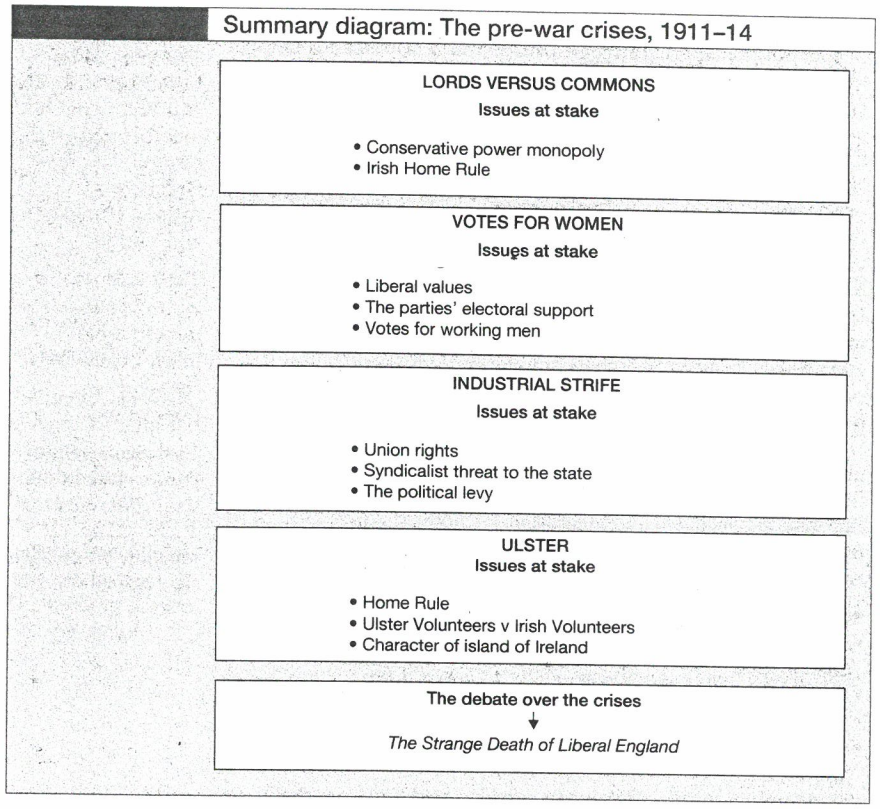
- Although the Conservatives made electoral gains in the south of the country, the Liberals maintained their traditional support in the industrial and working-class regions.
- The Labour party had made no serious inroads into the traditional Liberal strongholds.

It is the resurgence of the Liberal Party in this period that has been strongly emphasised by political historians Peter Clarke and Ross McKibbin. It is true that the Labour Party had grown in membership in the country at large, mainly through trade union affiliation. Yet, on its own admission, it had been only a marginal political influence before 1914. Clarke suggests that the Labour Party had begun to see its future role not so much as a separate radical force, but as a part of a Liberal–Labour 'progressive' movement.

All this tends to indicate that the problems of pre-1914 Britain were not proof of the failure of Liberal policies between 1905 and 1914. The decline of the Liberals as a political party had more to do with the impact of the Great War and the political realignment that it caused (see page 63).

Some key books in the debate:

Paul Adelman, *The Decline of the Liberal Party* (Longmans, 1995)
Peter Clarke, *A Question of Leadership: From Gladstone to Thatcher* (Penguin, 1991)
George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (Paladin, 1970)
Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party* (OUP, 1974)
David Powell, *The Edwardian Crisis, Britain 1901–1914* (Macmillan, 1996)
Alan Sykes, *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism, 1776–1988* (Longmans, 1997)
Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party* (Fontana, 1966)



Key question
How did the war affect the development of British politics?

2 | The Politics of Britain at War, 1914–18

Table 2.3: Wartime governments

August 1914–May 1915	Asquith's Liberal government
May 1915–December 1916	Asquith's Coalition government
December 1916–November 1918	Lloyd George's Coalition government

Key dates
Britain declared war on Germany: August 1914
First World War: 1914–18

The 1914–18 war had profound effects on British politics in general and the Liberal Party in particular. So protracted and so draining was the **Allied struggle** against Germany that it became a **total war**, which necessitated an unprecedented extension of State authority. Notions of individual freedom and limited government

meant little in the face of the State's claim to direct the lives of its people in the desperate struggle for survival. The demands of total war created a great challenge to Liberal values. The principles of personal freedom, peace and retrenchment were impossible to preserve uncompromised in wartime. The economic free-trade, non-interventionist theories that Liberals had held now seemed largely irrelevant.

Initially, the Liberals had been uncertain about whether to fight Germany but, once they had accepted the necessity of going to war, they had to adjust their political values to it. The powerful anti-war feelings expressed at the time of the Boer War (see page 9) now had to give way to the spirit of patriotism necessary to sustain the war effort. Rationing, conscription and the extension of State authority in many areas of the economy were responses to the needs of waging total war. Survival, not political theorising, was the prime objective.

