



WAGING DEMOCRACY
THE BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION OF 1918
RECONSIDERED

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From the perspective of the early twenty first century, it is surprising how often British general elections have been held in winter; modern party managers, seeking to maximise turnout and minimise inconvenience, called elections in the spring or summer. The only winter elections after the Second World War were those of 1950 and February 1974, and neither were good advertisements, being regarded as mistaken in their timing, and resulting in the emasculation of the governing party. In the twentieth century, no general election was held as late in a year—14 December—as that of 1918. The First World War had only ended on 11 November, however, so one month was as expeditious as could be expected for a ‘war party’ to take advantage of victory, and before the expected dislocations of demobilisation would be felt. A week later the general election was announced, and Parliament was dissolved on 25 November, leaving a three-week campaign. That campaign, and its consequences, was, by any measure, historic. The press played an often pivotal role in these events. Rather like revolutions, and rather as lazily, elections can be seen as turning points in history; more than that, they offer a snapshot of the nation in time: a political testimony on the condition of the people and their prospects as offered by the people themselves [MACCALLUM & READMAN: xiv-xv]. The 1918 election was framed by two events: the war, and in particular the political settlement of the crisis of December 1916, and the Representation of the People Act of February 1918. In December 1916, most of the Liberals left office, and David Lloyd George became Prime Minister of a largely Unionist Coalition. Those divisions were hardened by the Maurice debate on 9 May 1918, and by H.H. Asquith’s decision to refuse Lloyd George’s offer of a place in the government, and they were made material with the issuing of ‘coupons’ to preferred candidates in November [GOOCH: 211-228; MARTIN: 435-444]. The couponed Liberals were effectively the ‘Lloyd George party’ for which some of his supporters had long been calling, and the election can be seen as something of a plebiscite for or against the Prime Minister [PELLING: 46]. 541 coupons were issued: 159 to Liberals, 18 to the National Democratic

Party, and 364 to Unionists. Unionists would thus not be opposed by Lloyd George Liberals, and would be able to attack 'Asquithian' Liberals. The Liberals and Conservatives had the same number of seats when the war began; within a month of its ending, the Conservatives had three times as many and the Liberals were split.

Some elections have acquired identificatory epithets: the 'Khaki' election of 1900, the Chinese Slavery election of 1906, the People's Budget elections of 1910, the Zinoviev election of 1924, the 'who governs?' election of February 1974. 1918 has been called 'the most famous of all "atrocious" elections' [MACCALLUM & READMAN: xii], and was distinguished further by acquiring not one but two epithets: the 'Hang the Kaiser', and the 'Coupon', election. It was also singular in the more personal epithets it attracted. John Maynard Keynes condemned the 'fraud, chicane, and dishonour of the whole proceeding' [1919: 133, n.1]; for Wilson Harris it was both 'sinister' and 'staged' [1947: 113]; Barbara Hammond thought it a 'vile election';¹ for the innately moderate Sir Edward Grey it was merely 'infamous'.² It was an election that came at the end of a year of note. The war had been nearly lost, and then was won; the franchise was extended and electoral practice systematised; the Labour Party was formally constituted; and the party truce most emphatically ended. There are indeed grounds for considering the 1918 election as the first 'modern' one in Britain, given the attention, and expense, paid to mass media, and the presidentialisation inherent in the campaign.

The election highlights, as does no other, the subject of gender [HILSON: 333]. Most obviously it was the first election in which women were allowed to participate, but it was also an election which affords reflection on how the war brutalised British manhood more broadly [LAWRENCE: 557-589]. It is worth reflecting on the extent to which it did so to political elites in general, and those of Liberals in particular. What must also be considered is the extent to which such reaction was merely pique on the part of those Liberals supplanted in 1916; grievances at Lloyd George's behaviour were so great that no reconciliation was possible, even if political circumstances had changed so as to make one relevant. More widely, the election marked a new way of waging democracy. It can be asked how much through the experience of war there was also a 'brutalisation' of politics, as conveyed by the norms of democratic activity. The term 'cultural war' when it has been

¹ Barbara Hammond to Ponsonby, 8 January 1919, in CLARKE: 201.

² Crewe to Grey, 12 June 1928, in DUTTON: 74.

used has tended to refer to national cultures, however conceived, and in nature defensive and sentimental [MOMMSEN 1997], or offensive and strategic [KRAMER 2007]. There are other related themes: war, peace without victory, the masculinisation of political culture; to some extent, political culture had already shifted. The Parliament returned in 1918 was quite different from that returned in the last election eight years earlier. It was to be the Parliament of Amritsar, Chanak, the Geddes Axe, the Black and Tans; the 'hard-faced men', one Unionist so famously told Keynes, 'who look as if they had done very well out of the war' [KEYNES: 133].

Ten years before, the legal theorist A. Lawrence Lowell had praised the development of social psychology, but regretted how 'the normal forces that govern the ordinary conduct of men in their public relations have scarcely received any scientific treatment at all. In short, we are almost wholly lacking in a psychology of political parties' [LOWELL: 435]. This call for psephology, as it was then not known, was not met for nearly half a century, but the study of elections became more systematic after the First World War. The Nuffield studies that consecrated the practice saw elections as more than oscillations; as the product of context rather than merely campaign. The 'need for further serious studies of party structure and electioneering methods' [BUTLER 1955: 4] as expressed in the middle of the century was addressed subsequently [LLOYD 1968]. Psephology was not about prediction but analysis, and elections should be studied because of 'their importance as political and historical events' and the way in which 'they reveal new aspects of party politics' [BUTLER & ROSE: 4]. 'Twenty or more million people give their votes under every variety of circumstances and from innumerable motives', the authors of the first study wrote. 'One thing is certain about such an event as a general election. It is not simple' [MACCALLUM & READMAN: xii]. Perhaps that is why the earlier elections required special interest—such as an epithet—to attract the interest of historians [RUSSELL 1973; BLEWETT 1972]. 1906 brought a scene-changing landslide, 1910 accommodated two elections centred on a major constitutional crisis and producing identical results, and 1918 was the most metaphorical of all, with tectonic plates shifting and a political landscape created that would last much longer than any of its participants. 1918 is harder to measure in the mid-twentieth century Nuffield tradition, where sample surveys developed electoral sociology to find

how little the behaviour of the voter seems to be determined by ordinary campaign activities and arguments. It appears that the quality of the candidate and his organisation matter remarkably little; the great majority of voters will vote as they have always done [BUTLER 1952: 3-4].

In 1918, few voters could say that.

