
Asquith's Choice: The May Coalition and the Coming of Conscription, 1915-1916

Author(s): R. J. Q. Adams

Source: *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Jul., 1986), pp. 243-263

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175463>

Accessed: 01/02/2010 08:39

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of British Studies*.

Asquith's Choice: The May Coalition and the Coming of Conscription, 1915–1916

R. J. Q. Adams

I

The enactment into law in January 1916 of the first installment of mandatory military service in modern British history was an event whose importance few scholars dispute.¹ While invariably considered a significant break in the British political and military tradition, recent scholarship has tended to treat the passage of the first Military Service Act as an episode that has little new to tell us about the political rivalry within the coalition cabinet presided over by Herbert Henry Asquith since May 1915. No student of the compulsory service debate can deny that he has been warned off, as Lord Beaverbrook wrote in the late 1920s that close study of the politics of conscription in the Asquith coalition would be “tedious to the last degree.”² Most forbidding was

R. J. Q. ADAMS is associate professor of history at Texas A&M University. He wishes to thank Professor Carole Rogel Poirier, who provided materials relevant to this project from the researches of her late husband, Professor Philip P. Poirier. A version of this essay was read at the annual meeting of the Western Conference on British Studies, Las Cruces, New Mexico, October 25–27, 1984. This essay is related to a larger project: a study of mandatory military service in Great Britain, 1900–1918.

¹ For the moment, the sole monograph on the conscription issue remains Denis Hayes, *Conscription Conflict* (London, 1949). There are a small number of works on the anticonscription movement during World War I, of which the most recent and the most insightful is Thomas C. Kennedy, *The Hound of Conscience: A History of the No-Conscription Fellowship, 1914–1919* (Fayetteville, Ark., 1981). Also very useful on the same subject is John Rae, *Conscience and Politics* (Oxford, 1970). Among the most useful discussions of the issue in the politics of the period are Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914–1935* (London, 1966), chap. 3; A. J. P. Taylor, “Politics in the First World War,” in *Politics in Wartime* (London, 1964), pp. 11–44; and A. M. Gollin, *Proconsul in Politics: A Study of Lord Milner in Opposition and in Power* (London, 1964), chap. 11. See also the recent essay by John O. Stubbs, “Beaverbrook as Historian: ‘Politicians and the War, 1914–1916’ Reconsidered,” *Albion* 14, nos. 3–4 (Winter 1982): 245–48.

² Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War* (London, 1960), p. 200.

Journal of British Studies 25 (July 1986): 243–263

© 1986 by The North American Conference on British Studies.

All rights reserved. 0021-9371/86/2503-0004\$01.00

the judgment of Lord Blake in his life of the Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law: "The question of conscription would indeed be a tedious topic to pursue through all its ramifications. The endless discussions, the attitudes taken by public men at various times, the compromises, the disputes, constitute a chapter in English history to which, no doubt in years to come dull history professors will direct their duller research students."³

Many historians of the world war who have found the subject less dull than implied above have concluded that it presents a straightforward story: the implementation of conscription came about because the traditional policy of voluntarism had proven insufficient to raise an army of adequate size. The episode has been judged essentially a triumph of the Tory right wing (with the collusion of the maverick Liberal David Lloyd George) over orthodox Liberalism. Asquith and most of his Liberal colleagues, we are told, reluctantly acquiesced to compulsory service to quiet Lloyd George and maintain the coalition with the conservatives. Conventional wisdom would also have it that it was a time of particular trial for the prime minister, who accepted the sobering dose of state control only reluctantly, having delayed the inevitable as long as possible, like the good Liberal that he was.⁴

It is the purpose of this brief essay to suggest that, despite the great corpus of literature that has grown up around the struggles of British politicians in the First World War and regardless of the caveats of Lords Beaverbrook and Blake, there is yet more to be learned from the study of the passage of the first Military Service Act. Close examination of the months before January 1916 reveals that compulsion did not come when it did and as it did simply because a few keen conscriptionists forced it on a prime minister no longer strong enough to resist them. Nor was this episode simply an example of Asquithian "wait-and-see" procrastination, swept aside by powerful necessity. Mandatory service came only after Asquith had himself suitably prepared the way and when he was quite ready.

If there can be said to exist a consensus regarding the advent of

³ Robert Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister: The Life and Times of Andrew Bonar Law, 1858–1923* (London, 1955), p. 282. Gollin took issue with Lord Blake and wrote: "It may, perhaps, be observed in this connection that dullness, like beauty, resides in the eye of the beholder" (p. 275).

⁴ For many years the most important pillar of the Religio Asquithiana has been J. A. Spender and Cyril Asquith's *The Life of Lord Oxford and Asquith* (2 vols. [London, 1932]), which A. J. P. Taylor has appropriately termed "aggressively 'Squiffite.'" Many sympathetic portraits of the prime minister in historical literature can be traced back to this source.

compulsion, it approximates still the analysis laid down so matter-of-factly by Lord Beaverbrook more than fifty years ago: the Tories were open adherents of conscription even before entering the coalition formed in May 1915; David Lloyd George, minister of munitions in the coalition, was “from start to finish” the leader of the compulsionist movement; and, finally: “Everybody up to the summer of 1915 tended to rely on Lord Kitchener to give a sign—and Lord Kitchener seemed to be waiting on the Prime Minister to tell him whether to give a sign or not. So nothing happened.” The conclusion of the drama also struck the great press lord as a rather dull final act: “The Derby Scheme was the test. As soon as its failure was manifest to the country, the Military Service Act was passed and accepted by public opinion.”⁵

More recently, historians who have examined the part played by Asquith in the conscription drama after mid-1915 have frequently regarded the prime minister as holding the voluntarist line—if ultimately unsuccessfully—against the onslaughts of the state controllers of both major parties: Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Sir Edward Carson, Lord Milner, and the rest. Typical of the view expressed in much recent scholarship has been the explanation eloquently outlined by Trevor Wilson in his influential *Downfall of the Liberal Party*: “For the truth was that Asquith, although claiming to have an open mind on conscription, detested it—and believed that he represented his party in doing so.”⁶ To Michael Bentley, Asquith was caught between his own Liberals, angered at the possibility of conscription, and the procompulsion Tories, who were equally adamant that mandatory service was necessary.⁷ A. J. P. Taylor has interpreted Asquith’s actions over conscription as “ingenious evasion” that, in the end, saw his role both as victim and as apostate in the tragedy confirmed: ultimately defeated, Asquith, Taylor tells us, “sold the pass.”⁸ A closer look at his actions in the months prior to January 1916 suggests that such interpretations as these may have played their part in the making of the prime minister into “the plaster saint of a spurious Liberal legend that has been created round his memory.”⁹

It is indisputably true that Lloyd George and his allies wanted compulsion well enough, but the evidence indicates that the prime minister manipulated both them and the anticonscription Liberal fac-

⁵ Beaverbrook, pp. 200–201.