The Liberal dilemma was expressed in the very first measure necessitated by the war. In August 1914, parliament rushed through the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), which granted the State and its agencies extensive powers over the lives of ordinary citizens. DORA was regularly re-enacted during the war. Among the powers it granted were:

- government control of arms factories
- censorship of the press and restriction of freedom of information
- duties on imports
- government control of the rail and coal industries
- Ministry of Munitions set up to direct wartime industrial production
- trade unions granted greater recognition and higher wages in return for their agreement to aid the war effort by not striking
- companies required to accept restrictions on their profits and guarantee minimum wages to workers
- measures introduced to improve living standards and control rents in order to lessen social unrest
- conscription introduced, obliging males between 18 and 41 to serve in the armed forces
- food rationing imposed
- restrictions placed on the opening hours of public houses
- passports required for travel abroad
- limitations placed on freedom of movement within Britain.

The pacifist element among the Liberals had hoped that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lloyd George, renowned for his vehement denunciation of the Boer War, might lead an anti-war faction in the party or even in the Government. He soon disappointed them. He had had qualms about entering the war, but once Britain was involved, his commitment to it was total. One remarkable feature was that the political truce, which the parties agreed to for the duration of the war, allowed Lloyd George to develop his ideas of **consensus politics**. He was an advocate of

Key terms

Allied struggle
The main Allies were France, Russia and Britain fighting together against the Central Powers – Germany, Austria–Hungary and Turkey.

Total war
A struggle that directly and indirectly involves the whole population.

Consensus politics
Parties suspending their differences and working together on policies they agreed on.

Key date

Parties agreed to a political truce: August 1914

Key terms

Temperance
Opposition to the taking of alcoholic drink.

Shell crisis
Since much of the war on the Western Front took the form of artillery barrages, a constant supply of shells was vital. In 1915 supply was falling short of need.

Gallipoli Campaign
In April 1915 an attempt was made to knock out Germany's ally, Turkey, by an Allied landing in Gallipoli in southern Turkey. The landing proved a bloody failure.

inter-party co-operation and from the beginning of the war strongly urged Asquith to consider broadening the basis of the Government.

Lloyd George as wartime chancellor

The outbreak of war in August 1914 brought no immediate change in the structure of the Government, but, as it became increasingly clear that the war was going to last much longer than originally thought, the pressure for change mounted. Asquith was as patriotic as the next man, but his calm demeanour and refusal to be panicked into rash action (attributes which had proved highly effective during the pre-war domestic crises) now suggested a lack of dynamism.

In contrast, Lloyd George's bustling energy seemed ideally suited to wartime needs. His two wartime budgets in 1914 and 1915 doubled income tax and greatly increased government expenditure. Gone was the restraint he had shown in pre-1914 budgets when he had tried to keep defence expenditure to a minimum. Lloyd George's wartime measures raised income tax from 6d (2½p) to 6s (30p) in the pound and introduced super-tax on annual incomes over £2,500. Alcohol and tobacco were also taxed and Lloyd George aroused widespread unpopularity by his introduction of licensing laws, which severely restricted the opening hours of public houses. He sincerely believed that the drinking habits of the British workers lowered production and weakened the war effort. In a characteristic statement, which recalled the Welsh **temperance** background of his youth, he declared: 'This country is facing three enemies – Germany, Austria and drink – and the deadliest of these is drink!'

Key question
Why was a coalition formed in 1915?

The Asquith coalition, 1915–16

The implicit understanding among the political parties who had agreed to a political truce in 1914 was that Asquith's Government would conduct the war in a way that was acceptable to them all. By May 1915, however, serious criticism had begun to be made of Asquith's performance as war leader. As might be expected, the strongest objections came from the Conservatives who, unlike the Labour and Irish parties, had never had any doubts about the rightness of Britain's going to war. The **shell crisis** and the failure of the **Gallipoli Campaign** (1915–16) were the main pretexts for the Conservative demand for a Government shake-up. Asquith gave way before the pressure and accepted that the seriousness of the war situation necessitated the formation of a coalition government. Bonar Law, Balfour and Carson were among the leading Conservatives who received government posts. The Labour Party was represented by Arthur Henderson at the Board of Education.

From Lloyd George's point of view, the formation of the Coalition was welcome in that it provided the opportunity to advance the principle of centre politics. From 1914 he had encouraged Asquith to use the truce agreed between the parties as a means of widening the political base of the Government.

Key dates

Coalition government formed under Asquith: May 1915

Unsuccessful Gallipoli Campaign: 1915–16

Lloyd George acted as something of a political broker after 1914. It was he rather than Asquith whom Bonar Law approached in 1915 when considering the prospect of coalition. Lloyd George's pre-1914 record helped in this respect. At the time of the impasse over the Lords, he had unofficially discussed the possibility of a coalition with the Conservatives. Although this came to nothing at the time, it did indicate that he took the idea of inter-party dealings seriously.