The study of elections fits with broader, yet more specific historiographical debates, debates in which the 1918 poll is central [THOMPSON, 1969]; LAYBOURN 1995: 207-226]. The decline of the Liberal Party has been interpreted broadly in two ways. That even before the war, the Labour Party was eroding the base of Liberalism [LAYBOURN & REYNOLDS; MATTHEW, MCKIBBIN & KAY: 723-752; and of course HART: 820-832]; or that accommodation was possible, but that the war ruined it [WILSON 1966; MORGAN 1971]. To these traditional interpretations could be added the 'Fourth' Reform Act, which has been claimed to be 'of first importance in Labour's replacing of the Liberal party' [MATTHEW: 736]. Even without the war Labour would have made progress but for the fact that four million of its natural supporters did not have the vote, and when they did they voted Labour. The Liberals by this measure, as a party without a class-base, invited their own demise. This has been disputed on the basis that those disenfranchised millions cannot be assumed to be working class—there were other classes too, and even those who were should not be assumed to constitute a homogenous group with inherent sociological reasons for voting Labour [TANNER 1983: 205-219]. Such debates are unlikely ever to be settled, so necessarily flawed and partial is so much of the evidence, and so open to interpretation are its meanings. The present reconsideration employs a variety of methods and perspectives to present the election as it was to Liberals at the time, and subsequently.³

The context to the election was both circumstantial and legislative. In elections before 1918 it could be said that, '*Au fond*, the franchise represented a theory of property rather than of individual rights' [RUSSELL: 15]. The history of representing the people had been turbulent, but by the twentieth century only two major anomalies remained: the continued existence of plural voting and the continued absence of female suffrage. The redistribution of seats remained *ad hoc* and prone to partisan political influence [ROSSITER, JOHNSTON & PATTIE]. The 1918 Act,

to amend the Law, with respect to Parliamentary and Local Government Franchises, and the Registration of Parliamentary and Local Government

³ The principal studies of the election are those of J.M. McEWEN, Trevor WILSON (1964), Roy DOUGLAS, Barry McGILL, J.A. TURNER, Stuart BALL and Martin PUGH. The most rigorous analysis can be found in John TURNER.

Electors, and the conduct of elections, and to provide for the Redistribution of Seats at Parliamentary Elections, and for other purposes connected therewith⁴

was another or the transformative consequences of war.⁵ In August 1916, the Speaker of the House of Commons, after request by the Home Secretary, established an all-party conference that reported in January 1917.⁶ It was the first Speaker's Conference. Four of its thirty-seven proposals had been agreed unanimously, marking 'the solemnity of the hour' [ROSS: 316]. Broad agreement was reached on those anomalies untouched by the 1885 Act: universal male suffrage, voter registration, plural voting, university representation, redistribution of seats, adoption of alternative vote for single member constituencies, and even the enfranchisement of women who had attained a specific age. The subsequent Representation of the People Bill embodied those recommendations, leaving proportional representation and votes for women to a free vote. In the event, only proportional representation proved contentious, and in one vote MPs actually supported the measure—the Alternative Vote—that the whole electorate declined nearly one hundred years later [STEED: 35-54; 46-48]. The Act enfranchised women over thirty, the age qualification being a compromise to ensure that they remained in a minority of the electorate. More significantly, it was to prove, for Liberals, in particular, that Britain's best opportunity for proportional representation had passed [BOGDANOR: 132].

Many Unionists were alarmed at the Speaker's Report and the Bill [McCRILLIS: 14-16]. The concessions they obtained made the proposals easier to accept: the military franchise was extended to those aged at least nineteen, and conscientious objectors who had not served in any form lost their vote for five years. The electorate was more than doubled, from 8,357,648 in 1915 (when, but for the Asquith coalition being formed, a general election would have had to have been held) to 21,392,322. To the unprecedented increase in the number of voters, there were also a range of new practices and procedures. It was the first election to be fought on a redistribution of seats since 1885. It was a significant shift in practice in that independent commissions undertook the work, in consultation with local opinion, and scope for 'special geographical considerations' [ROSSITER: 51]. The main gains went to the largest boroughs. Birmingham went from five to twelve, Liverpool from two to eleven, Manchester from four to ten and Sheffield from two to seven. For the first time, the majority of MPs would be

⁴ Representation of the People Act, 1918, 8 Geo 5., Ch 64, [6 February 1918].

⁵ More detail may be found in BUTLER 1953: 7-12.

⁶ Cd 8463/1917. See ROSS: 295-317.

from industrial conurbations. The new electoral map reflected the growth of urban populations in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow, where Unionists were stronger, and a decline in rural Scotland and Wales, which had been Liberal heartlands. It also abolished nearly all the two-member constituencies that had allowed for the Lib-Lab pact. For Beatrice Webb it was 'the outstanding event of the year's home affairs ... admitting women to citizenship' [Beatrice Webb diary, 16 June 1918].

After the split of December 1916, the assumption was that the end of the war would signal the end of the party truce, and that the Liberals would reassemble, however grudgingly, under Asquith. Lloyd George had no organisation of his own outside of Wales, and the main party was in control of party headquarters in Abingdon Street [MORGAN 1979: 26-27]. However, as Lord Derby, the British ambassador in Paris recorded, Lloyd George would not abandon the Tories and go back to the Liberals:

[F]or a whole year the Liberal party had been kicking him and doing everything they could against him while our Party had loyally supported him and if it had not been for them he would not be in his present position now and he was not going back on them [Earl of DERBY diary, 3 November 1918: 316].

On 6 November, Lloyd George told H.A.L. Fisher that Asquith was 'too proud' to join him in the election and that '[t]he Coalition must go on' [FISHER diary, 6 November 1918, vol I: 315]. In turn, Fisher, a Lloyd George Liberal MP, noted that 'the Tories can't do without him as P.M.' [316], with the consequence, Derby noted, that 'there will be an open rupture at the Election and we shall run candidates against the Asquithian people' [Earl of DERBY diary, 1 November 1918: 314].

Lloyd George had been contemplating the election as early as August [AMERY: 173]. In early October, '[i]n view of the probability of an early appeal to the Country', Unionist Central Office was organising Party Agents to be released from official duties.⁷ John Gulland, another Lloyd George Liberal MP, thought it 'difficult in again extending the life of the Parliament as that there could be practically no bye-elections since hardly any of the old constituencies remained unaltered' [SCOTT diary, 6-8 August 1918]. It was clear to a Unionist such as Austen Chamberlain that if there was an armistice there would be an election: 'the Coalition against the rest' [Austen

⁷ John BORASTON and William JENKINS, letter, 8 October 1918, George Lloyd papers, GLLD 18/7.

CHAMBERLAIN to Ida CHAMBERLAIN, 9 November 1918: 99]. Andrew Bonar Law told Arthur Balfour that the election could not long be delayed [BONAR LAW to BALFOUR, 5 October 1918]. Bonar Law hurried the completion of the register [BONAR LAW to Auckland GEDDES, 29 October 1918], and admitted privately that he had not wanted official candidates at all, 'but we could never have worked well if Tories or Liberals had been allowed to fight each other at the polls' [FISHER to Lettice FISHER, 23 November 1918: 333-334]. Freddie Guest, another Lloyd George Liberal, and Coalition Chief Whip, said that he would deal with the Liberals 'but his terms would be rather stiff' [SCOTT diary, 6-8 August 1918]. On 26 September 1918 the Unionist party chairman Sir George Younger established five classes of seats: 1. Liberals MPs who supported the Coalition since 1916; 2. Vacancies caused by retirements of supportive Liberal MPs; 3. Asquithian; 4. Vacancies caused by retirements of Asquithians; 5. New seats [George YOUNGER to BONAR LAW, 26 September 1918]. To the first the Coalition had agreed to support their candidature, and this principle was extended to the second. To the third the Unionist candidate should be accepted, as for four. For the last category 'some clear understanding should be arrived at', Riddell warned, 'You will have to badge the LG candidates or people will not know for whom to vote. Many of the Asquith candidates pose as exponents of the LG policy' [RIDDELL diary, 17 November 1918].

