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THE PRESS AND THE FALL OF ASQUITH

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‘Who Killed Cock Robin?’ Familiar words to children, but not normally found over a leading article in a staid old tory newspaper. Certainly not when Britain was in the darkest period of a struggle for her very existence. Yet the *Morning Post*’s use of the nursery rhyme was most appropriate on Monday, 4 December 1916. The previous day there had been an historic confrontation between the prime minister, Herbert Henry Asquith, and his secretary of state for war, David Lloyd George. What happened when they met at 10 Downing Street was not clear – nor, it should be added, is it clear to this day – but by Monday morning it was widely assumed that Lloyd George had held a pistol to Asquith’s head and forced the old prime minister to yield the higher direction of the war to a small committee with the secretary for war at the helm. Therefore the answer should have been easy: Lloyd George killed ‘Cock Robin’.

In fact it was not that simple at all. Asquith was not yet dead politically; this did not come about until Tuesday afternoon and a great deal happened in the intervening hours. Further, various parties then and later tried to take credit for his slaying. One was the most powerful figure in Fleet Street, Lord Northcliffe, proprietor of *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*. Apparently he was a reader of the *Morning Post*, for early on the same Monday morning he telephoned his younger brother, Cecil Harmsworth, a Liberal M.P. as it happened, and gleefully repeated the question asked by that newspaper. Cecil replied obediently: ‘You did.’¹ But there was at least one other man outside the cabinet who perhaps had a better claim to the distinction than did Northcliffe. In 1934 Sir Evelyn Wrench asked Lord Beaverbrook to name the biggest thing he had ever done. Beaverbrook replied without hesitation: ‘The destruction of the Asquith Government which was brought about by an honest intrigue.’² These two names are highly suggestive. Northcliffe was the greatest ‘press lord’ of the twentieth century, at the peak of his power and influence in 1916. Beaverbrook, then Sir Max Aitken, was only beginning to forge the *Daily Express* into his own particular weapon, yet he too counted for something in Fleet Street by this time. Certainly each

¹ R. Pound and G. Harmsworth, *Northcliffe* (London, 1959), p. 513.

² A. J. P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (New York, 1972), p. 102.

man had a peculiar interest in the political crisis and its outcome. The question, however, is not whether Northcliffe or Beaverbrook better deserves to go down in history as the one who destroyed Asquith. That would grossly oversimplify a very complex problem. Rather we may ask how much Asquith's fall was the result of action, intentional or inadvertent, on the part of newspaper proprietors and editors collectively.

The situation in 1916 was unique indeed. Two-and-a-half years of war and eighteen months of a coalition ministry had reduced parliament to but a shadow of its former importance. The house of commons lost its traditional *raison d'être* and soon ceased to be a focal point of public interest. A party truce existed, the nation was told, which suited the popular mood well enough. Debates and divisions along old lines, to say nothing of constituency politics, would have seemed trivial, cruelly irrelevant even, at a time when men by countless thousands were fighting and dying on the battlefield, and when the country, however slowly, was girding itself for a tremendous effort. Therefore parliamentary opposition to Asquith's governments was minimal, save over an occasional important issue such as conscription; and even then M.P.s provided no real threat to the ministry's existence. Michael MacDonagh, correspondent of *The Times* and a close observer of the political scene, commented on this passivity: 'The sittings of the House have become infrequent and brief. Proceedings are dull and attendance scanty.'³ By-elections brought minor changes of personnel but were more interesting for the light they cast on public opinion. In these infrequent contests demagogues and rabble-rousers had a chance to come into their own as they played upon the innocence or baser instincts of the electors. A few moderate voices were beginning to be raised for 'Peace by Negotiation', but this did not accord well with the spirit of the age. So it happened that with parliament threatening to become superfluous, there was raised up a force which, if not new, soon proved incalculable. That force was the press.

It is not surprising that Fleet Street in this era wielded more influence than ever before or since. With mass as well as class readerships, and with radio and television not yet on the horizon, the owners and editors of important dailies and weeklies were in an exceptionally strong position to shape attitudes at every level of society. When early in the war the government became obsessed to the point of silliness with secrecy and security, a vacuum was created which the press had no choice but to fill. No amount of censorship, certainly not the heavy-handed and ineffective variety provided by the Press Bureau under the Defence of the Realm Act, could blunt the power of the printed word. Lack of official news too often encouraged editors to satisfy the public craving for information

³ M. MacDonagh, *In London during the Great War. The diary of a journalist* (London, 1935), p. 153.

by publishing all sorts of stories and speculative articles, often of doubtful value. Before 1914 politicians and parties had provided some kind of lead on the great issues of the day. Now this vanished and the press was on its own in strange and rough waters. Thus editors and leader-writers were unusually well placed not only to catch and reflect, but indeed create, a widespread mood of dissatisfaction with the existing order of things, government above all. And there was almost no way ministers could fight back. This was a powerful weapon. Nor did its use stop at undermining the Asquith regime from without, for the press also served as a catalyst in bringing the political crisis of late 1916 to a head. Lord Beaverbrook, whose opinion on this subject must command respect, remarked that

with most of the old party loyalties dissolved or in the process of dissolution, and with the spirit of war abroad in the country, the newspapers were in the main free to voice public opinion quite irrespective of ancient party bonds – and public opinion expressed through this medium might decide the result of the political struggle.⁴

One thing Fleet Street had in common with Westminster and Whitehall was an abundance of big names. It was the age of Northcliffe, that towering (and glowering) figure who believed that control of Printing House Square was proof of Napoleonic greatness. In *The Times* and the mass-circulation *Daily Mail* he possessed a fearsome one-two punch, sufficient it seemed to intimidate and perhaps even knock out any and all opponents. Yet there was a large element of illusion here, and Northcliffe deceived himself as to the extent of his influence. His papers could do many things to impress the public mind, but they could not create an army of Northcliffe followers. 'Men did not wear the *Daily Mail* hat; they did not eat the *Daily Mail* loaf. Nor did they accept the *Daily Mail* "Chief".⁵ There were other reasons too why the power of his empire was less than appeared to be the case. Neither Northcliffe nor Geoffrey Dawson (editor of *The Times*), certainly not the long-forgotten Marlowe of the *Daily Mail*, was on the same terms of intimacy with leading ministers as, say, J. A. Spender (editor of the *Westminster Gazette*) or C. P. Scott (owner and editor of the *Manchester Guardian*). Or Sir Max Aitken for that matter, though he was in a category all by himself due to his intimacy with the Unionist leader Bonar Law and his influence over R. D. Blumenfeld (editor of the *Daily Express*). This deprived Printing House Square of inside knowledge during times of political crisis. Northcliffe's bullying manner towards Unionist as well as Liberal ministers, individually and collectively, had an offensiveness about it that ensured their hostility in all seasons. This was true even of Lloyd George, whom Northcliffe suspected of having nefarious designs upon the army.

