

Governments, Parliaments and Parties (Great Britain and Ireland)

By [Matthew Johnson](#)

Summary

The Great War marked a period of profound upheaval in British politics. The old controversies of Edwardian politics were replaced by new debates about military strategy, civil-military relations and the capacity of the state to mobilize the nation for “total war.” The traditional structures of party politics began to buckle as new fault lines emerged within parties, and shifting coalitions were formed and broken between them. In just four years, the war witnessed the destruction of Britain’s last Liberal government, a Conservative resurgence after almost a decade in Opposition and the opening up of new political horizons for the Labour Party.

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Introduction: British Politics and the Coming of War

The years immediately preceding the Great War were a tumultuous period in British politics. By July 1914 a Liberal government had held office for more than eight years, having won a landslide general election victory in 1906 and two further elections (with much reduced majorities) in 1910. Shored up by a “Progressive Alliance” with the recently-formed Labour Party, the Liberals had embarked on an ambitious programme of social, fiscal and constitutional reform. Yet the final years of peace saw the government confronted by a series of seemingly intractable challenges, including a sustained outbreak of industrial unrest and a campaign of civil disobedience by militant suffragettes. Most worrying of all was the looming threat of civil war in Ireland, where Nationalists and Ulster Unionists, divided over the prospect of Irish “[Home Rule](#),” were assembling rival [paramilitary forces](#).

The European crisis of 1914 was initially greeted with uncertainty in London. Over the preceding decade, [diplomatic arrangements](#) with [France](#) (1904) and [Russia](#) (1907), intended primarily to settle outstanding disputes between colonial rivals, had seemingly pulled [Britain](#) into the continental system of alliances and away from her traditional policy of “Splendid Isolation.” Following an [international crisis over Morocco](#), the Anglo-French Entente was supplemented by a series of staff talks between the British and French armies concerning the prospect of collaboration in a future war against [Germany](#), with whom Britain had become engaged in a costly [naval race](#). Despite this, and even as the European situation deteriorated following [the assassination in Sarajevo](#), the British Foreign Secretary, Sir [Edward Grey \(1862-1933\)](#), insisted that his country retained a diplomatic free hand and was bound by no treaty obligation to intervene in a war between the Great Powers. Indeed, while Grey himself was gravely alarmed by the prospect of Germany overwhelming France and establishing a continental hegemony, it was clear that a majority in the badly divided Liberal cabinet – and in the wider Liberal Party – were resolutely opposed to any British involvement in a European war.

This situation was transformed by the German violation of Belgian [neutrality](#). “Prussian” military aggression outraged Liberal opinion, and a forceful performance by Grey in the House of Commons on 3 August did much to rally the party behind a decision for military intervention. Arguably more important in convincing the waverers in the cabinet was the skilful use made by the Prime Minister, [Herbert Henry Asquith \(1852-1928\)](#), of a note from the Opposition leader, [Andrew Bonar Law \(1858-1923\)](#), offering political support in the crisis from the Conservatives (known in this period as the Unionists – or officially, after 1912, as the Conservative and Unionist Party). Fearing that the breakup of the Liberal government would open the way for a pro-war Tory or coalition administration, most of the anti-war Liberal ministers fell in line. Britain declared war on 4 August, with only two members of the cabinet resigning – [John Burns \(1858-1943\)](#) and [John Morley \(1838-1923\)](#).¹

The Liberal Government at War and the Formation of the Asquith Coalition

In the short term, the outbreak of war appeared to strengthen the government’s position. The appointment of Field Marshal [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850-1916\)](#) as secretary of state for war enhanced the ministry’s standing in the country, while the international emergency offered the Liberals a means of escaping their domestic political difficulties. The crisis in Ireland was dwarfed by the arrival of the “real Armageddon” in Europe, and both Nationalists and Ulstermen rallied against the common foe.² At home, the Women’s Social and Political Union announced a suspension of [suffragette](#) militancy, and [Christabel Pankhurst](#)

[\(1880-1958\)](#) delivered an impassioned speech at the London Opera House, urging her followers “to do all we can to rouse the individual citizen to fight for the freedom and the independence of this country and this Empire.”³ After a doomed attempt to prevent the outbreak of war, [James Ramsay MacDonald \(1866-1937\)](#) resigned as chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party, to be replaced by [Arthur Henderson \(1863-1935\)](#) who pledged his party to support the war effort, echoing the promise of support already offered by Bonar Law. A political truce was quickly established, under which the parties agreed to avoid divisive by-election contests as parliamentary seats fell vacant during the war.

