

L. C. B. SEAMAN

**POST-VICTORIAN  
BRITAIN 1902-1951**



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L.C.B.SEAMAN

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It is not given to human beings, happily for them, for otherwise life would be intolerable, to foresee or predict to any large extent the unfolding course of events. In one phase men seem to have been right, in another they seem to have been wrong. Then again, a few years later, when the perspective of time has lengthened, all stands in a different setting. There is a new proportion. There is another scale of values. History with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days.

WINSTON S.CHURCHILL

House of Commons, 12 November 1940

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# Introduction

The period of United Kingdom history that extends from the death of Queen Victoria to the General Election of 1951 is still too often sharply divided into five distinct parts. The years before 1914 have to be studied in books mainly devoted to the nineteenth century; the two great wars of the period tend to be considered in isolation from their origins and their aftermath, and often in isolation from the political and diplomatic changes which accompanied them; the between-war period has been the subject of many books devoted solely to it and sometimes originating from motives apologetic or denunciatory; and there is an absence of coherent studies of the years 1945–51, even though the many changes, domestic and international, which have since occurred have given those years a psychological remoteness out of proportion to their comparative nearness in time. On the grounds of convenience alone, it seems desirable that an attempt be made to survey the whole period in one volume.

The attempt may also be justified on grounds less utilitarian. The years from 1902 to 1914 were not merely an Edwardian and Georgian autumn, stormy or golden according to taste, significant only as denoting the passing of a long Victorian summer; in affairs foreign, imperial and domestic, they were years of seedtime rather than of harvest. It was only from 1902 onwards that the larger ambitions of Germany and Japan, which constituted the major issues in world affairs during the first half of the twentieth century, began to be clearly visible; the story of Germany's unsuccessful attempt to master Europe, and of Japan's unsuccessful attempt to master the Far East are both completely contained within the period covered by this book. In like manner, fear of Russia, still a major consideration of British policy in 1902, speedily took second place thereafter to fear of Germany and (less quickly) to fear of Japan; but in 1951 it stood out once again as the major factor in world affairs. Between 1902 and 1951, the British Foreign Office had, indeed, traced a full circle from Korea back to Korea; unwillingness to be involved in a clash with Russia over that distant place troubled its thoughts about the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1902 and about the alliance with the United States in 1951. Thus, the first half of the twentieth century provides a coherent period of study because, during it, the main flow of world history was in one sense halted, and in other senses accelerated, by the ambitions of Germany and Japan. Emergent in 1902, these ambitions could, by 1951, be regarded with some certainty as having been relegated to the past.

In 1902, the fate of Korea was remote enough to cause only mild, and purely official, concern in the United Kingdom. In 1951, it was a matter which produced dramatic and immediate effects upon the British economy, and helped to destroy the unity of one of its two major political parties. This serves as a reminder of what is perhaps the period's most important unifying factor. Even before it began, the railway and the steamship had widely disseminated those industrial techniques the pioneering of which had given the United Kingdom its spectacular but already fading monopoly of the world's trade and oceans. Between 1902 and 1914, the development of wireless telegraphy and the discovery that the petrol engine could solve the problem of powered flight indicated that, during the first half of the twentieth century, history would at last

begin truly to be world history, rather than the history of separated continents and cultures. In 1902, but not much earlier, it could be seen, if only by a few, that science and technology were about to destroy the distances which had kept the Americas and Australasia relatively isolated, Africa relatively primitive, Asia relatively decadent and Russia absolutely backward. By 1951, the process was obvious to all.

By accelerating this development, even in the process of diverting attention from it, the wars against Germany and Japan also accelerated the process by which the United Kingdom was transformed from the wealthiest, and apparently the most powerful, of the Great Powers into but one advanced State among many. Already, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, other States, with larger populations and greater natural resources than hers, had begun to outpace her in technological progress. The two world wars stimulated industrial and technological growth all over the world; but in the United Kingdom absolute growth was accompanied, inevitably, by relative decline, notwithstanding much social advance and much successful adjustment to changing circumstance.

In 1902, Britain's imperial position seemed to dominate the world; even official doubts about its impregnability derived, in part, from the fear of anti-British combinations that never materialized. But, in the four years before 1951, the British abandoned India, Burma and Ceylon, signalling the start of a wholesale European retreat from Asia. In these same years, it lost also what it had fought two twentieth-century wars to maintain: its hold on the strategic centre of world power, the Near and Middle East. In 1951 itself, the signature of the ANZUS pact between Australia, New Zealand and the United States marked an abdication of power in Australasia also. The great world crisis over Korea in 1950–3 was the first for 250 years in which the United Kingdom played the part, diplomatically, militarily and economically, of a minor power. Nor, by the end of 1951, could there be much reliance on the belief that the shadow of a Common wealth of Nations was more real than the departed substance of Empire. The function of the Commonwealth idea in the 1950's was to be merely that of one uncertain hope competing with the contrary pulls towards union with Europe and 'special association' with the United States.

Yet to describe the period merely as one in which Britain declined is to over-estimate both the magnitude and the duration of the imperial power that had been lost. The 'Pax Britannica' of the nineteenth century was a peace whose maintenance depended less on Britain's absolute strength than on the absolute weakness of others. This thought was expressed, with characteristic lack of sophistication, by Ernest Bevin, speaking in a Commons debate on foreign affairs on 7 November 1945:

What astounds me about the history of the Navy is how cheaply we have policed the world for 300 years. I often think, when I read this history, that it is a good job no one called our bluff very often.... The world was policed largely by the British Navy with less than 100,000 men.

It is to forget also that the Empire whose liquidation had begun by 1951 had been to a considerable extent the creation only of the second half of the nineteenth century. The dissolution of the bonds that tied so many overseas territories to the direct control of Government in London was, in many instances, the abandonment of much that had been too easily acquired, that was too costly to hold on to, and which had only briefly been enjoyed. The process of adjustment to the changing facts of world power represented a growth in realism as well as a decline in power.

In the purely domestic history of the United Kingdom, unity is imposed on the first half of the twentieth century by the emergence of the Labour Party at its beginning and by the achievements of the Labour Government at its end. Confused though Labour's aims and methods usually were, the policies of the other two parties were already, by 1902, committed to the perpetuation of old creeds and old privileges. The transformation of the Liberal Party into the progressive party the twentieth century needed, and may perhaps be said not to have found, was prevented by Asquith's lack of understanding and Lloyd George's capacity for making enemies. The Conservatives stamped themselves as the party of resistance to social

change in the first decade of the period, and remained in that attitude, with only minor adjustments of pose, until the 1950's. But by 1951, having, after fifty years of struggle, at last put into effect a programme which would not have been unduly ahead of its time in the reign of Edward VII, the Labour Party, as it faced the opening of the century's second half, did so having become, in its turn, a party too deeply tied to its past. The result was that a half-century that began with a Tory debacle was brought to an end by a Tory restoration.

It is therefore appropriate to end this book in 1951 because it was in that year (it was certainly not in 1945) that history emerged from the past into the contemporary. At the time, contemplating the sufficiently unfamiliar pattern of affairs since 1945, men took for granted that the problem that would confront them for years ahead was the world-wide rivalry between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. It was assumed, from the evidence of the Korean War, that the triumph of Communism in China was simply an accession of strength to the U.S.S.R. It was overlooked that the emergence of an independent China represented a limitation, and not an extension, of Russian influence in Asia, and that it would pose altogether new problems in the relations between Asia and the rest of the world. That the political sovereignty of the United Kingdom and France would virtually have disappeared from the whole of Africa within the next decade and a half was also not foreseen in 1951; nor that Europe, while losing so much of its overseas power, would shortly recover so much of its interior vitality. And in the United Kingdom, few imagined that the Tory restoration would continue uninterrupted for thirteen years; or that a society which had spent the whole of the forties in the restrained and centrally disciplined pursuit of common ends in war and peace would give itself over so generally in the fifties to the pursuit of private affluence. By the mid-sixties, the year of the Festival of Britain had come to seem almost as remote as the year of the Great Exhibition.

Woking, March 1965 L.C.B.S.

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L.C.B.S.

PART I:

END AND BEGINNING 1902–1914

# 1 · Conspectus, 1902

In 1902 Lord Salisbury had retired, Edward VII had been crowned and the Treaty of Vereeniging had been signed. The Labour Representation Committee had been formed at Farringdon Street in 1900 and in 1902 had already won two seats at by-elections. 1902 was also the year of the Balfour Education Act and of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. All these circumstances justify taking this particular year as a starting-point.

In political history the retirement of Salisbury was as much the end of an era as had been the retirement of Gladstone or the death of Palmerston. Salisbury was the last Prime Minister to sit in the Lords. He was the last to bring to his office, though in a different and somewhat less excessively publicized manner, that devout awareness of Christianity which had also characterized Gladstone. What had distinguished Salisbury's Christianity from Gladstone's was that Gladstone's was basically Protestant, strenuous and optimistic, whereas Salisbury's was more Catholic and more pessimistic. Thus Salisbury, little though he relished selfishness and irresponsibility when he found it in other noblemen, attached, in contrast to Gladstone, little value to legislation as a means of human betterment. Unlike Gladstone, too, he was on the whole, except for the occasional railway directorship, a long way away from the commercial middle class and further still from the urban working class; Lord Salisbury belonged to that fast-dying era when the aristocratic politician could still think of the labouring poor chiefly as rural tenants. The profound but aloof pessimism of an eccentric other-worldly Christian who had himself never lacked for anything was one of the factors behind the marked lack of significant social legislation in the long years of Salisbury's political domination. There was already much evidence that the new forces in the electorate were not content with this state of affairs, and their discontent was speedily made evident when Salisbury left the political scene. His lightweight nephew, philosophical and sceptical where his uncle had been religious and devout, was equally remote from the realities of a great industrial State. Lloyd George commented on the evidence he saw of this in Balfour during the First World War, relating with sardonic enjoyment Balfour's somewhat glazed astonishment when confronted for the first time with a trade union delegation. Lacking his uncle's experience, his authority and his appearance of toughness, Balfour was unequal to dealing with the increasing political awareness of the lower orders, resulting from the growth of the trade union movement, and the general discredit which the length and difficulty of the Boer War had brought upon the only genuinely popular element in late nineteenth-century Toryism, its Imperialism. When to these were added the rogue-elephant tactics of Chamberlain in launching a Tariff Reform campaign, the stage was set for the election defeat of 1906 which condemned Balfour to spend the greater part of his political career as England's most distinguished former Prime Minister. The party considered itself lucky to have won the so-called Khaki Election of 1900 and, indeed, their victory then is ascribable not merely to their somewhat unscrupulous appeal to patriotism but also to the continued disarray of the Liberal Party. They therefore not surprisingly paid the penalty of an overwhelming defeat in 1906, and were not again undisputed masters of the political stage until the days of Baldwin.

The death of Queen Victoria and the accession of Edward VII were naturally taken then, and have been so considered since, as marking the end of an era. It is possible perhaps at this date to underestimate the effects on the national mind. Even more than Lord Salisbury, the Queen had linked the England of 1900 with the still largely rural England of the age before the Railway Mania; she had also linked England with the continent of Europe in a more personal way than has since been possible. Like Salisbury, and for longer than Salisbury, the Queen, by age and experience and through the marriages of her children and grandchildren, the unofficial head of many of Europe's royal families, in a symbolic way bound England, notwithstanding its notorious insularity, with Europe no less than she had bound it to the colonies. And just as the Conservative Party found itself diminished when Salisbury had been replaced by Balfour, so England was in some ways diminished (since politics domestic and foreign are not to be explained in terms wholly rational) by the substitution of Edward VII for Queen Victoria. William II was in awe of his grandmother but tried to patronize Uncle Bertie; and this was not without its significance in view of the temperaments of the two men. Moreover, Edward VII symbolized and encouraged the growing English suspicion of Germany by his obvious preference for France which, though not without precedent among statesmen, can be paralleled among the King's predecessors only by Charles II. The King was also only the second monarch since Charles II to identify himself publicly with 'smart' society; and since an important factor of the years after 1902 was a much increased display of affluence by the rich at a time when real wages were at best stationary, Edward the Peacemaker perhaps contributed a little, through his highly convivial personality and his un-Victorian choice of associates, to that increasing hostility of the poor towards the wealthy which Lloyd George was to exploit so high-spiritedly between 1909 and 1911. Edward VII's uniqueness in this respect is all the more noticeable when contrasted with his successors as well as his predecessors. George V and Queen Mary once again made the monarchy uncontroversial and, perhaps unwittingly, began the process which, by the middle of the twentieth century, had compelled the royal family to take part in an almost continuous ceremonial soap-opera.