⁴ Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the war* (London, 1960 edition in one volume), p. 396.

⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914–1945* (Oxford, 1965), p. 27.

Further, he did not know what was needed by way of change, which made his criticisms purely negative and destructive. Suffice it to say that Lord Northcliffe was the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mail* was Lord Northcliffe. With *The Times* it was different. Geoffrey Dawson presided there and he aspired to be a great figure independent of his employer and nominal chief. Like Northcliffe he wanted change in high places and more effective prosecution of the war. But Dawson worshipped the unemployed proconsul Lord Milner and thus identified himself with particular men who might do the job better than Asquith's team. He did not grasp that his attachment to the 'religio Milneriana' made him less a thunderer than an echo.

There were other powerful figures of the press whose role in the forthcoming crisis would match that of Northcliffe and Dawson. At first glance it may seem odd that so many of them traditionally were supporters of Asquith's own party. Why should several outstanding Liberal editors of the day – C. P. Scott, J. A. Spender and Robert Donald (editor of the *Daily Chronicle*) – be instrumental in bringing the old regime to an end? In Spender's case it turned out to be entirely fortuitous, hurting when he meant to help, for the men he admired most in politics were Asquith and Viscount Grey, the foreign secretary. Likewise Donald had little desire to aid in the destruction of Liberal leaders or Liberal principles, but he was more independent than Spender and prepared to speak out fearlessly, with no thought of persons, when he believed the public good demanded it. C. P. Scott, the sage of Manchester, was another matter. Like Lloyd George he had opposed British intervention in the war until late in the day. Again like Lloyd George he had come to the conclusion that the war could not be won unless there were drastic changes of methods and perhaps of men too. This made him increasingly critical of the Asquithian system of government and in consequence prepared to support an alternative, however much it hurt him to see Liberalism further damaged. It must be added that Lloyd George's press allies did not end with C. P. Scott. During the war he had become very matey with such diverse figures as Sir George Riddell and Sir Henry Dalziel, owners respectively of the popular journals *News of the World* and *Reynolds' Newspaper*, as well as Sir William Robertson Nicoll who had wide influence as editor of the *British Weekly*, the leading voice of nonconformity. This meant that Lloyd George's estrangement from Radicalism was not nearly as complete as some chose to believe in 1916. Of the other leading Liberal editors, A. G. Gardiner of the *Daily News* and H. W. Massingham of the weekly *Nation* saw little good in the coalition government as it existed but could think of no alternative, assuming the war continued, that would not be worse. Yet their captious criticism which focused on Lloyd George's delinquencies was more destructive than helpful, even of the things they sought to preserve.

Other tastes were well served too, if not always in the most fastidious way. Tories of the old school drew comfort from the *Morning Post*, edited by the fiery H. A. Gwynne, and the somewhat dowdier *Daily Telegraph* which was owned by Lord Burnham, another of Lloyd George's 'press lord' friends. Gwynne was well worth watching in times of political crisis because his columns reflected the thinking of Sir Edward Carson, ex-member of the Asquith coalition and *de facto* leader of the opposition in the commons. Doubtless this explains why Asquith preferred to read the *Morning Post* rather than *The Times*; he could hardly have found a better barometer of opinion in the Unionist party. Another important voice of Conservatism was the Astor-owned *Observer*, in whose pages the loquacious J. L. Garvin poured forth his weekly torrent of criticism. But 1916 was not Garvin's year to play a great role in shaping events, and the same could be said for the old-fashioned St Loe Strachey of the *Spectator*, though both men were in the front rank of editors and their opinions always carried weight. Less attractive but more influential in certain circles was Leo Maxse, whose *National Review* with its strident but narrow patriotism appealed to the extreme right by exalting the military and constantly denigrating (none too scrupulously) the politicians. Much the same effect was created among the lower orders by the infamous Horatio Bottomley in *John Bull*, which under the guise of simple patriotism pandered to the worst instincts of the mob. Somewhere in between, Lord Rothermere's *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Pictorial* caught the fancy of the lower middle classes, which meant that the Harmsworth influence covered the spectrum of British newspaper readers. It was perhaps fortunate that the brothers Northcliffe and Rothermere did not always speak with the same voice.

On all sides the war was going badly in late 1916. More than two years of fighting in a manner and on a scale hitherto unknown to mankind had brought none of the participants within sight of victory. Frenchmen and Germans, Russians and Austrians, Italians and Turks, all were looking for some way out of their difficulties and finding little light. As for the United Kingdom, accustomed to long periods of prosperous isolation occasionally spiced with fighting of a very different kind, and far from home, the shock of total war was doing strange things to her leaders and people alike. Gallipoli and the Somme, submarines and shortages, conscription in England and rebellion in Ireland – these were not the things the British had expected when they embarked into the unknown thirty months earlier. In a climate of increasing disillusion opinion was dividing into two camps: those who believed, like Lloyd George, that greater effort would bring complete victory; and those who were coming to believe, like Lord Lansdowne, the veteran Unionist statesman, that the war could never be won and might as well be ended sooner as later. Inevitably there were cross-currents. Critics of the Asquith government (whose members save for Lloyd George could see

little for it but plugging along in the same old way) were many, but they could reach no consensus as to what was needed. Northcliffe, for instance, hammered constantly at the coalition. Yet he was solidly behind the generals, who believed implicitly that the Western front was and must remain the main theatre of war. Asquith shared this conviction and did not attempt to dictate strategy to the military. But Lloyd George, the coalition's chief critic from within, had no faith in the generals and wanted a second front in the Near East. How, therefore, could such dynamic forces as Northcliffe and Lloyd George ever see eye to eye as to means and ends?