Yet the national unity ostensibly revealed by these developments remained, to a considerable extent, both artificial and superficial. The controversies of pre-war party politics did not simply disappear after August 1914. Unionists were soon expressing outrage at the government’s apparent willingness to exploit the cessation of party hostilities in order to advance its domestic agenda – most notably with regard to Irish Home Rule and the disestablishment of the church in Wales. More seriously, despite the addition of Kitchener, the government struggled to establish its credentials as an effective war ministry. Ministerial talk of “business as usual,” intended to calm jittery markets following the outbreak of war, increasingly came to be seen in terms of a failure to put the country on an effective war footing. At the same time, [Reginald McKenna \(1863-1943\)](#), the Home Secretary, was criticized for refusing to order the wholesale internment of enemy aliens in response to a spy scare whipped up by the press. To the government’s detractors, it appeared that Liberal sensibilities were hindering the effective prosecution of the war.

In fact, the ministry’s approach was determined less by an ideological commitment to *laissez faire* politics than by the strategic conviction that Britain’s contribution to the Entente’s war effort should be primarily naval and economic, rather than military, in nature. The Royal Navy would sweep the enemy’s warships from the seas and [blockade the German coast](#); at the same time Britain would supply her allies with financial and military resources but engage in only limited military operations on the continent.⁴ Unfortunately for the Liberals, this strategy failed to deliver a speedy victory either on land or at sea. Within Parliament, the Unionist leadership remained reluctant to attack ministers directly, but backbench Conservatives increasingly chafed under the constraints of a political truce which, they felt, was acting to stifle legitimate criticism of the government. The formation of the Unionist Business Committee in January 1915, intended to “ginger up” the parliamentary Opposition, was a sign of Conservative unrest. Moreover, as the Liberal editor [C. P. Scott \(1846-1932\)](#) observed, “the truce of parties certainly doesn’t apply to the party press,” and right-wing organs such as the *Daily Express* were vociferous in their denunciation of leading Liberal ministers – in particular McKenna and the German-educated Lord Chancellor, [Richard Burdon Haldane \(1856-1928\)](#).⁵

The government's underlying vulnerability was revealed in the summer of 1915, when it faced two serious crises almost simultaneously. On 9 May Sir [John French \(1852-1925\)](#), the commander of the [British Expeditionary Force](#) (BEF) on the [Western Front](#), launched an attack on Aubers Ridge which failed badly, with the BEF sustaining heavy casualties. French blamed the disaster on a [shortage of ammunition](#) – in particular high explosive shells – and allowed his frustrations to be made public in an article published in the *Times* on 14 May. The article's intended target was Kitchener but it also proved acutely embarrassing to the prime minister, who had recently given a speech at Newcastle in which (basing his remarks on assurances from the war secretary) he had denied that military operations were being hindered by any shortage of munitions.⁶ The day after the damaging article appeared, the government was rocked by the resignation of the combustible First Sea Lord, Admiral [John "Jacky" Fisher \(1841-1920\)](#), who had despaired over the mismanagement of a combined military and naval operation to the Dardanelles, and over the poor state of his working relationship with his political master, [Winston Churchill \(1874-1965\)](#).