Guest, Fisher reported, 'is anxious to save as many seats as possible for Liberals, but the Tories are driving a hard bargain & contend that anybody who even voted against the Coalition is an enemy. Guest thinks he has saved 150 Liberal seats and hopes to rope in another 30' [FISHER to Lettice FISHER, 19 November 1918: 330]. He roped in another nine. 'All the Liberals supporting L.G. are very uncomfortable about the proscription of Liberals who voted against the Government on the Maurice resolution' [FISHER to Lettice FISHER, 18 November 1918: 329], Fisher heard. Asquith's claim that the Maurice debate was the measure was dispelled nearly fifty years ago,⁸ but if it was not central, it was certainly coincidentally informative: 15.7 per cent of Liberal candidates who voted with Asquith received the coupon, as against 91.2 per cent that backed the government [SEARLE: 837]. Moreover, almost all the Liberals denied the coupon were lukewarm supporters at best. Thomas Lough, Islington West, said he would support LG, though, as *The Times* put it [4 December 1918], it must in truth be admitted by anybody who has witnessed Mr Lough's methods of giving 'steady support' to the

⁸ WILSON, 'Coupon'; cf. contemporary academics (BULMER-THOMAS: 45) and journalists (W. HARRIS: 112).

Coalition Government that they are, to say the least, peculiar. Fence-sitting produced 'independent', 'partial' or 'general' backing for Lloyd George [KINNEAR: 42]. Many Liberal candidates who had not been MPs had coupons issued against them, less through Conservative pressure than that they were contesting former Conservative seats and testing the truce to breaking point: to strengthen his position in the new parliament Lloyd George had to back Conservatives to retain their seats [43]. The government whips 'expect a safe poll and a substantial majority. Guest told me that the L.G. Liberals would get 120 out of 150 seats allotted to them & that Labour would win 100 seats' [FISHER to Lettice FISHER, 15 December 1918: 340]. The 'famous coupon!', with cyclostated signatures of Lloyd George and Bonar Law, from 'Downing Street London S.W. 1', read:

Dear,

We have much pleasure in recognising you as the Coalition candidate for We have every hope that the electors will return you as their representative in Parliament to support the Government in the great task which lies before it ['The Famous coupon!', AMERY papers, 4/8].

Widely-published and circulated, Lloyd George's 'letter' to Bonar Law of 2 November called for an election, written in an informal tone, but was in fact the product of extensive drafting between the two [LLOYD GEORGE to BONAR LAW, 2 November 1918]. 'If it were issued signed by Lloyd George, Bonar Law, and Barnes', Bonar Law told Derby, 'they would sweep the country' [Earl of DERBY diary, 1 November 1918: 314]. Bonar Law and Balfour agreed the general terms of the election for the Unionists [BONAR LAW to BALFOUR, 5 October 1918], but the real issue was, as Bonar Law said, that 'it is hard to see how L.G. will get his Liberal and Labour colleagues to agree to it' [SANDERS diary, 10 November 1918: 112]. It was Liberal in rhetoric, but Conservative in substance, committing the government to Imperial Preference, industrial protection, and anti-dumping legislation, and on Home Rule, Bonar Law told Derby, 'the Prime Minister reserves to himself the right to give some form of self-Government but with a distinct understanding that there shall be no coercion of Ulster' [Earl of DERBY diary, 1 November 1918: 313]. One concession was that the Welsh Church Act—a defining conflict of the 1910 Parliament—would remain. All that remained was the timing. On 16 November, Lloyd George presided over a 'Coalition Party Meeting' at Westminster Central Hall, with Bonar Law and Barnes on the platform. On 19 November an impatient Almeric Fitzroy, Clerk of the Privy Council, told Bonar Law that unless he was given a date for the dissolution of Parliament that evening, he would give instructions for 21 January 1919 [FITZROY diary, 25 November 1918: 687]. All

previous dissolutions back to that of 1874 were analysed to establish the precedents for a 'surprise dissolution'.⁹ So it was that 'this day saw the end of the longest Parliament this country has known since the first Parliament of Charles II' [FITZROY diary, 25 November 1918: 687].

Constituency compromises were duly ingenious or squalid to taste, and by no means numerically favoured Unionists. But a Lib-Lab pact had effectively been replaced by a Lib-Con pact. In Leeds the Coalition Unionists offered not to contest North, South, West and Central, if the non-couponed Liberals stood down in North East [LAYBOURN 1988: 50]. A similar situation obtained in Bristol, where all five seats were won by coalition candidates: three Liberals and two Unionists. In Sheffield Brightside, the Unionist, who had demobilised in order to stand, was forced by Central Office to stand down in favour of the incumbent couponed Liberal, who duly won [RAMSDEN: 140-141]. Bonar Law was 'tremendously harassed', Fisher wrote. 'He says the Tories are abusing him, the Liberals abusing George for having sold the pass. This morning he received 10 abusive telegrams from Liverpool' [FISHER to Lettice FISHER, 23 November 1918: 333-334]. The Unionists of Liverpool Fairfield were revolting against a Liberal assuming the title of Coalition candidate.¹⁰ They were duly told that 'both the Prime Minister and I find it is impossible to deal with particular localities'.¹¹ 'The business of arranging candidates with the L.G. whips has been very difficult', the Unionist MP Robert Sanders admitted. 'Bonar and Winston arbitrated on the cases where we could not agree, but their decisions have not been kindly received, and in a good many cases Unionists are fighting in spite of them [SANDERS diary, 27 November 1918: 117]. Younger warned that there may be problems with constituency parties, and highlighted Sir Alfred Mond at Swansea. Younger was right. Bonar Law gave Mond his support, and apologised for how unreasonable local Unionists were behaving.¹² Those Unionists were implacable. 'You can have no idea of the feeling in the Country against people of Teutonic origin', G.H. Crawford told Bonar Law. 'Mond may be a perfect man, but his origin ought to disbar him from the Government'.¹³ In Glasgow, Sir Archibald MacInnes Shaw was told to make way for John Pratt, 'thereby entirely nullifying the democratic

⁹ Undated, untitled memorandum, BONAR LAW papers, 95/2.

¹⁰ Sir Charles Petrie and Sir Archibald Salvidge to Bonar Law 21, 22, 25 November 1918, BONAR LAW papers, 95/4.

¹¹ Bonar Law to Sir Charles Petrie and Sir Archibald Salvidge, 27 November 1918 [copy].

¹² Bonar Law to Mond, 15 November 1918 BONAR LAW papers, 19/4. Balfour was also approached: Mond to Balfour, 4 December 1918, BALFOUR papers, 49866/1.

