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Source: *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Mar., 1982), pp. 1-26

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1906048>

Accessed: 01/02/2010 08:42

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British War Policy and the Crisis of Liberalism in May 1915

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The last Liberal government of Britain was terminated by the prime minister, H. H. Asquith, who called for the resignation of his cabinet colleagues on May 17, 1915 without consulting them, and without resigning himself. The king, who was incommunicado aboard the royal train somewhere in the north, was only informed of this extraordinary act as a *fait accompli*. Asquith, known to intend to put the king "in a glass case," had commissioned himself to form a coalition government. His colleagues were surprised and annoyed, and there was need of some dramatic explanation. This Asquith duly provided in a confidential circular sent round, like the call for resignations, in a cabinet box. Personal interviews or explanations were avoided. The circular declared that the resignation of Lord Fisher from his position as First Sea Lord at the Admiralty and "the alleged deficiency of high explosive shells" would, "if duly exploited . . . in the House of Commons at this moment, have had the most disastrous effect on the general political and strategic situation" and in particular might have determined Italy's attitude "adversely to the Allies."¹ This explanation did not convince the Liberal ministers, who attributed the sudden surrender to the idea of coalition as the result of a failure of nerve on Asquith's part in the face of a mounting wave of hostile criticism in the Unionist opposition's newspaper press.

Such a press campaign was undoubtedly under way prior to the two incidents which gave Asquith his pretext for coalition—the publication of Col. C. à Court Repington's "shells" dispatch in *The Times* of May 14 and Fisher's petulant walkout from the Admiralty on May 15. In fact there is evidence that a coalition was agreed on in principle between Asquith and the Unionist leader, Andrew Bonar Law, at a private conference on May 12, and certainly Bonar Law was advised by his party manager, Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland, to seek a coalition for reasons elaborated in a memorandum of May 13. These reasons concerned war policy. A coalition, Steel-Maitland urged, "could take some

¹ Earl of Oxford and Asquith, *Memories and Reflections* (London, 1928), 2: 95–96. Also Charles Hobhouse, *Inside Asquith's Cabinet*, ed. Edward David (London, 1977) pp. 243–6.

measures (as regards organising munitions and recruiting) which for political reasons the present Government dare not."² The Unionist press had begun to demand conscription and extreme measures. Asquith knew that certain moderate Unionist leaders, particularly the ex-prime minister and *éminence grise* of the party, A. J. Balfour, would settle for a compromise. This was the specific context in which he took his sudden and somewhat opportunistic decision to accept a coalition.

In the wider context of the Liberal party's long run of power since winning the general election of 1906 the coalition of 1915 has a deeper meaning. It marks the point at which the "new Liberalism" as practised by Asquith and expounded by the *Manchester Guardian* sages J. A. Hobson and L. T. Hobhouse, or as exemplified by the "true" Liberals in Asquith's cabinet, lost credibility, never to regain it.³ Even in its hour of victory in 1906 Liberalism could be seen as doomed to be squeezed between the hard pragmatic creeds of the political left and right. It was vulnerable because on any particular policy it could be outbid by the exponents of the politics of class or material interests. Alone among the major parties, the new Liberalism was burdened by special ethical sensitivities and a creed of moral and intellectual progress centered on the ideal of citizenship.⁴ The special doctrines of Liberalism—free trade, laissez-faire, voluntarism, temperance, anti-militarism—could indeed be applied flexibly. Compulsion, state interference, the heavy taxation of the rich, and other courses suggesting "socialism" were not outside the recourse of Liberals. But the trends of the early twentieth century were unfavorable to Liberalism's finely balanced moral and intellectual outlook, and also to the highly structured confederation of political forces that formed the Liberal party. Liberalism was not adapted to the crudities of mass democracy, and, as its Labour critics observed, was in no hurry to enfranchise all adult men,

² Quoted also below. See footnote 43.

³ For the importance of Hobson and Hobhouse see Michael Freeden, *The New Liberalism. An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford, 1978). The "true" Liberals, as Asquith's wife Margot liked to call them, were Reginald McKenna and Walter Runciman, who claimed that a conscript army on the continental scale would break the economy and the pound; Sir Lewis Harcourt, who worked behind the scenes for Asquith after his fall in Dec. 1916; Herbert Samuel, author of *Liberalism* (introduction by Asquith), 1902; Sir John Simon, who resigned over conscription; Sir S. O. (later Lord) Buckmaster; and Charles Hobhouse. Sir Edward Grey and Lord Crewe had greater stature and independence, while Edwin Montagu combined an intense personal loyalty to Asquith with a hankering after more drastic war policies.

⁴ L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (Oxford paper edn.) p. 73: "The heart of Liberalism is the understanding that progress is not a matter of mechanical contrivance, but of the liberation of living spiritual energy." See also pp. 68–69, and Freeden, *The New Liberalism*.

or women.⁵ Winston Churchill, looking back in 1930 to his prewar career as a Liberal, revealingly commented: "in those days we had a real political democracy led by a hierarchy of statesmen, and not a fluid mass distracted by newspapers. There was a structure . . . before the liquefaction of the British political system set in."⁶

Even before 1914 it had become evident that popular government was supplanting parliamentary government, and that the state would become the popularly-preferred instrument for social and industrial amelioration. What the devout Liberal, Lord Hewart, later called the "new despotism" had begun to emerge, with commensurate increases in state spending, justified on the grounds of popular majority rule, a principle that Liberals could never fully accept.⁷ The clash between the new Liberalism and "materialistic" state socialism was basic and ideological.⁸ But, inevitably, there were members of the Liberal party who went with the state-socialist trend, most notably the two most prominent popular speakers and reformers, David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. The split between the Asquith and Lloyd George Liberals was paralleled on the Unionist side by an analogous split between the Balfourian moderates and the militant exponents of tariff reform, national service, and national "efficiency."⁹ To a significant de-

⁵ See e.g. Victor Grayson, M.P., *The Problem of Parliament* (London, 1909) p. 21: "Only about 7,000,000 persons are electors out of an adult population of about 20,000,000. The Shah of Persia might call that Democracy; we do not. The spectacle of Mr. Asquith and his fellow ministers posing as the representatives of the people, when they are only elected by about one-third of them, has a humorous side."

⁶ Winston Churchill, *My Early Life* (London, 1930) pp. 372-3. He adds: "all experience goes to show that once the vote has been given to everyone . . . the whole system is very speedily broken up and swept away."

⁷ Lord Hewart, *The New Despotism* (London, 1929), particularly attacking the growth of bureaucracy and delegated legislation.

⁸ See e.g. *Essays in Liberalism*, ed. Hilaire Belloc et al. (Oxford, 1897), contribution by Francis Hirst, p. 60: ". . . the organised monotony and mechanical unity of a Socialist State is the negation of free play, and consequently its appropriate motto is not evolution and progress, but degradation and decay." Also contribution by Sir John Simon, pp. 108-113, explaining that Liberals have placed legal restrictions on industry for different motives from those of Socialists. Also L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism*, p. 88: "Mechanical Socialism is founded on a false interpretation of history. . . . Politically . . . [it] supposes a class war . . . [whereas] modern society exhibits a more and more complex interweaving of interests."