Of necessity, then, the line taken by the Northcliffe press was somewhat equivocal. *The Times* of 7 November admitted that the war minister was 'a great driving force and an invaluable leader of democracy in war'. This could mean anything or nothing. Only recently Northcliffe had threatened to break Lloyd George if he interfered with strategy. But Geoffrey Dawson was uneasy over the position. He had no thoughts as yet of Lloyd George as some kind of British dictator, so perhaps his great energies could be harnessed to a different chariot. Hence the suggestion in *The Times* of 17 November that Lloyd George become the nation's food controller, a new office with many possibilities. This suggestion fell flat, deservedly, and Printing House Square reverted to its customary broadsides. On 22 November, for example, there appeared a leading article 'Deeds Not Words', a slashing attack on an ill-conceived government proposal to send ministers about the country making speeches on the progress of the war. Nor were matters any more promising from the other side. About this time Max Aitken approached Lloyd George about co-operating with Northcliffe and got a blunt refusal: 'I would as soon go for a sunny evening stroll round Walton Heath with a grasshopper as try and work with Northcliffe.'⁶

Press reaction to the deteriorating political situation in Britain ran the gamut. At one end of the scale was the crude and debasing demagoguery of Horatio Bottomley in *John Bull*, and on a higher level of language if not emotion, the frenetic outpourings of Leo Maxse in the *National Review*. At the other end was the regretful Radicalism of H. W. Massingham in the *Nation*. In between were to be found all shades of opinion and feeling. Some journals of moderate views, Unionist as well as Liberal, wanted change without revolution, meaning the coalition patched up and reinvigorated if possible. This seemed to be the feeling in the North and Scotland, if the *Glasgow Herald* and the *Scotsman* were at all typical. Other newspapers had more specific aims, easily expressed: Asquith dethroned; Lloyd George elevated; Carson brought back; Milner as mayor of the palace; more power to the generals; politicians (or most of them) downgraded, etc. The press really agreed on two things only.

⁶ Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the war*, p. 360.

First, the war could not be won if things continued as they were. Even the *Nation* pressed for change, though Massingham knew that change must damage further both Liberal principles and the Liberal party. So in those columns on 18 November: 'It is not a Food Controller that we want. It is a Policy Controller, a statesman who will work out the threefold equation of our war needs – the relationship of man-power, money-power, work-power; and having arrived at it, fix it as the basis of our total effort.' And on 25 November: 'The House [of Commons] is done to death with phrases, and yet the closer realities of the war escape it, in face of a Cabinet which grasps power, hides knowledge, and suppresses much opinion, without giving an assurance of political competence or a clear direction of the war.' From such a quarter this was a resounding vote of non-confidence in the present leadership. The only other matter on which newspapers saw eye to eye almost suggested a vendetta; scarcely anyone (save perhaps Lord Rothermere) wanted Winston Churchill back in high office, from which he had been excluded this past year.

Four editors are of special interest for their part in the eventful days of late November and early December. Along with the Liberal trio of Donald, Scott and Spender was H. A. Gwynne of the *Morning Post*, which occupied a unique place among English newspapers. Indeed for its readers it came close to having the weight and authority of Holy Writ. Patriotic, consistent, unflinching in its support of the military, distrustful of Liberals as a whole and Lloyd George in particular – all in all, a dependable guide for the upper classes. There was another reason why the old lady of the press inspired trust among respectable Tories, for Gwynne's columns closely mirrored the views of the 'Unionist War Committee', Carson's followers in the house of commons. Unkind critics were of the opinion that Gwynne was little more than Carson's mouthpiece. So in the autumn of 1916 his articles ran true to form with their praise of Carson and defence of the generals against the predatory Lloyd George. Suddenly there came an amazing *volte face*, or so it appeared to those who read Gwynne regularly. On 23 November with absolutely no warning the *Morning Post* ceased its attacks on Lloyd George and instead portrayed him almost as a knight in shining armour:

He is not a strategist, he is not an administrator; but he is a power which makes for victory; he is a force to which the nation may adhere, which the nation may follow. And we believe also that he now sees the wisdom of working cordially with the Army. He is staunchly supporting Sir William Robertson and Sir Douglas Haig, and is doing all in his power to provide them with the means of victory.

Such words from such a quarter caused a great stir. Everyone knew that the *Morning Post* spoke for Carson, so this leading article could mean one thing only: Carson and Lloyd George were drawing together. For what ultimate purpose was not nearly so clear. If Gwynne's sentences were to

be taken at face value, then Lloyd George was the only man fit to lead the nation through to final and complete victory. Yet he was 'not a strategist', 'not an administrator'. What, then, was he, or could he be? No one tried to sort this out, nice conundrums being too much for a war-weary people to wrestle with. Obviously in the view of the *Morning Post* the strategy of the war should remain unchanged, with Haig and Robertson carrying on as before and the Western Front the main theatre of operations. But this was precisely what was driving Lloyd George along the road to revolt. Therefore a broad stretch of water separated the war minister and Sir Edward Carson at this time.

Whatever the *Morning Post's* new line signified, it was an important milestone. Meanwhile, and unknown to the public, a quiet reappraisal was taking place in another quarter, one more likely to encourage Lloyd George to break with Asquith. This was the conversion of C. P. Scott to the belief that there must be changes at the top. For several months past the great Liberal editor had looked upon Lloyd George with considerable disfavour; the failure of the Irish negotiations of mid-1916 was one good reason, and the war minister's celebrated 'Knock-out Blow' interview with an American journalist impressed him as crude and illiberal in the extreme. On the other hand Scott's pessimism over the prospects of victory was heightened by the Rumanian disaster, and now he felt compelled to reassess his feelings about the present leadership. On 25 November he wrote to L. T. Hobhouse: 'The crass stupidity of the military chiefs and the incompetence of the Government are enough to make one despair.'⁷ In fact C. P. Scott was far from despairing; rather he was making up his mind that one man and one man alone could save the situation. This conviction was strengthened as a result of talks with Lloyd George on 21 and 22 November. Encouraged also by Winston Churchill's opinion that the war minister was 'the only possible alternative to Asquith',⁸ Scott came to the conclusion that he must back Lloyd George to the hilt if it came to a showdown.

He had approached Lloyd George with some reluctance, conscious of the recent coolness between them and half-suspecting that the other was bent on self-aggrandizement as much as anything. But the two-day conversations reassured him that Lloyd George was still a Liberal and still the best man in the government, Irish failure and 'Knock-out Blow' language notwithstanding. More important, Lloyd George argued convincingly that he was fighting the battle of civilian control over the military. Scott went away satisfied as to the course he must follow in the days ahead. He summed up his thoughts in another letter to L. T. Hobhouse, dated 28 November. If there were to be a new prime minister, it 'must almost inevitably be Lloyd George with Asquith possibly as Lord Chancellor and Balfour in some purely honorary office'.