⁶ Wilson, p. 73.

⁷ Michael Bentley, *The Liberal Mind, 1914–1929* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 29–30.

⁸ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914–1945* (London, 1965), p. 53. In this regard, see also Rae, chaps. 1, 2.

⁹ Gollin, p. 256.

tion—with Sir John Simon, Walter Runciman, and Reginald McKenna foremost—to arrange as smooth a passage into law as possible for mandatory service. He did so not because he had been philosophically converted to the policy or because he had a Lloyd Georgian pistol placed to his head but because several months of patient maneuvering enabled him to execute an unappetizing but necessary duty. To fail to do so, Asquith realized, would quite probably lead to the breakup of the coalition and the end of his power.

II

Once the decision to join the European war was taken by the cabinet in August 1914, Field Marshal Earl Kitchener of Khartoum, hero of the South African War and consul general in Egypt, was dragooned by Asquith into accepting the post of secretary of state for war—the first serving officer to hold such office since General Monck in the time of the Restoration.¹⁰ In his first cabinet, “Lord K” made clear that he anticipated a different kind of war than that expected by virtually all other soldiers and statesmen. He announced that he expected the war to last for years and to require an army that far exceeded in size the mere six divisions of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).¹¹ His colleagues heard him out in silence, and many, like Sir Edward Grey, no doubt found his predictions “unlikely, if not incredible.”¹² The development of the war over the next year, however, proved him correct and reinforced his reputation for some months to come.

Immediately on taking office, Kitchener announced the first call for 100,000 volunteers to reinforce the BEF. Before the month was out, that draft was superseded by a call for another 100,000, and then another and another. By January 1915, as the trenches were dug from the Swiss border to the sea and Europe settled into a long conflict, the War Lord concluded that he needed virtually all fit men between the ages of nineteen and thirty-five.¹³

Thus were born the so-called New Armies of volunteers, signed on

¹⁰ The task was not financially unprofitable for Kitchener, as he continued to receive his military salary, in addition to which was added his salary as secretary of state and a special allowance of £1,140 per year. Anticipating a successful end to his leadership, he presumed there would be a parliamentary grant as a reward for his winning of the war. (See Philip Magnus, *Kitchener: Portrait of an Imperialist* [London, 1959], p. 278.)

¹¹ See Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1914–1918* (London, 1923), 1:253.

¹² Viscount Grey of Fallodon, *Twenty-five Years, 1892–1916* (London, 1925), p. 68.

¹³ Public Record Office (PRO), Cabinet (CAB) 42/1/25, January 27, 1915.

for three-year enlistments and grouped into newly organized "Service Battalions" rather than attached to the Regulars or the Territorial Force established by Haldane in 1907.¹⁴ The late summer and early autumn of 1914 did witness a remarkable response to Kitchener's call: in August almost 300,000 men volunteered. In September, another 460,000 joined them.¹⁵ In the final quarter of the year, however, the rate of enlistment fell from this frenzied pace, and the first concerns about adequate manpower for the army were expressed.¹⁶ Kitchener, though he was anxious about the decrease in enlistments, remained a rock-ribbed voluntarist; quite probably he distrusted conscript troops both because of the traditional belief that one volunteer was "worth ten pressed men" and because his experience with Egyptian conscripts had convinced him that such men made poor soldiers. Furthermore, there is reason to suspect that his determination to raise entirely new units—ever after remembered as "Kitchener Armies"—of volunteers was as much a product of his desire to raise monuments to himself as was his energetic dedication to accumulating treasures for his beloved country house, Broome Park.¹⁷

May 1915, of course, saw the advent of the Liberal-Conservative-Labor coalition cabinet, forced on Asquith but shaped by him to prolong his own power and deny authority to his colleague-cum-rival Lloyd George and to the Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law.¹⁸ Lloyd George gave his legendary energies for the next few months to organizing the Ministry of Munitions, the greatest experiment in state

¹⁴ For the raising of the New Armies, see Roy Douglas, "Voluntary Enlistment in the First World War and the Work of the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee," *Journal of Modern History* 42, no. 4 (December 1970): 564–85; Howard Green, *The British Army in the First World War* (London, 1968), passim; and Magnus, chap. 14. The most spirited defense of Kitchener's recruiting policies—and virtually alone among contemporary historians in his treatment of this subject—is George H. Casser, *Kitchener: Architect of Victory* (London, 1977), chap. 9.

¹⁵ N. B. Dearle, *The Labour Cost of the War to Great Britain, 1914–1918* (London, 1940), p. 8.

¹⁶ In the three months October–December 1914, approximately 425,000 men enlisted in the forces (*ibid.*).

¹⁷ The sole defense of Kitchener's decision and methods of raising the New Armies may be found in Casser, chap. 21. Robertson, the first "ranker" to rise to the lofty place of field marshal, was an unvarnished conscriptionist and—while not an intriguer on the level of General Sir Henry Wilson—used his office to the fullest to hasten the advent of mandatory service.