¹³ G.H. Crawford to Bonar Law 16 November 1918, BONAR LAW papers, 95/4.

theory of freedom of choice', as the President of the Govan Unionists complained to Bonar Law. 'I have swallowed, and still can swallow, many disagreeable things, but cannot swallow Pratt'.¹⁴

The free Liberals were disorganised and received no more leadership from Asquith than the parliamentary party had after December 1916. There was no coherent programme, other than the elimination of wartime measures before they became permanent, and many introduced, however half-heartedly, by Liberals themselves, such as conscription, tariffs, and government controls. Many parts of the country were uncontested. There were no candidates at all in Liverpool, and of Lancashire's eighteen divisions, only four were contested by the Liberals. Sometimes the Liberal stood down so as not to split the progressive vote, as did Alfred Hazel in West Bromwich, and in parts of the West Midlands and Lancashire a Progressive Alliance was still evident [TANNER: 406]. Liberal attitudes in the south east were such that often Labour was the only opposition to Unionists. In other places the Cabinet split of December 1916 was replicated on a constituency level: some seats having had no Liberals standing, but others having two.¹⁵ Fear of Labour had a salutary effect. In Newport, Unionists were told that the arrangement was a one-off, and the coalition candidate won. In Wales the Lloyd George factor was dominant: only two of the twenty-two coupons were Unionists. Nationally, only nineteen Unionists stood against coalition candidates, and only in Morpeth did it cost the coalition a seat. In some seats local party disorganisation could facilitate the Liberal-Unionist arrangement. North Cornwall Conservatives did not oppose Sir Croydon Marks, a Liberal elected in 1906. Marks had at least been serving in the Ministry of Munitions throughout the war; and Stockton-on-Tees Conservatives adopted Bertrand Watson, the Liberal only elected as Coalition candidate in a 1917 by-election as their candidate in the general election. Both were elected unopposed. Churchill urged the public to support

the National Government of Great Britain ... If you believe that a Party Government composed exclusively of Conservatives or of Liberals or Labour men would have a better chance of discharging this tremendous business, it is your duty to choose them and to place them in power [GILBERT: 424-426].

¹⁴ J.W. Cameron Black to Bonar Law, 4 December 1918, BONAR LAW papers, 95/4.

¹⁵ Bishop Auckland, Yorkshire Buckrose, East Bristol, Huddersfield.

In his ecumenicism, the Minister of Munitions sounded not unlike the Archbishop of Canterbury who wrote to the electorate on 19 November in thinly-veiled support for the coalition.

Here at home the most urgent problems of national welfare await solution ... Your help is needed in securing that long-standing abuses are taken away and much needed reforms are brought about to improve the health the housing, the education, the moral standard of the nation ... you will realise that in the choice of representatives in Parliament it is not enough to be satisfied with party zeal.¹⁶

'A Tory party masquerading as a coalition will win by a large majority', John Burns thought. 'There is no Liberal opposition. HHA is handicapped by his own war'.¹⁷ Webb thought the situation one that would benefit Labour:

Liberals all over the country, denounced by Lloyd George, and apparently deserted by Asquith, are cursing their fate: the more virile are joining the Labour Party; the weak ones are slinking in to the back lines of the Coalition' [WEBB diary, 21 November 1918].

For the Unionists, the whips said that 'they had never known so little about an election' [FISHER to Lettice FISHER, 15 December 1918: 340].

For all the uncertainty, no election had had the vagaries of opinion so well marshalled. With the war in its final 48 hours, the Unionist MP Leo Amery met Guest to arrange a harmonisation of Tory and Liberal newspaper proprietors, but '[n]o Unionist proprietor was there', he noted, only Rothermere, Dalziel and Riddell. Leo Amery was shocked:

I felt I was in a real den of thieves when they once started talking and realised more than ever that the political strength of the Liberal Party has lain not in its principles but in the thorough-going unscrupulousness of its wire pullers [AMERY diary, 8 November 1918].

It was certainly true for those Liberals present. The meeting was a failure:

The dominant note of the conversation was the insistence by all these Liberals of the danger of the Tory dominance in the Coalition. Our people insist so

¹⁶ 'The General Election: Letter from the Archbishops and Bishops', Lambeth Palace, 19 November 1918, British Library.

¹⁷ John Burns, diary, 23 November 1918, BURNS papers 46340/101. He repeated his prediction the day after voting, 15 December 1918: BURNS papers, 46340/202.

constantly that we are being sold to L.G. that it was rather refreshing to hear the other side [SANDERS diary, 10 November 1918: 112].

The coalitionist Liberals led by Lloyd George, Churchill, and Christopher Addison, had led the coup that delivered control of the *Daily Chronicle* in September. The coup duly delivered a full-page article on page 2 three days before voting, entitled 'The Men to Vote For. Full List of Lloyd George Coalition Candidates' [11 December 1918]. Party labels were given, but no other candidates were mentioned. In his own constituency, Churchill threatened the *Dundee Advertiser* that, unless it supported him, Rothermere would publish a special Dundee edition of the *Glasgow Record*.¹⁸

The *Times* and *Daily Mail* launched anti-German invective, at the same time as Northcliffe sought to keep Labour constitutional.¹⁹ Beatrice Webb noticed that

[t]he Northcliffe Press is showing its teeth to the Government—the Daily Mail has offered the Labour Party a full column of space every day until the election, without editing, to advertise its policy and its candidate. (This has led to the Daily News doing likewise) [WEBB diary, 21 November 1918].

She had also heard that Northcliffe's fear was revolutionary feeling, and that Lloyd George would be too lenient. Rothermere's 'principal complaint is that your programme is not sufficiently advanced & that you are being held back by reactionary Tories'.²⁰ 'Revolutions are produced by reactionaries', Northcliffe told Dawson.²¹ (On 27 November, in a meeting with Sanders, Lloyd George was 'anxious to know if anyone could get at Northcliffe' [SANDERS diary, 27 November 1918: 117]. Nor was Churchill happy with Beaverbrook, who took 'an independent attitude' to supporting candidates.²²) A regular 'Synopsis of Confidential Reports by Unionist Central Office Agents of the Progress of the Coalition Campaign' was also sent to Lloyd George, with the general conclusion being that

there is a distinct lack of enthusiasm about the election ... [n]o great progress has been made with canvassing, and it has only been commenced in a small number of constituencies ... [e]verybody appears to be rather behind with everything ... there is a quietness and want of excitement in the campaign ...

¹⁸ Churchill to Ritchie, 5 November 1918, GILBERT: *Documents*, 407.

¹⁹ Hamilton Fyfe to Northcliffe, 27 November 1918, NORTHCLIFFE papers, 62206/193.

²⁰ Churchill to Lloyd George, 21 November 1918, GILBERT: *Documents*, 421.

²¹ Northcliffe to Dawson, 1 December 1918, [copy], NORTHCLIFFE papers, 62245/142.

²² Beaverbrook to Churchill, 26 November 1918, GILBERT: *Documents*, 426.

[t]he Asquith candidates are endeavouring to persuade the public that they are as good Coalitionists as the rest.²³

As Bonar Law had feared, there was evidence that anti-Coalition reporting of the *Daily News* and the *Manchester Guardian* was having effect.²⁴ Thus, as Keynes later wrote,

the Prime Minister's more neurotic advisers told him that he was not safe from dangerous surprises, and the Prime Minister lent an ear to them. The party managers demanded more 'ginger'. The Prime Minister looked about for some [KEYNES: 126-127].

In the first week of December 1918, Lloyd George, 'getting nervous about the election', Duff Cooper was told, dined with his 'Press Gang': Beaverbrook, Sir Edward Hulton, and Rothermere [DUFF COOPER diary, 3 December 1918: 88]. The cabal was widely known about and resented,²⁵ but the result was Guest ensured that tens of thousands of copies of supportive newspapers were 'sent overseas with advertisement', and a much harder rhetorical tone adopted.²⁶ Having adopted a similar tone with his Limehouse oratory in 1910, December saw what Leo Amery described as 'the more demagogic side of Lloyd George's nature' [AMERY: 174].

