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Source: *The History Teacher*, May, 1970, Vol. 3, No. 4 (May, 1970), pp. 27-36

Published by: Society for History Education

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3054322>

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How a "squalid intrigue" in the midst of World War I led to the destruction of the great Liberal Party and the reshaping of British politics.

The Murder of the British Liberal Party

BY DON M. CREGIER

I am going to tell you a murder story. The crime was unpremeditated, but it left the victim just as dead as if it had been carefully planned. The victim in this case was a great political party, a national institution whose talented, experienced, broad-minded, and far-sighted leaders, if they had held office, might have weakened the effects of the economic depression of the 1930's and possibly even prevented World War II.

The victim of this crime was the British Liberal party, and there were three "murderers." The name of the "first murderer" was Herbert Henry Asquith. The name of the "second murderer" was David

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Lloyd George. There was also a third murderer. This was the British voter, who in effect gave the victim the coup de grace, which, as we shall see, was indeed an act of mercy.

The murder of the Liberal party might not have succeeded if the victim had not been debilitated by previous illnesses. The Liberal party was the great reform party of nineteenth-century Britain. Its leaders gave the country a succession of new institutions: a reformed Parliament, a greatly expanded electorate, a modernized system of taxation, the beginning of a national education system, a new judicial structure, army reform, land reform, mine and factory reforms, legalization of trade unions, and many other significant changes that transformed Britain into a modern nation.

By 1885, the Liberal party and the country were ready for another great leap forward into the field of social reform. The British working class, newly enfranchised by the Liberals, was pressing for such benefits as old age pensions, workmen's compensation, minimum wages and maximum hours, and other advantages that we today associate with the welfare state. There were two bold men in the party who would have led it along this road: Sir Charles Dilke and Joseph Chamberlain. Neither man, unfortunately, became leader of the Liberal party. Dilke's career was cut short by an absurd scandal. Chamberlain bolted the Liberal party over the Irish question, affiliated himself and a group of his followers with the Conservatives, and in so doing gave the latter a much needed stimulus.

The Liberal party was severely weakened by the loss of these two promising leaders. If either man had become Liberal Prime Minister and carried through the social reforms he favored, the Liberal party might be governing Britain today as the party of the moderate left. The political murder we are about to investigate might never have succeeded.

The Liberal party was further weakened by the long overdue departure of its greatest nineteenth century leader, William Ewart Gladstone. Gladstone, whose remarkable Ministry of 1868-1874

had carried through many of the institutional reforms mentioned above, should properly have retired in 1874. However, for various reasons he hung on to leadership for another twenty years. Instead of transforming the Liberal party into an instrument of social change, as either Dilke or Chamberlain would certainly have done, Gladstone—the relic of the earlier stage of *laissez-faire* Liberalism that had ended in the 1870's—dragged his unwilling party after him in pursuit of a mirage, the political liberation of Ireland, for which the British people were not yet prepared and in which the British working class had not the slightest interest.

For nearly twenty years, this Grand Old Man, energetic and domineering despite his advanced age, whom everyone admired but had become exceedingly bored with, diverted the Liberals from their true mission. When Gladstone finally was shunted into retirement, at the age of eighty-five, there followed a further crisis of the Liberal party, a ten-year struggle for leadership among his power-thirsty lieutenants. This was finally settled, after much blood-letting, in 1905 when Herbert Henry Asquith emerged as the coming man in the party. Three years later he succeeded to the official leadership and, since the Liberals were then in power, to the Prime Ministership.

The Liberals, returned to office in 1905 after a long opposition by the periodic swing of the political pendulum, now began to make up for lost time. Under Asquith's able guidance, a group of younger Liberal leaders, dominated by David Lloyd George but also including Winston Churchill and several other very capable men in their thirties and early forties, carried through a long overdue series of far-reaching social reforms. These included pensions, workmen's compensation, minimum wages for miners, health and unemployment insurance, a steeply graduated income tax, heavy inheritance taxes, a system of labor exchanges to fight unemployment, and other necessary and useful reforms. There was also the famous and heatedly-fought constitutional revision which checked the power of the Conservative-dominated House of Lords. The great Liberal Ministry of 1905-1914 finally gave Britain many of the social reforms it should have had two decades earlier.