⁹ For the ideology of "efficiency" see G. R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency* (London, 1977). Balfour's attempted army reforms and reorganization of the War Office, Army Council, general staff and Committee of Imperial Defence while prime minister from 1902 to 1905 were based on the supposition of the continuance of voluntary service.

gree Edwardian politics had polarized between moderate Liberals and Unionists, and the militant “forward” movements on both sides. Neither Liberals nor Unionists could evolve a clear party program, but there was, as Lloyd George could appreciate, a chance that his section and the Unionists might agree on a compact about specific measures. This was the inspiration of his proposal for a coalition government in 1910 and of his further dealings with Balfour and Bonar Law during the First World War and postwar coalition.¹⁰ The war revealed Lloyd George and Churchill as prominent compulsionists and advocates of coalition, destined also to quarrel with Asquith on other issues of war policy. The Unionists were in the main believers in wartime conscription—their “shadow cabinet” adopted the policy formally on May 14, 1915—and keenly aware of the possibility of using Lloyd George to further their aim of a more trenchant conduct of the war.

It was natural for Churchill and others to think of a national government in August 1914, with Unionists replacing the Liberal pacifists who resigned. Had Balfour still been the Unionist leader Asquith might have entertained the idea, for Balfour was much more of a free trader, anti-compulsionist and anti-socialist than many of his followers, was respected by Asquith, and was equally suspicious of trends subversive of the old style of political leadership. However, the Unionists were led somewhat feebly by Andrew Bonar Law in the Commons and Lord Lansdowne, an aloof patrician, in the Upper House. Of Bonar Law Asquith spoke with bitter contempt, blaming him for the imminent prospect of civil war over Ulster. Moreover, Asquith did not foresee a war of more than a few months, or the need for any domestic war policies more drastic than those of the South African War. The Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) was not prepared for the huge continental involvement that the war entailed, or for the financial, manpower, industrial, or supply problems involved.¹¹ The key question posed by the war, that of the supreme command and the integration of military and civilian war direction, had not been identified. Hence it could be assumed that a party government might run the war on the basis of delegation of policy to the existing departments, aided by special com-

¹⁰ The coalition proposal of 1910 is documented in Austen Chamberlain, *Politics from Inside* (London, 1936), pp. 286–97. For Lloyd George’s ambition to form a middle party see K. O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity. The Lloyd George Coalition Government, 1918–22* (Oxford, 1979).

¹¹ Lord Esher, the permanent member of the CID, thought in late August 1914 that “we should do well to retire either upon Havre or Cherbourg, and begin to create a Torres Vedras.” Sir John French, the British commander, also contemplated this strategy. A land war of attrition was as unexpected as trench warfare.

mittees coordinated by the prime minister. "Business as usual" became the appropriate slogan for the first six months of the war, when the massive unemployment and food riots feared by the Committee of Imperial Defence did not materialize, but instead a labor shortage and a bonanza of cheap funds on the money market. The Liberal government was able to finance the war without any steep increase in taxation by resorting to short-term borrowing at low interest rates. The issue of conscription, though raised by Churchill in the cabinet in August 1914, was dismissed from discussion and obscured by the run-away success of Lord Kitchener's appeal for volunteers.¹² A scheme to "commandeer the entire manufacturing potentialities of the Empire" for munitions under "an official with plenary powers" was put forward by Sir Charles Ottley, former Secretary of the CID, with the backing of the Secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey, and Churchill, in early September 1914. It got nowhere, and munitions remained under subdepartments in the War Office.¹³

Procrastination and indecision over war policy in Asquith's cabinet were understandable in view of the uncertainty as to the duration of the war and scope of the British war effort. A political truce, the cessation of parliamentary opposition, and the tight secrecy that enveloped all matters of war direction also facilitated the postponement of decisions. When the cabinet first seriously considered its policy with regard to the size of the army, which fell below the three million men authorized by Parliament and was itself a deep secret, opinion split between those like Lloyd George and Churchill who favored an army on the continental scale in ratio to population, and those, characteristically Asquithian Liberals, who argued that the "limits of enlistment" were already almost reached. It was, significantly, Balfour who started the debate and who took the Asquithian side.¹⁴ Asquith had surreptitiously involved Balfour in war policy by inviting him to attend the War Council which was set up in November 1914 disguised as a subcommittee of the

¹² Hobhouse, *Asquith's Cabinet*, August 25, 1914: "W. S. C. brought up Conscription as an immediate remedy. The PM asked why we should discuss it now, so did . . . most of the others. W. S. C. said truly that if not now we should never speak of it."

¹³ P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], 30/57/82. Kitchener papers, Munitions. C. L. Ottley to M. Hankey, September 2, 1914, enclosing letter from Sir Percy Girouard, whom Ottley recommended as the "ideal candidate" to control munitions. Also Hankey to Churchill, and Churchill to Kitchener, both of September 3, 1914.

¹⁴ PRO, Cab. 42/1/7, 13, 14, 20, 21, 22. Papers submitted to the War Council by Balfour (January 1, 1915), Churchill (January 11), Llewellyn Smith (January 11), Maurice Hankey (January 21), Llewellyn Smith (January 23), and Lord Lucas (January 23), all on the "Limits of Enlistment."

CID.¹⁵ Though Balfour informed his Unionist colleagues of his anomalous position, it is probable that very few realized his involvement in matters of domestic policy.¹⁶ In the War Council Balfour initiated the argument, which was taken up by Walter Runciman and Llewellyn Smith, his permanent secretary at the Board of Trade, that the British economy would not stand unlimited recruiting without a catastrophic collapse of the export trades and of internal stability, followed by a collapse of foreign credit and the means of continuing the war.¹⁷ The thrust of this argument was not only against conscription but against any drastic interference with the peacetime economy. Germany might adopt austerity enforced through inflation tempered by price controls of basic foods, or rationing, but Britain could not.¹⁸

By May 1915 it was no longer possible for the government to remain secretive and quiescent on the major issues of war policy. A minority in the cabinet, including Kitchener, had refused to accept the policy of

¹⁵ B[ritish] L[ibrary], Add. Ms 49692. Asquith to Balfour, November 24, 1914. Also Add. Ms 49768, Balfour to his secretary, J. S. Sandars, November 27, 1914: "Asquith is anxious that the character and composition of this and future meetings should be kept private [from other cabinet ministers]." Also House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George papers, C/6/11/22. Asquith to Lloyd George, November 24, 1914: "... we must preserve strict secrecy. . . ."

¹⁶ BL, Add. Ms 49730, Balfour to Lord Lansdowne, January 9, 1915, expressing "qualms of uneasiness" at the way the subcommittee was coming to be described by members "among themselves as a 'Council of War' " and explaining "I slid into this by insensible degrees." The other members were Asquith, Kitchener, Grey, Lloyd George, Churchill, Lord Crewe, and Lord Haldane. Balfour suspected that he had become virtually a member of the Liberal inner cabinet.

¹⁷ PRO, Cab. 42/1/7 and 21. Balfour pleaded to priority of luxury exports, and the maintenance of "fighting spirit" and a "healthy state of the country," to keep up "public credit" and "our powers of borrowing largely and cheaply." Recruiting should not be "pressed beyond a certain point." Llewellyn Smith estimated that two million men had already entered the army, and that the recruitment of another million "while it might not seriously cripple industry, would greatly hamper it." His paper was recirculated to the coalition cabinet in June 1915 by Runciman (Cab 37/130/17) and remained the basis on which he and McKenna opposed the seventy-division standard demanded by Kitchener and hence the need for conscription. Nearly five million men were finally added to the army.

