

Fusty English Customs: Lloyd George and the 1922 Committee

David Lloyd George, the brilliant radical from Wales, did not belong in the enclosed, snobbish clubland of his day. London clubs invited his ridicule, like other English institutions which he thought held back progress and change for the people at large, such as the monarchy, the House of Lords and the Church of England.

Lloyd George needed fun and laughter – and of course the company of women. He found them in the homes of Welsh compatriots – preferably Welsh-speaking compatriots – living in London. Music, unknown in stuffy clubs, enlivened the parties. Later, Downing Street, where he spent fifteen years as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister, would sometimes resound with the singing of hymns by powerful Welsh voices, including his own. His Christian faith faded (it was probably not very strong in the first place), but his attachment to his Baptist heritage never wavered. Yet it was in London's clubland that this critic of fusty English customs was deposed as Prime Minister a century ago.

In the race to set up permanent party political clubs for the first time with paid apparatchiks in residence, the Tories beat their Liberal rivals by four years. The Carlton Club came into existence in 1832, the year of the Great Reform Act; the Reform Club followed in 1836. For reasons I have been unable to fathom, they became Pall Mall neighbours (and remained so until a Nazi bomb fell on the Carlton in October 1940 after damaging the Reform), with just a narrow road, Carlton Gardens, separating them in a part of London that had just been opened up for development after the demolition in the 1820s of the Prince Regent's great palace, Carlton House, which stood at the top of the Duke of York's Steps.

The little road was wholly insufficient to prevent members of the two Clubs trying to spy on each other's political activities. In November 1884, when Tory MPs met at the Carlton to settle their tactics over the redistribution of seats at the time of the Third Reform Act, blinds were

pulled down at every window after a member of the Club noticed two figures across the road in the Reform peering intently through powerful opera glasses, on which the sunlight was glinting.

No such surreptitious activities were needed on 19 October 1922 when Unionist MPs (as Tories were for the most part then known) piled into the Carlton to settle Lloyd George's fate. The meeting had been eagerly anticipated in the media for days. It was the biggest political event of 1922. The leading lights in the Party – Arthur Balfour (a former Prime Minister), Andrew Bonar Law (former and future Party leader and briefly Prime Minister), Austen Chamberlain (current Party leader), and the dashing, erratic F. E. Smith, ennobled as Lord Birkenhead – were objects of particular press attention.

So too, for the first time in his career, was Stanley Baldwin, whose contribution to Lloyd George's downfall – through a short, but powerful, speech at the meeting – marked the start of his climb to a position of political ascendancy, which was to become as strong as Lloyd George's in its own, very different, way during the next few years.

This meeting at the Carlton Club, which swiftly became one of the best-known episodes in modern British party politics, brought down a formidable government, headed by a great statesman. But why should Lloyd George, a lifelong radical, have been removed from office by a gathering at the leading Tory club in London rather than one at the Reform Club or the National Liberal Club, where Mr Gladstone had been venerated since the 1880s?

The answer of course is that Lloyd George depended on Unionist votes in the Commons. The Unionists were in a position of total dominance in the Parliament elected in December 1918. Lloyd George's Liberal MPs, his section of a divided Party, were 133 in number. The Unionists had a mighty 382 MPs. Labour with sixty-three MPs provided the official opposition for the first time. Asquith's Liberals had a measly twenty-eight representatives. In Dublin, seventy-three Sinn Féin members met separately to lay plans for the creation of an Irish republic, assisted by an armed wing, the IRA,

which began a terrorist campaign in 1919.

By 1922, Lloyd George had been Prime Minister of an extremely talented Coalition government for over five years. In 1918 he was hailed as ‘the man who won the war’. The Coalition victory at the general election of December 1918, a month after the armistice on the Western Front, was widely attributed to him personally.

Since then, he had attended over twenty major international conferences, beginning in Paris in 1919, where he pressed for generous treatment of the defeated Germany and, later, for the establishment of diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia after the end of the civil war which followed the 1917 revolution. Many Unionist MPs were outraged. Such developments, he said, were essential for the long-term preservation of peace in Europe and the rebuilding of its economy, shattered by war. And he was right, though sadly few others possessed similar far-sightedness, one of the rarest gifts in politics.

He was right too about Ireland, where he did his second greatest service to mankind (an immense contribution to victory in the war having been the first). In early 1922 – with the fateful meeting at the Carlton Club still months ahead – Lloyd George basked in the applause that successful negotiations at the very end of 1921 with Sinn Fein representatives had brought him. His Irish settlement was the only one that could possibly have gained acceptance in the circumstances that existed at the time. It required the kind of political guile and skill, of which the Welsh wizard was such a master. ‘Constructive ambiguity’, Tony Blair called it in not dissimilar circumstances over seventy years later.