The signing of the Peace of Vereeniging in 1902 appeared to have brought to a satisfactory conclusion, if not to a glorious climax, the age of Imperialism in English history. One of the unnoticed features of British Imperialism, however, is the short run it had as a dominant political theory. A phenomenon which was spoken of in this country by J.A.Hobson and then outside it by Lenin, as the arch-enemy of liberty throughout the world, which has long been used to justify vilification of this country not only in Marxist-Leninist Russia but also in the United States, was in fact a phenomenon which barely existed before 1874 and which dominated the English mind only from 1885 to 1902. It is only in these years that Government and large sections of public opinion appeared to accept the rightness of a policy of actively extending the boundaries of Empire; only in these years was opposition to this idea without really effective political expression. 'Land of Hope and Glory' could not have been written at any time before the 1880's, and it could never be taken quite seriously at any time after 1906; and it is altogether fitting that Elgar himself, who prided himself on his Englishness, soon found it unbearable to listen to. In the Leninist and American-Liberal sense of the phrase, Gladstone had been an anti-Imperialist and so had Aberdeen, Peel, Castlereagh and Pitt. After Gladstone, Imperialism found full political expression only in the careers of Chamberlain and Rhodes. Behind them, it is true, had been the subtle mind of Salisbury, but though his Governments added many square miles to the British Empire he superintended this process very largely as a matter of political and diplomatic tactics, in a manner not altogether unlike that in which, in the early 1880's, Bismarck had also undertaken a colonial policy in pursuit of a particular domestic policy. The Boer War was seriously damaging to Imperialism partly by its inefficiencies and partly because of the publicity given by the Government's Liberal critics to Kitchener's concentration camps; conditions in these were, of course, the inevitable consequence of Kitchener's notorious lack of interest in the medical care even of his own troops.

He was hardly likely to show much imagination in his treatment of enemy aliens even if they were women and children. The Boer War did lasting damage to the British Empire chiefly because it made too many Englishmen as uncritically ashamed of Empire as, before 1899, too many had been uncritically proud of it.

The formation of the Labour Representation Committee had attracted no attention in 1900. But in the 1906 election, the L.R.C. and its T.U. allies were to win about fifty seats, a startling indication of the extent to which both the traditional political parties were felt to have failed the working class. The nineteenth century is widely and rightly thought of as a period of continuous social reform; but it is difficult to point to any reforms passed by Whigs or Liberals which were specifically intended to confer direct benefits on the working class as such. This would have seemed contrary to the Liberal concern to achieve what it considered a proper balance between the classes. To the nineteenth-century mind, laws which conferred exclusive benefits on any one class were bad laws. It was for this reason that the Liberals had set out to destroy the privileged legal position previously enjoyed by the aristocracy and the Church. It was also in this spirit that the Tories had legislated in the 1840's against the undue advantage which the common law appeared to give factory owners over their female and child employees. It was because it was widely held that universal suffrage, by giving numerical superiority to the labouring poor, would lead to governments being conducted solely in their interest that democracy had remained a term of abuse in the nineteenth century and parliamentary reform after 1832 had been so long delayed. By 1900, however, the working class had begun to demand once more what it had demanded hardly at all since the failure of Chartism, namely direct political power. Since 1848 the organized working-class movement had ceased to seek political power, partly because of the general material progress of the country, in which all classes except the unskilled worker had tended to share, and partly because the New Unions believed they could safeguard their special position as the aristocracy of labour industrially by negotiation, and politically by acting as pressure groups, procedures which made less heavy demands on their finances. This state of affairs was already coming to an end when Salisbury became Prime Minister for the second time, in 1886. Bloody Sunday (1887), the Match Girls' strike (1888), the London Dock strike (1889) and the growth of industrial unionism among the unskilled workers, suggested that the political future would be shaped, and perhaps dominated, by the greater political awareness of the working class. This new militancy no doubt resulted in part from the sharp decline in the prosperity of some sections of English agriculture in the last quarter of the century and from uncertainties caused by the so-called Great Depression. There was thus a stirring from the depths in late Victorian society, depths which decades of material progress had hardly touched and which had defied the intense missionary zeal of the churches altogether. Yet, at the beginning of the twentieth century, neither of the traditional parties showed signs of coming to grips with the problems thus posed or even of being aware that they existed.

Disraeli had to some extent foreseen that the party which was the more successful in wooing the working-class electorate could best meet the challenge of the future. It was for this reason that he had invented the idea of Tory Democracy, based on social reform and the Empire. It is true that Disraeli's so-called Imperialism was more an imitation of the foreign policy of Palmerston than an anticipation of the colonial policy of Chamberlain and Rhodes; but, in encouraging pride in Empire, Disraeli showed real understanding of the working classes. For working men, the colonies were not, as they were to Gladstonian Liberals, costly administrative inconveniences, but places to which their closest relatives had emigrated and to which lack of employment in this country might eventually compel them to emigrate also. Disraeli had had the sense to see that blood was not only thicker than water but a more living source of political power than the holier-than-thou counting of pence which so often passed among Liberals for a foreign and colonial policy. He had seen too, ahead of his contemporaries, that the extension of the franchise compelled the political parties to woo the working man more directly; and the social legislation of 1874–80, such as the Trade Union Act,

the Public Health Act and the Artisans' Dwellings Act, was a real departure in policy; it represented an appeal, limited though it was, to the daily interests of the working class, which, as the record shows, had not been made by Gladstone even in his prime between 1868 and 1874.

Unfortunately Disraeli's clairvoyance was not shared by his successor. Salisbury served his party ill in the long run by his remoteness from the working class. Tory Democracy, it is true, found an immediate champion after Disraeli's death in Lord Randolph Churchill, but Churchill ruined his career by staking more than was politically justifiable on his personal indispensability and on the value which Salisbury would attach to Churchill's following among the now further enfranchised working classes. The power with which the constitution and the party system combine to endow a Prime Minister makes other members of a Cabinet among the most easily replaceable of public figures; a circumstance which goes far to explain the survival in later years of Baldwin without Winston Churchill, and of Neville Chamberlain without Churchill, Eden, Amery, Duff Cooper and Cranborne. Unfortunately, the graver social problems of a great people cannot ultimately be solved by political adroitness. In this matter of the condition of the people, therefore, Salisbury sowed the whirlwind that Balfour was to reap.

The only other source from which the Tories might have continued to imbibe Tory Democratic principles was Joseph Chamberlain. Chamberlain was, however, largely lost to the radical cause by his espousal of Imperialism, and this was a double disaster for the Tory Party. It produced the psychological shock of the Boer War and it enabled Liberalism in 1906 to capture from the Tories the working-class vote which, on its previous record, it had done so little to deserve. This was made easier for the Liberals because Chamberlain added to his other political errors the greater error of championing the cause of Tariff Reform from 1903 onwards. This, coming as it did after nearly twenty years of Conservative rule during which hardly anything had been done politically to satisfy the social demands of the masses, helped to make more credible Lloyd George's attack on the Tories, and the Tory peers in particular, as enemies of the people. It explains also the size of Labour's representation in the 1906 Parliament. This was, however, more than a working-class judgement on the Tories; it was also a serving of notice upon the triumphant Liberals that they were victors on condition that they served the cause of the working class.

The Balfour Education Act of 1902 is likewise a starting-point. It originated the process which the 1950's and 1960's were taught to think of in disparaging terms as the education of a 'meritocracy'. The most important feature of the Act to contemporaries appeared to be that Nonconformists were now compelled to contribute by way of their local authority rates to the upkeep of the Church schools. They had been contributing to this through the national taxes since 1833, and their opposition was thus illogical; but it is customary to regard Nonconformist anger over this matter as a contributory factor to the Liberal victory in 1906. It was, like Tariff Reform, calculated to give new life to old Liberal shibboleths, and is better regarded as an indication of the quite temporary, not to say illusory character of the Liberal victory; for just as Free Trade was a slowly dying cause so the Nonconformist conscience was well on the way to becoming a small ignored voice. What gave the Act its significance both for good and ill was its creation of State responsibility for secondary education through the education committees of the county councils. The lower middle class were now able to educate their children above the elementary level by the payment of relatively low fees; and the children of even the least prosperous among them could henceforth enter these secondary schools provided they could establish a claim to free tuition and a maintenance grant by success in a stiff competitive 10-plus 'scholarship' examination. The State grammar schools thus created were later subject to continuous criticism. The Labour Party disliked them on the grounds that they turned lower middle-class and working-class children into *bourgeois* snobs; and the Conservatives disliked them on the grounds that they enabled fact-crammed examinees to establish a claim to positions in society for which their lack of public school character-training was alleged to make them fundamentally unsuited. This

suggests that the grammar schools were almost the only successful solvent of class divisions which this country evolved during the first half of the twentieth century. It would not be far wrong to say that it was the grammar-school educated who gave Labour its decisive victory in the 1945 election and who, out of discontent with the fruits they obtained from that election, put the Conservatives back into power in 1951.

Where the Balfour Act and its consequences are most open to criticism is that the schools which it created or revived were in fact grammar schools, too ready to assume that a traditional education, taking its spirit and aims from the public schools, was the only possible education to give to the new pool of ability for which they catered. A much greater readiness to respond to the country's obvious need for improved technical education would have been more in keeping with the first decade of the century, let alone later decades. By 1902 it was already nearly forty years since a Royal Commission had first called attention to the inadequacy of English technical education, and already well over a decade since the foundation of the Polytechnic movement by Quintin Hogg had pointed a way to the future which, despite the Technical Instruction Act of 1889, the local authorities and the State tended to ignore. They continued to ignore it when the 1944 Act gave them another opportunity to create secondary technical schools on a national scale.

Nevertheless, the grammar schools, along with the trade unions, provided for the first time since before the Reformation an organized route by which persons of humble birth with no flair for making money could rise to positions of authority. As it turned out, the grammar school quickly outpaced the trade unions as a nursery for new talent. Although the trade union movement produced a Foreign Secretary in Ernest Bevin, it is not likely to throw up a man of comparable type again; the Ernest Bevin of the future will be shaped differently by universal secondary education. The significance of educational expansion in effecting social change in the first six decades of the century is not of course to be exaggerated: a number of plays and novels in the 1950's testify to the durability of the fiction that the grammar school product, even when given a university education as well, remained something of a barbarian.

The signing of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1902 used to be regarded as marking the end of England's 'splendid isolation'. There are good grounds for saying that Salisbury's policy had never been one of splendid isolation; and grounds also for saying that if splendid isolation had been his policy the Anglo-Japanese Alliance did not end it. Learned arguments as to the origin and implication of the phrase need not debar its use if it is taken to refer to the evident fact that, whereas by the mid-1890's the continental Powers were joined into rival groups, the United Kingdom was formally associated with neither. It is in this sense and this sense alone that the British were 'isolated', and since it was an isolation from Europe, an alliance with Japan can hardly be said to have ended it.