¹⁸ PRO, Cab 37/126/42. "The War and Finance" by J. Bradbury, Treasury: "We in our insular superiority, are inclined to jeer at German war finance. . . . The currency and credit inflation has operated as a convenient taxing machine. . . ." Bradbury seems almost facetious when he adds "our position is wholly different. We are dependent upon our foreign trade. . . ."

limited enlistment or any commitment to voluntary recruitment,¹⁹ and the Unionist backbenders had set up a Unionist Business Committee to probe into war policy and press for effective action. Resolute state action was demanded to curb shipping freight rates and other war profits which were seen as raising prices, to unify the responsibility for munitions production, to promote key industries such as aniline dyestuffs, to rationalize manpower and improve industrial discipline, and to enforce a vigorous blockade.²⁰ A realignment of political opinion was emerging over the issue of what later became known as "total war" and the use of the state as its instrument. Liberals condemned this as a resort to "German" methods.²¹ Critics of the Liberal war policies—in the *National Review*, *The Times*, and the *Morning Post*—denounced the idea of waging the war by the methods of laissez-faire. The question of conscription emerged as the crux of the issue. Many saw it as beyond party disputes. Others could not. "... if the male population became soldiers" wrote Bernard Houghton, "the sceptre of the state will pass for good or evil into the soldiers' hand. Again will stalk forth the dark spirit of Machiavelli, the philosopher of militarism . . . 'self interest and self regard'—so the greatest of our writers sums him up—'avowed as principles of state action, material force as the master-key to civil policy' . . ." For such Liberals militarism was an enemy as formidable as the clericalism of old, that likewise "dwarfed the intellect and fettered all advance." It would strangle civilization "in a garotte of steel."²² Conscription, wrote Percy Alden, M.P., an ideological expo-

¹⁹ PRO Cab. 42/1/25. Minutes of War Council, January 27, 1915. In a debate on the limits of enlistment Runciman, McKenna, and Harcourt supported Balfour's proposition that recruiting be "kept within certain limits and certain departments." Kitchener observed, "If we had an organisation of labour such as Germany has, we should have no difficulty in getting 3,000,000 men"; also, men "not required by Trades . . . could only be brought in by conscription." He advocated a "system of organisation" of labour, replacing young men by older men, or women. McKenna opposed "such drastic measures. . . . It would be running against the evil to which Mr. Balfour had drawn our attention. We had not got the men to draw upon."

²⁰ For the Unionist Business Committee's activities see W. A. S. Hewins, *Apologia of an Imperialist* (London, 1929), vol. 2. Also Hammersmith Public Library, Bull papers, UBC circular of February 13, 1915 enumerating officers, subcommittees and policy areas studied.

²¹ L. T. Hobhouse in an imaginary dialogue, "The Soul of Civilization," (*Contemporary Review* 108 (July 1915): 159-164) makes his Liberal complain, "... we shall win only by adopting German methods . . . we ourselves may become a militarist nation, with conscription, Tariff Reform, and all the accustomed paraphernalia."

²² "Free Service or Conscription" by Bernard Houghton, *Contemporary Review* 107 (May 1915): 615-617.

nent of the new Liberalism, would “shatter at one blow all that has been achieved by the labour and sacrifice of many generations.”²³

By May 1915 the strategic outlook of the Allies, so hopeful in March, had become gloomy, with a stalemate at Gallipoli as in France, and a Russian “spring offensive” turned into a massive retreat. Liberal hopes of winning the war by blockade—mild by later standards—were more difficult to justify as the German war economy and organization manifestly produced a sustained offensive power on all fronts. The Germans’ resort to poison gas and zeppelin raids seemed to epitomize a harnessing of all scientific and material resources to their war effort, unimpeded by moral restraints, which could only be countered by a similar concentration of national effort. The Unionist leaders began to come out publicly for compulsion and national organization. Lord Derby called for powers to draft men under fifty-five for service “in the field and in the armament shops.”²⁴ *The Times* of May 6 proclaimed: “The voluntary system has its limits and we are fast approaching them.” The next day the *Morning Post* in an editorial “Organising the Nation” called for a “cabinet of talents” to stop “the waste involved in improvised methods.” Lord Selborne, an influential member of the shadow cabinet, sent *The Times* a “Case for National Organisation” which involved directing women as well as men into the “most important service . . . to fight or to work.”²⁵

The press campaign for national organization was assisted by an event of signal importance in the development of public attitudes to the war, the sinking of the liner *Lusitania* off Kinsale on May 7. The torpedoing without warning had indeed been threatened in New York papers, but this merely branded the act as the deliberate crime of the German state. As the casualty figures became known anti-German riots broke out in London and some provincial cities. According to police reports the rioting was also motivated by fears and resentments over poison gas, the anticipation that the zeppelins would soon reach London, and stories of atrocities perpetrated by German troops or ordered by German commanders. At the height of the riots, which were not quelled for several days, the Bryce committee report on German out-

²³ “Labour Unrest and the War” by Percy Alden, *Contemporary Review* 108 (July 1915): 147. The case for conscription, irrespective of peacetime parties or ideals, was put forward in many journals, e.g. George Dewar, “Voluntary or Compulsory Service,” *Nineteenth Century & After* 77 (January 1915); Austin Harrison, “Conscription,” *English Review* 19 (February 1915); and Cecil Batten, “Conscription and Democracy,” *Fortnightly Review* 97 (June 1915). Batten asserts that “In order to preserve the continuity of Liberal policy the obvious measure of Conscription was indefinitely deferred. . . .”

²⁴ Speech at Liverpool on May 3; *Morning Post*, May 4, 1915, p. 9.

²⁵ *The Times*, May 11, 1915.

rages in Belgium appeared.²⁶ Politicians and editors on all sides condoned the riots as a welcome expression of national resolve. Bonar Law speaking as opposition leader said he did not "entirely" regret them, as they showed that "we as a nation are now realizing that this is not a war between armies but a war between nations" and hence every individual should "throw his weight into the scale."²⁷ The Unionist press, and also some Liberal papers, took the line baldly stated by the *Morning Post*. "The sinking of the *Lusitania* marks the end of the first phase of the war . . . it coincides with . . . a new conviction . . . that the German must be broken in pieces before there can ever again be peace and safety. Germany has lost the right to make peace on terms." The *Morning Post* added its own corollary—"The state should at once requisition the entire male population."²⁸ The mood of the Unionists in the Business Committee was recorded by its secretary, W. A. S. Hewins, in his diary: ". . . no vestige of excuse for associating success with present German methods must be left in the mind of any German . . . we must therefore break the German Empire. This probably means a long War and much sacrifice. . . . the first thing to do . . . is to reconstruct the ministry, so that we can organise the Empire."²⁹

The prevailing spirit in this great cataclysm of national emotion was one of consensus and the emotion did not exacerbate political tensions. The unity of national will seemed to transcend the issue of voluntarism versus compulsion and was aptly expressed in the *Punch* cartoon in which Mr. Punch, assuming for once the gravity and sincerity usually displayed by John Bull, informs Asquith with polite deference: "You'll get all the willing service you need, Sir, if you'll only organise it. Tell each one of us what is wanted of him, and he'll do it."³⁰ Statutory compulsion was by itself of doubtful utility—the statute book and regulations under the Defence of the Realm Act were replete with drastic powers which had not been implemented because there was no national plan for military or industrial adaptation to a prolonged war. Conscription had little point so far as military needs alone were concerned, for indiscriminate voluntary recruiting, while it played havoc with skilled manpower in industry and the specialized trades necessary for armaments, filled the ranks with a superb infantry. The real utility of conscription, as Lloyd George, on one hand, and the trade unions, on the other, were quick to see, was that it would permit the rationalization and disciplining of industrial manpower. The Asquithian Liberals did

²⁶ *Annual Register*, 1915, p. 103; *The Times*, May 11, p. 7, May 13, pp. 6, 10.

²⁷ *Hansard*, 5th Series 71 (May 13, 1915): 1843.

²⁸ *Morning Post*, May 12, 1915, editorial.

²⁹ Hewins, *Apologia*, 2:30. May 10, 1915.