Lloyd George’s Irish settlement confirmed the partition of Ireland, brought about in 1920. No administration in Dublin could conceivably have governed implacable opponents in Ulster, who had for years shown their determination to resist such a dispensation. So separate arrangements had to be made for Sinn Fein’s unyielding adversaries in the North. The latter got limited Home Rule within the United Kingdom; Sinn Fein in the South got dominion status outside the UK; a Council of Ireland was proposed to give them the means to work together for their mutual benefit.

The Ulster Unionists, dominant in the newly created Northern Ireland, nominated their representatives to the Council of Ireland; Sinn Fein would

have nothing to do with it. The Council would not have worked. Sinn Fein and the Unionists of Northern Ireland were too far apart to co-operate cordially, and so they remain a century later.

Lloyd George's Irish settlement did not replace Irish strife with total Irish contentment. No British politician, however gifted or adroit, could have achieved that. What Lloyd George did, in conjunction with both Sinn Fein and Ulster Unionists, was to transfer power from Westminster to two governments in Ireland. Under the two new regimes, Ireland achieved greater stability than it would otherwise have known. The settlement lasted for nearly fifty years until serious unrest in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s over complaints about the abuse of civil rights gave the IRA the chance to re-emerge as a major factor in Irish politics, and undo much of Lloyd George's handiwork.

In 1922, Lloyd George was saluted as 'the solver of the insoluble'; a medal was struck in his honour. But his success did him no good at all amongst those on whom he depended for his continuance in power. It turned many Unionist MPs against him. It made him politically vulnerable for the first time since the start of his great premiership at the end of 1916.

Unionist MPs did not vote in large numbers against Lloyd George's Irish settlement when it came up for approval in the Commons. But they resented it deeply. For decades they had worked to keep the whole of Ireland within the United Kingdom. Now they had to accept the ruin of their work. They had no serious alternative to offer. But they cursed the man who had forced them to come to terms with Irish realities. People don't tend to like those who shatter their illusions – in this case the illusion that somehow the Union as a whole could be saved.

The habit of cursing Lloyd George grew in Unionist ranks. July 1922 brought the most notorious honours scandal of modern times, the thing for which Lloyd George is best remembered today, apart from his insatiable interest in women (many of whom reciprocated that interest). The scandal turned on the sale of peerages. Lloyd George protested that he had merely continued a well-established political practice. In that he was undoubtedly correct. Indeed, his peerages, which included all the leading war-time commanders, were not much greater in number than those of his predecessor, Asquith. Still, some of his recommendations

were unusually improper. And there was a new element: whereas other politicians had put the proceeds of peerage sales into their Party's funds, Lloyd George peddled honours on his own account to build up a personal political fund to spend as he pleased.

Nothing showed more clearly Lloyd George's indifference to the long-established conventions of British political life, or his disdain for the House of Lords (though that did not stop him taking a peerage in 1945 at the very end of his life). He was now flouting some of the deepest instincts of his Unionist supporters.

Lloyd George expected to rally the many disaffected Unionists when war suddenly seemed about to break out in the Near East in September 1922. A Turkish army under Kemal Ataturk swept the Greeks out of Asia Minor (where Lloyd George had encouraged their territorial ambitions) with great loss of life, most notably at the great cosmopolitan city of Smyrna where thousands perished, and came face to face with British forces, charged with protecting the neutrality of the Straits and holding the Turks in check.

Lloyd George and his fellow Liberal, Winston Churchill, in bellicose mood as usual, told the commander of the British forces outside Constantinople to prepare for battle. The opposition to war at home and abroad was overwhelming. What came to be known as the Chanak crisis was rapidly defused, but Lloyd George was left looking more vulnerable than ever.

How could the tide be turned in his favour? A general election was Lloyd George's answer. Almost all the Unionists in his Coalition cabinet agreed enthusiastically. They felt their overall record in government would stand up to electoral scrutiny. And they had a terrifying bogey at their disposal: the spectre of a Labour government, seen widely as a serious prospect for the first time in 1922. 'Vote for Lloyd George's coalition to stave off the red revolution': that was to be the election slogan.

The three most prominent Unionist ministers – Chamberlain, Balfour, the flamboyant Lord Birkenhead – all adored working with Lloyd George.

(A fourth, the Foreign Secretary, George Curzon, found it rather harder.) Their former leader, Bonar Law, until recently also one of Lloyd George's greatest fans, was having second thoughts, after recovering from serious illness which had forced him to resign as number two in the cabinet the previous year. That meant that a serious potential successor as Prime Minister was available.

Chamberlain, the incumbent Party leader, was absolutely adamant that the Party must fight the forthcoming election in partnership with Lloyd George. In a speech on 16 October 1922, he said that the Coalition must be maintained in the face of the 'common foe', Labour. No question of principle, he asserted, divided the Coalition Liberals and the Unionists, and it would be 'criminal' to allow personal or party prejudices to prevail 'at a moment of national danger'. Division between them would allow Labour to win, and it would 'not be the moderates of the Labour Party who would prevail'.