⁷ T. Wilson (ed.), *The political diaries of C. P. Scott, 1911-1928* (London, 1970), p. 233.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 235.

This did not mean that the *Manchester Guardian* would give unqualified support, for 'terms would have to be made with Lloyd George – e.g. the reinstatement of [Lord] Fisher [as first sea lord] and in some degree at least of Churchill'. However, the hope of better things to come overrode his feelings about persons: 'Hindenberg has changed the whole aspect of affairs for the Germans. George *might* do something of the same for us.'⁹ Henceforth Scott was on the side of change, though troubled by what it could mean for the Liberal party. If no clarion call issued from his pages as the Asquith era drew to an end, the language used was perhaps more persuasive by its very moderation. By 3 December the *Manchester Guardian* was prepared to abandon all caution and demand new leadership for Britain.

C. P. Scott was not the only famous Liberal editor seeking a ray of light at the end of the tunnel. Robert Donald of the *Daily Chronicle* had maintained a judicious attitude towards the Asquith coalition since its inception, praising when he thought it was due but not fearing to criticize ministers either. Now in late 1916 he too was becoming disillusioned and a prey to despair. Unlike Scott he was not on intimate terms with any of the leading men in politics, not even Lloyd George whom he had supported strongly before the war. This forced him to approach the leadership question in more circumspect fashion. On 24 November he had a long conversation with Sir William Robertson, chief of the imperial general staff, who complained at length about indecision and delay on the part of the War Committee. He added that Asquith was of too judicious a temperament to run a war, whereas Lloyd George by contrast was the only civilian leader who could say 'Yes' or 'No' without hesitation. Apparently these words made a deep impression on Donald. That afternoon he sought out Bonar Law, with whom he was on good terms and could talk freely. As usual the Unionist leader was despondent. According to Donald's recollections of their talk, Law 'had made up his mind that some change must take place. The War Council had grown too big and clumsy in its methods. . . things could not go on as they were.'¹⁰ Law suggested that Donald should have a talk with Asquith, but as the editor rightly pointed out this might inhibit the *Daily Chronicle* in speaking its mind on the subject of national leadership. However, he did get in touch with Asquith's office immediately after leaving Bonar Law, only to learn that it would be difficult to see Asquith in the next day or two. Donald was not too displeased to learn this.

His perturbation was no secret. Sir George Riddell was with Lloyd George at Walton Heath on Sunday, 26 November, and reported that

⁹ Ibid. p. 233.

¹⁰ H. A. Taylor, *Robert Donald* (London, 1934), p. 111. Bonar Law was rather fond of this phrase. A little earlier he had remarked to one of the lesser lights: 'One cannot go on like this, Addison, do you think?' (Christopher Addison, *Four and a half years. A personal diary from June 1914 to January 1919* (2 vols., London, 1934), I, 269).

Donald hoped to see Asquith and press for a committee of three or four powerful ministers to run the war. This did not surprise Lloyd George, who remarked that Robertson probably had urged Donald to try something like this.¹¹ At the same time the war minister saw at once another potential ally in a great Liberal daily and a respected editor whose opinions were highly valued in the party. That Donald did not go to Downing Street after all hardly mattered. Two days passed while he contemplated what steps to take, and then on Wednesday the 29th the *Daily Chronicle* dropped a bombshell. It took the form of a long leading article entitled 'Trials of the Coalition: Firmer Methods Needed'. From the opening sentences the message was crystal clear: 'The Ministry's arch-defect is inability to make up its mind. It is not so much that it reaches wrong decisions, as that for weeks and even months it fails, in crucial matter after crucial matter, to reach any decision at all.' Donald then proceeded to catalogue recent failures of the government:

Ten weeks back the Man Power Board was appointed; and a great many weeks ago Parliament was promised an early day to debate its report. The Report and the debate are still not forthcoming – not because the Board did not submit a prompt report, but because the Government cannot make up its mind what to do with it. Our second instance is the Air Board crisis. The Air Board has been brought to a standstill, because the Admiralty defies its authority. Every aspect of the matter has been before the Government for weeks; but nothing is decided. A third case is food control. A fortnight ago Mr Runciman announced in the name of the Government that a food controller would be appointed, to perform most important functions, which can scarcely be performed otherwise. The appointment is still not made. A fourth example is agricultural policy. Everyone sees now that if our home production of food is to be appreciably increased, there must be no delay in taking steps to that end. Virtually none are being taken. Ministers are still without an agricultural policy worth mentioning. A fifth instance is the Pensions Bill, about which we need say the less, because of what happened in Parliament on Monday speaks for itself. A sixth case is Ireland, where the Government, to the growing embitterment of the whole situation, persists in formally maintaining martial law, because Ministers cannot adjust their minds to make even a formal departure. Seventh and last we might cite the subject of black labour. There seems to be no considered Cabinet policy about it at all... Without touching on great issues of war policy, here are seven plain cases of urgency disregarded; and let nobody fancy that we have exhausted our quiver. War efficiency is not possible on such terms.

Donald wound up with a plea for a powerful war council consisting of four men only – Asquith, Lloyd George, Balfour and Bonar Law. No mere reshuffling of existing personnel, he argued, would suffice to meet the needs of the hour.

Here was a formidable indictment of Asquith and his methods. It is sometimes suggested that Donald was either a tool or a fool in writing as he did at this critical moment. Mr Roy Jenkins in his biography of

¹¹ Lord Riddell's *war diary, 1914–1918* (London, 1933), p. 222.

Asquith implies that the *Daily Chronicle* article on 29 November was only one result of increasing newspaper pressure being brought to bear by Sir Edward Carson and Max Aitken.¹² This is unlikely. Though Donald had talked with Bonar Law, there is no evidence that he had any communication with either Carson or Aitken, nor is it probable that he was influenced by them in any way. His record of independence and integrity was sufficient to refute such a charge. Afterwards he insisted that the article was intended solely to stimulate Asquith and assist him in carrying out reforms, as he feared that parliamentary and press opposition might become sufficiently strong to force the prime minister into humiliating concessions. In the event, the article had precisely the opposite effect, which prompted Mr Jenkins to castigate Donald as 'a man either of extraordinary naiveté or of considerable disingenuousness'. Such criticism is unfair. It is even more unfair to omit to point out that in the *Westminster Gazette* that very afternoon J. A. Spender said almost the same thing. And there could be no doubt about Spender's solicitude for Asquith's interests.