Those who knew, such as Churchill, prepared their constituency organisations urgently, if – as was proved – to little purpose: it was a rough campaign precisely because, he felt, 'there is practically no effective opposition or counter-case being unfolded' so that extremists crowd to the candidate's meetings.²⁷ In Birmingham, Austen Chamberlain felt that

there is a want of workers, absence of organisation. I have never hated [an election] so much. The voters are apathetic, the dividing lines of parties obscure and uncertain, the issues ill-defined, cranks and numerous worse elements very much in evidence.²⁸

'All organisation practically had disappeared', for Amery in nearby Sparkbrook [AMERY diary 29 November-14 December 1918]. 'We are still

²³ 'Synopsis of Confidential Reports by Unionist Central Office Agents of the Progress of the Coalition Campaign, West of England', 3 December 1916, LLOYD GEORGE papers, F/167/11.

²⁴ 'Synopsis of Confidential Reports from Lloyd George Liberal Candidates', third batch, LLOYD GEORGE papers, F/167/1.

²⁵ A.G.G. Gardiner, 'The Great Cabal', *Daily News*, 23 November 1918.

²⁶ F.E. Guest, 18 December 1918 F/167/1/2; Riddell diary, 9 December 1918, RIDDELL papers, 62982/215.

²⁷ Churchill, 27 November 1918, GILBERT: *Documents*, 429.

²⁸ Austen Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 8 December 1918, *Diary Letters*, 100.

woefully short of workers, and practically no canvass has been done yet [AMERY diary 23 November]. Yet, as Riddell had warned, 'The extraordinary anxiety of the Asquith Candidates to pose as Coalition Candidates is, I think, the best proof of the popularity of the Coalition arrangement'.²⁹ The change in rhetoric benefited the coalition campaigners. By far the three most popular subjects raised in the campaign were, in order, 'full indemnities and reparation from Germany', 'Punishment for the Kaiser and other responsible persons in Germany' and 'Repatriation and exclusion of enemy aliens'.³⁰ Also popular were tariffs to protect British industry, housing, pensions. 'All this fitted Tory politics well' [SANDERS diary, 5 January 1919: 122]. Sir Henry Norman reported from Blackburn, where

Liberals are in a state of fury, their grounds being that the Prime Minister has 'betrayed Liberalism to the Tories', that he has 'sold Free Trade' and that the Whips' arrangements had split the Progressive vote for ever.³¹

Alfred Illingworth found his association 'is in a state of ungovernable fury over the action of the Whips in officially sanctioning the candidature of Tories against Liberals'.³² In the North East, for Robert Mason, concerns as to apathy were counteracted by Lloyd George's visit to Newcastle, and '[h]is pronouncement on indemnities and enemy aliens and bringing to justice authors of war given great satisfaction'.³³

Josiah Wedgwood, in Newcastle-under-Lyme, claimed to be the only Liberal to have refused a coupon, though he was returned unopposed because, as a *soi-disant* 'Independent Radical', he made a personal arrangement with the local Unionists on the question of Imperial Preference [BEALEY: 71]. Percy Harris in Leicestershire South, a Liberal who had been elected to replace a Liberal against an Independent in a by-election in 1916, was told by the Tories that he would be unopposed, but to everyone's surprise the coupon was issued to the Unionist.

²⁹ 'Synopsis of Confidential Reports by Unionist Central Office Agents of the Progress of the Coalition Campaign, 3 December 1916, East Midlands', LLOYD GEORGE papers, F/167/11.

³⁰ 'Summary of reports from Unionist agents indicating the subjects in which the electors are most interested', 4 December 1918, BONAR LAW papers, 95/2.

³¹ 'Synopsis of Confidential Reports from Lloyd George Liberal Candidates, First batch of reports, Blackburn', LLOYD GEORGE papers, F/167/1/1.

³² 'A.H. Illingworth Synopsis of Confidential Reports from Lloyd George Liberal Candidates, First batch of reports, Haywood and Radcliffe', LLOYD GEORGE papers, F/167/1/1.

³³ Synopsis of Confidential Reports from Lloyd George Liberal Candidates, Second batch of reports, Wansbeck, LLOYD GEORGE papers, F/167/1/1.

Until then all had been going well, but now my friends melted away like snow in the night. I could get few speakers to come out on my behalf and I had to rely on a police court missionary and his pal, a pork butcher [HARRIS: 76].

Harris came second in a three-cornered fight against the coaly unionist. 'It was not all explained by the coupon, though that had most to do with it', Harris recalled, there also being the loss of part of the seat through redistribution, a Labour candidate who took votes from him; moreover MacDonald supported him, which did not attract Labour men, who had their own candidate, and discouraged those who wondered why he had been denied the coupon. In Leith, to where he had found himself after his old seat of Tower Hamlets was lost to the redistribution, William Wedgwood Benn made much of his war record, thereby inoculating himself against the anti-Asquithian tropes [STANSGATE papers, ST 40/1]. He told his old association that had he stood he may have divided the progressive vote. '[I]t is my duty—as it is the duty of every Progressive Elector—to unite at this juncture to prevent the Division being represented by a reactionary'.³⁴ In Cleveland, Herbert Samuel had a Labour opponent for the first time, and came last of three: Cleveland had its first Tory MP. Samuel felt that he would have avoided defeat against either a Tory or Labour challenger, and particularly the Labour man (who lost by 89 votes), but not both. In 1910, nationally, Labour had effectively been contained; in 1918 two thirds of its MPs came from mining seats, seats in which the party had done well in 1910 [BLEWETT: 414]. In North Monmouthshire, Reginald McKenna's supporters hoped at the outset that the Labour man might withdraw, leaving the Liberal to face the Unionist, and at the end that the Unionist might withdraw, leaving the Liberal to face the Socialist. In the end, all three stood. McKenna went from a 71 per cent share in 1906 (*South Wales Daily Press*: 'there are no more loyal supporters of Mr McKenna than the Labour Party') and over 62 per cent in each 1910 election, to coming last; as happened to Walter Runciman in Dewsbury.

Duff Cooper dined with Lloyd George during the campaign,

and he talked of nothing but the election—of what cries went down with the electorate and what did not—and speculated what the results would be. He is a great contrast to Mr Asquith, who prefers to talk of nothing nearer home than Thucydides [DUFF COOPER: 93].

³⁴ Benn to The Chairman of Mr Kiley's Meeting, 19 November 1918, STANSGATE papers, ST 40/1/34.

Their approaches were reflected in their campaigns. In mid-summer, Beatrice Webb could see Lloyd George ‘playing up to the bellicose mood – he is preparing for a full-blooded khaki election of the 1900 type’ [WEBB diary, 2 July 1918]. ‘He is acting on the belief that Englishmen shake hands after a fight; so they do, but not this time’.³⁵ ‘The campaign, which lasted barely three weeks, was not waged on these heights. The charge brought against the Prime Minister is that he did not peg public opinion at this ethical level’, as Thomas Jones recalled. ‘He underrated his unique power to sway the country, or which his wife and some of his secretaries sought in vain to convince him’ [JONES: 160]. Thomas Jones, assistant Cabinet Secretary, concluded more generally that LG ‘was inclined to shout the popular demand and to whisper the qualifications which diminished the chance of their fulfilment’ [161-163]. ‘To secure a temporary advantage he played upon the baser passions of the electorate... he is condemned because he did not lead, nor seriously try to lead, the nation along the path illuminated by his own inner light’ [163]. Lloyd George ‘following the irresponsible levity and the lust for blood of the yellow press [had] reduced the election to the lowest level of demagoguery’.³⁶ For Keynes, ‘the debauchery of thought and speech progressed hour by hour’ [KEYNES: 130-131].