With Unionist discontent in danger of boiling over, on 17 May Bonar Law visited the Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer, [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#), who had for some time been growing increasingly frustrated both with the "limited liability" strategy being championed by his cabinet colleagues and with Kitchener's handling of [munitions production](#). Agreeing that the present administration was unlikely to be able to deliver a military victory in the foreseeable future, the chancellor and the Unionist leader presented the prime minister with what was effectively an ultimatum demanding the "reconstruction" of his government. Asquith responded by dissolving his cabinet and announcing the formation of a coalition – to the shock and dismay of his colleagues and followers. [Charles Hobhouse \(1862-1941\)](#), the Postmaster-General who lost his office in the reconstruction, observed privately that "the disintegration of the Liberal Party is complete. We shall not return to power for some years."⁷

The creation of the coalition should not, however, be seen simply as a triumph of Unionists over Liberals. Asquith had probably anticipated the possibility of needing to broaden the base of his administration for some time. By the summer of 1915 he was less concerned about a Unionist challenge in the House of Commons than he was about the prospect of a [general election](#) which was due, under the terms of the Parliament Act, before the end of the year. The fact that an election could only be postponed with the approval of the Tory-dominated House of Lords offered Bonar Law valuable political leverage over the prime minister. Yet leading Unionists had reasons of their own for wishing to avoid going to the country. If the party were seen to be forcing an election in wartime it would leave itself open to charges of sectionalism. Thereafter, even a victorious Unionist Party might struggle to implement the policies it deemed essential for military victory without sacrificing national unity – especially

if a defeated Liberal Party were driven into outright opposition.⁸

Asquith's grip on power thus remained, for the time being, secure, and the prime minister was able to frame the new coalition largely on his own terms. Despite the departure of Haldane (one of Asquith's oldest political friends), Liberals retained control of almost all the key offices in the new administration, including the Foreign Office, Home Office and Exchequer. Kitchener's prestige in the country convinced Asquith to retain his services at the War Office – albeit with his powers diminished by the establishment a new Ministry of Munitions under Lloyd George. The former Conservative leader [Arthur Balfour \(1848-1930\)](#), who had already been attending meetings of the Committee of Imperial Defence at Asquith's invitation, was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty, replacing Churchill, who became chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Bonar Law accepted the comparatively minor post of colonial secretary. The Irish Nationalists remained outside the coalition but the appointment of Arthur Henderson as president of the Board of Education served to enhance the image of the new administration as a "National Government," in the process granting the Labour Party its first taste of ministerial office.

The Conscription Crisis and the Rise of Lloyd George

The life of the new coalition was dominated by controversies in two key areas of policy: the mobilization of manpower and the creation of an effective political machinery for the higher strategic direction of the war. The cabinet was split from its very inception over the question of military conscription. Most Unionists, with the notable exception of Balfour, favoured its immediate introduction. The Liberals were far more divided. Lloyd George and Churchill quickly emerged as keen conscriptionists but most of their senior colleagues remained sceptical. Perhaps more than any other issue, compulsory military service appeared to represent a direct threat to the values and traditions of Liberalism, with its emphasis on the liberty of the citizen. It was a particularly troubling prospect in the context of a war ostensibly being waged against "Prussian [militarism](#)." Within the cabinet, however, the leading opponents of military compulsion – McKenna, recently promoted to the Exchequer, and [Walter Runciman \(1870-1949\)](#), the president of the Board of Trade – based their case not on abstract principle but on the damage to Britain's industrial output and her ability to continue financing her allies which they feared would result from the introduction of wholesale military conscription. In essence, this was no more than a reassertion of the "limited liability" strategy that they had been pushing since the outbreak of war – a belated challenge to Kitchener's decision to commit Britain to raising a mass army of seventy divisions, rather than an argument against conscription *per se*. The strength of their case was undermined by the willingness of a faction of backbench Liberal MPs, organized in the Liberal War Committee, to defend conscription both as the most rational and efficient means of organizing the nation's

manpower and as the most “democratic” and egalitarian means of raising a national army.⁹

The conscription controversy placed Asquith in a difficult position. His first priority was to preserve the stability of his government and, as far as possible, the unity of the nation. Accordingly, he refused to allow his policy on recruiting to be determined by “abstract attachment to an *a priori* principle,” but insisted that conscription could only be introduced with something approaching “general consent” in the country.¹⁰ This required careful handling not only of Liberal sensibilities but also of the Labour movement, which was concerned that the introduction of military compulsion might herald the imposition of industrial conscription – an innovation which Lloyd George had appeared to endorse in a speech in Manchester in June.¹¹