The Anglo-Japanese alliance had, however, immediate consequences of far-reaching importance and it was certainly a landmark in the history of the relations between the European and the non-European world. For the first time in the modern period, a European Great Power was treating a non-European Power as an equal. The alliance may or may not have ended England's isolation but it clearly ended Japan's; it raised the curtain on a drama which reached its apocalypse at Hiroshima and proceeded thereto by way of the Manchurian crisis, Pearl Harbor and the fall of Singapore. By a curious twist of circumstance, the fact that the British were the first European Power to treat an Oriental Power on terms of equality was never to redound to their credit; but there is no doubt that British patronage of Japan was a decisive event in the revival of the peoples of the East. There were, within less than ten years of it, a would-be 'Westernizing' revolt in Turkey, the first moves in the long-drawn-out Chinese revolution, and the first stirrings of Indonesian revolt against the Dutch. Nothing more pregnant of future change had happened to Asia since Vasco da Gama's arrival at Calicut in 1498.

The alliance also set in train events which changed the course of European history. Without it, the Japanese would not have risked their war with Russia; and that had for its sequels the abortive Russian

revolution of 1905, the Anglo-Russian *entente*, and a renewed if unwilling concentration of Russian policy on the Balkans, which by 1914 had produced a situation from which war seemed the only possible escape. By making a Russo-Japanese War possible it made an Anglo-French *entente* more urgent. The French had been working for this since Fashoda; but it was the French desire to bring the Russo-Japanese War to a speedy end before it disastrously weakened France's one European ally that impelled the French to make haste to sign an agreement with England, the ally of Japan. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance was also the first successful positive step that British Governments had taken in foreign policy since the Cyprus Convention of 1878. After 1878, foreign policy was hesitant, as under Gladstone, or cautiously serpentine, as under Salisbury. Egypt had been acquired inadvertently; in 1898 there had been failure to obtain agreement with Russia, and between 1898 and 1901 successive failures to secure agreement with Germany. Even Fashoda was largely negative and its significance greatly exaggerated. All that Fashoda had done was to recall sharply to the French that it was exactly a hundred years since Nelson's victory at the Battle of the Nile had destroyed the one real chance the French had ever had of controlling Egypt, that it was over fifty years since Palmerston had bludgeoned Louis Philippe out of trying to secure Egypt for France by exalting Mehemet Ali, and nearly twenty since the French had opted out of the expedition to Alexandria in 1882. The purpose of the Anglo-Japanese alliance was certainly the negative one of restraining Russia in north China; but it is significant that the British had at last taken on a new commitment, by offering support for Japanese ambitions in Korea, just as two years later they took on the new commitment of supporting French ambitions in Morocco. In 1902 the British had thus taken the first step along a path from which they were to find it impossible to retrace their steps.

## Conservative Balance Sheet, 1902–05

The defeat which the Conservatives suffered in the election of 1906 was so overwhelming that it cannot be explained solely on rational grounds. Considered as a verdict on the achievements of Balfour's Ministry since 1902 it was unjust; and it would be wrong to take it as implying an overwhelming desire on the part of the electorate for the legislation which the Liberals eventually put on the statute book. There seems little evidence that the electorate either knew that they were voting for a Government which would later be described as 'founding the welfare state'; or that, if they had known this, they would have necessarily voted for it. This is shown by the heavy losses the Liberals suffered in the 1910 elections. Discontent with twenty years of Tory rule was deep-seated but incoherent; and there is much to be said for the view that the Conservatives were defeated in 1906 for good reasons but largely over the wrong issues.

Thus, in the prevailing atmosphere of disillusionment after the Boer War, the public mind was more impressed by the issue of 'Chinese slavery' and by the Elgin Committee's revelations of the incompetence with which the war had been conducted, than they were by the Government's achievements in imperial defence and foreign policy. The 'Chinese slavery' affair was certainly an indication of the political insensitivity of Balfour's Government. Chinese coolies were being imported in tens of thousands into the Transvaal to make good the shortage of Kaffir labour. The terms of their employment involved their compulsory attachment to their new masters by a form of indenture and by their segregation into special compounds. The procedure had ugly associations. A somewhat similar reason, the shortage of native labour, had inaugurated the slave trade in African Negroes for use in the Americas. Worse still, it was bound to reinforce the more and more frequently articulated view of the Radical Opposition that the Tory Government had launched the Boer War for the benefit of the mine-owners of the Rand and was composed of men who treated labour with contempt and were indifferent to the elementary human decencies. Of course, the agitation was fomented for political gain and, of course, Winston Churchill was right when in a famous phrase he said that it was a 'terminological inexactitude' to describe the position of these Chinese as 'slavery'; but here was a deplorable indication that, for all their virtues, the Conservatives were blind to the times they lived in. It is indeed odd that a Government which had allied itself with one Oriental people should cancel out this act of apparent magnanimity by a policy towards another Oriental people which seemed to establish a direct resemblance between Balfour and Milner and the most ruthless of the *conquistadores*. What made it worse was that as a result of the Peace of Vereeniging the British Government was now itself responsible for what was done in the Transvaal.

Against this must be set the Conservatives' solid contributions to imperial defence. Balfour made the Committee of Imperial Defence a permanent institution and provided it with a secretariat; and although the Government did not establish a General Staff it did abolish (at last) the office of Commander-in-Chief, and set up the Army Council. In naval matters, Lord Cawdor (Balfour's First Lord of the Admiralty) and Sir John Fisher, First Sea Lord from 1904 onwards, reorganized the Navy so that henceforth it was concentrated

into three fleets: the Mediterranean Fleet based on Malta, the Atlantic Fleet based on Gibraltar, and the Home Fleet based on the home ports. More important still, they began the Dreadnought building programme. All these changes were to be of great value to the nation within less than a decade, but unfortunately they were electoral liabilities rather than assets. Any reorganization of the Army after the Boer War could only be regarded as a case of shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted; and, given the rising temper of the working classes and the growth of Radical' pacifism in the Liberal Party, any expenditure on battleships would seem one more affront to the labouring poor. Similar considerations apply to the signing of the *entente* with France in 1904. Although initially hailed as an act of pacification it was soon regarded as the alliance of one Imperialism with another.

Nor did the Government receive much credit for Wyndham's Irish Land Purchase Act of 1903. This provided for State assistance, on a more comprehensive and generous scale than hitherto, to enable tenants in Ireland to purchase land and to repay the agreed purchase price by annuities spread over 68½ years. Unfortunately, Wyndham then flirted with the idea of giving more administrative freedom to Ireland as a whole and, in the face of the Unionist agitation against him, Balfour allowed him to resign rather than permit his Government to be accused of flirting with common sense in its Irish policy.

The Nonconformist prejudices which had been at work over the Education Act have already been discussed; like prejudices were also aroused by the Licensing Act of 1904. The reduction of the number of public house licences had long been recognized as necessary, but had been held up because the magistrates concerned were unwilling to withhold licences for so long as the law forbade the compensation of the dispossessed brewer. By the Balfour Act, the brewers were to be compensated for loss of licences out of a fund to which the trade itself had to contribute. This allowed the reduction of licences to proceed, whereas the previous arrangement had obstructed reduction. Since nothing would satisfy the Nonconformist conscience but the virtual abolition of public houses forthwith and without compensation, once again the Government received no credit for a piece of sensible legislation. On the issues of licensing and education, the Liberal Party had little reason to congratulate itself: it received too many votes from voters who had too little regard for minorities of whom they disapproved, on allegedly religious or moral grounds.

It is not surprising therefore that the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905, giving the Local Government Board power to establish unemployment committees to keep a register of local unemployed and to set up labour exchanges, attracted no credit to the Government either. These committees could not give the unemployed financial assistance, but were allowed to appeal to public charity for funds for this purpose. Thus, on one hand the act can be regarded as setting a legislative precedent for the Unemployment Exchanges Act of 1909, since Beveridge secured the passage of the 1909 Act partly by using the statistics made available to him as a result of the Act of 1905. On the other hand, the reliance on charitable subscriptions which accompanied the Act was a further example of how Tories could resist the idea of State responsibility for unemployment even at the very moment of appearing to yield to it.

Understandably, what loomed larger in the mind of the working class was the complicated legal tangle of the Taff Vale case. In 1900, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants held an 'official strike among its members working for the Taff Vale Railway Company in South Wales. The company sued the Amalgamated Society, first to restrain it from action which might damage the company's business, and second for damages already caused to it by their action. The case went against the union in the High Court; the Court of Appeal found for the union; but the House of Lords, as the final Court of Appeal, gave judgement against the union for £23,000 damages plus costs. This decision compelled the unions to regard the Trade Union Acts of 1871 and 1875, which they believed had protected both their funds and their right to strike, as so much waste paper. Since the case had been decided by the Lords as a final Appeal Court the only way out was the passage of a remedial statute. No such statute was forthcoming from the Government;

Balfour took refuge in the appointment of a Royal Commission. There could be no other result of this situation than to make the unions a good deal less lukewarm towards the Labour Representation Committee than they had been in the past. The political levy by which trade unions subsidized Labour candidates was introduced in 1903. Moreover, it is difficult to explain, even to the educated, that the House of Lords, when sitting as a Court of Appeal, has no connection with the House of Lords which because of its Tory majority was in Mr Balfour's pocket. To explain this to the working man, already surfeited with legal niceties, was even more difficult. The Taff Vale case confirmed the working man in the view that the Conservative Party was using the machinery of law and government to deprive him of his rights. Baldwin later claimed that his own attitude to Labour and the trade unions in the 1920's, which struck many of his followers as 'soft', took its origin from his distress at the consequences of Tory disregard of Labour's needs at this particular time.

The final cause of the Conservative catastrophe was Chamberlain's Tariff Reform campaign which he launched in 1903. As a young man, Chamberlain had seen visions; and now that he was older he was still dreaming dreams. He had begun by making a highly successful business as a screw manufacturer, and continued by making a fortune. He followed this by making Birmingham a great city while its Lord Mayor. Achievements of this sort marked him as a man apart from the other politicians of his time. His activities made of him a Radical because to any self-made man of vision it seemed evident that nothing but a radical change in the social and political system could create a right correspondence between the institutions of society and the industrial and commercial nation which they were now called upon to serve. While a member of Gladstone's second administration, he had attacked the aristocracy in terms not unlike those which were to be used by Lloyd George at the time of the People's Budget in 1909. The cry of 'the Peers versus the People' which Lloyd George raised then had first been raised by Joseph Chamberlain, in the months of the Lords' resistance to the third Reform Bill of 1884. In the same period, he had acquired notoriety by demanding free elementary education, the taxing of the rich to provide social reform for the benefit of the poor, and had even dared to call himself a Republican. It was clear that once Gladstone was removed from the stage Chamberlain was the destined leader of the Liberals. Indeed, if the whole course of English political life had not been distorted by the Irish Home Rule problem, neither the career of Lloyd George nor the rise to power of a Labour Party would have taken place. Over Home Rule in 1886, Chamberlain broke with Gladstone and divided the Liberal Party so that it did not come together again as an effective political force for twenty years. But it might not be amiss to say that over Home Rule, Gladstone broke Chamberlain. Henceforth Chamberlain was compelled to sit in the Commons side by side with aristocratic Whigs who together with him led the Liberal Unionists, and in alliance with Conservatives led by the Tory peers he had all his life attacked. It was this situation of Chamberlain's, created by Irish and Gladstonian obstinacy, which lay at the root of the lack of constructive social legislation in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. But if his imprisonment by the Tories constricted his radicalism it could not permanently fetter his dynamic mind. And so it was that, from 1895 onwards, as Colonial Secretary he became the embodiment in Government circles of the Imperialist idea. He became devoted to the cause of Anglo-Saxon supremacy in Africa and, indeed, the world. Chamberlain the business man, the Radical, the organizer of civilized civic life, once he had turned his attention to what he called the 'undeveloped estate' of the ramshackle overseas empire, could hardly be expected to resist the desire to do with it what he had done to Birmingham and to apply to it those principles of sound organization, radical betterment and dynamic growth which were in fact the essential contribution of nineteenth-century England to human progress. To such a mind, not after all totally unlike that of Beatrice Webb, the Queen of the Fabian Socialists, Kruger was as much an impediment to the onward march of civilization as the mosquito and the tsetse fly. And if business progress and civilized organization required from time to time the exercise of a little sharp practice, the end more than justified the means; even if, when translated into an African context, this meant secret involvement,

subsequently denied, in the Jameson Raid, and eventually in the Boer War. But one of the most common features of business men is to overreach themselves; and it seemed that Chamberlain's Imperialism had by 1902 all but gone bankrupt. Johannesburg was not, after all, Birmingham.