‘The megalomania of the war Prime Minister in his recent speeches is disgusting many of his admirers’, Burns thought [BURNS diary, 9 December 1918]. For Keynes the election ‘affords a sad, dramatic history of the essential weakness of one who draws his chief inspiration not from his own true impulses, but from the grosser effluxions of the atmosphere that momentarily surrounds him’ [KEYNES: 127-128]. Hence the final manifesto of Six Points, almost compiled from comments recorded in campaign report, ‘furnishes a melancholy comparison with his programme of three weeks earlier’ [131]. For William Allen White he was ‘a fire-brand scattering hate across England’ [R.R. JAMES: 392]. Yet the presidentialisation of the premiership certainly worked in campaign terms. Leo Amery’s election literature ‘The Coalition Candidate’ was pictured with Lloyd George at Criccieth deep in conversation, and one poster was of a union flag with the crossed words: ‘Vote for Amery, Bonar Law, Lloyd George’ [AMERY papers, 4/8]. ‘I must say Lloyd George is a great help from the electioneering point of view. His speeches and manifestos are good reading and full of zeal’ [AMERY diary, 23 November 1918, 29 November-14 December 1918]. In his

³⁵ Thomas Marlowe to Northcliffe, 27 November 1918, Northcliffe papers, 62199/143.

³⁶ E.D. Simon, diary, 15 December 1918, in DUTTON 2005: 74.

campaign, Samuel saw that '[i]n Cleveland, as elsewhere, the walls were placarded with enormous portraits of Lloyd George, with appeals from him to the electors to vote for the Conservative'.³⁷

By contrast, Arthur Henderson felt that Asquith had 'abdicated by not championing Free Trade against L.G.'s Colonial Preference, which he hadn't even platform instinct enough to call a Zollverein'.³⁸ The irenic benefit of free trade was not however, as the 'Nigeria Debate' of November 1916 had shown, an argument easy to convey in wartime [YEARWOOD & HAZLEHURST: 397-431]. Coalition intelligence reported that he was 'likely to be returned' [LLOYD GEORGE papers, F/167/1/2], but Churchill heard that 'Asquith is having a very rough time in East Fife, and is being subjected to abominable baiting by a gang of discharged soldiers'.³⁹ After thirty years as the MP, Asquith told Esher, 'I am not happy about the prospect' [Asquith to Esher, 17 December 1918, ESHER papers, 5/55]. A Liberal Prime Minister and Liberal minister had won the war with the prospect of reconciliation with those Liberals from whom they had separated two years earlier, on a programme largely Liberal certainly in rhetoric. Yet there were so few coupons offered to Liberal candidates that most faced a Coalition candidate who displayed the imprimatur of victory, and there was little time to prepare. And there was Asquith, visibly an older man, who had been Prime Minister a decade earlier. His leadership was nominal; constituency parties could decide what to do. The coupon, which, as Masterman put it, 'commands local Liberals in Liberal constituencies to vote against the sitting Liberal member and for the local Conservative candidates' [*Contemporary Review*, 638, February 1919: 122]. Samuel felt that Liberalism had little to offer. For those excited by war fever, there were the couponed candidates; for those animated by social improvements there was Labour [SAMUEL: 133]. To make matters worse, George Bernard Shaw complained of the Asquithians: 'None of these chaps seem to have any ringcraft'.⁴⁰

A close approximation of contemporary psephology had it that 'the electors have proved how little they care about old party cries and party distinctions, and that they value independence' [HOPKINSON: 131-138; 134]. 'The unique pragmatic genius of the English people to contrive working

³⁷ Viscount SAMUEL: 131; Synopsis of Confidential Reports from Lloyd George Liberal Candidates, Second batch of reports, Bishop Auckland, Lloyd George papers, F/167/1.

³⁸ Bernard Shaw to Beatrice Webb, 21 November 1918, PASSFIELD papers, 50/115.

³⁹ Churchill to Clementine Churchill, 13 December 1918, GILBERT: *Documents*, 437.

⁴⁰ Bernard Shaw to Beatrice Webb, 21 November 1918, PASSFIELD papers, 50/115.

principles out of elements apparently incompatible is nowhere more clearly disclosed than in the history of the Liberal party' [SESSER: 7]. It no longer appeared to work. The 'coupon' offered a definite choice to the inexperienced voter, and one based on trust and unity in a time of great uncertainty [SHORTER: 216]. The result was overwhelming. There were 707 MPs in the new Parliament—a record number. 478 supported the Coalition, and 73—the Sinn Feiners—would not take their seats, which meant a government majority of 156. Of the 272 Liberal MPs led by Asquith in the previous general election, 36 survived. The Government could claim 48 per cent of those who voted; the Asquithians twelve per cent. 332 (of 364) couponed Unionists and 127 of (159) couponed Liberals were returned. More than the measure of the success of the coupon, the results demonstrated the success of the right [COOK: 75]. Certainly some Unionists thought of it as a Unionist victory: 'George thinks he won the election. Well, he didn't. It was the Tories that won the election, *and he will begin to find that out*', Walter Long warned [*in* ADELMAN: 29]. Leo Amery agreed: 'All the Coalition Liberals are in by virtue of Unionist votes and though they may lose their seats to Labour they can only hold them by continuing alliance with the Unionists' [AMERY diary, 29 December 1918]. It was argued that the 111 seats the party had gained since the last election demonstrated its success in the intervening years, and then the effects of the 1917 redistribution. The couponed Liberals had done so well precisely because they had no Unionist opponents. Unionists had done well in places where there were no coupons, such as Manchester and Cardiff.⁴¹ It was, almost as much as that of 1900, the prototypical khaki election. The coalition would have been entitled to a majority of 82 over all parties if seats were proportionate to votes. As it was, the five ninths of the vote in contested seats produced an overall majority of 239. This was unbalanced and appeared so to opponents not represented in anything like so proportionate a way [BOGDANOR: 135]. The coalition won 533 seats off six million votes, the opponents (excluding Sinn Fein) 101 from four million, so the case can be made that it was the coalition that won [TURNER: 404-409]. One view was that the 150 coupons spared 150: more were elected in 1918 than ever afterwards [TAYLOR: 126]. Nevertheless, the Unionists were set fair for the peace. They had benefited from the war, and they had benefited from the coalition in two-way contests with free Liberals: Conservatives averaged more than 72 per cent of the vote, and 58 per cent in contested seats. Those with the coupon averaged 60 per cent, those without 45 per cent [McCRILLIS:

⁴¹ Winning seven out of ten, and two out of three seats respectively. SANDERS, diary, 5 January 1919: 122.

44]. The coalition benefited those Unionists associated with it. 'Spent the morning reading the amazing news of the complete disappearance of the Old Gang', Amery wrote the day after the results were announced.

I have always said that Liberalism has been internally dead for the last 20 years or more and would have gone the way of continental Liberalism ages ago but for the cohesive force of the two-party system. The breakup of that system by the war destroyed all *raison d'être* for our Liberal politicians; even apart from the failings of Asquith's war leadership. And so the great Liberal party has vanished, and, as far as I can see, for good [AMERY papers 7/14].