Pressure for compulsory service increased during 1915 as [military casualties](#) mounted, and in December a report by [Edward George Villiers Stanley, Lord Derby \(1865-1948\)](#), the director-general of recruiting, revealed that large numbers of available men were still holding back from volunteering. With Lloyd George now threatening resignation if conscription were not introduced, the prime minister persuaded the cabinet to approve a Military Service Bill providing for the compulsory enlistment of unmarried men between the ages of eighteen and forty-one. It passed the House of Commons the following month. A second bill, extending conscription to married men, was passed four months later. Asquith’s skilful management of his Liberal colleagues ensured that only one anti-conscriptionist resigned from the cabinet, with Sir [John Simon \(1873-1954\)](#) standing down as Home Secretary.¹² The Labour Party accepted the new law, albeit without much enthusiasm, and Henderson remained in the government.

The successful implementation of military conscription bought Asquith’s government little respite over the months that followed. On Easter Monday a force of armed Nationalists, led by [Patrick Pearse \(1879-1916\)](#) and [James Connolly \(1868-1916\)](#), seized control of the General Post Office and other major buildings in Dublin, and proclaimed an Irish Republic. Initially caught off-guard, the British authorities responded by declaring martial law and deploying thousands of troops to the city. The uprising was suppressed but the heavy-handedness of the British crackdown, which saw sixteen of the rebel leaders executed, rapidly alienated even moderate Irish opinion. Meanwhile, a series of military and naval setbacks during the spring and summer, including the surrender of the British garrison at [Kut al-Amara](#), a costly [naval engagement at Jutland](#) and the appalling casualties suffered in the [Somme offensive](#), served to further undermine public confidence in the government’s conduct of the war. With the Liberal Party fractious and demoralized, Unionist opinion was hardening against the coalition. Bonar Law’s ability to control his party appeared increasingly uncertain, and in

November the government was challenged by a significant Unionist rebellion led by Sir [Edward Carson \(1854-1935\)](#) in a debate over the Colonial Office's policy for disposing of captured German assets in Nigeria.¹³

The principal complaint against the coalition by the end of 1916 concerned the apparent lack of a coherent strategic vision at the highest levels of government. Asquith had attempted to streamline political decision-making during the war by working through a series of *ad hoc* bodies: the War Council, the Dardanelles Committee and, from November 1915, a new War Committee. However, he always remained constrained by the need to balance competing factions in the cabinet. The prime minister's cautious and steady approach had held the coalition together during the struggle over conscription, but his unwillingness to force the pace on controversial questions of policy increasingly came to be seen as a sign of weakness and vacillation. This was a source of frustration not only for many Unionists but also for Lloyd George, who became war secretary in July, following Kitchener's death at sea. The Welshman, by now widely regarded as the most dynamic personality in the coalition, had been drawing ever closer to both Bonar Law and Carson during 1916, and in December the three hatched a plan to force Asquith into accepting the creation of a new executive "war committee," which would handle the day-to-day running of the war, independent of the cabinet and without the membership of the prime minister. Asquith initially rejected the proposal but the threat of both Lloyd George and the Unionists withdrawing their support from his government persuaded him to reconsider and agree to a revised version of the plan. On 4 December, however, the *Times* published details of the proposed reconstruction of the government in an article that was highly critical of the prime minister and talks collapsed. Asquith resigned and King George, after consulting Bonar Law, invited Lloyd George to form a new government.

Lloyd George as Prime Minister

The political complexion of the administration formed by Lloyd George was markedly different from that of its Asquithian predecessor. Unionists now occupied most of the key cabinet posts, with Bonar Law taking the Exchequer, Balfour the Foreign Office, Derby the War Office and Carson the Admiralty. Arthur Henderson signalled Labour's support for the new regime by agreeing to serve as minister without portfolio and joining Lloyd George's new five-man "War Cabinet," but the senior Liberal ministers from Asquith's government followed their chief onto the backbenches. This at least freed the new prime minister from the need to constantly balance the interests of rival factions within his administration. Nevertheless, the challenges facing Lloyd George and his government remained formidable.