³⁰ *Punch*, May 26, 1915, p. 411.

not believe in such a rationalization or in any overall plan of national organization for war. Strong public pressure for such a plan, backed by the Unionist opposition, would split the Liberals and separate Asquith from Lloyd George.

The course of events would suggest that Lloyd George was shrewd enough to see this, and that he was unwilling to separate from Asquith on these grounds. Later, in December 1916, he was willing to do so, but that was after the problem of trade union resistance to conscription had been faced and overcome. Lloyd George probably sought to promote the coalition of May 1915 for the same reasons as those that prompted his 1910 initiative. On Monday May 10 notice of a parliamentary question about coalition was given by Handel Booth, later described as "an erratic, jingoistic Liberal who had defended Lloyd George with much partisanship on the Marconi committee."³¹ Booth's phrasing was highly significant. He was to ask Asquith whether he would consider admitting "leading members of the various political parties" into the government, in view of "the steps necessary to be taken in order to grapple with the rearrangement of industry and social life consequent upon a prolonged struggle."³² On May 11 another henchman of Lloyd George, Sir Henry Dalziel, took advantage of the intrusion of an angry deputation from the City of London into the Lobby demanding the immediate internment of enemy aliens to raise an adjournment debate. He inflamed passions by declaring that a large enemy fifth column was in readiness to set fire to London when the zeppelins arrived.³³ Dalziel, a prominent parliamentarian and newspaper proprietor, knew what he was doing. He represented the views and tactics of those Lloyd George Liberals wanting a more vigorous prosecution of the war.³⁴

During the debate Bonar Law, seeing the government in trouble, interposed with the unusual suggestion that the matter of internment be urgently considered by the cabinet.³⁵ Accordingly, a "hastily summoned" cabinet met the next day, and Bonar Law took the extraordinary step of holding a private conference with Asquith to reach

³¹ Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party* (London, 1966), p. 53.

³² *Hansard*, 5th Series 71 (May 12, 1915): 1642.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 1608-9.

³⁴ See e.g. *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott*, ed. Trevor Wilson (London, 1970), p. 170: "... it was lamentable to see the sort of man with whom he [Lloyd George] had now surrounded himself and with whom he was to be seen in frequent conference in the tea-room—Dalziel and Booth, Chiozza Money . . . and Markham—a sort of lunatic."

³⁵ *Hansard*, 5th Series, 71: 1613.

agreement on a common policy.³⁶ Booth's question about coalition, down for answering that afternoon, had been commented on in the press, and even if they did not discuss it the two leaders must have gained some insight into their mutual feelings on the matter. At least one contemporary account speculated that some sort of interparty meeting was held "and the possibility of forming a Coalition Government was then tentatively discussed . . . in such a way as to . . . leave it entirely an open question," so that when Asquith blandly declared in his answer to Booth that he was not aware that coalition would gain assent, the reply was "strictly accurate. No decision had been taken. . . ."³⁷

Bonar Law's initiative in seeing Asquith to smooth over the government's difficulties placed him out of line with most of his Unionist colleagues. They did not want coalition. He did.³⁸ This divergence had been apparent since a Unionist meeting of early February, at which the only advocate of coalition had been the party manager, Steel-Maitland. Steel-Maitland's reasons for thinking that "aloofness is the weak policy: the offer of coalition the strong" stemmed from party political calculations and the expectation of a short war.³⁹ Even as late as mid-April he had warned Bonar Law that, failing a compact with the Liberals, the government might "be able to jump a khaki election in November or December" should the Germans appear to be collapsing.⁴⁰ By May it was apparent that the war would last beyond the date that an election was due.⁴¹ The Unionist militants, strong in the House of Lords, would

³⁶ Sir Almeric FitzRoy, *Memoirs*, 2: 592-3. *Annual Register*, 1915, p. 104. *Hansard*, 5th Series, 71 (May 13, 1915): 1844.

³⁷ A. P. Nicholson, "The Late Crisis and its Causes," *Contemporary Review* 108 (July, 1915): 18.

³⁸ See e.g. Maud Selborne to Lionel Curtis, March 6, 1915: "We don't much believe in Bonar Law's dreams of coalition." Lionel Curtis Mss.

³⁹ Scottish Record Office, Steel-Maitland papers, GD 193/306/1. Memorandum by Steel-Maitland [n.d.], after a meeting of the shadow cabinet at Lansdowne House on February 1, 1915. There had been "strong opposition . . . to any idea of Coalition," and Steel-Maitland's reasons for dissenting turned on fears of an electoral advantage the Liberals might gain should the war end in 1915.

⁴⁰ Steel-Maitland papers, GD 193/386, "Memo. of Conversation with Mr. Bonar Law, April 1915" [n.d.]. The Unionists had rejected a Liberal proposal to prolong Parliament for a sixth year, and Steel-Maitland suggested an alternative "bargain" of no election until after the peace. Bonar Law opposed this on the ground that "it would mean that we would not be able to turn the government out before that date. . . ." Clearly he still anticipated possible peace overtures in 1915.

⁴¹ The Admiralty's projection was advanced to December 1916, or later.

war policy it is necessary to look carefully at the events of Friday May 14.

The sense of crisis produced two unusual meetings that day: one of the Unionist shadow cabinet at Lansdowne House, the other a final convening of the government's War Council which had been in abeyance since March.⁴⁴ The Unionists met to consider a proposal of Lord Robert Cecil for a secret session of Parliament to discuss "several matters in the conduct of the war which are giving rise to much anxiety." This was put aside in favor of sending an open letter, like the one of August 1914, which had considerable public impact, offering Opposition support to Liberals in the national emergency. The letter would suggest a manpower register and offer support if military or industrial conscription became necessary. It would "formally urge" the Liberal government "to take all the preliminary measures which would be required if it became necessary to organize the whole nation on the basis of compulsory service either for the army or for the production of munitions of war," "promising support if it became necessary to employ compulsion."⁴⁵ The drafting of the letter went on over the weekend, and Bonar Law and Lord Lansdowne agreed to sign it jointly at Lansdowne House at 10:30 on Monday morning, after Bonar Law had seen his dentist.⁴⁶ At the last moment he preferred a less painful interview with Lloyd George, and the letter was not sent.

The War Council met to consider some gravely pessimistic statements by Kitchener, presented in written form, which renounced his original hopes that the war might be won either by strategic blockade or by a breakthrough in France. "The optimistic view that Germany was becoming seriously weakened by the prolongation of the war has been entirely disproved by the facts," he declared, adding also that "... experience has shown that the German lines cannot at present be seriously forced along our or the French front." Now that the Russians were

⁴⁴ The War Council of March 19 had, on learning of the loss of four battleships at the Dardanelles the day before, virtually delegated the questions of a renewal of naval operations or military landings to the commanders on the spot. The tension between Churchill and his First Sea Lord, Admiral Fisher, and also between Churchill and Kitchener, rendered any further War Councils inadvisable. The "Council" of April 6 was merely a brief exchange between Kitchener and Churchill in Hankey's presence.

⁴⁵ Birmingham University Library, Chamberlain papers, AC 2/2/25. Memorandum dictated by Austen Chamberlain on May 18, 1915. A free paraphrase of this with omissions and distortions is printed in Charles Petrie, *Life and Letters of Austen Chamberlain*, 2: 20-27. The author gratefully acknowledges permission from the University of Birmingham to quote from the original.

⁴⁶ House of Lords Record Office, Bonar Law papers, 117/1/9 and 10. Bonar Law to Lansdowne, May 15, 1915, and reply of May 16, with draft of letter phrased for public appeal.