But in the meantime the disgruntled left wing of the Liberal party associated with the trade union movement had grown tired of waiting, and had broken away from the parent party and established a new Labor party, financed with trade union funds and dedicated to the gradual socialization of the British economy and society. This new Labor party

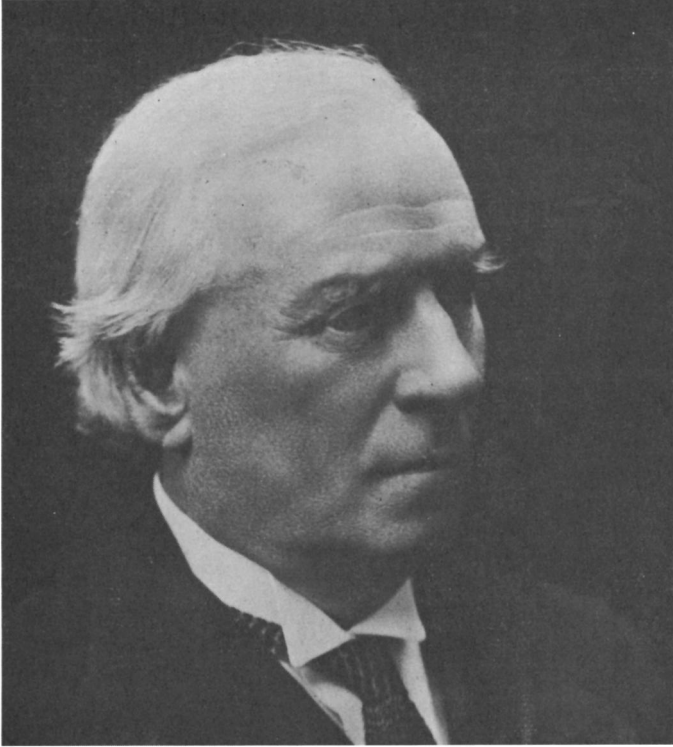
was not much of a success, simply because when the Liberals finally did get a reform Ministry into office in 1905, it carried through most of what the Laborites and the British working class in general wanted done at this stage.

Like most third parties, the Labor party was in the unfortunate predicament of seeing one of the major parties steal its program. By 1914, therefore, the Labor party was about ready to go under. If a peacetime election had been held in, say, 1915, the Labor party would probably have lost up to half its 40-odd M.P.'s. Indeed, the Labor party really had been kept alive for a decade by a tacit alliance with the Liberals, who used it as a kind of satellite party to win votes in heavily working class constituencies. This alliance, for various reasons, had come apart by 1914. If there had been an election then, the Liberals would have fought Labor and probably destroyed it.

The important thing about the Labor party was not its power or its influence, both of which were practically nil, but the mere fact that it was *there*, that it existed as a potential alternative reform party if anything should happen to embarrass and discredit the Liberals.

We come now to our main event. The dramatis personae need some introduction, which must be very abbreviated. Asquith—bland, portly, genial, a lover of good food

Culver Pictures

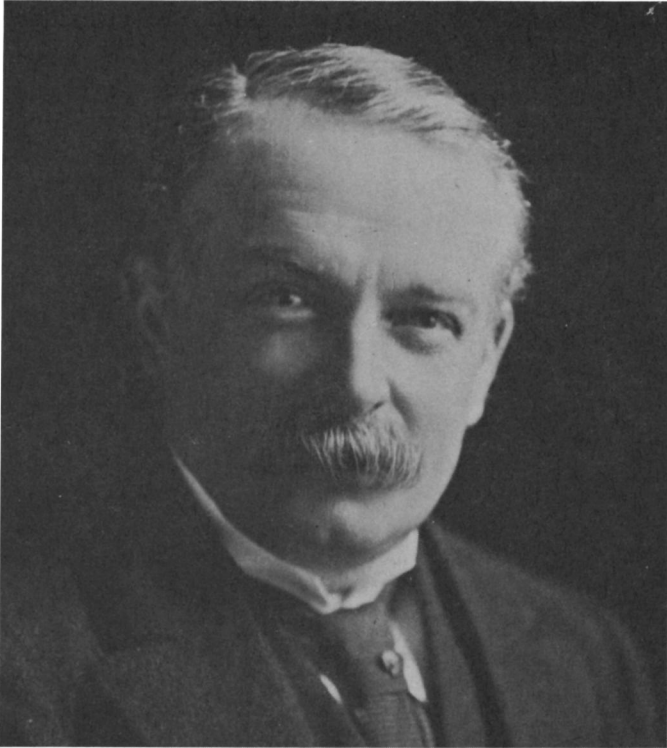


Herbert Henry Asquith (1852-1928).