Surprise and shock followed Donald's sweeping denunciation of the government. Harry Jones, parliamentary correspondent of the *Daily Chronicle*, noted that it 'created an immense sensation in political circles', which was no exaggeration.¹³ Many people jumped to the conclusion that a leading Liberal paper had suddenly turned against Asquith, though there was nothing in Donald's paragraphs to suggest that he was now backing another for the post of prime minister. To Liberal headquarters in particular this apparent defection was a nasty blow, made worse by its very unexpectedness. That afternoon in the lobby of the house of commons, Jones was accosted by Geoffrey Howard, one of the Liberal whips, who said accusingly: 'My dear Harry, there is a dirty intrigue on against the P.M. I hope that the *Chronicle* is not in it.' Jones warmly denied any such intention on the part of his editor and Howard reluctantly accepted his disclaimer. But he added: 'Still, your article coming now will encourage the plotters.'¹⁴

If Robert Donald and the *Daily Chronicle* are to be charged with behaving perfidiously towards Asquith and the coalition, the same must be said of J. A. Spender and the *Westminster Gazette*. Spender too had become increasingly uneasy in recent weeks as he saw the government sinking into the morass of indecision and doubt. On personal as well as patriotic grounds he felt moved to utter a warning. Later he recalled going to Asquith, probably about the third week of November, and warning him to be on guard against plots to destroy him. His words were brushed aside.

¹² R. Jenkins, *Asquith* (London, 1964), p. 426.

¹³ Harry Jones's 'Notes' of the crisis, Beaverbrook papers, Deed Box 4, Folder V. House of Lords Record Office, London.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

He said he was sick of all this gossiping and whispering and was determined to take no notice of it. He admitted that he was aware of the friction between certain of his colleagues, and added rather impatiently that he would be grateful to them if they would learn to take a more charitable view of each other and leave him out of their disputes. For the rest, there was nothing to be done even if what I said was true.¹⁵

This sounds like a tired and disillusioned old man who had given way to moroseness, with defeatism not far behind. Asquith did not mean it that way, however, for he added that he believed the utmost was being done on the civilian side to organize and co-ordinate the war effort. The rest was up to the military commanders in the field. But Spender was not altogether satisfied, and decided that the prime minister needed a sharper warning.

So it happened that on the afternoon of 29 November the *Westminster Gazette* came out with a leading article strikingly similar to that which had appeared in the *Daily Chronicle* a few hours earlier. Admitting that the coalition had held together surprisingly well during a period of great crisis for the British people, Spender felt obliged to point out that there was

an appearance of delay and indecision, which may belie the fact, but none the less makes an unhappy impression. Great schemes of food control are announced, but the days go by and the Controller is not appointed. The Man-Power Board is supposed to have prepared its report, and a debate is promised, but again the days go by and it is still postponed. The Pensions question is taken in hand, but the official scheme comes to grief. The question of aircraft is supposed to be the subject of lively discussion between different Departments, but is apparently not brought to an issue. Agriculture is clearly of enormous importance, and various schemes are projected for enabling or inducing the British farmer to grow more wheat, but, so far, none of them are adopted. All this may be compatible with undiminished energy in the Departments and the actual conduct of the war. But it leaves the public disturbed and uneasy. . . . The Government seems at one and the same time to disclose too much and too little of its plans. It discloses half-baked schemes before it is ready to take action on them, it leaves the public a good deal in the dark about certain of the fundamentals of war.

What Asquith and other leading Liberals thought of this production can only be conjectured. Coming hard on the heels of Robert Donald's blast it must have made painful reading indeed. While in some respects the *Westminster Gazette* article may have been a little less forceful than the other, the thrust was there all the same. Had there been collusion between the two editors? It must have seemed so to many readers, for two such admonitions in great Liberal newspapers on the same day was truly suggestive. Yet it was no more than coincidence, another way of saying that two highly intelligent observers had sized up a dangerous

¹⁵ J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith, Lord Oxford and Asquith* (2 vols., London, 1932), II, 244.

situation and voiced their fears at the same moment. More important by far was the effect created. Donald admitted later, and Spender did not deny, that 'your article, coming on top of ours, greatly strengthened his [Lloyd George's] hand'.¹⁶ It availed little for the *Daily Chronicle* in its 30 November issue to reprint the *Westminster Gazette's* leading article of the 29th, at the same time sharply rebuking those newspapers hostile to Asquith which had rejoiced to see the coalition being undermined by its own friends. Far from heading off a crisis, Donald and Spender by their action had served to bring one that much nearer. It was a risk to publish as they did, a risk each editor took knowingly. Yet the outcome was little short of disastrous for the ends they sought to accomplish.

By now the crisis was moving nearer as the 'triumvirate' of Lloyd George, Carson and Bonar Law took shape. Their goal was a small 'war council' to run the war; Asquith of course would be excluded for all practical purposes though he might remain as a nominal prime minister. The weak place in this scheme was Bonar Law, who had not yet steeled himself to break with Asquith. Now his intimate friend Max Aitken decided to intervene with a view to bringing matters to a head. There were compelling reasons for this. Favourable publicity was all important, but the press on Friday, 1 December showed no great prescience that a political upheaval was imminent. For example, Lord Northcliffe's twin scourges served up their usual fare: 'Weak Methods and Weak Men' proclaimed *The Times*, while the *Daily Mail* unleashed a fresh torrent of criticism to edify the man in the street. But this was old stuff. Blumenfeld of the *Daily Express* had received no hint from Aitken so he merely asked why the government continued to procrastinate over the food controllership. Other papers appeared to be no better informed, not even the *Morning Post* which continued to sing the praises of Sir Edward Carson but had nothing good to say about Bonar Law. Meanwhile Lloyd George was sitting down to breakfast at Sir George Riddell's in company with his host and Lord Burnham of the *Daily Telegraph*. The message to the two publishers was perfectly clear: the war could only be won if Lloyd George were given the reins of power.¹⁷ To this there was a corollary, equally clear. If the war minister were to seize and keep control he would need the backing of stalwart friends in the press such as Riddell and Burnham.

It is often said that Lloyd George was guilty of 'trafficking with the Press'. Certainly events of the first Friday in December provide evidence of his activities in this direction. Riddell and Burnham in the morning, a visit from Northcliffe in the afternoon, and then an inspired story in Edward Hulton's *Evening Standard*. That paper's leading article flung at its readers the solemn warning that 'we are on the eve of important political changes, so far as the conduct of the war is concerned'. The

¹⁶ H. A. Taylor, *Robert Donald*, p. 113.