"in full retreat to the line of the San," the Germans might concentrate their forces in the west and break through to the Channel ports. The submarine and zeppelin bases then available would menace England, and a threat of invasion might materialize. For these reasons Kitchener took the momentous step of getting a decision to retain the new armies in Britain. Churchill's objections were to no avail.⁴⁷

Kitchener had already quarrelled with Churchill over the withdrawal of the super-dreadnought *Queen Elizabeth* from the Dardanelles. He now further embarrassed the government by declaring that the military operations at Gallipoli could not succeed. He "did not see how we were ever to drive the Turks out of Kilid Bahr." This reiterated his earlier objection to military involvement in what had originally been presented by Churchill as a forcing of the Dardanelles by "ships alone." The government could be accused of being a body of amateur strategists who through their civilian-dominated War Council had promoted a fiasco in defiance of their chief professional adviser, Fisher. Fisher was present when it was admitted on all sides that the Gallipoli operations had degenerated into a "permanent state of siege" and could not be relinquished without military disaster or the collapse of British prestige in the Balkans and the East.⁴⁸ He knew that Kitchener's new moves greatly strengthened his case against Churchill and any resumption of the Dardanelles naval operations. He had been keeping his resignation in reserve: "I don't mean to explode my bomb without dead certainty it will act," he had told Hankey a day or two before.⁴⁹ According to J. L. Gavin, editor of the *Observer*, who knew him well, "he believed that his resignation would precipitate the fall of the Government—a crash bound to come soon in any case—and that he would return to the Admiralty as First Lord in Churchill's place, and enter the new government with full Cabinet rank and a position at least equal to Lord Kitchener in the War Directorate."⁵⁰ When after the War Council meeting Churchill drafted orders for more naval units and equipment to go to the Dardanelles, Fisher resigned.

This was by no means the only embarrassment resulting from the quarrel over strategy. Equally serious was the dispute between Kitchener and Sir John French, the Commander-in-Chief of the British army in France. Kitchener did not allow war correspondents, but Sir John admitted Col. Repington, military correspondent of *The Times*, to his Headquarters as his personal guest. Sir John went against the War

⁴⁷ PRO, Cab. 42/2/19. Minutes of May 14, 1915.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ S. Roskill, *Hankey*, 1: 173.

⁵⁰ House of Lords Record Office, Beaverbrook papers, G.5/F.v. "The Admiralty Crisis," memorandum by J. L. Garvin, Oct. 6, 1919.

Council's policy of avoiding offensive attacks, and then grumbled about the lack of sufficient ammunition. He had just failed to storm the Aubers Ridge with the wholly inappropriate support of field guns firing high explosive shells—a miserable expedient which would not have been approved later in the war.⁵¹ After a question had been asked in the Commons about Repington's anomalous position at H.Q., *The Times* of May 14 carried an edited "dispatch" from Repington attributing failure to the want of an "unlimited" supply of shells.⁵² His real complaint was the lack of heavy artillery. *The Times* was using him to attack Asquith for the complacency of his public speeches on the question of shells.⁵³ However, the allegations also reflected on Kitchener, who that evening sent a note to his adviser, Lord Esher: "I am deadly sick of this system of intrigue with Headquarters, and if I get an excuse I shall take it and get out of it all."⁵⁴

On Saturday afternoon, May 15, Fisher arrived at Downing Street just as Asquith was about to leave town. Asquith got out of his car and remonstrated with him for an hour, but in vain. About the same time at Sir John's H.Q. at Hazebrouck the War Office orders arrived conveying the War Council's decision to withhold the new armies on which Sir John had been counting to fulfill his promises to General Joffre. Ironically, the artillery preparation for another offensive—this time a night attack—had already commenced. Sir John showed the papers to Repington, and it was decided to make a political protest. A King's messenger, Capt. Stanley Wilson, M.P., was sent to see Bonar Law, while Repington arranged to follow him to London the next day. Wilson met Bonar Law at the Carlton Club on Sunday afternoon, while Repington saw Lloyd George on Monday, probably early, and also some Unionist leaders.⁵⁵ Repington's main concern was to explain the need for heavy guns, of which the army in France had little more

⁵¹ The 18 pdr gun had too small an explosive charge in its HE shell to destroy the sunken wire the Germans had begun to use, or level parapets, especially as it lacked the graze fuse perfected later. During the remainder of the war shrapnel shells were the standard ammunition for these guns.

⁵² *Hansard*, 5th Series, 71: 1824. Kellaway's question, May 13. Repington's statement needs to be measured against his other despatches and *The Times's* other reports, e.g. that of May 13 about the German emplacements which were "deep and reinforced with concrete, with underground galleries, giving almost complete immunity from shell fire."

⁵³ Lloyd George papers, D 18/6/1, Repington to Lloyd George, May 17, 1915, reviewing the army's artillery needs. *The Times* had castigated Asquith for his assertion at Newcastle on April 20 that the army had not been hindered by want of sufficient shells.

⁵⁴ *Journals and Letters of Viscount Esher*, ed. R. B. Brett and M. V. Brett, 4 vols. (London, 1934–38), 3: 233.

⁵⁵ C. à Court Repington, *The First World War* (London 1920) 1: 37–38.

than three score, and to reverse the decision about withholding further divisions. He came over to help the government and not to attack it.⁵⁶

Asquith had retired to his house near Oxford for the weekend, nursing desolate feelings over the unexpected engagement of his epistolary confidante Venetia Stanley to Edwin Montagu. Some have seen his acceptance of coalition as a weak move taken in a moment of low spirits.⁵⁷ But if his tactics are analyzed in detail they appear to display extreme boldness and indeed panache. He was informed of developments in London by his secretary, Sir Maurice Bonham Carter, who conveyed the King's concern over Kitchener's disgruntled feelings and a suggestion that he might be relieved of the War Office and made C-in-C of all forces.⁵⁸ He also learned of the King's annoyance with Churchill. When Churchill motored down to Sutton Courtenay on Sunday he found that Asquith was at first willing to allow him to replace Fisher. But before dinner time Bonham Carter "mentioned that the shell shortage disclosure and the resignation of Lord Fisher was so serious that the Prime Minister thought the Unionist leaders would have to be consulted on the steps to be taken."⁵⁹ Asquith told Bonar Law the following morning that he had already begun to allocate offices in a coalition, and the vital first step was Churchill's replacement by Balfour at the Admiralty.⁶⁰ Balfour had a room there, and had understudied Churchill in all the secret aspects of policy and strategy.⁶¹ Moreover, Balfour as a member of the War Council had backed the Dardanelles expedition with enthusiasm from the outset.⁶² When the policy became suspect he became a political hostage, and when Bonar Law learned of the proposed appointment he must have seen that Unionist backing of Fisher would involve Unionist condemnation of Balfour, who had upheld Asquith against Fisher at every turn.

⁵⁶ Lloyd George papers, D 18/6/1. Repington to Lloyd George, May 17, 1915, concerned with artillery, and the retention of the new armies ordered on May 14, which concludes: "Bonar Law will see the Prime Minister on the subject, and I feel sure that you will put things to rights."

⁵⁷ See esp. Roy Jenkins, *Asquith*.

⁵⁸ Churchill College, Cambridge, Esher papers, Journal of May 15-16.

⁵⁹ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis* (2 vols.), 2: 797.

⁶⁰ Chamberlain papers, AC 2/2/25. Asquith negotiated personally with Balfour apart from the other Unionist leaders; see BL Add. Ms 49692, Balfour to Asquith, May 19, 1915 commencing "Apropos of our conversation yesterday evening. . . ." The excuse was that the Admiralty had to be filled urgently.