¹⁸ For the confused nature of the conscription question in the formation of the May coalition, see Barry McGill, "Asquith's Predicament, 1914–1918," *Journal of Modern History* 39, no. 3 (September 1967): 290–91. For the contending views on the formation of the coalition, see also Cameron Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War: July 1914–May 1915* (London, 1971), passim; and Stephen Koss, *Asquith* (London, 1976), chap. 8.

control in British history to that time.¹⁹ Bonar Law, Sir Edward Carson, darling of the ultra-right-wing Tories, and their colleagues were brought into the government in subordinate positions. Asquith, pleading through crocodile tears that it was bitter necessity, jettisoned some of his closest associates—among them his old friend and former war minister Lord Haldane—to make room for the Tories, and his power seemed safe for the moment.²⁰

The conscription issue grew considerably warmer in the summer of 1915. In the first place, Lloyd George embarked on a relentless program to increase munitions production, and his highly centralized labor control policies moved ever closer to mandatory industrial service. Second, dangerous factions or “ginger groups” within each major party were organizing to force the issue—these were the Liberal and Conservative War Committees.²¹ Third, by August, certain front bench Tories—Lord Curzon and Walter Long, in particular—were openly lobbying to bring in conscription; their Liberal opposite numbers—following the lead of McKenna and Runciman—were equally adamant in their opposition and were determined to frustrate such a policy.

As the summer months continued and the military news was especially doleful, yet more unpalatable helpings were piled on Asquith’s plate. In July, for example, Kitchener crossed to the Continent for a conference of Allied commanders at Calais and pledged Britain to fielding an army of seventy divisions—close to twice the size of the force in the field at the time and more than ten times as large as the BEF on August 1914.²² As though this were not shock enough, in August the British army renewed the attack in the Eastern Mediterranean and carried out the disastrous Suvla Bay landing—the results spelled the end both of the Dardanelles campaign and of the career of General Sir Ian Hamilton. When the reports reached him of the terrible results, Asquith—normally so unflappable—wrote to Kitchener on August 20: “I have read enough to satisfy me that the generals and staff

¹⁹ For the place of the ministry in both Lloyd George’s and the war’s development, see R. J. Q. Adams, *Arms and the Wizard: Lloyd George and the Ministry of Munitions, 1915–1916* (London, 1978), *passim*.

²⁰ For Asquith’s exercise at coalition making, see Koss, pp. 188–90.

²¹ There is little doubt that, prewar animosities notwithstanding, the ginger groups were cooperating (see F. E. Guest to F. S. Oliver, July 23, 1915, enclosed with Oliver to Austen Chamberlain, July 26, 1915, University of Birmingham Library, Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC 14/6/35).

²² Kitchener chose the number of seventy divisions virtually without consultation with either his military or his cabinet colleagues, thinking that it approximated—given the variance in population—the French contribution.

engaged in the Suvla part of the business ought to be court-martialled and dismissed from the Army.”²³

There was still more: Marshal Joffre, the French commander in chief, had lent his support to the Dardanelles “push,” though he had no confidence that it offered much chance of success. His reason? He intended an offensive of his own and meant that the British should be morally bound, in turn, to support it. His approval of the Suvla Bay fiasco was simply a quid pro quo for yet another assault on the western front. A. J. P. Taylor has written: “After Hamilton’s failure [at Suvla Bay], Joffre presented his bill, and Kitchener honored it. He told the Dardanelles Committee [Asquith’s inner cabinet for management of the War]: ‘We have to make war as we must[,] not as we should like to.’ The French ministers, who had no faith in an offensive agreed to it in order to please Kitchener; the British ministers agreed in order to please the French.”²⁴ Accordingly, Asquith wrote to the king on August 20: “Lord Kitchener while far from sanguine that any substantial military advantage will be achieved is strongly of the opinion that we cannot, without serious and perhaps fatal injury to the alliance, refuse the co-operation which General Joffre invites and expects. . . . After much consideration, the Cabinet adopted Lord Kitchener’s view and the necessary steps will be taken.”²⁵

The result was the Battle of Loos, fought in September and October 1915, at a cost to the British Army of 50,000 casualties, with no profit of any material sort save the fact that it provided the excuse for supersession (in December) of Commander in Chief Sir John French with General Sir Douglas Haig.²⁶ Haig (like French, a cavalry general and an unshakable “Westerner”) undoubtedly had a stronger nerve than French but, in the long run, proved to be little improvement over his predecessor.

III

Asquith knew that he was in deep water after the shattering setbacks at Suvla Bay and Loos. Masses of men had been killed, maimed,

²³ Magnus, p. 347.

²⁴ Taylor, *English History* (n. 8 above), p. 45.

²⁵ Bodleian Library (Bodl.), Asquith Papers, 8/82–83.

²⁶ Sir Douglas Haig, since mid-July 1915, had been secretly sending his evaluation of the war directly to Kitchener and to the king, at their request. George V told Haig of a conversation with Kitchener: “‘If anyone acted like that, and told tales out of school, he would, at school, be called a sneak.’ K’s reply was that we are beyond the schoolboy’s age!” (Magnus, pp. 347–48).

or lost, and the response of the generals was simply to demand even more men.²⁷ Enlistments, quite understandably, continued to decline, and the conscriptionists in and out of the government redoubled their efforts to bring in compulsory service as the only answer to the dilemma. The prime minister turned, as he so often did, to a cabinet committee to advise the government on the question of manpower resources and army requirements. To most observers of the period this was a familiar Asquithian device “through which he hoped to defuse the situation.”²⁸

The new War Policy Committee was appointed on August 12 to consider the question: “How large should be the Army which we endeavour to keep in the field during the year 1916? If the main facts can be established [their instructions continued], the Cabinet as a whole will be able to discuss the questions of policy which will then arise.”²⁹ In the chair Asquith placed Lord Crewe, the colleague whose judgment he most respected; he added, as well, Arthur Henderson, the token representative of the Labor party in the cabinet. The rest of the group consisted of well-known supporters of compulsion: Winston Churchill (the only Liberal minister, besides Lloyd George, who openly supported the policy), Lord Curzon, Austen Chamberlain, and Lord Selborne. Asquith had knowingly created a clear majority already convinced that compulsion was necessary.³⁰ Furthermore, he had not chosen a conscriptionist majority who might be expected to muddle their own case—perhaps Lord Derby and Walter Long in place of Curzon and Chamberlain might have provided such a result—but instead he had put in place a formidable cadre of able and experienced opponents of voluntarism. If, as has been suggested, Asquith detested conscription, if he was holding the ideological line against it, then he chose a curious way to demonstrate it.

