.'<sup>25</sup> He wondered 'whether any war has not been too heavy a price for its gain – excepting perhaps the American Civil War' which had ended slavery.

### Conclusion

Morley's failure to explain more clearly his motives for opposing

Britain's involvement in the war in 1914 was partly personal: he was old and tired and reluctant to speak out against ministerial colleagues of whom he had become fond. But the failure was also more general. There was no adequate debate, in the cabinet or in parliament, about the reasons for going to war (particularly the case for sending an army to France rather than relying on naval power). Opponents of the war failed to face up clearly to the implications of neutrality. It was uncomfortable to argue that France should be 'left in the lurch' against a German attack, and those taking such a line needed to make it clear whether they believed that the consequences of a German victory were not as serious as suggested. Looking back after a century (much of which has been devoted to the struggle against Russian domination that Morley foretold), it is easier to accept Germany's leadership of Europe as natural and inevitable. But at the time few were willing or able to spell this out, and Morley's critics were able to portray his optimism about Germany and his pessimism about Russia (although these views were widely shared) as being based upon emotional prejudice. There is still no clear consensus.

*Patrick Jackson was the author of Morley of Blackburn, a biography of John Morley published in 2012. This article was one of the last he wrote before his death in November 2014 (see obituary, Journal of Liberal History 86 (winter 2014–15)).*

1 Patrick Jackson, *Morley of Blackburn: A Literary and Political Biography of John*

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*Morley* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012).

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- 15 Brock (eds.), *Asquith Letters*, letter 112.
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- 17 *Ibid.*, letter 113.
- 18 *Ibid.*, letter 112.
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- 20 MP MS Eng d 3585, fo. 146
- 21 NLS MS 5910, fo. 253
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- 24 Morley, *Memorandum*, p. xi.
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