Disputes over strategy persisted, but they now principally took the form of a confrontation

between the prime minister and the military high command. Lloyd George clashed bitterly with Field Marshal [Douglas Haig \(1861-1928\)](#), who had succeeded Sir John French as commander of the BEF the previous year, and with [William Robertson \(1860-1933\)](#), the chief of the Imperial General Staff, over the bloody cost of the Passchendaele offensive launched in July 1917 and over the prime minister's plans to establish Allied unity of command. The new coalition also had to contend with the rapidly deteriorating situation in Ireland. On the outbreak of war the Nationalist leader in Parliament, [John Redmond \(1856-1918\)](#), had placed the paramilitary Irish Volunteers at the disposal of the government and lent his support to the military recruiting campaign. By 1917, however, frustrated by the failure to implement Home Rule and alienated by British repression in the wake of the [Easter Rising](#), Irish opinion was drifting away from Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party and towards the more militant Nationalists of Sinn Féin.

The speed with which the political landscape was shifting was made clear in July when [Eamon de Valera \(1882-1975\)](#), the most senior surviving commander of the Easter insurgents, won a by-election in East Clare – taking for Sinn Féin the seat previously held by Redmond's brother [Willie Redmond \(1861-1917\)](#), who had been killed while serving with British forces in [Belgium](#). An effort to salvage some measure of Home Rule through an Irish Convention came to naught, and a disastrous attempt in 1918 to extend conscription to Ireland (which had been exempt from the 1916 Military Service Acts) served only to bring together Sinn Féin, the Irish Parliamentary Party – led by [John Dillon \(1851-1927\)](#) after John Redmond's death in March – and the Catholic bishops in powerful opposition to British policy. At home, Lloyd George had to confront the challenge of deepening war weariness among the population, manifest in the growth of organizations like the [Union of Democratic Control](#) and the No-Conscription Fellowship, and in a wave of Labour unrest which appeared particularly alarming in the wake of the [Revolution in Russia](#).¹⁴ The emergence of radical right-wing groups such as the British Empire Union and the "Vigilantes", and the formation of a breakaway "National Party" led by the Tory renegade [Henry Page Croft \(1881-1947\)](#), threatened to destabilise politics from yet another direction.¹⁵

Ultimately, the government weathered these storms. Domestic dissent was managed through a combination of state repression and a concerted effort at national remobilization overseen by the National War Aims Committee.¹⁶ Lloyd George was able to outmanoeuvre the military high command, securing the removal of Robertson (although not Haig) in February 1918. His triumph in the "Maurice debate" in May, when Asquith attempted to attack the government over allegations by General [Frederick Maurice \(1871-1951\)](#) that the prime minister had weakened the British army on the Western Front prior to the German spring offensive, revealed the absence of any viable parliamentary alternative to the coalition. The

unexpected speed with which the final British military victory emerged in November put an end to the prospects of any more serious challenge emerging from the radical right.¹⁷

The Khaki Election of 1918 and the Emergence of a New Political Order

The end of the war was swiftly followed by a general election – the first held under the expanded franchise created by the 1918 Representation of the People Act, which had effectively introduced universal male suffrage and extended the vote, on a limited basis, to women. The election proved a triumph for the prime minister but a disaster for the party through which he had entered politics. On 12 November Lloyd George's Liberal ministers agreed to continue their membership of the coalition but an invitation to Asquith (who had remained the official leader of the Liberal Party after 1916) to join the government as Lord Chancellor was rejected. The 1918 election thus formalized a schism in the Liberal Party that had become increasingly serious since Asquith's fall from office. Lloyd George's lieutenants secured from the Unionists an agreement not to challenge 150 Liberal MPs identified as supporters of the government (many on the basis of their loyalty during the Maurice debate in May) and 133 of these were duly returned. But the Asquithian "Official" Liberals, denied the protection of the coalition "coupon," were routed at the polls and reduced to just thirty-six MPs. Asquith, McKenna and most of their senior colleagues lost their seats. The Liberals would never again hold office outside a coalition.