The committee met twelve times and heard an impressive array of witnesses, including Kitchener, Lloyd George, Long, Runciman,

²⁷ The myth was widely believed during the world war and after that disastrous news from the front stimulated enlistment. Such was actually not the case at all. (See John Morton Osborne, *The Voluntary Recruiting Movement in Britain, 1914–1916* [New York, 1982], pp. 86–87.)

²⁸ Bentley (n. 7 above), p. 30.

²⁹ Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill: Companion Volume 3* (London, 1973), pt. 2, p. 1132.

³⁰ Asquith, perhaps accidentally, had failed to include the name of the Tory leader Bonar Law; likewise, he had not consulted him regarding the names of the Conservative members he intended to appoint (though he had spoken to Curzon about the list). Bonar Law was much distressed over what he presumed to be this cavalier treatment at Asquith's hands. (See Blake [n. 3 above], p. 263.)

McKenna, and a number of high-ranking military officers. These luminaries took predictable lines: Lloyd George and Long strongly recommended compulsion, and Runciman and McKenna opposed it. Kitchener, still caught up with his New Armies, straddled the issue, and his generals loyally but hesitantly tried to support him. In this regard, Lieutenant General Callwell wrote to the editor of the *Morning Post*, H. A. "Taffy" Gwynne: "In dealing with Cabinet Committees it is very difficult not to expose the business. I am not a good liar—the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak—and you cannot fool people like Curzon & Winston who know the business. . . . [Kitchener] trusts to bluffing them all; but he may not succeed."³¹

After these deliberations the committee produced not one but three sets of findings: the official report, dated September 8, simply laid out the alternatives that they had considered for solving the manpower riddle, the first of which was the hearts' delight of the Liberal voluntarists: to freeze the size of the army at current strength and continue to rely on voluntarism to fill the ranks. The other two solutions discussed came from within the committee: one was to bring in conscription immediately; the other suggested renewed efforts to bolster voluntarism with the threat that conscription would be instituted unless the seventy-division standard was reached and maintained.³²

A second paper—in fact a majority report—was signed by the four conscriptionists, and it supported the second alternative: the immediate implementation of an efficient system of compulsory service meant to supply men both to the army and to the labor-starved munitions shops.³³

A third memorandum was signed only by Henderson. It obviously supported the third alternative view and eventually carried the day with Asquith. The Labour party leader advised:

The unity of the nation is in danger. Our aim must be to handle the situation so that compulsion, if it comes, comes by the action of the people themselves. On the alternative of conscription or defeat they will be united again. But they cannot be brought to that alternative suddenly, or apart from the conviction that it is a military necessity. They must have time. And if the time is spent in a final endeavour, made after the most solemn appeal and on a full and reasoned statement of our obligations to our Allies, to meet those obligations voluntarily, I believe that one of two

³¹ Gilbert, pt. 2, pp. 1155–56.

³² PRO, CAB 37/134/9.

³³ PRO, CAB 37/134/3.

results will follow. Either conscription will be accepted without serious injury to the nation, or it will be proved to be unnecessary.³⁴

Lieutenant Colonel Maurice Hankey, ever the painstaking observer, noted that the committee's action "had put Asquith in a fix, as at that time any attempt on his part to force through compulsory service would have involved resignations, and the unity of the Coalition Cabinet would have been lost."³⁵ In fact, it would have done more than that, for Asquith himself would have been lost.

As though the prime minister had not enough sources of anxiety, within a week Lloyd George released to the press the preface to a soon-to-be-published volume of his wartime speeches; this indicated how firmly he had come down on the side of mandatory service. The munitions minister's revelation, his secretary and mistress, Frances Stevenson, noted in her diary, "on Monday created a great stir, being the first public hint he has given of his views on conscription."³⁶ Lloyd George was, of course, on the verge of joining Curzon, Long, and Churchill among the coalitionists in openly working to bring in a conscription bill.³⁷ Asquith was strolling on the thinnest of ice, and the first faint sounds of a massive breakup could already be heard.

Herbert Henry Asquith was a master both of parliamentary strategy and of parliamentary tactics, but it was the latter—decision making in the short term—that kept him on top of the political world in these months. In the autumn of 1915 he required time to prepare the political way for a measure of compulsory service that would serve both his and the nation's needs. Accordingly, he brought off a remarkable feat in October that was the equal of any of his most celebrated machinations: Asquith, the Liberal, was able to stave off the baying pack of conscriptionists by taking refuge behind the broad back of Edward George Villiers Stanley, the seventeenth earl of Derby—a High Tory and an enthusiastic supporter of the mandatory service cause in the years

³⁴ PRO, CAB 37/134/5.

³⁵ Lord Hankey, *The Supreme Command, 1914–1918* (London, 1961), 1:427.

³⁶ A. J. P. Taylor, ed., *Lloyd George: A Diary by Frances Stevenson* (London, 1971), p. 59, September 15, 1915.

³⁷ It was soon after the publication of the celebrated preface that Lloyd George came publicly to be associated with the conscriptionist forces in the government. His parliamentary private secretary, J. H. Whitehouse, resigned in protest on September 16, 1915, and his letter to the minister of munitions is preserved in House of Lords Record Office (RO), Lloyd George Papers, D/1/12/20. Whitehouse would have been more upset had he known that Lloyd George was secretly meeting with Churchill and Curzon and, separately, Milner, to discuss hastening the policy. (See Taylor, ed., p. 59; and Gollin [n. 1 above], p. 295.)

before the war. Equally ironic was the fact that the suggestion of a last voluntarist push to convince working men of the need of conscription was given him in the Crewe Committee supplementary report of Arthur Henderson, the pioneer socialist and leader of the Labor party. Asquith knew no partisan animosity when it came to employing others to gain his own ends.