Nor was Chamberlain's breadth of vision limited to purely African affairs. Like other men of vision at this period, he thought in terms of world policy; and this characteristic of Chamberlain is evident in his projection in 1900 of the idea of a 'triple alliance' of the United States, the United Kingdom and the German Empire to preserve the world for ordered Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic progress against the Latins and Slavs. Such a plan had not the slightest chance of realization at the time that Chamberlain made it, but this had not prevented him from putting it forward for serious and immediate consideration.

His plan for Tariff Reform was of like character and arose from a similarly broad view of world policy. It was clear that Britain's mid-century monopoly, industrial and imperial, was passing away, and that if there were to be the possibility of continued greatness in the face of United States and German (let alone Russian and French) growth, this could only be achieved by a more effective economic and political organization of the British Empire. By 1903 Chamberlain was convinced that the only method by which he could achieve a closer union within the Empire was by Imperial Preference; and Imperial Preference could be achieved only by taxing imports from outside the Empire. This meant proposing the abandonment of Free Trade. The firm belief that there had been a 'depression' (which in some senses was true) and that it would continue (an expectation which quickly proved false), as well as the unemployment that followed the Boer War, all directed his mind towards the end of Free Trade in favour of the protection of British manufactures. Protection, by preserving the profitability of industry, would also maintain the rate of employment.

Yet again, Chamberlain showed his obtuseness as a politician by plunging so precipitately into this whirlpool of controversy. It is fair to say also that a less intellectually curious Prime Minister than Balfour might equally have hesitated before slipping into the whirlpool as well. The conducting, by a major Cabinet Minister and his Prime Minister, of a pamphleteering and platform controversy as to the basis on which the country's future fiscal policy should be undertaken was not likely to inspire confidence either in the Prime Minister or his Government. The most elementary considerations of tactics required that the advocacy of Tariff Reform should have been mooted first in private. Instead, Balfour made the mistake of publicly advocating the desirability at least of some kind of retaliatory tariff against the country's chief economic rivals. Such a procedure, pardonable in a party in opposition, casts doubts on the capacity both of Balfour and Chamberlain as Cabinet Ministers. Balfour's public efforts at compromise offended the Free Traders in the party without in any way satisfying Chamberlain, and in a short time Balfour thought it expedient to disembarass his Cabinet both of the Free Traders and the 'whole-hog' Protectionists. The result was to leave in office a Government whose chief characteristic was that it consisted of men patently unprepared to make up their minds about a major problem of policy. Even when, in January 1905, Balfour produced a formula to prevent his own and Chamberlain's supporters offering entirely different fiscal policies at the next election, nobody believed that its acceptance by the two sides made any difference to the fact of their disagreement. The Conservatives paid dearly for Balfour's attempt to retain votes in the country by saying he did not support Tariff Reform, while trying to retain votes in the Lords and Commons by saying he did not support Free Trade. Even after the 1906 election had been lost, Balfour was still prepared to go to ludicrous lengths in trying to pretend that the problem could be solved by a multiplicity of words. He produced another face-saving formula in a letter written on St Valentine's Day, 1906 which included the following:

Fiscal reform is, and must remain, the first constructive work of the Unionist party; its objects are to secure more equal terms of competition for British trade and closer commercial union with the

colonies; and while it is at present unnecessary to prescribe the exact methods by which these objects are to be attained, and inexpedient to permit differences of opinion as to these methods to divide the party, though other means are possible, the establishment of a moderate general tariff on manufactured goods not imposed for the purpose of raising prices or giving artificial protection against legitimate competition and the imposition of a small duty on foreign corn are not in principle objectionable and should be adopted if shown to be necessary for the attainment of the ends in view or for the purposes of revenue.

Balfour's last move was to gamble on the possibility that, divided though the Conservative Party now was, the Liberals might be even more divided. He therefore resigned early in December 1905 without asking for a dissolution. Campbell-Bannerman thereupon became Prime Minister of a minority Liberal Government. Balfour hoped that the divisions which had rent the Liberal Party since Gladstone's time would make themselves sufficiently manifest for the electorate to have second thoughts about confirming them in office. Once again, and for the last time as Prime Minister, Balfour proved himself out of touch with political reality. The Liberals presented the electorate with a Government which gave every appearance not only of being strong but of being united. In the January 1906 election the Liberals gained a majority of 84 over all other parties combined. Ranged against the 157 Conservatives and Unionists were not only 377 Liberals but 83 Irish Nationalists and, most significantly of all for the future, 53 Labour members, of whom 29 were sponsored by the Labour Representation Committee.

It would have taken nothing short of the prospect of a rapid return to power to unite the Liberal Party, which, characteristically in a party of the Left, especially when in opposition, could not help but be a prey to fissiparous tendencies. These tendencies had been encouraged by uncertainties about the leadership. Lord Rosebery had resigned the leadership in 1896 but had kept the party in a state of uncertainty about the degree of finality he intended to be inferred from his action. Apart from the inherited cleavage in the party between the Radicals and the surviving Liberal Whigs, there had developed the division between the so-called Liberal Imperialists who had supported the Boer War and those, such as Campbell-Bannerman himself and Lloyd George, who in their different ways had opposed it. Worse still there had, during Balfour's term of office, developed a new clash over Home Rule. Both Asquith and Campbell-Bannerman had upset others in the party by proclaiming their belief that Home Rule for Ireland should be achieved only 'step by step'. These problems in fact presented no difficulties at the end of 1905 because the Tariff Reform campaign had presented the Liberals with the golden opportunity to unfurl their old, faded Free Trade banner. Once again they could represent themselves as the party that could say 'Hands Off the People's Food', and as the party to save the country from a return to the 'hungry forties' when, according to legend, the English had been starving and the Irish dying because a Conservative Government continued to prohibit free trade in corn. The Liberals swept into power with sectarian prejudices on their Right flank, an angry trade union movement on their Left flank, and with their centre marching triumphantly into the future behind the ghosts of Cobden and Bright.

Nevertheless, the split in the Liberal Party which Balfour had hoped for as soon as it took office in December 1905 was only narrowly averted. The leading Liberal Imperialists in the party, Haldane, Grey and Asquith, had agreed in September 1905 that as soon as Balfour resigned they would refuse to take office under Campbell-Bannerman unless he agreed to go to the Lords, leaving the effective leadership of the Government to Asquith. They secured the approval of Edward VII, and when Campbell-Bannerman first went to the Palace the King did in fact suggest that he take a peerage. Campbell-Bannerman, always a forthright man, had by that time already made it clear that he disliked Haldane so much that he would refuse to let him be Lord Chancellor as he desired, and would, if necessary, exclude him from the Government

altogether. He also showed some willingness to appoint someone other than Sir Edward Grey to the Foreign Office. At this, Asquith called the conspiracy off. He became tardily aware that the imminence of the General Election made the creation of a united Government imperative. He was determined not to prejudice his own position and felt satisfied that, since Campbell-Bannerman was twelve years his senior and in indifferent health, the reversion of the leadership to himself could not be long delayed. He therefore allowed himself to be conciliated by his own appointment to the Exchequer, and by the appointment of Grey and Haldane to the Foreign Office and the War Office, respectively; though Grey, who tended to fuss, and was not good at changing his mind, wanted to hold out against the Prime Minister a little longer. The intention of the conspirators, that there should be continuity in defence and foreign policy after the fall of the Conservatives, was largely fulfilled. The fears of the Foreign Office, that the advent of the Liberals would lead to an irresolute foreign policy, proved unfounded as soon as Grey took over. Campbell-Bannerman took little cognisance of the work of the Foreign Secretary, and Grey made sure that the Prime Minister was told as little as possible.

## Indian Summer of the Liberals, 1905–09

The first years of Campbell-Bannerman's Ministry were chiefly occupied, in domestic affairs, with attempts to fulfil the more obvious pledges the party had made before its election. Chinese slavery having been dealt with by forbidding the importing of more Chinese (though existing contracts were allowed to run their term) the Transvaal was given self-government in 1906 and so, in 1907, was the Orange River Colony. In 1908 and 1909, the four South African Governments worked out a constitution for a Union of South Africa and this was brought into being by the Union of South Africa Act of 1909. The apparently happy outcome of this swift repudiation of the Imperialist past was consciously used by the Labour Government of 1945–50 as a precedent for similar acts repudiating the past in India and elsewhere. Not for the first or last time, however, were the men of the Left blind to the pitfalls awaiting those who imagine that the past can be put right by a statutory washing of the hands. There was not one moral issue in South Africa; there were two. In effect the Liberals sought to solve the issue of Anglo-Boer relations by shelving the second issue, that of the relations between white South Africans and coloured South Africans. This was to ignore the fact that all through the nineteenth century an important element in the Anglo-Boer conflict had been differing views on the question of the coloured population. Like the Austro-Hungarian *Ausgleich* of 1867, the Liberal settlement of South Africa was a compromise for the benefit of two 'master' races; and it left the larger problem of the subject peoples for future generations to grapple with.

The most important statute of 1906 was the Trade Disputes Act. In future a trade union was not liable for civil wrongs committed on its behalf. That the Act was as comprehensive as this was due to Government yielding to Labour pressure in the Commons. As passed, it represented a revolutionary departure from the common law. It established finally that peaceful picketing was legal, even when its objects were to incite to breach of contract, and even though it was contrary to the common law principle that a man might work where he could and that an employer had a similar right to earn his living in his own way. The result was to give the trade union movement what amounted to the status of a medieval 'immunity'; and to depart from the Anglo-Saxon principle of equality before the law. It is not surprising that Asquith and the other lawyers in Campbell-Bannerman's Government had grave doubts about the propriety of accepting the Labour members' own version of the Bill; and it was the personal decision of Campbell-Bannerman to cut through the legal tangle and accept Labour's proposals which got the Act on the statute book in its final form.

It is typical of the behaviour of the Conservatives at this time that they did not modify the Trade Disputes Bill in the Lords. Instead, they chose to defeat the two other Bills of the year, the Education Bill and the Plural Voting Bill. The former was designed to amend the 1902 Education Act in a sense favourable to the Nonconformists. In spite of the fact that many leading churchmen were not opposed to it, the Lords destroyed it by a number of wrecking amendments. They dealt similarly with the Bill to end the right of owners of business premises to additional votes in respect of those premises. At a time when the total electorate was smaller, the practice of plural voting was more important than when it was abolished in

1948. The use by the Conservatives, for purely party ends, of the legislative powers of the Lords against a Government which commanded an unprecedented majority in the Commons was one which the Conservative leaders would have been wiser to avoid. A further example of Conservative obstruction was the Lords' destruction of a non-controversial Liberal Licensing Bill in 1908.

The Liberals were thus being pressed by the Labour members into legislative action they did not want, and were being prevented from legislative action which they did desire, by the pressure of the Conservatives in the Lords; and their need to escape from this situation provides the clue to the subsequent history of this period of Liberal rule. It was under Labour pressure, for example, that the Government accepted in 1906 an act giving permission to local authorities to provide school meals for necessitous children and to establish school Care Committees; this was followed in 1907 by the authorization of regular medical inspection of schoolchildren and the setting up of a medical department within the Board of Education.

If, at this stage, the Labour Party and the trade unions had been capable of rather more militancy in the political field, and if the Conservatives had displayed a little less, the Liberal Government might not have long survived. In 1908, trade was bad, the swing of opinion towards Tariff Reform was becoming more marked, and the Government began to lose by-elections. What saved the Liberals, though at a heavy cost, was that the death of Campbell-Bannerman in 1908, by elevating Asquith to the premiership, brought Lloyd George to the Exchequer and Winston Churchill to the Board of Trade. This not only gave the Government a new aggressiveness which goaded the Conservatives into a succession of political errors; it also gave it a policy capable of stealing Labour's thunder.