¹⁷ *Lord Riddell's war diary*, pp. 225-6.

writer concluded that 'new methods will have to be employed, and the war run by two or three men of force and energy, and not, as now, by a debating society presided over by a politician who always shirks decisive action'. Elsewhere in the *Evening Standard* was an article headed: 'To Mr Lloyd George. An Appeal.' After several paragraphs of impassioned pleading it concluded with the words: 'If you believe that the perils of the hour cry aloud for change, do your part without counting the cost, without calculation as to personal results. Be true to and straight with this great, proud, fearless British people, and you shall not lack your reward.' Behind this lay a little story. The previous day Harry Jones of the *Daily Chronicle* had had a long talk with a Liberal M.P., J. W. Pratt, who was secretary of the 'Liberal War Committee' and of course a dedicated Lloyd George man. Pratt was loud and long about the war minister's leadership qualities and how they matched the needs of the hour. When Jones read the *Evening Standard* for 1 December he wrote in his notes: 'That article is a free paraphrase of Pratt's talk with me. I have no doubt that it was written by him.'¹⁸ So whether or not Lloyd George was 'trafficking with the Press', his fervent supporters were doing a good job of boosting his claim to lead. The end result was the same.

Scarcely had this effusion reached the streets when two popular morning papers prepared to publish sensational stories. The editors of the *Daily Chronicle* and *Daily Express* had just been warned that wholesale reconstruction of the government was imminent, and they shaped their Saturday editions accordingly. How they came by this information was largely Max Aitken's doing. By his own claim he had made up his mind Friday afternoon to bring matters into the open, in hopes of precipitating a crisis that would cause Asquith's fall. The *Daily Express* provided him with a ready outlet, for with his controlling interest a hint to Blumenfeld would suffice. But he feared this alone would have insufficient weight with the public, so it was necessary to ensure that another important newspaper carried the story at the same time. Here was where the *Daily Chronicle* came in. Both Aitken and Blumenfeld were on good terms with Robert Donald, but discretion was necessary lest the Liberal editor suspect that he was being used by the other two. Rather than approach him directly, Aitken decided to convey the necessary word through an independent party, an American journalist named Bell of the *Chicago Daily News*, who was well known and trusted in Fleet Street. Thus on Friday afternoon Bell advised the *Daily Chronicle* editorial staff that he had learnt from the War Office about great political developments in the offing, with a general election probable. Hearing this, Donald had enquiries made at the War Office to check the authenticity of the story, and having satisfied himself on that score he decided to publish at once.¹⁹

¹⁸ Harry Jones's 'Notes'.

¹⁹ A. J. P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, pp. 113-14.

This at any rate is how Beaverbrook's biographer describes the manoeuvre. He explains Aitken's oblique approach by saying that 'he wished to shield himself from Lloyd George's disapproval. If Lloyd George, as seems likely, aimed at an amicable arrangement with Asquith, he would not want publicity which might provoke a crisis'. But Aitken was determined to bring matters into the open, so this had to be done without Lloyd George's sanction. The upshot was that he succeeded in manipulating Lloyd George into a position where either compromise or retreat would be much more difficult, if not completely impossible. Such an explanation is, of course, entirely plausible. It is equally possible that the initial impulse for the *Daily Chronicle* and *Daily Express* stories came from the war minister himself. He remembered very well how in May 1915 newspaper publicity had forced Asquith to make swift changes in order to forestall a crisis, and the same thing might be engineered now. It is therefore hard to see how Lloyd George's campaign for a small war council could be hurt by publicity at this moment. On the contrary, since earlier on Friday he had given Asquith an ultimatum which might lead to his own resignation, it was absolutely vital that the reasons for his action should be known and understood if that final step were necessary. At no time did Lloyd George show displeasure with Aitken for priming the press without his authority, yet the *Daily Express* story could only have been Aitken's work. It appears that Lloyd George was cleverly using Aitken for his own ends.

The two journals which had been tipped off, and it hardly mattered how, made the most of their opportunity. Saturday's *Daily Chronicle* came out with a vivid headline: 'New and Smaller British Council of War.' According to the story that followed, the higher direction of the war was no longer to be vested in the cabinet and old war committee but entrusted to a five-man junta consisting of Asquith, Lloyd George, Bonar Law, A. J. Balfour and Sir Edward Carson. The *Daily Express* headline was even more dramatic: 'Coalition Crisis – New War Control.' The subheadings were in kind: 'Control of the War'; 'Sudden Crisis in the Coalition'; 'Rule of Five? Mr Asquith, Mr Lloyd George, Mr Bonar Law, Mr Balfour, and Sir E. Carson.' Similar in most respects to the *Daily Chronicle*, there were one or two curious features about the *Express* story. Since one of the aims of the Lloyd George triumvirate was to get Balfour out of the Admiralty, if not out of the government altogether, it seemed odd that a paper controlled by Max Aitken should have named him to a new war council. At least Donald of the *Daily Chronicle* was able to produce an excuse for doing so. He told Blumenfeld later that they had included Balfour as one of the five for fear that omission of his name might cause alarm, presumably among influential classes.²⁰ Secondly, the *Daily Express* quoted with evident approval a statement by Arthur

²⁰ Donald to Blumenfeld, 27 Feb. 1917. Blumenfeld papers, DON-1, H. of L. Record Office.

Henderson (Labour's lone cabinet minister) on Friday night that 'Mr Asquith is the indispensable man to lead us to the end of the war and to lead us successfully.' It seems either Aitken and Blumenfeld were of different minds about the necessity for ousting Asquith, or else Aitken's own mind was not quite so clear as he would have us believe in his later writings.