Aneurin Williams saw a bright future for the Liberal party, its present 'unfortunate position' notwithstanding, though he made the mistake of measuring votes rather than seats [WILLIAMS: 139-144]. Little of the post-1918 landscape was visible, but a significant Liberal presence was clearly missing, and would remain so. The performance in the southwest was even worse, with coalition candidates winning 24 of 27 seats. The lesson was that Liberals fared well only where there were no Socialist candidates [TREGIDGA: 23]. The Liberals may well have continued to contain Labour in the 1915 general election, but then came the war, shattering Liberals, and emboldening the two struts on which they had balanced in 1910: the Irish and the Socialists. 'I don't see much hope of resurrection for the Squithian body', the Socialist, Hugh Dalton, wrote. 'On the other hand, if the Coalition Liberals, or a large proportion of them, cross over and join up again with the Squithian residue a Liberal buffer-party might again come into being between Conservatism and Labour' [DALTON diary, 29 December 1918]. It was significant that McKenna, privately, agreed [McKenna to Runciman, 4 January 1919]. It was even more so that he decided to leave politics altogether shortly after [McKenna to Runciman, 30 July 1919, 24 August 1919].

There were personal as well as party considerations. Asquith referred to the rushed election as 'a blunder and a calamity' [*New York Times*, 21 November 1918]. Progressives could take a novel form of comfort. 'It is a compliment to be excluded', Arthur Ponsonby told Ramsay MacDonald. 'Your cowardly little guttersnipe of an opponent will be in his element with [Horatio] Bottomley, [Pemberton] Billing, [Charles] Stanton, etc.'⁴² Augustine Birrell told Asquith: 'you are surely better out of it for the time, than watching L.G. lead apes to hell' [R.R. JAMES: 112]. In that hell, a

⁴² Arthur Ponsonby to MacDonald, 30 December 1918, MACDONALD papers, PRO 39/69/1736.

presidential dynamic had been introduced, with all its new-found perils and contradictions.

Lloyd-George has a fine long rope now. But the result of the election justifies him in fighting it on false pretences as completely as the result of the war justifies Asquith (poor Asquith!) in fighting that on false pretences. What a farce!⁴³

The Cabinet Secretary Maurice Hankey, who had worked closely with Lloyd George throughout the war, noticed that 'he is in a nervous, irritable, and difficult frame of mind... more and more to assume the attitude of a dictator' [HANKEY diary, 25 December 1918]. Leading Unionists were said to be concerned at 'being saddled with the present P.M.' after the war,⁴⁴ but Burns suspected that their silence 'is to let LG talk himself out as a prelude to ditching him' [BURNS diary, 24 December 1918]. Thus was the course of the new ministry charted.

Firm conclusions are hard to come by when reconsidering the 1918 election. There were many independent candidates, many more voters, and then there were the sons of existing voters, most of whom were in uniform and did not vote, and there were the women; and the weather. It is fair to say that there was no simple transfer or switch on the part of those who voted Liberal in 1910 to voting Labour eight years later. Labour's record in local elections had been so good as to demonstrate that it was not the newly-enfranchised four million who made the difference in the national election [TANNER 1990: 410]. Moreover, it no more helps subsequent analysis that there was more than one Liberal vote to count than it did Liberal party organisers at the time. Organisation was patchy and rarely developed, turnout was low, the register was a work in progress, but for the Liberals it was clear. For Herbert Gladstone 'The result of 1918 broke our party'.⁴⁵ 'The disintegration of the Liberal Party began with the Coupon election of 1918', Asquith privately admitted years later. 'It then received a blow from which it never recovered. I myself was turned out of a seat which I had held against the Tories for 32 years. All my leading colleagues in the House of Commons suffered the same fate'.⁴⁶ Contemporaries were in no doubt that

⁴³ Bernard Shaw to Beatrice Webb, 29 December 1918, PASSFIELD papers, 53/118.

⁴⁴ George Younger to Bonar Law, 16 March 1918, BONAR LAW papers, 83/1/9; and Lloyd George, Scott diary 27-8 December 1918, SCOTT papers, 50904/224.

⁴⁵ Herbert Gladstone, 18 November 1924, *in* SHORTER: 212.

⁴⁶ H.H. Asquith, 'secret memorandum', 5 October 1926, SPENDER papers, 46388/109.

the coupon was responsible. Only twenty-one uncouped Liberals prevailed over a couped opponent.

However animated it made some people, the 1918 election certainly cannot be presented as an event that galvanised the nation. Masterman wrote of an 'anti-election feeling' as eventually manifested in low turnout [*Contemporary Review*, 638, February 1919: 125]. Twenty years later it was remembered as one that 'went off quietly, even apathetically' [GRAVES & HODGE: 9]. Nor can it be seen as one where rhetoric was believed even during the campaign. 'The great British people are not in the least interested in Social Reform or Reconstruction, but only in making the Germans pay for the war and punishing the Kaiser', Amery wrote from the campaign [AMERY papers, 23 November 1918]. E.D. Simon, campaigning in Manchester, began optimistically, but by the end he deplored 'the utter lack on the part of the Liberal Party and the [Manchester] candidates in particular, of any knowledge or of interest in industrial problems and the great question of equality between the two nations of England' [Diary, 15 December 1918, in DUTTON 2004: 74]. 'The general result is that in a world sweeping towards Democracy a Tory majority unprecedented in the history of modern politics is left to cope with social unrest and universal Labour upheaval' [*Contemporary Review*, 638, February 1919: 122]. It was not just the complexion of Parliament, but the quality that concerned some. Northcliffe had said before the election that 'a government of Sir George Younger's choosing means a very bad England in 1919'.⁴⁷ It came to be a common conclusion. Even Fisher, on the winning side, admitted 'It will be a most undistinguished parliament'.⁴⁸ Hamilton Fyfe wrote that 'It may be difficult to conceive of any Government worse than that of the Coalition returned to power in 1918' [FYFE: 225]. For Samuel, considering the product of snap elections—those of 1900, 1918 and 1931—'the House of Commons chosen in such circumstances proved among the least satisfactory of recent times [SAMUEL: 131]. For Asquith, the 1918 Parliament 'was the worst in which I ever sat' ['secret memorandum', 5 October 1926].

It may have been eight years since the previous election, but the few weeks between Armistice and Christmas had, Lloyd George's former confrere Charles Masterman complained, been 'chosen by the Government and its newspaper allies to force the country into a General Election' [*Contemporary Review*, 638, February 1919: 121], and some found it

⁴⁷ Northcliffe to Dawson, 18 December 1918, [copy] 62245/1550.

⁴⁸ Fisher to Lettice Fisher, 29 December 1918, *Coalition Diaries*, 349.

'indefensible'. 'They allowed the people no interval for reflection, or for the consideration of policies for the future' [SAMUEL: 131]. For Keynes, the decision 'was widely recognised at the time as an act of political immorality' [KEYNES: 126]. There were no grounds not to delay until the issues were clearer, 'but the claims of private ambition determined otherwise'[126]. Gardiner described an electorate

angry, perplexed, and indifferent. It is angry that it should be asked to vote, perplexed about what to vote, and indifferent whether it does vote... Why has this duty been thrust upon you so hastily [Lloyd George] does not want your mandate. He wants your blank cheque.⁴⁹

Bonar Law admitted that two thirds of the services would not be able to vote, and that the Asquithians 'will undoubtedly have right on their side when they say that the result does not truly represent the views of the whole country' [DERBY War Diary, 1 November 1918: 314]. Younger was concerned that, as in 1900, 'there may be public suspicions of taking advantage of the war'.⁵⁰ Sir Almeric Fitzroy, Clerk of the Privy Council, thought preparations had

a somewhat chaotic aspect. The immense addition to the electoral roll has had the unexpected result of tightening official control, due partly to the mutual suspicions of the organisers of an imperfectly consolidated alliance [FITZROY: 688 (2 December 1918)].