This latter task was made politically more urgent by the damaging effect on Labour's political progress of the Osborne judgement. A branch of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, through their secretary, Osborne, challenged the legality of the political levy. The political levy was the compulsory imposition upon trade union members of a contribution to assist the cost of campaigning for Labour and trade union M.P.s and to help give them a salary at a time when M.P.s were still unpaid. In 1908 and 1909 the case went upwards through the courts to the House of Lords; and at each stage the levy was declared illegal. For the second time in less than a decade the laws of England had deprived working men of the power to organize themselves effectively. The Taff Vale judgement had sought to prevent them acting industrially; the Osborne judgement now prevented them acting politically. The Osborne judgement greatly increased the militancy of the unions in the industrial field and gave brief but alarming prominence to Syndicalism, with its emphasis on the use of the strike, not only as a means of establishing better conditions, but also as a means to disrupt and eventually overthrow the capitalist system.

It was Lloyd George who, intuitively and without preconceived plan, sought for a means to cast off the upper and nether millstones which were constricting the Government and threatening, by 1909, to crush the life out of it. There is no indication that he planned in advance to draw up a Budget in 1909 that the Lords would be bound to reject, thus providing a good reason for destroying their veto. It was rather that, given the situation as it had been developing since 1906, it was sound politics to try to save the Liberals by a dramatic appeal to the masses. Under the spell of Lloyd George's rousing oratory, a purely political struggle between Liberals and Conservatives was dramatized as a fundamental struggle between the Peers and the People, with the Liberal Party as the People's champion. Thus it was hoped that the Conservatives could be routed and the Labour Party outbid. At this stage, the Labour Party was inexperienced, devoid of outstanding personalities and coherent political programme, and debilitated both by the Osborne judgement and by the surviving tradition of co-operation with the Liberal Party. There was thus still time to stifle it in its cradle, while its voice was feeble and muffled. By contrast, Lloyd George's appeals would be all the louder and

clearer for coming from a magnetic personality whose oratory and whose actions were uninhibited by regard for principle.

Lloyd George had been the most notably successful member of the Campbell-Bannerman Government. Asquith had been a sound Chancellor; Grey had been an unobtrusive Foreign Secretary, since only by shunning the limelight could anyone conduct foreign policy with a large Liberal majority in the Commons; Haldane had been reorganizing the Army, but without attracting public approval. Lloyd George, however, had startled observers by showing considerable ability at the Board of Trade; he had piloted important reforms relating to merchant shipping and patents, had taken the first census of production, had skilfully averted what might have been the first national railway strike in 1907, and settled a shipyard strike in 1908. He had also implemented a Royal Commission's recommendation that London's docks should come under the control of a single Port of London Authority, an undertaking that required both patience and energy in view of the large number of private and public interests involved. All this showed Lloyd George's skill as a manipulator both of people and of plans.

When Lloyd George took Asquith's place at the Exchequer, he at once ran into a piece of good luck which was of permanent benefit to his reputation. It fell to him to preside over the last stages of the 1908 Budget, which Asquith had prepared before taking over the Premiership; and it was this Budget which contained provision for the initial financing of old age pensions. It was thus to some extent fortuitous that when it came into operation the old age pension was familiarly known as 'the Lloyd George' and that ever since he has been inseparably associated with it. He was quick to see, however, that the introduction of old age pensions provided him with the kind of political publicity he needed if he were to present the Liberals as the true friends of the poor and needy, in contrast to the Tories with their championship of the powers of the Lords.

In relation to the size of the problem of poverty, and to the length of time it had been under discussion, the Old Age Pensions Act was inadequate. The operations of the Poor Law had been criticized by a Royal Sanitary Commission of 1869, and had been condemned not only by persons who might be regarded as propagandist, such as Charles Booth in his *London Life and Labour* of 1886, and Beatrice Webb, but also by a whole generation of Poor Law Medical Officers; and a Royal Commission on the Aged Poor had advocated old age pensions in 1895. Yet despite these soberly statistical criticisms of the administrative chaos and human suffering which attended the operations of the Poor Law, it was still governed essentially by the principles of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. The Royal Commission on the Poor Laws which reported in 1909 had been set up in the hope that it would condemn, not the existing system, but the alleged growth of humanitarian departures from it. The prevailing doctrine was still that the deterrent effects of detention in a workhouse and of the stigma traditionally attached to pauperism should be maintained in order to prevent idleness and thriftlessness. In fact, the majority of the Commission reported in favour of abandoning the deterrent principle in Poor Law administration and demanded that it should henceforth concern itself with preventing and curing destitution and not merely with its relief in the traditionally semi-penal fashion. Both the majority and the minority reports were, in practice, in favour of a complete administrative reorganization of the Poor Law.

The introduction of old age pensions took place ahead of the Royal Commission's report and was the first of various piecemeal substitutes for the comprehensive reforms which the Commission advocated. The Act gave a non-contributory pension of five shillings a week to persons over 70, and 7s. 6d. to married couples, provided income from other sources did not exceed 10s. a week. Where other income exceeded £31 10s. a year there was no entitlement to pension. The emotional excitement which it was possible to generate on account of the Act is a proof of how little the poor had come to expect of their rulers. Public meetings could be worked up to utter fervent cries of 'Thank God for Lloyd George!', and old ladies were reported to be

weeping tears of gratitude as they tottered to the post offices to draw their pensions. Lloyd George himself spoke of the Act thus in his Limehouse speech on July 1909:

It is rather hard that an old workman should have to find his way to the gates of the tomb, bleeding and footsore, through the brambles and thorns of poverty. We cut a new path through it, an easier one, a pleasanter one, through fields of waving corn. We are raising money to pay for the new road, aye, and to widen it so that two hundred thousand paupers shall be able to join in the march.

Yet, for all its inadequacy, the Act was as significant in the history of social legislation as the inadequate Reform Bill of 1832 had been in the history of affairs political. For the aged poor themselves it was indeed a milestone, since even this meagre pension might make it easier for them to avoid the grisly fate of final incarceration in the workhouse. Furthermore it was a major breach in the iron Victorian doctrine of ‘self-help’: the Conservative mind was greatly incensed by the non-contributory basis of the new pensions, seeing in them the first statutory admission that poverty could no longer be treated as the divinely-ordained consequence of a misspent life. They realized this was the beginning of the end of a social system based on the notion that the only way to keep the masses at work was the threat of starvation. When Rosebery said that the Old Age Pensions Act was so prodigal of expenditure that it was likely to undermine the whole fabric of the Empire he was not as wrong as he sounded.

It would be uncharitable to assume that the lack of comprehensive legislation following the Poor Law Report had particularly sinister causes. It was due rather to personalities. Asquith was the sort of Prime Minister who presided over the deliberations of his ministers; he was temperamentally averse from directing their activities on his own initiative. What could be done by Lloyd George at the Exchequer and by Winston Churchill at the Board of Trade was done; hence the establishment of the labour exchanges and the trade boards under Churchill and the introduction of health and unemployment insurance under Lloyd George. The failure to reorganize the Poor Law was due to the administrative feebleness of John Burns, the president of the Local Government Board. Although he expressed himself ready in 1907 to succeed Cromer in Egypt (which he said he would ‘rule like a Pharaoh’) he lacked the drive and authority required to override the unprogressive permanent officials with whom he had to deal in his particular department. A more dynamic Prime Minister would have seen to it that Burns got on with his job, or would have replaced him. Asquith did neither. There was in consequence little progress in the large field for which Burns was responsible—the Poor Law, housing and town planning and public health.

It was the formidable combination of Beveridge and Churchill, his political chief, which produced the labour exchanges, which were now to be staffed by civil servants. Their introduction was based on the recommendations of the Poor Law Commission and on the operations of the Conservative act of 1905. The available facts indicated that much unemployment was the unemployment of casual workers, and the labour exchange made it easier for such workers to find employment, since it tended to reduce time spent travelling in search of work, which in view of the low standard of living of casual workers was a drain on their energy, initiative and resources.

The Board of Trade also produced the Trade Boards Act of 1909. This set up Boards for the four trades in which, largely owing to the lack of trade unions, ‘sweated’ labour (i.e. long hours and extremely low wages) was found to be prevalent. The occupations concerned were tailoring and the manufacture of chains, lace and paper boxes. The Boards were to consist of representatives of employers and employed, together with a number of outsiders. They were to fix minimum wages, which then had to be confirmed by the Board of Trade. Here again was a significant departure from nineteenth-century principles, though it affected only a small section of industry. Once more, the action was not taken in response to theory; a social problem had

been discovered, its existence acknowledged, and an administrative solution worked out for it. As in the matter of pensions, a new principle had nevertheless been given statutory authority, and the State had declared itself for the employee and against the employer.

A year earlier, in 1908, there had been another break with the past. The Coal Mines Act had established a statutory eight-hour day for the miner; this was the first occasion on which the working hours of adult males had been limited by statute.

The Home Office, under Herbert Gladstone, had also been active. After twenty years' experience of a rudimentary system of probation for first offenders the Probation of Offenders Act of 1907 permitted the probation of all offenders; it led, therefore, to an extension of the probation system, though more slowly than was desirable since the Act was not mandatory. In 1908 the Home Office produced the Children's Act which gathered together a large number of regulations which the experience of many officials and social workers had shown to be desirable. For some time past the Home Office had recommended that cases involving children should be heard separately from those involving adults; the 1908 Act went beyond this and established Juvenile Courts. It was also on the basis of past experience, such as the activities of the N.S.P.C.C. and the working of a Children's Act passed by the Balfour administration in 1904, that there were new regulations concerning the employment of children, and others designed to protect them from fire and tobacco and liquor, and from the hazards of begging in the streets.

## Challenge to the Rule of Law, 1909–14

Meanwhile, the Government was compelled to conduct its major operations in the constricting atmosphere created by the Conservative threat from the Lords, and by growing industrial unrest. It was not these circumstances alone, however, which produced the controversial People's Budget of 1909. This Budget was remarkable not merely because it was concerned to raise money for social payments to the lower orders. It was also remarkable as the Budget of a Cabinet which had decided not to make what has since tended to become the normal choice that Cabinets make about budgets. Defence requirements necessitated the raising of large additional sums for the resumption of the full Dreadnought programme, which the Campbell-Bannerman Government had slowed down. At first, Churchill and Lloyd George had opposed this expenditure; but what emerged from their opposition was not a decision in favour of either defence or social reform, but a decision in favour of both. It was a budget which, because of its size, the Conservatives were bound to oppose; but in view of its declared purposes they could oppose it only by doing damage to their political reputation, for it would be easy to condemn them as rich men unwilling to contribute to the defence of their country or to the relief of poverty. From the point of view of the Liberals it had the further political advantage that provision for both Dreadnoughts and pensions would keep the Government united and the Labour Party at least grudgingly co-operative. It can hardly be imagined that Asquith expected the Opposition leaders would allow the Conservative peers to reject the budget, since this would be to violate a long-standing constitutional custom. It was a weakness of Asquith's to expect his opponents to have the same respect for the processes of law that he had himself; and, as for Lloyd George, it is difficult to believe that such a skilful politician could imagine other politicians, even Tory politicians, behaving quite so foolishly.

The Budget proposed to increase income tax from a shilling to is. 2d. in the pound and introduced super-tax at 6d. in the pound on incomes over £5,000 a year. Death duties on estates over £5,000 were increased. There were heavier taxes on tobacco and spirits, and the liquor licence duties were raised. There were to be special taxes on petrol and motor-car licences. Stamp duties were increased. There were to be a 20 per cent tax on the unearned increment of land values; a new tax to be paid by lessors when leases were terminated; and a tax on mining royalties. The only concession the Budget contained was the introduction into the tax system of children's allowances.