and drink, a charming conversationalist and raconteur—after a brilliant career at Oxford, had done well as a barrister and been enticed into politics by Gladstone. More important, he had been initiated into High Society by his second wife, a social gadfly with important connections in the highest circles. It was these social-political connections that chiefly accounted for Asquith's final emergence over his rivals as Liberal party leader.

During the peacetime Ministry of 1906-1914, Asquith was an exceptionally competent leader of the party and the government. An astute Parliamentarian and able committee chairman, he skillfully manipulated his remarkable colleagues, one of the most talented group of men ever to govern Britain. Asquith's enormous success as Liberal leader before the war contrasts so sharply with his later failures that the change seems incredible.

Culver Pictures



David Lloyd George (1863-1945).

The driving spirit of the Liberal Ministry was not Asquith, but David Lloyd George. This extraordinary Welshman, so very unlike most of his affluent and polished Cabinet colleagues, came from a humble home—he was an orphan raised by a shoemaker uncle—and after succeeding as a solicitor, had risen to prominence in the Liberal party solely through tremendous drive and an incomparably sharp and devious mind. Lloyd George had a computer-like

brain, absorbing everything that he ever saw or heard, recalling it instantly when needed, and intuitively fitting together all the elements needed to make lightning decisions. It is probably no exaggeration to say that no other British statesman has possessed Lloyd George's raw intellectual ability.

This exceptional mental agility had no solid foundation in character. Lloyd George lacked formal education except for a smattering of technical legal knowledge, and

the religious indoctrination that he had superficially imbibed as a child and youth in rural Wales was quickly rubbed away when he entered the great world of London politics and society. Thus we have in Lloyd George the dangerous combination of tremendous brain power and practically no morals. There were many political associates of Lloyd George who regarded him as close to being an unprincipled scoundrel.

Asquith understood this dark side of Lloyd George's personality very well. He saw it, made allowance for it—Asquith was very tolerant—and protected Lloyd George from his own shortcomings. In 1912, Asquith saved Lloyd George from the fate of Sir Charles Dilke when the Welshman became involved in a shoddy financial scandal, the Marconi affair, involving the unethical use of inside information available to Lloyd George as a Cabinet minister. Asquith knew that Lloyd George was of great benefit to the Liberal party because of his shrewd insight, his ability to simplify complex issues, his talents as an administrator and a mediator of disputes, his skill as a public speaker—close to demagoguery—which no other prominent Liberal had, and his unmatched power to drive the party forward, a power Asquith lacked but knew the Liberals needed if they were to stay in power. Asquith had no intention

whatever of ever allowing Lloyd George to become party leader, a post for which he considered him unfitted by any proper standards of ethics or conduct.

The great Liberal Ministry was interrupted by World War I, a war that should never have happened and might not have if Asquith and his colleagues had given as close attention to foreign affairs as to domestic. The domestic troubles had seemed far more pressing until that fatal August of 1914 brought an abrupt end to the pre-war world and the pending crises in Ireland and in labor-management relations that had absorbed the Cabinet for months. An official moratorium on party politics was agreed upon and a three-party Coalition Cabinet replaced the Liberal Ministry early in 1915.

This war was unlike any in which Britain had ever been engaged before. The problems of mobilization, training of troops, supply, transportation, and organization of the homefront were wholly unprecedented. These problems were too much for the unimaginative Asquith to cope with very successfully, though at first he did his best. But these difficult problems and the immediate decisions they required were the very food on which a mind like Lloyd George's thrived.

This man, once considered a pacifist—he had strongly opposed the Boer War and frowned on

peacetime spending for armaments—within months transformed himself into the guiding spirit of the British war effort. Unlike Asquith and most of the other rather complacent Liberal ministers, Lloyd George was by temperament a fighter. War gave him an outlet for his energies and skills that no peacetime pursuit ever could have provided. Only Churchill shared this enthusiasm for the war, and Churchill was soon removed from the Cabinet as a scapegoat for certain blunders in war strategy.