⁶¹ Churchill, *World Crisis*, 2: 798.

⁶² See his ludicrously over-optimistic paper "The Dardanelles and Balkan Operations," February 24, 1915 (PRO Cab. 42/1/44), which envisages a "pitched battle" in the vicinity of Constantinople with a scratch force, and further moves up the Danube.

It is doubtful, however, whether the Opposition could have made much political capital out of Fisher's resignation, even if they had been prepared to antagonize their principal leading statesman, Balfour, over the matter. Fisher was a serving officer, not a politician, and he was accused by Asquith of deserting his post. The Dardanelles strategy and even the scope of the bridgeheads after the Gallipoli landings were highly secret, and parliamentary questions as to Fisher's attitude had been rebuffed. An inquiry could not have been held while the situation remained critical, even had the Opposition demanded one, which at this point was unthinkable. Churchill could have been removed from the Admiralty without a coalition, for he was blamed by his cabinet colleagues as well as by the public for several indiscretions. It is equally unlikely that the opposition would have made any party dispute over the "shell shortage disclosure." The shell shortage had been much publicized, chiefly by Kitchener himself. And on Monday morning *The Times* carried the headlines "German Line Broken. German Lines Stormed. A mile of Ground won."⁶³ Sir John had defused the "shell scandal" by the success of his night attack.

The notion of a party assault by rank-and-file Unionists on the government, and the argument that the coalition was a compact between the two front benches in order to ward off such an assault, have been widely accepted.⁶⁴ It needs to be said that the normalities of parliamentary opposition had been utterly suspended, and a large proportion M.P.s were absent on active service. The division lobbies had remained defunct from the outbreak of the war, except for the occasion on April 29 when seven Irish Nationalists protested against an increase in whisky duties. When Hewins asked leave to put a question to Asquith on the shells question on Monday May 17 he added that he "did not wish to embarrass the Ministry and would adopt any better course he

⁶³ *The Times*, May 17, 1915, p. 8.

⁶⁴ The orthodox interpretation, originated by Asquith himself, giving this defensive reason for coalition was challenged by A. M. Gollin in the *Spectator*, May 28 and June 11, 1965. Gollin contended that Freedom versus Control was "the master issue in May 1915." He was attacked for this by R. R. James (*Spectator*, July 2, 1965) and in particular for his statement that Bonar Law "supported Asquith because he knew the Liberals could impose conscription more easily than the Tories." James claimed there was "a complete absence of contemporary evidence" for this. Cameron Hazlehurst in *Politicians at War* (London, 1971) also dismisses Gollin's interpretation with the comments (p. 266): "Never did the controversy become simply a struggle between defenders of freedom and proponents of more organisation. Nor, by May 1915, had the preliminary skirmishings begun. It was the political crisis itself which precipitated discussion of conscription." Hazlehurst (see esp. p. 232) reverts to the orthodox explanation.

could suggest."⁶⁵ Asquith put him off to Wednesday, the last sitting before the Whitsun recess. Hewins had led the debate of April 20 calling for a centralized department to control munitions, and what could be expected in any parliamentary sequel to the Repington telegram was not a party attack but renewed pressure for a comprehensive policy of national organization. M.P.s, including Liberal members, were proposing this in the last days before the recess, and one such Liberal, Ivor Herbert, was actually on his feet when Black Rod arrived.

To explain Asquith's acceptance of coalition it is therefore necessary to seek larger reasons than the exigencies of tactical politics. It is also highly significant that he, like Bonar Law, was totally out of step with his colleagues in doing so. Liberals were unaware of any political danger, though ready to believe in a Unionist conspiracy. One might suppose that Asquith realized that strategic blunders had been made, and that it was expedient to associate the Unionists in the direction of the war before these became known to the public. But this is not a convincing hypothesis. The sacrifice of his colleagues and the dismay and resentment that the coalition caused was too high a price for such an objective. Asquith showed little concern for strategic matters, which he happily delegated to others with little sense of his own ultimate responsibility. His acceptance of coalition was a response to the call for national organization in the context of a new realization that the war would demand a major continental commitment over an extended period. His own cabinet and party would split on the issues of compulsion and centralized direction involved. The pursuit of victory by methods which Liberals had denounced as militarism and socialism or collectivism required the suspension of Liberal values. Rather than preside over such an apostasy, Asquith was prepared to admit other parties and thereby retain the right to oppose or moderate the inescapable but long-dreaded advent of the managerial state pursuing purely material objectives. He could in any case hardly have expected to remain as a one-party prime minister while implementing war policies so utterly removed from Liberalism.

The only authentic account of the clinching of the coalition bargain between Asquith and Bonar Law on the morning of Monday May 17

⁶⁵ W. A. S. Hewins, *Apologia*, 2: 30-31. One of his associates, Sanderson, decided to raise the munitions question on Monday, encouraged by a *Times* reporter, Robbins, who told him that GHQ in France wanted a debate. Sanderson was then persuaded to withdraw his motion on being told by Bonar Law confidentially of "the approaching fall of the government." Thereupon a third member, Cooper, did raise the question on the Monday adjournment, but he asked for a secret session the next day, and no member attacked the government.

was recorded by Austen Chamberlain, Law's closest associate in the transaction. It tells how Bonar Law, on learning of Fisher's resignation, went "at once" to see Lloyd George and said he could not allow the Commons to go into recess without a statement, which in turn would precipitate "a severe attack upon the government." Whereupon

Lloyd George burst out passionately, saying that he entirely agreed with Bonar Law—that it was impossible that things should go on as they were, and inveighing against much in the conduct of the war. In particular he said that Kitchener had 'put lies in his mouth' as to the supply of munitions, and that the situation was altogether intolerable.

Bonar Law there and then drafted a letter to the Prime Minister in which he stated that having regard to Fisher's resignation things could not go on as they were, that in his opinion the time had come for a Coalition. . . .⁶⁶

Bonar Law then "brought this draft to Lansdowne House" where Chamberlain, having been summoned by telephone, was waiting with Lord Lansdowne. "We neither of us liked the direct statement that . . . Coalition was necessary," Chamberlain recorded, and the letter was finally sent calling for "some change in the constitution of the Government" in order to "retain a sufficient measure of public confidence to conduct the war to a successful conclusion." But:

Before this letter reached Asquith's hands he telephoned that he and Lloyd George wished to see Bonar Law, who at once joined them in Downing Street.

Lloyd George had told Asquith of his conversation with Bonar Law. Asquith now stated that he had arrived at the same conclusion and that he had intended to inform his colleagues at the end of this week. He produced a scheme for the distribution of offices . . . showing that he had been seriously thinking of the matter. . . .

He and Lloyd George stated that it was absolutely necessary to get rid of Kitchener. . . .

Asquith's suggestion was that Lloyd George should be made Secretary of State for War, Bonar Law Chancellor of the Exchequer, Balfour First Lord of the Admiralty, and Lansdowne Lord President of the Council. He . . . inquired whether I should be content with the Colonial Office. He was anxious to get in Carson and equally anxious to keep out Curzon. Haldane would retire from the Lord Chancellorship.⁶⁷

Bonar Law's demand for coalition had been met by something rather different—a reconstruction firmly designed in advance by Asquith.