This is the background to the famous Derby Scheme, which, in the light of this sequence of events, seems clearly to have been the direct outgrowth of Henderson's Crewe Committee memorandum.³⁸ To the absolute fury of his Conservative friends, Derby was chosen by Asquith and Kitchener in late September to be director of recruiting at the War Office. The scheme, the details of which seem to have been Derby's own, are well-known: he announced on October 19 that all males between nineteen and forty-one years of age were to come forward to "attest" that they would serve in the army if called on. Attestation lists were to be compared against the results of the National Registration (a collection of vital statistics on all citizens between the ages of fifteen and sixty-five) carried out in August 1915. If sufficient numbers were raised to satisfy the needs of the army, voluntarism would be vindicated and conscription avoided, just as Henderson had advised. Failure of the experiment would lead, it was made clear, to stronger measures: that is, to conscription.

The most significant question the historian of British politics in this period must ask is not, Did the Derby Scheme fail? for the answer to that is clear enough. The crucial query is, Was it meant to fail? Asquith's choice of Derby, for example, is a curious one; the noble earl was known to be an avid conscriptionist closely associated with the army establishment and had once been vice president of the National Service League, the best-known prewar compulsionist pressure group. In fact, when he took the post, Derby's friends virtually accused him of treason against the cause.³⁹ Asquith was fully aware of Derby's background in the conscription movement, and there is reason to suspect that the premier never had much faith in the ability of the Lancashire magnate to save voluntarism: he confessed to the editor-proprietor of the *Manchester Guardian* that he found Derby "unfortunately . . . short of brains."⁴⁰ Asquith was an acute judge of the abilities of men.

³⁸ For the Derby Scheme, see Douglas (n. 14 above); and Osborne (n. 27 above), chap. 7.

³⁹ See Randolph Churchill, *Lord Derby: King of Lancashire* (London, 1959), pp. 192-93.

⁴⁰ Diary entry, September 5, 1915, British Library (BL), C. P. Scott Papers, Additional (Add.) MS 50902.

One cannot help but wonder, then, why he would select for such a sensitive post a man whose gifts he held in such low regard—if, that is, he hoped for Derby's success.

While Derby himself carried the scheme through to its disappointing end, it does appear from his own statements that he, too, had little faith in the plan. In a speech at Rossendale, for example, given days before the official announcement of his appointment, he admitted that he felt "somewhat in a position of a receiver who was put in to wind up a bankrupt concern."⁴¹ He went so far as to advise Asquith to have a conscription bill in hand if the scheme failed—though he added perfunctorily that it would not, of course, fail.

Henderson had advised that time and persuasion were required by the working classes before they would accept conscription; this analysis also met Asquith's requirements. The Derby Scheme bought time—until December, as it turned out. Time was also what the premier needed to bring in mandatory service on his terms and at his own pace. Even the Tories were his reluctant accomplices. Walter Long advised Bonar Law in October that the scheme had to be allowed to play itself out and that their party had to be careful not to appear to force the issue prematurely:

I think the position is most critical and one which is fraught with danger not only for our party, as nobody will believe that we have not forced the question to the front, but what is much more important, for the cause of Compulsory Service, which I believe to be essential to the successful prosecution of the war. Asquith is the most adroit and skillful of advocates. There is a great deal to be said of course for those who object to Compulsion, and the cause we may be certain will not suffer in his hands.⁴²

Long knew that no one could surpass Asquith in selling compulsory service to unwilling Liberal voluntarists. Though they hated "Squiffy," as they called him behind his back, even most Conservatives were well aware that the best way to gain their goal of mandatory service was to stay out of the prime minister's way once he set about the task of bringing it in. Only a day before Long sent his letter, Asquith had indicated to the cabinet his willingness that the Derby Scheme should be the final test for voluntary service.⁴³

⁴¹ *London Star* (October 6, 1915).

⁴² House of Lords RO, Bonar Law Papers, 51/4/18, October 17, 1915.

⁴³ Asquith indicated his willingness to consider the scheme the final test of voluntarism in a speech given on October 17, 1915, a position he reiterated more strongly in his "Secret Note to the Cabinet," Bodl., Asquith Papers, 8/179–80.

Lord Edmund Talbot, chief whip of the Conservative party, similarly advised Bonar Law a day before Walter Long on the political volatility of the conscription question. The Tories, with the support of a minority of the Liberal zealots, possessed the strength to force the issue, but it would lead to the collapse of the coalition and to a bitter and confused election. He continued: "We are therefore in this position, that rather than wait 6 weeks & then have compulsion with the consent & approval of the labour leaders, it is desired [by the most extreme conscriptionists] to force a decision now with the result of showing to our enemy as well as to our Allies & our colonies, that we are in a state of bitter feud & chaos at home. Rather than this, I suggest it is better to keep Asquith, with all his faults, where he is at present." ⁴⁴

Both Long and Talbot were correct in their analysis that Asquith knew how best to steer the conscription issue through the political shoals that lay ahead. At the same time as these two Tories were writing to Bonar Law, the premier was faced with a crisis caused by his war secretary, Lord Kitchener, and he handled it masterfully. "Lord K," who had steadfastly refused to speak out in favor of compulsory service until this point, submitted a cabinet paper on October 8 titled "Recruiting for the Army." His memorandum suggested consideration of a sort of revived militia ballot under which eligible young men in districts in which enlistments were insufficient would be subjected to conscription by lot. ⁴⁵ Rumors abounded that Kitchener would resign if his plan were not adopted. Within a matter of days no less astute an observer than C. P. Scott, editor-proprietor of the *Manchester Guardian*, recorded in his diary that it appeared likely that Lloyd George, Churchill, Curzon, Bonar Law, Carson, Long, and Lansdowne would press for adoption of the plan in place of the Derby Scheme. ⁴⁶ They threatened resignation, or so Scott recorded, not because of their faith in Kitchener's unlikely plan but because of their hope that the popularity of the war secretary enlisted behind any form of compulsion was a valuable thin edge of the wedge and better than no compulsion at all.

In the end, nothing came of the flare-up. Asquith pacified Kitchener with the flattering (and self-serving) intimation that, "so long as you & I stand together, we carry the whole country with us other wise [*sic*], the Deluge!" ⁴⁷ The appeal worked, as Kitchener fell back into

⁴⁴ House of Lords RO, Bonar Law Papers, 51/4/16, October 16, 1915.