Unfortunately for the Liberal party, the newfound power that Lloyd George was able to grasp as minister chiefly responsible for the war effort gave him fancies and ambitions that earlier he either had not had or had been willing to sublimate. In short, Lloyd George saw that the circumstances were ripe for a power play that would give him the supreme leadership of the British government, in fact if not in name.

Lloyd George's ambition was heightened by a growing awareness that Asquith was no longer living up to the demands of his office. Asquith was increasingly disheartened by the misery and death on the battlefield, which was startlingly brought home to him in the summer of 1916 by the loss of his eldest son, a promising young lawyer and politician. Under Asquith's faltering leadership, weakened by this personal tragedy

and by a growing disillusionment and cynicism, the British government and its war program lost momentum. As this happened, a peace movement began to gain ground both within and outside the government, and simultaneously patriotic and nationalistic forces associated with the Conservative party, and rallied by a powerful newspaper publisher, Lord Northcliffe, demanded the removal of Asquith and his replacement by a more effective Prime Minister.

Asquith, accustomed to years of authority and power in the Liberal party, believed he was indispensable to the party, which still, of course, was the majority party in Parliament. He therefore discounted and closed his mind to the intrigue that was developing to oust him and substitute Lloyd George as Prime Minister. Lloyd George, who was sincerely patriotic—one of his few consistent principles—was frankly worried by the peace movement, and perhaps with reason feared that Asquith would be captured by it and would end the war on terms favorable to the enemy.

Combining quite legitimate apprehensions about Asquith with personal ambition for power, Lloyd George joined forces with the plotters, nearly all of whom were Conservatives who before the war had been among his bitterest enemies. Among them were Andrew Bonar Law, Sir Max Aitken

(later Lord Beaverbrook), Sir Edward Carson, Lord Milner, and Leopold Amery. There seems little doubt that some of these conspirators, while inspired by truly patriotic motives, also saw the situation as an excellent opportunity to discredit the Liberal party for years by tagging it with responsibility both for lack of preparedness before the war and ineptitude in managing the war. By making Lloyd George Prime Minister, they would remove from the Liberal party its ablest politician, since Asquith would never take him back after such a betrayal. He might even be absorbed into the Tory party as Chamberlain had been thirty years before.

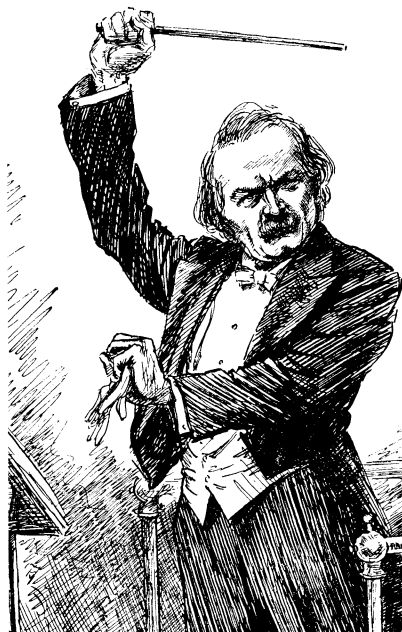
In early December, 1916, this rather squalid intrigue came to a head. In concert with his new political and journalistic allies, Lloyd George gave Asquith an ultimatum demanding that he be made head of a special War Council that would have complete control of the war, while Asquith would remain in office as a figurehead Prime Minister. Asquith, at first seemingly acquiescent, suddenly changed his mind and tried to force Lloyd George out of the government. What seems to have happened was that Asquith abandoned his original plan to give in to Lloyd George when some of his Liberal friends, who intensely disliked Lloyd George, reminded him of the Marconi incident and cited

similar evidence of how untrustworthy and dangerous the man was. Asquith therefore determined to fight. Thereupon the Conservative party leaders, some of whom were in on Lloyd George's plot, threatened a full-scale government crisis unless Asquith resigned.

Asquith did so, apparently believing that the plot would fail and he would be returned to office. But Lloyd George and his fellow conspirators had prepared their ground well. Just under half of the Liberal and Labor M.P.'s were persuaded that the success of the war effort required a government controlled by Lloyd George. Combined with the solid Conservative block critical of Asquith, this gave Lloyd George more than enough votes to defeat Asquith if there was a showdown in the House of Commons. When Asquith grasped the true situation, he saw that he was beaten and went quietly into opposition. Lloyd George became Prime Minister of a new Coalition Cabinet of Conservatives and dissident Liberals. It is noteworthy that a large number of obscure Liberal M.P.'s who supported Lloyd George were given under-secretaryships and other minor government posts that they would not have gotten in ordinary circumstances. They were, in effect, paid off.