Compared with these two, the other London morning papers were not in the picture at all. The *Morning Post* may have been Carson's voice in the press, but on this second day of December it contained nothing special to indicate that a major crisis was near at hand. Until the very end Carson allowed H. A. Gwynne to go blundering along in his turgid way, not grasping that a new relationship existed between his hero and Bonar Law. Nor had Northcliffe's Friday visit to the War Office paid off in terms of a scoop. Both *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* of Saturday adopted their customary disparaging tones towards the government, at the same time praising Lloyd George and Carson, but they were sketchy and inaccurate. As usual Northcliffe's effectiveness was diminished by the extravagance of the language in the *Daily Mail*, whose lead story was fairly described as a 'vicious and blackguardly article directed against [the] P.M., Grey, Balfour and [Lord] Haldane'.²¹ As for the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily News*, the one sympathetic to Lloyd George and the other bitterly hostile, they shared the general ignorance of their bigger and more influential brethren. In another quarter, however, there were signs of prescience. The *Manchester Guardian's* London correspondent warned in his Friday night letter that he would be failing in his duty to his readers if he did not inform them of 'the strong rumours, perhaps one ought to say more than rumours, that are going on in the Lobby of an imminent change of Government'. Thus the war minister had no reason to feel in any way displeased with the tone of the press this Saturday morning. Maurice Hankey's opinion was widely shared: 'The morning papers contained a great deal of information obviously inspired by Lloyd George.'²² Clearly the press had helped bring a showdown between Asquith and Lloyd George appreciably nearer.

By mid-afternoon Lloyd George had prepared a draft letter of resignation. The immediate purpose of this was to stiffen the back of Bonar Law, who showed distressing signs of wobbling back into the Asquith camp. Later in the day the contents of this letter would be revealed to another of Lloyd George's press friends, with momentous results. Before that happened, however, he busied himself strengthening his position with various important figures. To C. P. Scott in Manchester he sent a telegram asking him to come to Walton Heath, Lloyd George's Surrey retreat, next day. Max Aitken of course was in and out of the War Office during the afternoon. And Lord Northcliffe called, though once

²¹ Harry Jones's 'Notes'.

²² Stephen W. Roskill, *Hankey: man of secrets* (3 vols., London, 1970-74), I, 323.

again he was not taken completely into Lloyd George's confidence. None the less he learnt enough to set his great machine to work, and shortly afterwards the *Evening News* placarded London with signs 'Lloyd George Packing Up'. Then there was a visit to the War Office, mentioned in few accounts, of T. P. O'Connor and John Dillon. They were two of the greatest figures in the Irish Nationalist party, Dillon having practically taken over the leadership from John Redmond, now a broken man, while 'Tay Pay' was a veteran M.P. and journalist (he founded the *Star*), thoroughly conversant with Westminster as well as Irish moods. Clearly Lloyd George was testing the ground for possible Irish Nationalist support in the event he formed a ministry. Last but not least came Sir Henry Dalziel to Lloyd George's presence.

Dalziel was the proprietor of *Reynolds' Newspaper*, a Sunday journal which usually dispensed a non-political brand of titillation. He had sat in the house of commons as a Radical member since 1892 and was an old crony of Lloyd George's. Though the proprietorial side of journalism had become his main interest, in parliament he continued to be watched. Sir Percy Harris from his intimate knowledge of Westminster described Dalziel as 'a great power behind the scenes... when he did intervene you could be quite sure that trouble was brewing'.²³ Thus it was his close connexion with Lloyd George and reputation as a stormy petrel that made his action now so immensely significant. It was only a matter of hours until the essence of his conversation with Lloyd George on Saturday afternoon became public knowledge. Alone among the Sunday papers for 3 December *Reynolds' Newspaper* carried a sensational story. Its headlines guaranteed an attentive readership for what followed: 'Grave Cabinet Crisis'; 'Lloyd George to Resign'; 'Campaign in the Country'. Those who knew something of the inner workings of British politics realized immediately that these words were neither random shots nor inspired guesswork. Lloyd George had flung down the gauntlet and this was his way of letting the world know.

No reading between the lines was required of the *Reynolds's* story: 'Mr Lloyd George has intimated to the Prime Minister his intention to resign his post as Secretary of State for War.' The next sentence was only slightly less piquant. 'The actual resignation will probably not be in the hands of the Prime Minister until today, it having been delayed at the request of several of Mr Lloyd George's colleagues in the Cabinet, who are still doing everything in their power to prevent the final step being taken.' At once it was recognized that no journal, not even one which operated at the level of Dalziel's organ, would have the effrontery to publish such a story unless sure of the facts. What the reading public did not know was that the words used bore a striking resemblance to particular sentences and phrases in a letter lying on Lloyd George's desk,

²³ P. A. Harris, *Forty years in and out of parliament* (London, 1947), p. 68.

a letter not yet sent. It is only necessary to compare the two to see that one was a paraphrase of the other. For example: 'Mr Lloyd George has arrived at the definite conclusion that the methods of dilatoriness, indecision and delay which characterize the action of the present War Council are such, in his opinion, as to endanger the prospects of winning the war.'²⁴ Another prospect was envisaged which made the blood of many readers run cold, namely that Lloyd George 'is fully satisfied that by the present methods the war cannot be won, and he will ask the people of the country to save themselves from the blunders and delays of the Government. He will, in short, appeal from the Cabinet direct to the people.' This again closely resembled what the war minister had written in his draft letter of resignation.

Here was political dynamite which could hardly fail to blow the situation wide open, and in fact did so within hours. The events of this fateful Sunday form a remarkable tale of confusion, but the substance can be set down briefly. Before noon an outraged group of Unionist ministers, led by Austen Chamberlain, Lord Curzon and Lord Robert Cecil, descended upon Bonar Law and demanded an explanation, assuming that he knew what was afoot. The ensuing discussion was hot and heavy, out of which came a curious four-sentence document that Bonar Law was to convey to Asquith after luncheon. In effect this missive said that the situation was impossible and unless immediate changes were made the Unionist ministers would resign *en masse*. Controversy has swirled about this piece of paper ever since, as it was unclear whether the aim was to speed Asquith's departure or force Lloyd George to come to heel. Faced with this apparent mutiny in his cabinet, Asquith hastily arranged a meeting with Lloyd George and Bonar Law in order to attempt a patch-up. Here too there is a large element of mystery. Most writers take the view that Asquith yielded to the demand for a small war council under Lloyd George's chairmanship to run the war. In fact it is far from clear that there was any real understanding between the two leading Liberals about a reallocation of power. None the less, by nightfall the word was spreading round London that Asquith had yielded to Lloyd George and henceforth would be little more than a figurehead. Yet Asquith's enemies in the press (and elsewhere) could not repress the suspicion that he might have engineered yet another of his famous compromises so as to remain in the saddle a little longer. Monday's newspapers were to ensure that this did not happen.