Bonar Law had in any case overstepped himself. During the afternoon he found that Carson and Robert Cecil were "strongly averse from coalition, and he began to doubt whether he could carry his party

⁶⁶ Chamberlain papers, AC 2/2/25.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

with him." Carson wanted a party meeting. Walter Long was ill in Wiltshire but soon made his opposition to coalition very apparent. He had already called for a "National Cabinet . . . a smaller and more compact body really representative of the country." He had seen the Lansdowne House decision of May 14 as implying universal compulsion: " . . . local committees could be easily and rapidly formed who could do all the work of selection into fighters and workers."⁶⁸ He did not believe that under a coalition "the new policy will be drastic enough." His basic objection was that an interparty coalition would have to retain the large peacetime cabinet and therefore would never agree on the kind of policies required or on any policies at all.⁶⁹

After much discussion Bonar Law's views prevailed. His correspondence with Chamberlain shows that he sincerely believed that the Liberals were too weak to cope with the situation, and that the country would expect the opposition to adopt the patriotic course of coming to their aid. He rebutted Carson's idea of militant opposition by observing that any effective criticism would "at once break down the party truce and range the country in two hostile camps." To form an alternative government the Unionists would need to force an election, but "it was equally out of the question to contemplate a general election . . . for, even if it gave us a commanding majority, party spirit would then have revived, we should have an embittered Opposition on our flank, and it would be impossible for us to carry the war to a successful conclusion and still more to stand out for satisfactory conditions of peace."⁷⁰ Coalition was therefore seen as the only available means of persuading or enabling the Liberal ministry to make the drastic policy changes demanded.

Having obtained acquiescence rather than consent, Bonar Law "sought Asquith again" on Monday evening and as Chamberlain quaintly puts it, "obtained permission to consult the Shadow Cabinet, and it was agreed between them that no reference should be made in public to Bonar Law's letter but that we were to consider as the starting point of the negotiations the invitation from the Prime Minister. . . ." There was a further consultation between Asquith, Lloyd George, and Bonar Law on Tuesday morning, prior to the shadow cabinet, at which it was agreed not to displace Kitchener after all. When Bonar Law finally confronted the full meeting of his colleagues he found "a strong desire that a change should be made in the Prime Ministership" and he had to explain that he had broached the subject to Lloyd George only to find that "a change was impossible."⁷¹ The Unionists had identified

⁶⁸ Bonar Law papers, 117/1/9. Long to Bonar Law, May 15, 1915.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 117/1/11 and 12. Long to Bonar Law, May 19 and 20, 1915.

⁷⁰ Chamberlain papers, AC 2/2/25.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Asquith as the real obstacle to the acceptance of their policies. However, they consented to reply favorably to his offer on the assurance that they would receive a fair share of places in a national government. They could hardly have foreseen that after a full week of party political haggling they would end up with offices almost entirely irrelevant to the conduct of the war. It is not clear whether Bonar Law told them that he had been promised the Exchequer, but he did not get it. And the Unionists were saddled, quite unjustly, with the odium of ejecting Haldane, the one Liberal who might have called for conscription and persuaded the Liberals to accept it.⁷²

Equally high-handed methods were used to impose the coalition on the Liberal party. Asquith did not announce the compact ratified by the Unionists on Tuesday until some time had passed. Even his front-bench colleagues who had obeyed his request to hand in their resignations "knew nothing about the proposals except from Conservative sources" when they assembled on Tuesday afternoon.⁷³ The bulk of members on both sides of the House disliked the idea of coalition, and on Wednesday the *Morning Post*, supposed to represent the views of Carson and the Unionist militants, in an editorial headed "National Government" said it "failed to see how a Coalition is to help," since the country was behind the government, and "the only question . . . is whether the Government is behind the country. . . . in some of the most important departments of war policy the Opposition would have followed a course altogether different from the Government [including] . . . the question of universal service. . . . Is the Government prepared to form a Coalition on that basis?" Such an attitude was bound to alarm the Liberals. They wondered "what demands were made or assurances given on *policy* to Bonar and his colleagues; in particular if they were told that we had an open mind on compulsory service or taxation or trade policy."⁷⁴ Asquith gave no such assurances, but it was not prudent to let this be known. The Liberal rank and file could see no reason for coalition and many reasons against it. But by postponing his announcement until an hour or two before Parliament went into recess Asquith denied his party any real chance to oppose it. He avoided question time on Wednesday May 19 but appeared shortly afterwards to make a brief announcement of his intention to reconstruct the ministry, emphasizing the continuance of policy symbolized

⁷² Stephen Koss, *Lord Haldane, Scapegoat for Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) supports the view that Asquith himself, and not the Unionists, brought about Haldane's exclusion.

⁷³ House of Lords Record Office, Ilbert papers, Sir Courtenay Ilbert's diary, May 18, 1915.

⁷⁴ Runciman to McKenna, May 19, 1915, quoted in Stephen Koss, *Asquith*, p. 197.

by the fact that he and Sir Edward Grey would not resign. A protest meeting was hastily organized by word of mouth among the Liberals, and a threat developed that they might call Asquith to account on the adjournment motion. He was hastily summoned to attend upstairs, and gave his explanation, his "voice husky and his face twitching" while he spoke of "unexpected disclosures" which could not have been made public without "imperilling national safety." He "hinted at diplomatic reasons for avoiding an appearance of difference in the House of Commons and was supposed to refer to Italy." "... in an address of great tact and cunning he completely placated the angry assembly," gained an "overwhelming ovation," and hurried away before questions could be asked.⁷⁵ As John Robertson, one of the intellectual writers on the new Liberalism in the government, explained to the Clerk of the Commons afterwards, "... what impressed the Liberals was not Asquith's eloquence, but the evidence of his personal distress. . . . He evidently felt very keenly having to throw overboard such an old friend as Haldane. . . ." Robertson thought it was a "failure of nerve," but the clerk, Sir Courtenay Ilbert, was still puzzled at Asquith's worry, noting: "Why should they have been afraid of a debate?" He reckoned that in any case a debate would have come too late to affect Italy's entry into the war.⁷⁶

The rumor of a forced entry into the government by Unionists greedy for office and ready to use methods little short of blackmail went rapidly into circulation and ensured that in the bargaining over offices the Liberals would be tough and unyielding. They refused to give Bonar Law either the Exchequer or the new Ministry of Munitions. Finally, after a week of secret interparty conclaves where party bickering held sway in scandalous contrast to the tone of national unity and trust displayed in the press, Asquith threatened to call off the negotiation, or fall back on a deal with Balfour alone.⁷⁷ Bonar Law was defeated, and gave in. Even so the press, including *The Times*, gave the coalition a generous benediction. "Government by party has given way to a National Administration. . . . There has been no Coalition so broad-based in our history. . . . Any opposition . . . can only be sectional and . . . irresponsible."⁷⁸

Thus far Asquith had succeeded in his strategy of neutralizing opposition by absorbing the moderate opposition leaders into offices periph-

⁷⁵ Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War*, 275-6. Hobhouse, *Asquith's Cabinet*, p. 245. *Morning Post*, May 20, 1915.

⁷⁶ Ilbert papers, diary, May 20, 1915.

⁷⁷ See esp. Lord Stamfordham's memorandum, May 25, 1915, printed in Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill*, Companion vol. III, Part 2. (London 1972).