In four days of conspiracy, the historic Liberal party had been

(C) PUNCH, LONDON



Punch greets "the New Conductor."

cleaved in two, temporarily as some thought at the time, permanently as events were to prove. The murder had been committed.

There remain the questions, which of the two Liberal leaders was primarily responsible for this schism, and did it have to happen? Most students of this affair place the principal blame on Lloyd George. I do not agree. Lloyd George did not want to destroy the Liberal party. His sole object was control of the government to win the war. He singlemindedly sought this goal, one by-product being the destruction of the party.

A second one was the destruction of Lloyd George's peacetime political career, because once the war and postwar reconstruction were over, Lloyd George was unceremoniously ditched by his ungrateful Conservative allies and never returned to office.

Although Lloyd George's intrigue indirectly resulted in the destruction of the Liberal party, it was actually Asquith's refusal to accept Lloyd George's ultimatum that was the immediate cause. If Asquith had been willing to act as a figurehead Prime Minister, or perhaps to take a peerage and an honorific office like Lord Chancellor, there would have been no party split at this time, and probably not at all.

We must ask, was Asquith justified in deciding to fight Lloyd George and suffer the possible consequences? As noted, Asquith may have thought he could defeat the rebel. But if he thought this, obviously his political wisdom had grown very dim. If, on the other hand, he knew he would lose the struggle, he must also have known that the Liberal party of which he was the leader was, at very best, doomed to years of weakness and frustration. Thus Asquith was either guilty of gross political incompetence, or he was prepared to sacrifice the party for the sake of his personal pride and honor. In either event, I would say that

Asquith was the real "murderer" of the Liberal party, and Lloyd George merely an accessory.

The sequel is well known and need not detain us long. The Labor party, waiting in the wings, came out of the war in a very strong political position, because it bore no responsibility for either the causes or the effects of the conflict. Once Lloyd George's personal prestige as "the man who won the war" faded, as it was bound to, the electorate was given the choice of a powerful Conservative party strengthened by the annihilation of its traditional Liberal opposi-

tion; an aggressive, optimistic Labor party appealing strongly to frustrated workingmen and newly-enfranchised women; and two weak Liberal factions attached to the two rival leaders, more intent on fighting each other than winning Parliamentary elections. The British voter, always a sportsman, decided in due course to put the mortally wounded Liberal party out of its misery. In so doing, unfortunately, he retired into private life the majority of the best administrative brains in Britain, with consequences the country is still suffering.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

There is still no definitive account of the fall of the Asquith Ministry, one that is both fully detailed and impartial. The best short interpretation is in A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford, 1966). The most complete version is that of Lord Beaverbrook, one of the Tory conspirators, in his *Politicians and the War, 1916*, Vol. II (London, 1932). Roy Jenkins, *Asquith* (London, 1964), provides 1914 the best analysis from the Asquithian point of view. Lord Riddell's *War Diary 1914-1918* (London, 1933) and Christopher Addison's *Politics from Within, 1911-1918* (2 vols.; London, 1924) throw light on Lloyd George's thinking and behavior before and during the plot, and his possible motives. Many further details are to be found in the memoirs and standard biographies of such participants in the events as Sir Henry Wilson, Andrew Bonar Law, Sir Edward Carson, Sir Austen Chamberlain, Reginald McKenna, Lord Crewe, Lord Northcliffe, A. J. Balfour, Lord Curzon, Lord Milner, Geoffrey Dawson, and Leopold Amery. The biographies of Lloyd George are either too vituperative or hagiographic to be helpful, and his memoirs are equivocal. Two recent studies reach quite different conclusions. Trevor Wilson, *Downfall of the Liberal Party* (London, 1966), charges that Lloyd George plotted the destruction of both Asquith and the party, while Cameron Hazlehurst, in a lecture published in *Great Lives Observed: Lloyd George*, ed. Martin Gilbert (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), argues that Lloyd George was a hesitant and fearful plotter, if indeed a plotter at all.