We began this article by quoting the *Morning Post's* question of 4 December: 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' This suggests that H. A. Gwynne

²⁴ See such sentences as 'There has been delay, indecision, lack of forethought and vision.' Also, 'We have thrown away opportunity after opportunity, and I am convinced, after deep and anxious reflection, that it is my duty to leave the Government in order to inform the people of the real condition of affairs. . . .' (Lloyd George papers, E/2/23/11. H. of L. Record Office).

had received word, probably through Sir Edward Carson, of Asquith's purported surrender to Lloyd George on Sunday afternoon. The tone of the *Manchester Guardian* was strikingly similar. 'Mr Lloyd George Demands a New War Council: Resignation to Follow Refusal.' So ran the heading over the main news story, which read as if Lloyd George had achieved a great victory. It concluded: 'The most natural constitutional course for Mr Asquith would be either to resist the demand for a War Council, which would partly supersede him as Premier, or alternatively himself to resign.' Coming from a great Liberal journal this must have made painful reading in Downing Street. Also significant was the fact that an extract from the leading article appeared in *The Times* on Monday morning, provided by courtesy of the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*. But Geoffrey Dawson needed no push from C. P. Scott or anyone else to persuade him to strike and strike hard at the tottering prime minister. Like all the Milnerites he heartily loathed the Asquithian system and wanted to deliver a knock-out blow of his own. Nor did he want Lord Northcliffe to have a share in this. Part of the week-end he spent at Cliveden with Waldorf Astor where he worked on Monday's leading article, adding the finishing touches Sunday evening after a long talk with Carson. The result was the most celebrated single piece of editorial writing for many a year before or after. Dawson's key passages were these:

Mr Lloyd George has finally taken his stand against the present cumbrous methods of directing the war. . . The gist of his proposal is understood to be the establishment forthwith of a small War Council, fully charged with the supreme direction of the war. Of this council Mr Asquith himself is not to be a member – the assumption being that the Prime Minister has sufficient cares of a more general character without devoting himself wholly, as the new council must be devoted if it is to be effective, to the daily task of organising victory. . . The inclusion of Sir Edward Carson is believed to form an essential part of Mr Lloyd George's scheme, and it is one which will be thoroughly understood.

On the top of all this comes the official announcement that the Prime Minister has decided for reconstruction, and with it fresh hope that the change may be effected without interregnum or delay. It means, we assume, that he consents in principle to Mr Lloyd George's proposals. The conversion has been swift, but Mr Asquith has never been slow to note political tendencies when they become inevitable. The testimony of his closest supporters – even more, perhaps, than the pressure of those who have no politics beyond the war – must have convinced him by this time that matters cannot possibly go on as at present. They must have convinced him, too, that his own qualities are fitted better, as they are fond of saying, to 'preserve the unity of the nation' (though we have never doubted its unity) than to force the pace of a War Council.

There was a calculated offensiveness about Dawson's prose that none could miss. One hardened veteran of political journalism was sufficiently impressed to speak of 'vicious reflections on the P.M.'. He added that the leading article 'deliberately conveyed the impression that the P.M. had been, as it were, extruded by force from the Council, and made it

appear before the world as if he had suffered a grievous humiliation'.²⁵ Hankey likewise entered in his diary that it was 'an intolerable, one-sided, and obviously inspired "leader"'.²⁶ According to Austen Chamberlain in a long letter to the viceroy of India, *The Times* represented the situation as 'a complete surrender by the Prime Minister, who was to be left in his position only on condition that the whole conduct of affairs was placed in Lloyd George's hands'.²⁷ Beaverbrook in *Politicians and the war* attempted to play down the spirit of Dawson's article, though admitting that it was 'hostile to Asquith and carried a sting in some of its implications'.²⁸ But in his original account of this crisis he said frankly that the piece in question was not intended to soothe Asquith and his friends – 'not what he [Dawson] said but the nasty sort of way he said it'.²⁹

The press had done its work well. Whatever the nature of the reconciliation between Asquith and Lloyd George on Sunday afternoon, all was in ruins as a result of Monday's newspapers, *The Times* in particular. Asquith recognized at once that their interpretation of yesterday's events was far from his own. Limited concession rather than wholesale surrender was the way he saw the arrangement with Lloyd George. A Sunday midnight press release about ministerial reconstruction was intended to convey that fact to the general public as well as to colleagues and supporters. After all, something similar had served his purposes in May 1915. Instead, Asquith awoke on Monday morning to discover leading journals rejoicing that the conduct of the war was to be placed in more dynamic hands, which meant he himself was to be largely superseded. A politician of the prime minister's experience and sagacity hardly needed lesser men to tell him what that portended. Next thing his enemies in the press and parliament would be dancing on his grave.

So there was only one thing for it. Lloyd George, intentionally or not, had challenged him to a fight to the finish. There could be no compromise now. The rest of the story is well known, how Asquith insisted on remaining prime minister in fact as well as name, which forced Lloyd George to carry out his threat of resignation. Unionist ministers at once followed suit, and by Tuesday afternoon, 5 December, Asquith was hopelessly isolated with no choice but to advise the king that he was unable to continue. And when the dust settled, Lloyd George emerged as prime minister with the backing of those very same Unionists who so recently had seemed anxious to dispose of him (or so Asquith thought). An era had ended once the split between the two strongest men in

²⁵ Harry Jones's 'Notes'.

²⁶ Roskill, *Hankey*, 1, 326.

²⁷ Sir Austen Chamberlain, *Down the years* (London, 1935), p. 121.

²⁸ Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the war*, p. 445.

²⁹ 'Report on Cabinet Crisis 1916', part II, p. 20. Beaverbrook papers, Deed Box 4, Folder XXIV.

British politics became irreconcilable. One or the other must rule, not both.

Could Lloyd George have become prime minister without the aid of the press? It is doubtful. Or at least not at that time and not in that way. True he owed much to Asquith's fatal miscalculation, namely that he could overcome this crisis as others by adjusting men and offices. Asquith's failure to seek a vote of confidence in parliament puzzled many, Churchill among others, long afterwards.³⁰ But the answer is fairly simple. Like many another leader he believed himself indispensable, and like many another he was deceived. By neglecting the press, to say nothing of parliament, Asquith misread the temper of the times. On the other hand Lloyd George, in Churchill's words, 'by some instinctive, almost occult process', sensed what the nation wanted.³¹ Or as Beaverbrook said of Lloyd George, 'in some vague and inspired manner he represented all those forces of national energy which were determined on complete victory'.³² The press caught and reflected Britain's mood in late 1916. Lloyd George rode to Downing Street on the crest of that wave.

³⁰ Winston Churchill, *Great contemporaries* (London, 1937), p. 116.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 116.

³² Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the war*, pp. 408-9.