⁴⁵ PRO, CAB 37/135/15, October 8, 1915.

⁴⁶ BL, C. P. Scott Papers, Add. MS 50902, October 14, 1915.

⁴⁷ Kitchener Papers, PRO 30/57/76/25.

step and the conscriptionists who thought they could divide him from the prime minister climbed down. Perhaps partly in order to insure that no decision was rushed, Asquith, the most important arbiter of the struggle, almost immediately retired from the political wars for more than a week, complaining of illness. Lord Crewe, who deputized for him in his absence, explained to the king that "nothing in the nature of a [conscription] crisis can well occur. . . . For one thing it is not likely to be discussed in detail during the unfortunate absence of the Prime Minister."⁴⁸ Lord Crewe, in the end, was proved correct, as the heady atmosphere of crisis calmed a bit over the ensuing weeks, and pro- and anticonscription forces looked to the Derby canvass for their vindication.

The public response to the Derby Scheme was troubling from the outset: bachelors interpreted the fact that separate attestation lists were kept for married and unmarried men to mean that the latter were to be treated unequally and called up first. As a result, attestations among single men were poor. Their anxiety was not illogical, for all European nations employing conscription had long relied on the custom of calling up single men first—an "absurd differentiation, founded neither on justice nor common sense," perhaps, but an undeniable fact nonetheless.⁴⁹

Asquith, apprised of the dearth of attestations among younger bachelors, seized on this circumstance both to insure the failure of the Derby Scheme and to circumscribe the coming compulsion bill. Having secured the acquiescence of the cabinet to clarify the situation,⁵⁰ Asquith, in a typically circumlocutory fashion, told the House of Commons on November 2 that the scheme "ought to aim at securing everybody of military age and capacity who is left after you have supplied the other national necessities to which I have referred."⁵¹ Fully aware that sufficient attestations were not being collected, he essentially doomed the Derby canvass with these words. Likewise, he made clear to what that failure would lead:

But if, . . . the whole of this machinery has been in operation and has achieved what it can, there should still be found a substantial number of men of military age not required for other purposes, who, without excuse, hold back from the service of their country, I believe that the very same

⁴⁸ Bodl., Asquith Papers, vol. 8.

⁴⁹ Blake (n. 3 above), p. 283.

⁵⁰ Trever Wilson, ed., *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott, 1911–1928* (London, 1970), p. 155, November 5, 1915.

⁵¹ *Parliamentary Debates, 1915*, 5th ser., vol. 75, cols. 522–24.

conditions which make compulsion impossible now, namely, the absence of general consent, would force the country to the view that they must consent to supplement by some form of legal obligation the failure of the voluntary system. As far as I myself am concerned I should be prepared to recommend them to take that course.

Turning finally to the question of the status of single and married men, he added: "So far as I am concerned I should certainly say the obligation of the married men to serve ought not to be enforced or held to be binding upon him unless and until—I hope by voluntary effort, if it be needed in the last resort, as I have explained, by other means—the unmarried men are dealt with." If anything killed the hope that a sufficient number of the "right" men would attest in sufficient numbers, the so-called pledge to the married men did it. While young and fit bachelors who did not enjoy an occupational exemption shunned the attestation forms like the plague, married men—sure of their immunity to immediate call-up—signed up in droves. Likewise, it demonstrated that Asquith would not go beyond the terminus of his own choosing—he would bring in only mandatory service limited to unmarried men.

On November 3, the day after this speech, three of the conscriptionist members of the late War Policy Committee—Curzon, Selborne, and Chamberlain—suggested to the prime minister that the time had come to begin preparing for the inevitable. Though the scheme had not yet run its course and no official figures had yet been released, Asquith replied: "I think you have correctly apprehended the meaning of what I said in the House of Commons. I shd. be glad if Curzon would give instructions to the draughtsmen to prepare a Bill (for consideration) along the lines suggested by him."⁵² It is worth noting that this transpired more than a month before even the most incomplete results of the scheme were known to the cabinet, much less to Parliament or the public.

The cabinet was presented with Derby's preliminary report on December 14, 1915, and the predictable results were before them in black and white: the scheme revealed that more than a half million single men were neither attested nor employed on work essential to the war effort.⁵³ More complete (and even worse) figures appeared one

⁵² H. H. Asquith to Chamberlain, November 7, 1915, University of Birmingham Library, Austen Chamberlain Papers, AC 19/1/7.

⁵³ PRO, CAB 37/139/41. These figures were revised upward several times until the total of unattested bachelors exceeded 650,000. Asquith wrote to King George V that the results of the Derby Scheme were so dismal that a cabinet committee would be created to draw up a conscription bill. He neglected to mention that he had already such a draft in

week later—on that same day, December 21, Asquith announced a bill to authorize the increase in establishment of the army by an additional million men.

The logic of this latter action seems difficult to grasp, given the fact that enlistments and attestations were already alarmingly insufficient and that the decision for conscription had yet officially to be made. The prime minister's action, however, was not confused at all: the army required the rise in authorized establishment in order to presume to meet the seventy-division standard—one of the major arguments in favor of compulsion. Furthermore, he had promised and was already in possession of a draft for a conscription bill that would meet the letter of his pledge to the electorate and to the conscriptionists in the government and in Parliament. Finally, it added to the massive weight of evidence in favor of mandatory service and, therefore, added to his leverage over the voluntarists of his own party, whose support he required to expedite such a bill in the House. As in the case of the May 1915 crisis that brought about the coalition, his followers were to be presented with a *fait accompli*.

The prime minister wrote to his confidant, Mrs. Henley, on the day following this episode: "We seem to be on the brink of a precipice. The practical question is—Shall I be able during the next ten days to devise and build a bridge?"⁵⁴ It is a safe assumption that the dramatic note in this missive was inserted for effect only and that the prime minister had no doubt that he could again survive the crisis. He had few peers at bridge building of this sort, though the immediate future was not without worry.