The Conservatives' objection to the Budget was that it was a 'class' Budget directed against the rich and particularly the landowner. Super-tax was not expected to produce more than half a million a year; but in conjunction with the increase in death duties they saw it, not without justification, as the introduction of a purely confiscatory principle in taxation. They objected to the land-value tax not merely because it involved a complete valuation of the land by Government officials but because, in combination with the taxes on lessors and on mining royalties, it looked like a deliberate tax on the landed interest. The tax on petrol and cars was likewise an attack on the wealthy since at this stage the motor-car was still principally a luxurious

toy for the rich;<sup>1</sup> the liquor taxes were a frontal attack on the brewing industry which since Gladstone's days had been an essentially Conservative pressure group. One last reason for Conservative objection was that if the Government succeeded in raising additional revenue by increased direct taxation it would nullify the claim of the Tariff Reformers that tariffs were a necessary source of revenue.

The Conservatives therefore launched a furious attack on the Budget not only in the Commons but in the country; and Lloyd George was quick to exploit the vulnerability of the position the Conservatives had now taken up. Their previous harassing of the Liberal Government had not been on issues which it was electorally worth while to challenge them. In opposing the Education Bill the Lords could claim to be protecting the Church. Their opposition to the Licensing and the Plural Voting Bills had been minor matters. But when, faced with the unavoidable fact that the Government's majority would get the Budget through the Commons, the Conservatives resolved to mobilize their majority in the Lords against it, they were plainly acting unconstitutionally. Moreover, their language exposed them to violent attacks which Lloyd George was only too ready to deliver. When peers of the realm were prepared to assert that a super-tax of 6d. in the pound and the various small land taxes would be the ruin of them, when they descended, as some of them did, to the pettifogging depths of withdrawing their subscriptions to village football clubs on the grounds that the Budget would disastrously diminish their fortunes, they were asking for the kind of language Lloyd George used in his Limehouse and other speeches, and in large measure deserving it. And if the Limehouse speech has tended to rank, if not rankle, in the minds of some as the moment when class warfare was overtly introduced into British political life, it is difficult to avoid insisting that it was the Conservatives rather than Lloyd George who must bear the responsibility. When he said, at Lime-house, 'We have not provoked the challenge, but we welcome it', he was probably representing his own and the Opposition's positions with more than his usual accuracy.

There were three reasons why the Conservative rejection of the Budget in the Lords was ill-advised. The Lords had not rejected a Budget for over two hundred years and their action could properly be regarded as having been made unconstitutional by the mere passage of time and by custom. The claim that the Lords were exercising the functions appropriate to a revising chamber when they rejected the Budget was without substance. It was not as a revising chamber that Balfour had either used or defined the Lords. Shortly after the 1906 election, he had asserted that the function of the Lords was to ensure that whoever won an election the ultimate destinies of the country would be in the hands of the Conservative Party. This was a clear indication that the Lords was a political weapon whose function was to serve Conservative Party ends. There are grounds for saying that majorities are often wrong; but this argument had no relevance to the House of Lords, since it had for nearly a century treated every majority as right if it happened to be Conservative and had invoked the theory of the fallibility of majorities only against Liberal majorities. Thus, when Lloyd George said that the House of Lords was 'not the watchdog of the constitution but Mr Balfour's poodle', he had stated the position precisely.

From the political point of view, the Conservatives' agitation against the Budget and their rejection of it in the Lords were a denial of the true principles of their party. Indeed, there are grounds for saying that, on the basis of the previous histories of the two major parties, the 1909 Budget was based on Conservative principles. It was certainly not a traditional Liberal Budget. Gladstone would have regarded it with horror. It violated almost all the principles upon which Liberals had previously conducted their fiscal policies. It

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<sup>1</sup> The character of Toad in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (published 1908) obviously derives from the popular Edwardian conception of the typical motorist as a reckless braggart with more money than sense and a total lack of consideration for ordinary folk with their 'common little carts'. The clouds of dust which Toad's various motors created are also a reminder of road conditions before the 1909 Budget set up the Road Fund for their improvement.

provided large sums for national defence, on which Liberals had in the past been reluctant to spend anything; and it was to provide large sums for social payments to the working classes on which Liberals in the past had hardly ever spent a penny. It had always been a Liberal principle not to interfere with the operation of economic laws and not to use public money to succour the victims of those laws. The classic Liberal statute of the nineteenth century was the Poor Law Amendment Act and the classic example of the Liberal response to destitution was the policy of Lord John Russell's administration towards the Great Famine in Ireland. Sir Charles Trevelyan was allowed to devote months and years of utterly devoted energy to the superhuman task of persuading himself, his political chiefs, and the Irish themselves, that even this vast natural calamity could be dealt with by arranging for the bankrupt, the starving and the dying to organize the distribution of food and money to themselves, more or less by themselves.

In asserting that the principles of the Budget were wrong the Tories were denying their own tradition. There was no future for the party if it now associated itself solely with landlord and employer against worker. It had been the essential link between Toryism and the expanding urban society of the nineteenth century that only the Tory Party had the strength, political and social, to counterbalance the influence of the employing class. This is the key to an understanding of the greatness of both Peel and Disraeli. It was the working people of the land to whom Peel had addressed his ultimate justification for his repeal of the Corn Laws. It was on the basis of working-class discontent with Liberal policies that Disraeli had recreated the party in the 1870's; and the 1909 Budget was the first in history resolutely to serve Disraeli's own principles of social reform and the Empire.

In allowing itself to abuse the constitution to protect the rich and to prevent the State taking action to help the poor, the Conservative Party was betraying itself, and in grave danger of handing over the working classes to its opponents. It may well be that its behaviour between 1909 and 1911 helped to make it so difficult for the Conservative Party to acquit itself of the charge of being 'the party of the rich'.

The third reason for describing the rejection of the Budget as misguided is the evidence of the election results of 1910. They show such a swing away from the Liberals that it is more than likely that if this Parliament had run its full term the Conservatives would have won the election due in 1912 or 1913.

The Budget did not pass through the Commons until November 1909 and in the same month the Lords rejected it. Asquith then asked for a dissolution, appealing to the country on the combined issues of the Budget and the reduction of the power of the Lords. The election results of January 1910 always surprise the student of this period, since the Liberals lost over one hundred seats. They now had 275 members, only two more than the Unionists. The Labour Party had lost over a dozen seats; the Irish Nationalists had 82 seats. There was, as a result, a majority of 124 against the Unionists; but the specific proposals of the Budget, which were the fundamental issues, and with which the Liberals and the Labour Party had been identified, had lost those parties a combined total of 114 seats. The Labour loss may be ascribed in part to the effects of the Osborne judgement; the Liberal losses to the apparent success of the Unionists in persuading the electorate that Liberalism had now become dangerously revolutionary.

The situation was thus embarrassing for the Liberals. They could now operate successfully only with the support of the Irish Nationalists; and the latter were determined on forcing the Government into an immediate attack on the Lords' veto so that the way could be cleared for the early introduction of a Home Rule Bill. The Government would have preferred to reform the Lords rather than leave it in its existing state as a major political weapon of the Conservatives, even though the weapon were to be blunted.

The Government now sent the Budget to the Lords once more; in view of its vindication by the electorate they let it through without a division. Asquith then prepared the Parliament Act. The problem was now to get it passed through the Lords. Precedent indicated that, as in the case of the 1832 Reform Bill, the Prime Minister would invoke on his behalf the power of the Crown to create peerages. The King would be asked

to announce his readiness to create sufficient Liberal peers to swamp the Conservative peers, in the confident hope that this threat would persuade the Conservatives to give way. Edward VII had in fact indicated in advance of the January 1910 election that he would not make this constitutional threat until there had been one more election on this specific issue of the Lords. Asquith suppressed this fact, partly because the constitutional propriety of the King's action was doubtful, and partly because Asquith no doubt hoped the situation would solve itself in due course. In the event, Edward VII died in May 1910, before the issue could be put to the test.

George V, soberly endowed with much down-to-earth common sense, had little liking for political dogfights and no desire to involve himself at the outset of his reign in an acute controversy which might compel his initial constitutional act to be one of apparent partisanship for the Liberals. He suggested a conference between the leaders of the two major parties; it met, but produced no agreement. The decisive obstacle turned out to be the question of Ireland. The Conservatives were unable to accept any solution which did not leave them free to block an Irish Home Rule Bill. To this the Liberals could not agree.

The conference thus foreshadowed the dreadful decade that lay ahead for Ireland. It foreshadowed also the long years during which Lloyd George was to be every other political extremist's greatest enemy: during the conference he mooted the idea of a coalition. It was typical of Lloyd George that, faced with a complicated political tangle, he itched to cut right through it; and that, confronted with a battle between opposing principles, he yearned to discard the principles and get something done.

Nevertheless, the fact that this conference came quite near to evolving satisfactory compromises over both Lords' reform and Home Rule indicates how unnecessary were the political conflicts which were carried on in public in these years. Britain was not well served by the party political system in these years.

The conference having failed, Asquith sent the Parliament Bill to the Lords; they rejected it. George V then repeated his father's request for a second general election before undertaking to the Prime Minister to threaten to use the Crown's power of creating peers. In accepting the King's request Asquith displayed that detached sense of fairness for which he was famous. He would have been within his rights in declining the King's request. The election took place in December 1910, with results closely similar to those of January. Liberals and Unionists each secured 272 seats, Labour and the Irish Nationalists each gained two seats, and there was now a slightly larger majority against the Unionists than at the beginning of the year. Nevertheless their success in holding their position in the Commons suggests that the electorate took a less censorious attitude both to their policy and their methods than the majority of subsequent historians.

The Unionists, having convinced so many voters that Asquith was planning the overthrow of the Constitution by reducing the Lords' power, continued to behave for the most part as if they had convinced themselves also. Asquith's Bill proposed that the Lords should have no further power over Bills certified as Money Bills by the Speaker and that over other legislation they should have only a two-year suspensive veto. To cope with the hypothetical argument that in its last years of office a popularly elected Government might seek to act against the wishes of those who had elected it, the Bill also reduced the maximum interval between general elections from seven years to five. The Bill thus left the Lords with the power to reduce to a mere three years the effective legislative life of any Government it disliked. In the last two of its five years of office, such a Government could pass no legislation of which the Lords disapproved. This, coupled with the absence of any scheme for reforming the composition of the Lords, meant that the Unionists could still make considerable use of the upper house to thwart the electorate whenever it decided to deny the party a majority in the Commons. Nevertheless, only at a very late stage did there emerge a group of Unionists in favour of giving way. When Asquith announced in the Commons that the King had intimated in writing his willingness to create peers if the Tory Lords rejected the Bill he was deliberately howled down. The uproar was instigated by one of the great Lord Salisbury's sons, Lord Hugh Cecil. There was then, for a brief space,

talk of a vote of censure on the King for having the temerity to support the declared wishes of the majority of his subjects against those of the hereditary aristocracy. In July 1911, however, the crisis was resolved. When the Bill went to the Lords, 29 unionists peers voted with the Government. It passed by only 17 votes in a division in which 245 peers cast votes. As a prominent Anglican layman, Lord Hugh Cecil must have been chagrined to observe that both the archbishops, and all but two of the bishops present, voted for the Government.

The failure of the Unionists to prevent the passage of the 1909 Budget and the Parliament Act led to Balfour's resignation from the leadership of his party in November 1911. His rejection by his party was not undeserved. He had, ever since Chamberlain's Tariff Reform campaign, followed rather than led the party. He had made little effort to restrain the wild men, and had allowed too much influence to pass into the hands of Lord Lansdowne, the Unionist leader in the Lords. Yet in the final outcome he had had to summon his party to retreat; and after leading it to defeat in three successive elections. He was replaced by Bonar Law, a Scottish Presbyterian who had been born in Canada. The party had been sharply divided between the two obvious claimants to the succession, Walter Long and Austen Chamberlain. When it became apparent that the supporters of neither would reconcile themselves to the leadership of the other, they fell back on Bonar Law for the uninspiring reason that his leadership would divide the party least. To a much greater extent than Balfour, Bonar Law was a follower rather than a leader. His sole advantage over Balfour was that he was a convinced Tariff Reformer and would not therefore embarrass the party as Balfour had done by having medieval disputations with himself on the subject in public. His lack of intellectual pretensions also made him an acceptable leader to the Unionists at this particular time, though hardly a statesmanlike one. A natural second fiddle, he followed Carson's lead over Home Rule from 1912 to 1914, subordinated himself to Lloyd George for most of the war and was finally pushed into the premiership by Lord Beaverbrook and by Baldwin.