⁷⁸ *The Times*, June 3, 1915, p. 8. Parliamentary correspondent.

eral to the war effort, while subject to a cabinet still dominated by Liberals. The coalition cabinet split almost immediately on the issue of compulsion, and on this and other matters of war policy, feelings proved to be so intense that both Liberal and Unionist ministers continued to hold separate meetings to concert their action before the full cabinet met. The Unionists' demand for compulsion was renewed even before the coalition cabinet held its first meeting. Lord Milner, who despite Chamberlain's strong advocacy had been left out of the coalition, launched an appeal for a manpower register to enable the state to "call out the number it wants, as and when it wants them."⁷⁹ At the same time Lord Selborne, who had been given the Board of Agriculture, circulated to the Unionist ministers a "Note on National Organisation" repeating his draconian proposals for a *levée en masse* of the population.⁸⁰ The Unionists even got cabinet approval for Walter Long, now president of the Local Government Board, to introduce a bill for a national register of manpower.⁸¹ The proposal then became the object of a protracted delaying action by the Asquithian Liberals, aided by Balfour. Runciman circulated a cabinet print condemning a register as unnecessary for industrial purposes and premature for military needs, and there ensued a series of disputations as to whether registration implied compulsion or not. In the end Balfour produced a formula: the register might serve for "guiding voluntary enlistment." He deemed full registration "impossible" and condemned the idea of ordering "each man to a task determined for him by some central or other authority. It is on this rock that . . . Socialism would split."⁸² When Long finally introduced his registration bill he had already despaired of its achieving any useful purpose.⁸³ Nevertheless it was opposed by many Liberals, and of these twenty-two, including Runciman, went to the extremity of a division in support of a nullifying amendment—the first occasion during the war on which the House divided on a government policy.⁸⁴ The coalition had revived party warfare, and on the very issue which the Unionists had thought it would settle in their favor.

In the short term the coalition succeeded in enabling the anti-compulsionist Liberals to stave off the demand for national organization. They

⁷⁹ Letter in *The Times*, May 27, 1915.

⁸⁰ Bodleian Library, Selborne papers, 80/1, May 27, 1915.

⁸¹ PRO Cab 41/36/24. Cabinet meeting of June 4.

⁸² PRO Cab 37/129/17 (Runciman, June 7); *Ibid.*/24 (Harcourt, June 8); *Ibid.*/30 (Balfour, June 9); *Ibid.*/35 (Long, June 10).

⁸³ Hewins, *Apologia*, 2: 38.

⁸⁴ *Hansard*, 5th Series, 73: 167–71. Also *The Times*, July 6, 1915, p. 9, "The Register . . . Radical Critics." Sixteen hostile amendments had been put down, fourteen by Liberals, one of whom (Lambert) was an ex-minister.

did so by dissident tactics which involved enlisting the Labour members in opposition to industrial compulsion. They scored a success over the Ministry of Munitions Bill, which was said to imply what Philip Snowden (Labour) called "forced labour" and Dillon (Irish Nationalist) called a "dictatorship over all the working classes."⁸⁵ Actually the Bill did no such thing. Lloyd George compromised with the trade unions and gave special inducements including travel allowances and guaranteed pay levels to armament workers, creating a privileged class of worker. Yet Sir John Simon, who was later to head the pacifist Liberals, gratuitously pledged the government against industrial compulsion while Lloyd George was absent. Henceforth a compact group of Labour members with some Liberal support began to force divisions in the Commons on questions of popular concern, such as coal prices. The division lobby was reinstated as a legitimate recourse for dissident groups, and became the resort of Unionist tariff reformers, Carsonite exponents of total war, Lloyd George Liberals, Irish Nationalists, and Liberal or Labour pacifists. Factions in the cabinet leaked reports of the in-fighting to their respective supporters, or newspaper editors, helping to consolidate a system of subparty groups that replaced the official party organizations. In the long term the new milieu created by the coalition worked against the Asquithian Liberals. It reduced them to just another of several political groups.

The coalition had been Lloyd George's inspiration and Asquith's refuge. It marked the final estrangement of the two Liberal leaders and gave rise to a schism in the Liberal party under the influence of their two polarities. Asquith no doubt calculated that by coalescing with the Unionist moderates he would isolate Lloyd George, and he never understood how Bonar Law or even more unaccountably, Balfour, went over to Lloyd George's side in December 1916. He should have taken warning when C. P. Scott and the *Manchester Guardian*, a center of Liberal orthodoxy, went with Lloyd George.⁸⁶ Exasperated by Asquith's "chicane," Scott identified Lloyd George as the only Liberal who could win the war. In the crisis of May 1915 Asquith had been unable to rise above the confining canons of prewar Liberalism, and he was destined rather unfairly to become identified with the antiwar Liberals of whom Francis Hirst, editor of the *Economist*, was a good representative.⁸⁷ This

⁸⁵ *Hansard*, 5th Series, 72: 107-8, 115.

⁸⁶ *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott*, ed. Trevor Wilson, pp. 124 ff give an illuminating presentation of Liberal dilemmas over the respective policies and conduct of Asquith and Lloyd George after the coalition.

⁸⁷ Hirst wrote to C. P. Scott (*Ibid.*, p. 124) on May 21: "Do you feel as much stirred as I do about the wickedness, and folly, and shame of introducing compulsory service? I feel that this, with Protection, the Censorship, and a mil-

was unfortunate. As a Liberal imperialist Asquith approved of the continental military commitment. He was in principle ready to waive any article of Liberalism to win the war. But his inveterate dislike of Lloyd George and his methods was reinforced by a realization that the war tipped the balance in favor of the "forward" elements in the party employing a combination of state socialism and demagoguery. Ironically, by opposing Lloyd George he paved the way for the parliamentary Reform Act of 1918 which ushered in mass democracy, and also for the advent of a popular Labour party organized by Arthur Henderson after his estrangement from Lloyd George in 1917.⁸⁸ When Lloyd George became prime minister in December 1916 after what Asquith called "a well-organised, carefully-engineered conspiracy," Asquith retained the leadership of the Liberal party but sat on the opposition front bench. Thereafter there were two sets of Liberal central party organization and whips. Asquith's feud with Lloyd George arose not from war policies so much as from what Asquith saw as the peacetime implications of Lloyd George's alliance with the Unionists and his methods of mass appeal through popular journalism and the rigging of the party machine. The crowning example of rigging was the "coupon" election of 1918. Here again, Asquith's Liberals might have avoided being crushed by the coupon if Asquith had been prepared to associate even minimally with Lloyd George. He preferred to risk annihilation between the coupon and the new Labour party. The coupon, and the "hard-faced" M.P.s it produced, provided him with justification in his stand against the "forward" Liberals.

Historians have underrated the importance of war policy in the formation of the coalition of May 1915. This is understandable, since the coalition did not appear to alter earlier policies. It thwarted the first great national demand for a systematized war effort and reduced the main issue, a national plan, to a protracted series of factional squabbles about the means—the register, the size of the army, and conscription. The price paid by Asquith for delaying the process of national organization for war was his own relegation to powerlessness in the

itary bureaucracy would make England no place for people like me. . . .’ Instances of the antiwar pessimism of Asquith's immediate associates in 1917–18, especially McKenna, Loreburn, Beauchamp and Buckmaster, may be found in the Runciman papers, Beatrice Webb's diary, and unpublished sections of C. P. Scott's diary at Manchester University Library.

⁸⁸ The Asquithian Liberals in 1916 opposed the enfranchisement of servicemen and munition workers and so outraged the Commons over the obsolete electoral register that the matter was referred to the interparty Speaker's conference, from which the 1918 Reform Act took its origins. Carson and Lloyd George through their respective "War Committees" had pushed the question.

larger struggle of Liberalism against the onset of class politics, and against materialistic or nationalistic ideologies magnifying the role of the state. He could have resigned and allowed the front-bench forces to reach their own accommodations, or he could have given the Unionists a fair share of the departments concerned with the war. By trying to entrench his own section of Liberals in commanding positions for a political endgame on war policy he made a fatal miscalculation. His maneuver legitimized the independent action of the Lloyd George Liberals within the party and hastened their consolidation with analogous forces on the Unionist side. Asquith cared for Liberalism more than for war policy but failed to foresee that neither could compromise with the other. His mistake makes the coalition of May 1915 a terminal point for Liberalism as a force in British politics.