On December 27, Lloyd George sent a message to Asquith through the good offices of Lord Reading, indicating that a compulsion bill could no longer be avoided. As Stevenson remembered it: "If, however, the P.M. did not see his way clear to keep his promise, he [Lloyd George] . . . would be obliged to send in his resignation."⁵⁵ On the same day, General Sir William Robertson, after holding his new office as commander of the imperial general staff less than a week, leapt into the fray demanding of the government "not less than 130,000 men per month"—beginning immediately.⁵⁶ This, too, was a virtual ultimatum

hand, prepared at his behest by Curzon. The committee consisted of Curzon, F. E. Smith, and Walter Long, all fierce conscriptionists; Lord Crewe, a "realist"; and Sir John Simon, a committed voluntarist. As in the case of the War Policy Committee, a proconscription majority was guaranteed.

⁵⁴ The earl of Oxford and Asquith, K.G., *Memories and Reflections, 1852–1927* (London, 1928), 2:135.

⁵⁵ Taylor, ed. (n. 36 above), p. 89, January 31, 1916.

⁵⁶ PRO, War Office 106/368.

for conscription, making it appear that Asquith had not one but two compulsionist pistols at his head.

Yet he delayed a bit longer, until he insured that the most important anticonscription Liberal ministers, particularly McKenna, Runciman, and Grey, remained in place. The diffident Liberals were lured to remain at their posts by the promise of the premier that he would appoint yet another cabinet committee (the Military-Finance Committee, which virtually acceded to Kitchener's seventy-division pledge by calling for an army of sixty-two regular and five reserve divisions) to look into the fiscal and manpower implications of the decision to implement mandatory service. Asquith was to control the findings of this body as he had controlled the result of the Crewe Committee, though in a different way: he appointed McKenna, a voluntarist; Austen Chamberlain, a strong conscriptionist; and himself—guaranteeing that he held the deciding vote and control over the recommendations of the three-man board. As it turned out, in December 1915 only Sir John Simon resigned.⁵⁷

On December 29, when *he* was ready, Asquith announced in cabinet that mandatory service was the only possible policy, in light of the failure of the Derby canvass. His colleagues accepted the judgment. The Military Service Bill, imposing compulsion on unmarried men, passed quickly through Parliament and received the royal assent on January 27, 1916. Asquith survived as premier with the loss of neither his Conservative nor his Liberal colleagues (excepting only Simon). The case of extreme exigency was soon sold to the electorate, and the war went on. The conscription bill became law, and voluntarism was doomed, but in fact only the first conscription skirmish of the Great War had been fought in Britain.

IV

Asquith's most recent biographer has written of this episode: "Playing both ends against the middle, he maintained to his critics of the left that his policy was merely an extension of the Derby Scheme,

⁵⁷ Simon later recanted his decision to resign: "I have long since realised [he recalled in his memoirs] that my opposition was a mistake. . . . But where I was wrong was in failing to appreciate the psychological effect, alike on our allies and on the men in the field, who were hard pressed, and their anxious relatives at home, of this demonstration that we would stick at nothing" (*Retrospect: Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Viscount Simon* [London, 1952], p. 107). It is interesting that, while Simon's judgment of the ineffectiveness of mandatory service is frequently cited by historians of the period, this admission by the only minister to resign over the question—which appears on the same page—is (in my experience, at any rate) forgotten.

while those on the right were allowed to infer the contrary.”⁵⁸ Another recent and quite persuasive view has suggested that Asquith “waited and saw until the Cabinet could be persuaded that it had agreed and then announced the decision as his own.”⁵⁹ Yet another interpretation commands many adherents: “Whatever Asquith might say, it was plain that Lloyd George had won.”⁶⁰ Each of these powerfully argued judgments contributes to our understanding of the character and the political persona of Herbert Henry Asquith. It is now quite clear, however, that more can be concluded from his actions during the conscription crisis of late 1915.

Asquith without doubt did “play both ends against the middle” over the issue of compulsory service in the autumn and winter of 1915, keeping his own views well hidden and painfully carrying out each step of a Derby Scheme the failure of which was assured. He did labor strenuously to guarantee the appearance of cabinet and coalition unity on the issue of the “salability” of conscription to the electorate, “waiting and seeing” until the time was right. Finally, the result did certainly please Lloyd George and the other conscriptionists—at least temporarily. However, to this must be added that Asquith acted as he did beginning in the early autumn of 1915 from the conviction that some form of mandatory service was necessary. Two conditions were foremost in his mind: the coalition had to be continued (thus avoiding an election), and his prime ministry had to be preserved.

His artful peregrinations and skillful arabesques brought frustration and confusion to his friends and opponents alike, but these tactics also brought in a conscription bill—when he chose and bound by limitations that suited him. When the cabinet reached agreement, they did so not independent of his influence but because of it. Lloyd George and his friends may have won a compulsory service bill, but it was not the bill they wanted, as the months that followed were to prove. As in the case of the formation of the coalition in mid-1915, the prime minister kept control of the situation, forcing his own solution on all concerned.

The quality of his success in this episode is further illustrated, perhaps, by noting briefly the postscript to it—that is, the passage of the second conscription bill in May. Despite the fact that the prime minister had not lost his skillful hand or brain and that his opponents of the earlier struggle had not changed in character or method, he was defeated in this important battle. As it turned out, within an additional six months he fell from his powerful place, never to hold office again.

Asquith faced calls for additional measures of conscription begin-

⁵⁸ Koss (n. 18 above), p. 203.

⁵⁹ Cited in Bentley (n. 7 above), p. 40.