The other important social legislation of the Liberal administration included the National Insurance Act of 1911, the Shops Act of 1911 and the Trade Union Act of 1913. The Shops Act, while evading the question of the daily working hours of shop assistants, gave them a statutory half-holiday. The Trade Union Act treated the demands of the unions less uncritically than the act of 1906. It made the political levy legal only after the holding of a ballot and subject to the right of an individual member to contract out in writing.

The National Insurance Act was the most important piece of Liberal legislation, since it established the basis on which most welfare payments were financed thereafter. By the health insurance part of the Act, workers earning up to £160 were to be insured compulsorily against sickness. The worker contributed 4d. a week, the employer 3d. and the State 2d. The benefits were sick pay at 10s. a week, and free medical treatment under a 'panel' doctor. The unemployment part of the act applied to eight major trades in which unemployment was endemic, and was similarly financed by contributions paid by worker, employer and State. It provided 7s. a week unemployment pay for fifteen weeks in any one year.

It is a curiosity of twentieth-century history that, because this Act laid the foundation of a system of welfare which reached its fulfilment in the Labour legislation of 1945–50, it is therefore regarded as a piece of Socialist legislation, the first step in a vast, not to say hazardous, social revolution. Yet the whole purpose of the National Insurance Act was anti-Socialist. State insurance against sickness and unemployment was invented by Bismarck, to take the sting out of Socialist agitation in the Kaiser's Reich and was imitated by Lloyd George for the same purpose in 1911. The 1911 Act, whatever benefits it may have conferred on the working classes, and however important it may be as a pointer to later developments, was an astute politician's bid to meet the menace of Socialism in Britain by using methods first used by Europe's most ruthless opponent both of Socialism and of Liberalism. That the importation into English social life of methods devised by Bismarck should be held to have initiated a beneficent revolution testifies either to the

obtuseness of the public mind or to the extreme political cunning of the man who put it on the statute book. Like anything copied from Bismarck, the most successful political confidence trickster of the nineteenth century, the National Insurance Act was also a confidence trick. The opposition of the Unionist peers to the Act, which (with more justice than they imagined) they described as a form of confiscation of working-class earnings, induced Lloyd George to publicize health insurance as a matter of the worker getting 'ninepence for fourpence'. The truth was that the worker contributed towards his benefits not only through his fourpence a week but also through general taxation. In effect, healthy and employed workers were being forced to subsidize sick and unemployed workers. The total financial contribution made by the Government in 1913 to the cost of pensions, sickness and unemployment insurance and to the labour exchanges, taken altogether, represented one per cent of the national income; and this at a time when the real wages of the working class were less than they had been in the last years of the nineteenth century.

The only specifically English innovation in the scheme (the device of insurance cards was copied from Germany) was the use of what were called 'approved societies' for the actual administration of the scheme and the physical distribution of the appropriate benefits. Approved societies could be working men's friendly societies, trade unions or commercial insurance companies. This was both astute and salutary. It was astute because trade unions and friendly societies gained increased membership and new status as a consequence of the service they were providing as Government agents. It was also a means of bringing in new business to the insurance companies and silenced any objections they might have had to the Government's entry into their business. It was salutary in that it preserved some limitation upon the scheme's tendency to bind the working-class population more closely to the State. The interposition of his approved society between the worker and the State did a little to preserve working-class independence. The disappearance of the approved society in favour of a tidily centralized National Insurance Ministry with the passing of the 1946 Insurance Act was a contraction of an important area of social and industrial democracy.

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With the active encouragement of the Unionists, who, now that the Parliament Act prevented them rejecting the Insurance Act, were more determined than ever to oppose for the sake of opposing, the medical profession raised its own noisy objections to the scheme on the grounds that they were in danger of becoming bureaucratized. In fact the doctors did well out of it, and the guaranteed annual flat-rate fee they received in respect of each insured patient on their 'panel' provided many of them for the first time with a steady annual income. Thus the scheme was, as a political manœuvre, a masterpiece. It took the sting out of Socialism to the extent that it was supported by most trade union leaders and most of the Labour Party. It bought off the insurance companies; it bought off the doctors. It created for its initiator and his party a reputation for beneficent social innovation; it contributed something of unquestioned value, though of minimal proportion, to the solution of a major human and industrial problem; it hoodwinked its anti-Socialist opponents and even more remarkably the Socialists themselves into thinking that Socialism was almost synonymous in practice with an increase in State insurance; and it successfully disguised from the recipients of health and unemployment benefit how small a proportion of it came from the wealthy and how much of it came ultimately out of the pockets of their fellow-workers. Instead of the expropriation of the expropriators demanded by Marx, they got instead something very like the further expropriation of the expropriated; and remained convinced all the same that the process was something which though thoroughly English (this was false too) was also Socialism.

It is paradoxical that for all the solidity of this Government's achievements when seen in the perspective of the succeeding half-century, the more immediate impression of the last four or five years of its peacetime life is of men faced with demands they could or would not satisfy, and forces they did not know how to control. From 1909 onwards there was, contemporaneously with the creation of a considerable bureaucratic machine

for the increase of social security, a growing lack of faith in the whole parliamentary system. This was expressed in outbursts of unconstitutional violence by militant suffragettes, by militant trade unionists and by the opponents of the Home Rule Bill for Ireland which the Government introduced in 1912.

It is commonplace that Asquith did not have the stomach for directing the affairs of a nation at war. His dealings with the suffragette movement, with the great strike wave and with the English and Ulster Unionists suggest a lack of capacity for coping even with peacetime crises. Asquith adhered massively, sluggishly, marmoreally, to the classic nineteenth-century tradition that progress should emerge only out of the slow processes of political education and persuasion, and that no new interests or classes should be given legal or political enfranchisement until it was certain that this would harmonize with the protection of interests already entrenched. Worse still, he believed that everybody else had his own calm ponderous faith that change need move only at the majestic pace of a minimally mobile glacier. He believed that the Liberal principle of government based on consent had won universal acceptance, and that dissenting minorities would in the end always accept decisions from which they dissented, provided only that the decisions were those of an electorally sanctified majority. It is this attitude of mind that makes Asquith's political behaviour in these years reminiscent of Louis Philippe at his most smug and of Guizot at his most remotely magisterial.

All three challenges to the constitutional Government came from the passionate depths: they were an irrational response to unreasonable circumstances, all of them in some measure attributable to the Government itself. It was unreasonable that women should not have the vote. It was unreasonable that as industry's profits grew in these years, the real wages of the working class should go down. It was unreasonable that Ulstermen should be forced against their will to cease to be full citizens of the United Kingdom. To all three problems the Government had no constructive answer. The women were to be fobbed off; the trade unionists could be ignored because their political and industrial leaders were in political servitude to the Liberals' parliamentary majority; Ulstermen's clamour could be ignored until they should agree at last to see what Asquith saw from the beginning, that it was being exploited for party political ends by a Unionist Party at Westminster desperate in its search for a means to destroy the Government. The consequence was that the Liberals themselves helped to induce the violence displayed by their opponents and then found that they, on their side, were committed to the use of counter-violence. It is this circumstance which, coupled with the collectivist character of so much of their legislation, makes it possible to say that the Liberals had by 1914 long ceased to practise Liberal policies.

The most violent of the Government's enemies were the middle-class women who wanted the vote; and their violence could have been avoided altogether by the simple process of giving them what they wanted. The really militant phase of the suffragette movement did not begin until after the Liberals had come into power and the formidable Mrs Pankhurst put in a position to exploit the situation created by the Government's evasions. There is little excuse for the failure to grant the suffrage; and there is less for the way in which the Government sustained its refusal. Women, imprisoned for their violent acts against property and public order, would then go on hunger strike. They were thereupon forcibly fed. An alternative device was the Cat and Mouse Act of 1913 by which suffragette hunger-strikers were released from prison in order to recover their health, whereupon they would be re-imprisoned. The attitude of the Government to middle-class Englishwomen demanding the right to vote, and reacting with violence to the Government's provocative and pointless delay, provides a sinister comment on the persistent Liberal claim to stand for a higher morality than other political parties. The Cat and Mouse Act came strangely from a Government

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<sup>1</sup> See page 443.

which a few years before had been grieved so sorely by the hardships suffered by Boer women and children, and by Chinese coolies in the Transvaal.

The other and more significant outburst of violence for which the Government similarly had no constructive policy was the movement within the trade unions usually described as Syndicalism. Syndicalism was copied from the methods advocated by French trade unions and by the programme of the Industrial Workers of the World organized in the United States; though its aims would not have seemed altogether strange to Robert Owen. To Syndicalists, strikes were not a means of improving working conditions or a last-ditch sanction against employers, but an offensive weapon to be used as often as possible to disrupt the national life and eventually overthrow the existing order of society. It was Syndicalism which brought into this country the idea of a 'sympathetic' or general strike, by which the whole trade union movement would, at need, be mobilized to coerce Government and employers by an unshakeable display of working-class solidarity. The most celebrated names in the movement at the time were Tom Mann, famous as one of the organizers of the London Dock Strike of 1889 and first secretary of the Independent Labour Party, and A.J. Cook, later more celebrated as the spokesman for the mineworkers during the General Strike. The Syndicalists were encouraged by the setting up of a Marxist educational organization in 1909 called the Central Labour College; there was an Industrial Syndicalist Education League from 1910 onwards; and from 1912 there was a revolutionary workers' newspaper, the *Daily Herald*. The number of active Syndicalists within the trade union movement was at all times small but they were important because of their energy; many of them formed the nucleus of the Communist Party of Great Britain when it was formed in 1920.

The growth of Syndicalism, like that of the militant suffragette movement, was partly a consequence of the dilatory inefficiency of those whose responsibility it was to advance trade union interests by properly constituted means. The trade union movement was incapable of decision-making on a broad front because of the multiplicity of unions and the petty rivalries between them; and the Labour Party had neither policy nor effective personalities. The Government similarly had a responsibility, from 1909 onwards, to rectify the apparent bias of the legal system against the unions revealed by the Osborne judgement. It was not till 1913 that they did so. The interim saw a wave of strikes, often caused less by specific grievances than by angry frustration at the absence of any other means of making an effective impression.

The strike wave began in the summer of 1910. There was a four-day railway strike in the north-east in July; in September there was a strike in the cotton industry in Lancashire involving 120,000 workers, and then a fourteen-week lock-out of boilermakers; in all these cases it was clear that the strikers were hardly less hostile to their official union leaders than they were to their employers. In November 1910, a local mining dispute produced a three-day riot in Tonypany as a result of which troops were sent from Salisbury Plain. Churchill, now Home Secretary, was not forgiven by the miners for allowing the troops to be used; and severely criticized in other quarters for delaying their dispatch while he waited to see the effect of a personal appeal to the miners to cease their violence. In June 1911, the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union called an official strike which rapidly spread to all the ports and was supported by unofficial action by other dockworkers when there was an attempt to use black-leg labour. The strike was successful in securing wage increases and was quickly followed by a widespread dock strike, made the more effective by the establishment, in the previous year, of a large new industrial union, the Transport Workers' Federation. At Liverpool, workers in all forms of transport came out, the city was in a state of siege, troops were called in, and two men were killed. The situation led the four railway unions to call a national railway strike. Though not universal it was disorganizing enough, and once again there were clashes between strikers and troops, with fatal casualties. Asquith tried to deal with the strike by appointing a Royal Commission and by strongly asserting the Government's determination to prevent the paralysis of the railway system. This did

not improve matters; and he soon allowed negotiations to take place under the emollient care of Lloyd George, whose first step was to secure the co-operation of Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour Party leader. The strike was ended after four days. By the end of the year, a more effective system of consultation was worked out, though the railway companies were still not prepared to give full recognition to the railway unions.