The Irish Parliamentary Party, on whose support at Westminster the Liberals had relied during the final years before the war, suffered a similarly disastrous result and was overwhelmed by an ascendant Sinn Féin. The result effectively laid to rest any remaining hopes of implementing Home Rule. Refusing to take their seats in the House of Commons, the Sinn Féin delegates established an independent legislature at Dublin – the Dáil Éireann – in the name of the Irish Republic. There followed two and a half years of armed struggle between the Irish Republican Army and the British government, leading ultimately to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the creation in 1922 of the Irish Free State.

While the Liberals' position at Westminster deteriorated, the prospects for the Labour Party in 1918 were rather brighter. Henderson had resigned from the cabinet in 1917, following a dispute over British participation in a planned [International Socialist conference in Stockholm](#), but the party remained in the coalition until the Armistice. Like the Liberals, Labour was torn between patriotism and [pacifism](#) during the war. But unlike the Liberals – and despite MacDonald's resignation in 1914 – the party never suffered a serious institutional split. Indeed, while the Liberal Party organization had decayed conspicuously since the general elections of 1910, the war enhanced the political and social importance of the industrial

working class and the trade union movement from which Labour drew its strength.¹⁸ Experience of ministerial office boosted the party's credibility, yet Henderson's defiance of Lloyd George in 1917 ensured that Labour retained its political independence. After his resignation Henderson embarked on a major reorganization of the party which led to the adoption of a new constitution, containing an explicit commitment to socialism, and laid the basis for Labour's emergence as a truly national party. The party was able to field an unprecedented 388 parliamentary candidates in 1918. There was to be no resurrection of the pre-War "Progressive Alliance." Within half a decade Labour had effectively replaced the Liberals as the principal political alternative to the Conservatives and in 1924 the party formed its first government, with Ramsay MacDonald as prime minister.

The real political "winners" to emerge from the war in Britain, however, were the Conservatives. This is not to say that the war did not present problems for the party. Many Unionists found the enforced passivity of "patriotic Opposition" during the first ten months of the war a stifling and frustrating experience. Even after May 1915 the Unionist leadership frequently found itself caught between the exigencies of coalition politics and the demands of the party's rank and file. Moreover, while Unionists were broadly united on the need for policies such as military conscription, they were conspicuously divided over issues such as the amount of economic collectivism they were prepared to accept in the pursuit of victory – for example, in the debate over the 1917 Corn Production Bill. The party was also divided over its response to the deteriorating situation in Ireland and most notably over Bonar Law's acceptance of a measure of Irish Home Rule in the wake of the Easter Rising.¹⁹ Indeed, the rise of Sinn Féin seemed to suggest by 1918 that the party's defining pre-war *raison d'être* – preservation of the union with Ireland – was itself becoming untenable.

Despite this, and notwithstanding [Henry Charles Keith Petty-Fitzmaurice, Marquess of Lansdowne's \(1845-1927\)](#) famous letter calling for a negotiated peace in 1917, the Unionists were essentially comfortable with the experience of war in a way that was true of neither the Liberals nor Labour. Their self-conscious image as the "party of patriotism" provided a powerful basis for political unity, not least as a means by which the leadership could marginalise the party's more extreme elements.²⁰ The Conservatives were also the principal beneficiaries of the way in which the war transformed the conditions of partisan politics. After three consecutive general election defeats prior to 1914, the formation of a coalition administration in May 1915 offered the Unionists a "back door" into office, while the fall of Asquith in December 1916 created the political space for the party to re-establish itself as the dominant force in government (albeit under Lloyd George's premiership), without even needing to seek a mandate from the electorate. In the 1918 general election, the Unionists benefited from the restricted nature of the franchise extended to women under the

Representation of the People Act (which granted the vote only to older, propertied women) and from the survival of plural voting. 335 of the party's official candidates were returned. Yet this result merely confirmed the revival in the party's fortunes that four years of conflict had already wrought.²¹

The Great War transformed the political landscape in Britain in ways which were not fully clear even by the end of 1918. The future of Lloyd George in particular and his relationship with the Conservatives remained uncertain. Yet as the Liberal Party crumbled, an increasingly ambitious Labour Party surveyed expanding electoral horizons, and the resurgent Conservatives embraced a new *raison d'être* in the politics of anti-socialism, the contours of a new political world were already beginning to emerge.

Matthew Johnson, Durham University

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