⁶⁰ Wilson (n. 1 above), p. 75.

ning almost immediately after the passage of the January National Service Act, and they were to persist until May.⁶¹ Convinced that it was politically dangerous to extend mandatory service so soon, he met these challenges as he had in the previous autumn: he delayed, he appointed carefully recruited committees, and he shielded himself behind the convenient predictions of working-class disapproval put forward by Arthur Henderson. In the spring of 1916, these ploys simply no longer worked. Several conditions had changed: in the first place, two new and important antagonists emerged. The first of these was General Sir William Robertson, the chief of the imperial general staff, who wrote to Sir Douglas Haig on March 8: "The conscription bill is proving a farce. Macready [the Adjutant General] and I are attending to it, & will shortly go to the Government about it if matters do not improve." He continued in almost Cromwellian terms: "I am writing this with the object of saying that practically anything may happen to our boasted British constitution before the war ends, & that the greatest asset is the Army—whose value will be fixed largely to the extent by which we at the top stick together and stand firm."⁶²

"Wully" Robertson meant to have general conscription. While Kitchener, then the supreme military voice, had waffled on the issue for more than a year, Robertson was absolutely self-confident and ruthlessly single-minded. He circulated a brutally frank memorandum to the cabinet on March 21 that promised peace only after more hard and costly fighting, and he warned his political masters that they had not yet given him the means:

Therefore, after the most careful thought, and speaking with the fullest sense of my responsibility as the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, I desire to say that if it is the will of the nation this war be brought to a successful conclusion immediate steps must be taken to meet the requirements of the Army in men as laid before the Cabinet [Military-Finance] Committee. We have reached a stage in the development of our resources when those requirements can only be met by putting the same strain upon the social and business life of the community as has long been borne in France.⁶³

Robertson wanted his promised sixty-seven divisions; he wanted them immediately, and he had no intention of allowing his political masters any rest until he got them.

⁶¹ See, e.g., Lord Kitchener's cabinet memorandum of February 7, 1916 (PRO, CAB 17/159). Lord Derby washed his hands of the Bachelors' Bill policy by March 1.

⁶² King's College, University of London, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Robertson Papers, I/22/30.

⁶³ PRO, CAB 22/80.

The other figure who prevented a repetition of Asquith's success was Sir Edward Carson. The undisputed leader of Ulster Unionism, Carson had served in Asquith's coalition from its inception until November 1915, when he resigned over what to his mind was the government's insufficient assistance to Britain's Balkan allies. One of the most famous advocates of his day, he had a genius for destruction—a gift for locating, exposing, and exploiting the weaknesses in other men's works that made him a feared opponent. Sixty-two years of age at this time, he did not enjoy robust health (though he was to live another twenty years), and he returned to the Commons in March after almost two months recuperation following an incapacitating illness.

Carson's return could not have been at a worse time for Asquith. The prime minister had previously managed to control the conscriptionist "Ultras" in the House because he had prevented them from securing leadership of sufficient prestige and skill to threaten him. They were little short of an angry rabble, undisciplined and poorly led. With the reemergence of Carson, this condition, too, changed: in January there were founded two compulsionist ginger groups in the Commons, a small Liberal War Committee and a much larger Unionist War Committee of more than 100 members. On March 28, Carson took the chair of this latter group and immediately began a systematic challenge to the conscription policy of the government. Within a month, goaded on by the repeated demands for more men of the chief of the imperial general staff and the army council, they forced Asquith to accept general compulsory service.

As has been noted, the prime minister again employed the tactics that had worked so well for him in the past. He reappointed the Military-Finance Committee of Chamberlain, McKenna, and himself (reinforced with the addition of Lord Lansdowne, who was unsure of general conscription) in mid-April, which proposed a measure calling for the extension of the service of time-expired men, the compulsion of men serving in the Territorial Force to serve at the front, and the lowering of the age of liability to conscription to nineteen years. Using the skills that served him so well in late 1915, Asquith was able to fashion a compromise based on this plan to hold off Robertson (who demanded that such a policy must gain for the army the impossible total of 60,000 men in six weeks and 15,000 weekly thereafter), Lloyd George (who was seriously contemplating resignation over the issue), and Bonar Law (who was suffering heavy pressure from his compulsionist backbenchers). The acceptance of such a half measure by these impatient men was based on their judgment that only the prime minister could get another conscription bill through the House. Stevenson recorded: "The P.M. is only too glad to find something which he can

adopt as an alternative and must avoid a smash, and the others are also willing to make a bargain. [Lloyd George] himself is most anxious to avoid a break, for he says that Asquith is the only man who can get [general] conscription through the *House of Commons* at present.”⁶⁴

The test came in the celebrated “Secret Session” on manpower policy of April 25—which, it should be noted, was the price of cooperation levied by Henderson and the Labor party. The result is well-known: the compromise solution was literally laughed out of both houses of Parliament, whose temper was so much closer to that of Carson, in the Commons, and Lord Milner, who led the assault in the Lords. On May 2, Asquith admitted his defeat and acquiesced to a general compulsion bill. Hankey’s diary entry of that day has frequently been quoted in this connection, and it is worth considering again: “The fact was that people who want compulsory service don’t want Asquith,” he wrote, “while those who want Asquith don’t want compulsory service; so he fell between two stools.”⁶⁵ Even Hankey did not know how far that fall would be. The passage of general conscription fundamentally altered the manpower question: the challenge after May 1916 was not how to pass controversial legislation but, rather, how best to administer the broad new powers possessed by the state. Asquith’s part, so crucial in these events, shrank in importance, and he ceased to be “irreplaceable.” Carson and Robertson had thrown him for a loss over the second compulsion bill, and Lloyd George and Bonar Law—tired of his characteristic delaying tactics—brought him down in December 1916. By that time, his parliamentary skills were worse than impotent; they were irrelevant.

It must be recalled, however, that before 1916 he won more tactical skirmishes than he lost, and the first conscription crisis must be numbered among those triumphs, despite the fact that the price proved ruinous and the elation short-lived. Even now, as more is learned about the politics of this period, it is still clear that his victories over the writers and readers of history are still largely quite safe. While Lloyd George continues to be portrayed, even by his admirers, as an adroit and ingenious “operator” and the extremist conscriptionist Tories are revealed as efficiency-minded but ham-handed seekers after a sort of corporate state (or worse), there lingers about Asquith some hint of “the plaster saint of a spurious Liberal legend.” This 1915 episode clearly demonstrates that we may have underestimated his triumphs and oversold his principles.

⁶⁴ Taylor, ed., pp. 106–7, April 18, 1916.

⁶⁵ Sir Maurice Hankey, diary entry, May 2, 1916, Hankey Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge University.