The struggle was resumed by the miners, who early in 1912 adopted the Syndicalist tactic of voting in favour of a national coal strike to force the Government to establish a national minimum wage. A Government compromise was wrecked by the intransigence of both the Miners' Federation and some of the owners, and for the first three weeks of March 1912 a million miners presented the country with the largest strike it had ever seen. The Government ended the matter by forcing its pre-strike compromise through Commons and Lords despite strong Unionist Opposition; and the Miners' Federation grudgingly called the strike off.

Two months later, in May 1912, 100,000 London dockers came out over a relatively trivial matter, though they had been greatly provoked by the aggressively anti-trade-union attitude of Lord Devonport, the chairman of the Port of London Authority. The strike was defeated owing to the failure of transport workers outside London to support it with a national strike, and because Lord Devonport was vigorously determined not to give way, even though Asquith wanted him to. It was noticeable that the powerful railway union leader, J.H.Thomas, came out publicly against the London strike; this was not to be the last occasion on which he braved the wrath of the extremists in the movement.

It was the coming of the war and not an improvement in the situation itself which accounts for the fact that this unsuccessful London Dock Strike marks the end of this period of extreme unrest. It was resumed on much the same lines in 1919 and continued until the General Strike of 1926. Indeed, during the last two years of peace, the unskilled workers were girding themselves for a renewal of battle at the earliest moment. In 1912, the National Union of Railwaymen was formed, by the fusion of the large Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants and the smaller General Railway Workers' Union and the United Signalmen and Pointsmen. It is significant of the character of this new industrial union that the Amalgamated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen, and the Railway Clerks' Association, held aloof from it. The appearance of the N.U.R. clearly signalled a new phase in the militancy of the less skilled workers. Its membership doubled within eighteen months of the fusion. In 1914 came an even more ominous development, the formation of the Triple Industrial Alliance between the N.U.R., the Transport Workers' Federation (which had been behind the 1912 London Dock Strike) and the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. The object of the Triple Alliance was to coerce employers and Government by the threat that if any one of them was involved in a dispute the other two would concert a sympathetic strike in its support. It was thought that the Triple Alliance would bring about such a strike before the end of 1914.

Thus, by the time war began, the country had seen what looked like the culmination of that revolt by the unskilled workers against the rest of society which had begun with the London Dock Strike of 1889. There is no doubt that, had the issue been put to the test, the Asquith Government would have found it extremely difficult to deal with. A situation would have developed not unlike that which was simultaneously threatening to develop in Ireland; and the Government would have been hard put to it to avoid clashes with the industrial workers not greatly less bloody than those which actually developed in Ireland between 1920 and 1922.

It was Irish Home Rule which occupied the first place in the Government's mind from 1912 onwards. The problem was once again that traditional policies of temporizing delay had been outpaced by events. English procrastination and the declining vigour of the Irish Nationalist Party had led to the growth of the Sinn Fein movement, which was beginning to agitate for an independent republic for the whole of Ireland.

The long interval since the earlier Home Rule Bills had led also to the full development in Ulster of a strong sense of its economic and religious separateness from the south. Thus, although by 1912 a Home Rule Bill was for the first time a political possibility, it was already ceasing to be regarded by Irishmen themselves as a desirable solution. It did not go far enough for the South; and the North did not want it at all.

Asquith was once again caught between an upper and a nether millstone. The support of the Irish Nationalists had seen the People's Budget through the Commons; and the passage of the Parliament Act (which had also depended on their vote) had removed the power of the Lords to prevent the passage of a Home Rule Bill. But the very disappearance of this traditional obstacle to Home Rule enabled the Unionists to represent him as abusing the powers he had been at such pains to secure, for the shameful purpose of destroying the United Kingdom with Irish votes, and of subjecting the Crown's loyal Protestant subjects in Ulster to the alien rule of disloyal Catholics in Dublin. Having, despite all their efforts in 1909–10, now lost three General Elections in a row the Unionists were desperately anxious not to lose a fourth; and they set out to exploit Ulster's genuine grievance less out of regard for the susceptibilities of Ulstermen than with the object of discrediting the Liberal Government. In any case, the Unionists were now, as always, primarily interested, not in keeping Belfast Protestant, but in keeping Dublin subject to Westminster.

It was fairly easy to represent the Liberals as in the wrong over Ulster. It could be claimed with justice that Home Rule had no support among Ulstermen; yet the Parliament Act deprived them, and their Unionist champions in Parliament, of any legal means of opposing a Bill which sought to expel them from the United Kingdom against their will. In organizing the Ulster Volunteers to resist the operation of Home Rule by armed force, Sir Edward Carson, an eminent lawyer and a leading Unionist M.P., could rightly be described as reckless, dangerous and unconstitutional. Bonar Law's public support for the Volunteers was a revolutionary departure for one who, as Leader of the Opposition, was therefore an alternative Prime Minister. Yet they could always claim that the passing of the Parliament Act by the Liberals had improperly deprived them of the power to resist Home Rule by constitutional means.

It was because he saw through all this that Asquith's only memorable public contribution to the affair until the spring of 1914 was to utter the grimly minatory but ultimately discrediting words, 'Wait and See'. He knew that the real issue at Westminster was not Ulster, and that the Unionists were trying to bluff him out of his Home Rule policy and, if possible, out of office. He behaved all along like a man supremely confident that he was dealing with opponents who must know in their hearts that he had seen through their bluff and that it could not therefore succeed. It was all part of the political game; and he reckoned himself a more capable operator than the slow-minded Bonar Law and the theatrical but superficial Carson.

Exploiting the situation by highly provocative speeches, and parades and drillings of the Ulster Volunteers, the Unionists went on to urge the King to dismiss Asquith and dissolve Parliament. Alarmed, as was his wont, by any suggestion of civil disturbance, George V told Asquith he thought there should be yet another election before the Home Rule Bill was put on the statute book. Asquith replied firmly that this would create the impression that the Parliament Act was so much waste paper. There was then Unionist talk of obstructing the passage of the Army Act; this would deprive the Government of the right to have an army with which to enforce Home Rule. Meanwhile, arms were being imported into both Ulster and the South of Ireland; an indication that there was an increasing likelihood that the political shadow-fight in London might produce a shooting war in Ireland.

The Unionists, most spectacular success was to secure the support of important elements in the army. Lord Roberts, the darling of the public and the hero of Kandahar and of the Boer War, as well as Sir Henry Wilson, the Director of Military Operations at the War Office, were active partisans of Ulster; and Wilson, though a servant of the Government, was in constant communication with Bonar Law. Awareness of this, together with the fear that the Ulster Volunteers might seize arms depots in Ulster, led to plans to move

additional troops from the south of Ireland and from England in order to protect them. In addition, Churchill, now First Lord of the Admiralty, moved destroyers into the Irish Channel; and declared, in a typically pugnacious speech at Bradford on 16 March 1914, that if there were threats to resist the operation of an Act of Parliament by force, the time had come to ‘put these grave matters to the proof’.

The immediate response was a dramatic demonstration in the Commons by Carson, intended to convey the (false) impression that he was about to leave immediately to organize a military *coup* in Ulster. This was followed by the so-called Curragh Mutiny. Sir Arthur Paget, Commander-in-Chief in Ireland, caused it to be known to the officers stationed at the Curragh, near Dublin (where the army in Ireland had its headquarters), that Ulster-born officers might ‘disappear’, and that other officers might resign, if ordered north against Ulster. Paget had no authority from Seely, the Secretary for War, to make a public announcement to this effect. All he had obtained from the War Office (though this was bad enough) was an informal agreement that Ulster-born officers could be excused from taking part in operations in Ulster; and that any other officers who raised objections would be ‘removed’ but not court-martialled. As a result of Paget’s evidently improper methods of procedure at the Curragh something like three score senior officers indicated that they would prefer resignation and consequent dismissal rather than act against Ulster.

The news of what was not technically a mutiny, but could hardly be distinguished from one, caused an immediate outcry against the Unionist Party. To be accused of undermining the loyalty of the army was the last thing they desired. Unfortunately, the tale of administrative and indeed political inefficiency was not yet over. The offending officers were summoned to the War Office, but allowed to extract from Sir John French, then C.I.G.S., and from the Secretary for War, a promise that, in return for the withdrawal of the officers’ resignations, the Government would not use the army in Ireland to enforce Home Rule on Ulster. In order to put this right, Asquith had to force the resignations of the Secretary for War and Sir John French; he then took over the War Office himself in a grand gesture designed to restore confidence.

The Curragh affair reflected little credit on the Unionists, whose inflammatory behaviour had helped so much to create the disloyalty that Paget’s incompetence had startlingly uncovered. It cast considerable doubts on the intelligence not only of Paget but of Sir John French and of those who gave Paget permission to take any action of any kind favourable to senior officers who did not want to obey orders; and it confirms that Asquith’s handling of his Cabinet’s affairs was liable to be inefficient. The slovenliness in the highest places of Government was all the more alarming in view of the imminence of the war. Its immediate effect, by no means entirely eliminated by Asquith’s assumption of the War Office, was to make the risk that the Home Rule affair would issue in violence seem much more likely.

The situation was worsened a month later by the Larne Gun-Running, when the Ulster Volunteers smuggled in, despite the official ban Asquith had at last imposed, 30,000 rifles and three million rounds of ammunition. The result was an immediate rush to join the ranks of the National Volunteers which had been formed as a counter-measure in the south. But when, in July, a similar smuggling operation to that in the north was attempted near Dublin, the army and the police interfered; three Irish were killed and nearly twenty others seriously injured. The contrast between this and the lack of interference with the Larne Gun-Running was one which Dubliners were not soon to forget.

All this time, Asquith had been quietly conducting behind the scenes what he considered the only real battle, the political war of manoeuvre. From the start, the Cabinet had held itself in readiness to exclude Ulster from Home Rule if opinion there seemed to make it unavoidable. In a sense, therefore, the Unionists, by whipping up feeling against the Bill in Ulster, were playing Asquith’s game for him. In order to compel the Irish Nationalists to agree to Ulster’s exclusion he may almost be said to have needed the grim spectre of civil war; and this was duly conjured up for him by the Unionist agitation. On the other hand, since the Unionists claimed that Ulster was their chief concern, the decision to exclude Ulster would abruptly remove

their whole platform from underneath their feet. Asquith's dilatoriness between 1912 and 1914 was certainly complacent; but it was also calculated. It was an exercise of what, writing about himself, he described as his

rather specialised faculty of insight and manipulation in dealing with diversities of character and temperament<sup>1</sup>

In great secrecy, various consultations took place between Asquith and the political opponents who so loudly abused him in public. Unfortunately, the Unionists would not easily give way over Ulster, since they would then have no stick with which to beat Asquith. Hence, by the time the last meeting on the subject took place, at Buckingham Palace in June 1914, no decision could be reached because the Unionists insisted that Ulster's exclusion could not be considered unless Ulster was held to include the counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone, fifty per cent of whose population was Catholic. The Conference bogged down in the problem of whether or not these two counties could be partitioned. Thus, Asquith had finally succeeded in compelling the Unionists, including Carson, to accept that the fundamental issue was not, after all, Home Rule, but Ulster; but a peaceful solution was probably even further away in the summer of 1914 than it had been in 1912. He had used tactics in the interim as devious as any of those later used by Lloyd George when Prime Minister; and it was an ill omen for Asquith's performance as Prime Minister in wartime that he had become so certain that great issues that passionately divided nations and cultures could be adequately handled by the acquired skills of a master of political manipulation and of strategic procrastination. Nor was it valuable training for the problems of wartime to have spent, by 1914, almost five years in continuous political shadow-fighting against opponents most of whose threats had been entirely unreal.

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<sup>1</sup> R.Jenkins, *Asquith*, p. 336.