Would the thought of filthy capitalists dangling from lamp-posts silence the criticism of Lloyd George that had been growing in the ranks of the Unionist Party throughout 1922, and unite it beneath the Coalition banner? That was the issue that Chamberlain expected to be settled in accordance with his wishes at the meeting to which he summoned MPs and selected peers at the Carlton Club.

Chamberlain chose to hold it on 19 October because he expected a by-election at Newport in Wales to produce a Labour victory in a Coalition Liberal seat where an independent Conservative was also standing. That would help reinforce his view that Coalition alone could stem the advancing red revolution. But Unionist MPs woke up on the nineteenth to the news that the independent Tory had won the Newport by-election, and also that, after much agonising, Bonar Law had decided to attend the Carlton meeting.

A vivid account of the meeting was recorded by the Earl of Crawford, a Unionist member of the Coalition cabinet, in his brilliant diary, edited for publication in 1984 by a great political historian, Professor John Vincent: 'We assembled at eleven', Crawford wrote, 'a thoroughly good-humoured crowd. We were just about to begin when a waitress advanced with two immense brandies and soda to lubricate Chamberlain and F. E. [Smith,

Lord Birkenhead]. Much cheering... Austen, who spoke from 11.15 to 11.35... was very grave, but very rigid and unbending: needlessly so... Stanley Baldwin followed – gulping and hiccoughing a lot of good sense – no hesitation in denouncing the coalition and Lloyd George in particular – a clear declaration of war.’

Bonar Law’s speech, seen by everyone as crucial, came late in the proceedings. Crawford recorded that he ‘condemned the coalition. He looked ill, I thought – his knees more groggy than ever, his face more worn with distress. His voice was so weak that people quite close to him had to strain their ears – but his matter was clear and distinctly put. After his speech the issue was unmistakable, and he was hailed as the Leader of the Party’ once again.

The motion before the meeting, which was passed by 185 to eighty-eight with one abstention, declared that the ‘Party, whilst willing to cooperate with the Liberals, should fight the election as an independent party, with its own leader and with its own programme’. It was a vote for independence from Lloyd George, not a vote to strike out in a new right-wing direction, freed from Liberal constraints. Baldwin, man of the future, summed up the central issue at the meeting: ‘it is owing to that dynamic force, and that remarkable personality, that the Liberal Party, to which he formerly belonged, has been smashed to pieces, and it is my firm conviction that, in time, the same will happen to our party’. Seven months later, he was Prime Minister, and in the following year, 1924, proudly coined the phrase ‘one nation’, signifying his wish to unite, in his words, ‘those two nations of which Disraeli spoke’.

At No. 10, Lloyd George accepted his fate with good grace. He told his close Welsh confidant, the Deputy Cabinet Secretary, Thomas Jones, that ‘the moment he had learned the result of the Newport election and heard definitely that Bonar was going to the meeting, he had told Stamfordham [the King’s Private Secretary] that he would be resigning in the course of the day’. He did so at 4.15pm. When he got back to Downing Street, he found a delegation of miners waiting to see him. He told them cheerily, ‘I am very sorry, gentlemen, I cannot receive you. I am no longer Prime Minister’. In fact he remained at his post until 23 October when Bonar Law was ready to take over. Jones recorded in his diary for the twenty-

third that 'at 4.00 he motored away with his son Gwilym to Churt, smiling to the last'.

Frances Stevenson, his mistress and super-efficient secretary, was not so resilient. The previous day Jones had 'found her burning papers in the fireplace, and looking sadder than I have ever seen her'. Did she perhaps sense that the man she loved would never hold office again?

It was quite something for disaffected backbench MPs to have toppled a statesman of international renown, who was not even a member of their own Party. What could be more likely than that they followed their triumph by forming a backbench parliamentary Committee with the year 1922 in its title, ready to take action against future Prime Ministers who displeased them.

Over the years the 1922 Committee has held celebrations at the Carlton Club to mark the anniversary of its birth in October 1922. They are to do so again on the centenary this year. They celebrate under false pretences. Even recent history can be misremembered. The Conservative 1922 Committee did not spring from the meeting that brought down Lloyd George. It was set up in April 1923 by Tory MPs who were finding their feet in the Commons after entering it for the first time at the general election of November 1922, which followed Lloyd George's downfall. The new boys set up the Committee to help them understand the curious ways of the institution they had just joined.

Membership was widened over the next few years to include all backbench Conservative MPs. The most important development in the Committee's history occurred in 1965 when it was put in charge of the arrangements for electing Conservative Party leaders. In 1975 it became possible to fire and replace incumbent leaders under the Committee's rules.

Yet perhaps one should be cautious in spreading the truth about the Committee's origins. It may be best to encourage the belief that they are the direct heirs of the MPs who got rid of Lloyd George. A century on, the Committee helped kick out a discredited prime minister. It may not be long before it is called on to do its duty again.