Sir Claud Schuster, Clerk of the Crown, did not think there were even sufficient facilities to store the ballots, given that the total weight of those of the previous general election was over sixteen tons, and the new electorate was so much larger.⁵¹ A victorious Tory admitted that 'The register was very badly done all over the country' [SANDERS diary, 5 January 1919: 122; FISHER, 13 November 1918: 327]. Then there were the usual complications of holding a general election in the middle of an influenza epidemic, with candidates dying or withdrawing, and public meetings cancelled [SHORTER: 348 n. 9]. And there was also the immediate aftermath of world war. 'What a sin having the G. E. at a time when all our thoughts should be centred upon Peace', the King's Private Secretary complained.⁵² It meant that the debate

⁴⁹ A.G. Gardiner, 'Letter to a Voter', *Daily News*, 14 December 1918.

⁵⁰ George Younger to Bonar Law, 16 March 1918, BONAR LAW papers, 83/1/9; also A.G. Gardiner, 'The Great Cabal', *Daily News*, 23 November 1918; and Lloyd George, Scott diary 27-8 December 1918, SCOTT papers, 50904/224.

⁵¹ Crown Office, House of Lords, 1 November 1918, LORD CHANCELLOR'S OFFICE Papers, LCO 2/4412 NA.

⁵² Stamfordham to Esher, n.d. [December 1918], ESHER papers, 5/55.

over the peace has been 'debased and vulgarised' by the newspaper-led election campaign, and the editor of the *Daily News* went on: 'your verdict is to be snatched while you are blinded and bewildered by events' [A.G. Gardiner, 'Letter to a Voter', *Daily News*, 14 December 1918]. The paradoxes were 'that four-fifths of the electors loathed the very idea of an election at this time, and especially an election before "the boys" came home', and that 'the other fifth were filled with fierce bitterness at what they regarded as unfair fighting' [*Contemporary Review*, 638, February 1919, 121]. The result was, for the *Manchester Guardian*, 'by far the most one-sided and the least representative of modern times' [30 December 1918]. The most compelling case is statistical. There were twenty-six British general elections in the twentieth century. In twenty-five of them turnout was over seventy per cent; in one of them, 1918, it was under sixty.

The 1918 Representation of the People Act has long been thought of as a 'turning-point' in British political history [BUTLER 1953: 1]. It marked the break between the long evolution of a fractured and usually contested framework of representation, to the uniform, universal, and largely depoliticised system that obtained thereafter. Electoral reform was depoliticised, except for that concerning the system itself, which retained a strong, though minority, appeal, and was almost certainly made less, rather than more, likely, with the referendum of 2011. The great landmarks of the nineteenth century had made the Representation of the People Act 1918 possible, and in particular that of 1885, which made male suffrage universal, and removed many other inequities, although many remained, including of course the main one. In the event, the 1918 Act and its consequences could not have been more successful, and it settled many of the longstanding anomalies and controversies of the electoral system. In terms of party politics, however, the pattern was more complicated. Britain went no further, and the Liberals would ever after rue their decision. The major beneficiary of retaining the plurality system was the Conservatives. The election may have been a victory for the right, but the Liberal Party was no longer the left.⁵³ Nor could it be said any more to lead.

The 1918 election is perhaps better seen as a beginning than as an end. Lloyd Georgians could claim that his efforts in 1918 were another attempt to reorientate British politics away from party dogma, as he tried in 1910 with the Unionists, and two years later with Labour [DALTON diary, 2 January

⁵³ DUTTON 2008: 8. Dutton moves Dangerfield's dating of this shift from the 1906 election: George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1936): 10.

1919]. Lloyd George could have sought reconciliation, but it had been rejected and would have been unpopular with the Tories, to engineer a new national party, as Addison advocated. 'It looks too much as if one section of the Coalition was determined to seize the citadel and hold it against all comers' [FITZROY, 2 December 1918: 688]. There were already concerns about further foreign entanglements—'what are our boys doing in Russia?—which were being expressed by the public, and passed to the Prime Minister.⁵⁴ As it was, Burns thought, 'LG sees his impending fate by his quondam friends now the election is over and the Tories have a clear majority over him' [BURNS diary, 2 January 1919]. The election fractured the party system, and it took three more for the two-party system to be restored. It took longer for party managers to accustom themselves to the new settlement, and would no doubt have taken longer had plurality voting been abandoned. Unionists got their best ever vote, and in the next election, four years later, broadly the same result but without Lloyd George. If the result flattered to deceive the couponed Liberals (and by association Lloyd George, though he could claim a personal vote), the future threatened to disabuse them. Labour's vote had increased to a quarter of those cast, and pointed to consolidation in those industrial, working-class areas that had returned couponed Liberals in the absence of Unionists. Coalition Liberals were dependent on Conservative votes; though the coupon was a one-off, as in Leeds, and the growth of Labour was dynamic. The coalition lost eight seats in by-elections in its first eighteen months. It was the last government with Liberals to be returned for over a decade—and that too was a coalition. The Tories were in power, with two brief interruptions, until the next war.

As melodramatic as the notion of a 'cultural war' may be, the 1918 General Election suggests something like a waging of democracy. For the Asquithians, public advocacy of peace was no more possible than private faith in the war; the key had always been the essential ambivalence of so many of them to that war in the first place; ambivalence complemented by an aversion to the developing tropes of politics and to those who, by contrast, were attuned to and could exploit them. While the change in ministry of December 1916 was one more of process than policy, a more profound but altogether less tangible change had also taken place. What made it less palatable for Asquithians was it was a Liberal who had occasioned it, and Lloyd George exceeded even the worst excesses of the

⁵⁴ 'Synopsis of Confidential Reports from Lloyd George Liberal Candidates, third batch of reports, Bishop Ayrshire Kilmarnock', LLOYD GEORGE papers, F/167/1; Amery to Lloyd George, 24 December 1918 [copy], AMERY papers, 2/1/1.

Liberals' official opponents. Mere pique on the part of the deposed cannot be discounted, and resentment at Lloyd George's behaviour from the exiles was so great that it ensured that there could be no rapprochement after the war. Other principles were even more painfully compromised. Indeed, of those Liberals supplanted in December 1916 only two—Sir John Simon and Herbert Samuel—returned to Cabinet politics; it was a supreme irony—but no more than that—that they were actually in office long after Lloyd George, who, four years after his electoral triumph, and as Burns had predicted, was himself deposed. His exile from office did not, however, repudiate or reverse the shift that had taken place. For many Liberals, defeat was a cynosure: a repudiation of character in political action. The cultural divide that had opened up over the war was the most profound, and, as it turned out, the hardest to traverse. The 1918 election can be viewed as oscillatory or contextual, or both, and will occupy psephologists for as long as elections are studied. It can also be viewed not only as a muddle, and for that reason as much as any other as a snapshot of the Britain of which it was part, but also as a cynical muddle, and that for all the reasons to hold the general election of 1918, there were greater reasons not to.

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