Benefits for the Conservatives

Key question
Why were the Conservatives eager for a coalition, but many Liberals opposed to it?

The prospect of a coalition was especially attractive to Bonar Law. It offered his party a return to government office after ten frustratingly powerless years; this without the necessity of a general election which should have occurred in 1915, but which the Conservatives judged they had little hope of winning. In marked contrast to Conservative elation was the depression that the Coalition created in many Liberals. They felt the party had compromised its principles by allowing the Conservatives back into office, albeit only in minor positions at first. Moreover, as some Liberals saw it, the Coalition was really a face-saving exercise for Asquith, a way of hiding how badly the war effort was going under his uninspiring direction.

Table 2.4: Party composition of the Coalition Cabinet in May 1915

Liberals	28
Conservatives	10
Labour	1

Lloyd George at the Ministry of Munitions

Key question
What was Lloyd George's new contribution to the war effort?

In the ministerial reshuffle that accompanied the formation of the Coalition, Lloyd George moved from the Exchequer to head the newly created Ministry of Munitions. He was able to make the Ministry a model of what could be achieved when a government department was inspiringly led. His essential aim was to produce more shells, the chief reason for the mounting criticism of Asquith's handling of the war.

Lloyd George, ably served by his departmental officials and by a series of experts he drew from outside politics, had outstanding success in increasing the production of armaments. One particular statistic shows this:

- when the war began the army possessed 1,330 machine guns
- by the time it ended it had 250,000.

Furthermore, by 1918, the supply of shells had begun to exceed demand. Lloyd George ascribed this success to the fact that the Ministry was 'from first to last a business-man organisation'. His use of experts from the areas of industrial production and supply was a step towards his concept of a government of national efficiency, drawing from a pool of the best talents and subordinating party politics to the needs of the nation.

Key date
Conscription introduced: January 1916

Conscription

As 1915 wore on, it became clear the war was to be a long one, requiring vast resources in manpower. This meant that the existing system of voluntary enlistment would not be able to keep the army up to strength. Something approaching a national campaign, led principally by the Conservatives, had developed by the autumn; it demanded that in the hour of the nation's need able-bodied men should be compulsorily called up for military service.

Knowing how unacceptable this would be to many in his party, Asquith tried to avoid the issue by suggesting various alternatives short of conscription, but eventually he bowed to pressure and supported the **Military Service Act**, introduced in January 1916. A group of 50 Liberals voted against the Bill on the grounds that it was an unprecedented invasion of individual freedom to oblige citizens to engage in warfare. The majority of Liberals shared this view but, nonetheless, voted for the Bill, believing that circumstances made it necessary. It was this acceptance of the argument from necessity that gravely damaged liberalism as a political philosophy.

Key term
Military Service Act, January 1916
Imposed compulsory enlistment on single males between the ages of 18 and 41; by 1918, the age limit had been raised to 50 and the scheme extended to include married men.

Conscription caused dissension in the Cabinet. **Edward Grey** and **Reginald McKenna** were among those who were strongly against it. Lloyd George, however, true to his conviction that the war justified extraordinary measures in mobilising the nation, threatened to resign if it were not introduced. He also objected to the concession written into the Act that allowed conscientious objectors exemption from war service. The term referred to those who opposed war on moral and religious grounds; they had to go before an enquiry board to prove they were genuine in their beliefs and could be required to serve in a non-combative role. Some 16,000 men registered on these grounds, contrasting with the three million who had volunteered for service before 1916.

Key figures
Edward Grey (1862–1933)
MP 1885–1916; one of the longest serving Foreign Secretaries (1905–16) ever, he took Britain into the 1914–18 war.

Reginald McKenna (1863–1943)
Home Secretary 1911–1915, Chancellor of the Exchequer 1915–1916; a bitter opponent of conscription, he left politics after 1918.

How far Lloyd George's authoritarianism stretched was later shown in 1918 when, against Bonar Law's plea that the Conscription Act should never be used 'as an agent in an industrial dispute', Lloyd George helped Churchill break a strike among munitions workers in Leeds by threatening to send the strikers straight to the war front.

What made the strike particularly notable was that it had begun as a protest by the workers at their being transferred against their wishes from one factory to another. Despite the gains undoubtedly made by the unions during the war in regard to status and the negotiating of better wage deals, there was a strong feeling among the workers that on both the home and war fronts the burden of winning the war was falling disproportionately on them. They were the class having to make the greatest sacrifice, and they doubted that Lloyd George, notwithstanding the many tributes he paid them in his public speeches, was as understanding of this as he should have been.

Lloyd George as war minister, 1916

His success as minister of munitions did not prevent Lloyd George from becoming increasingly depressed during 1916 by the slow progress in the war. He felt that the wrong strategy was being followed. He wanted diversionary campaigns to be mounted that would end the **stalemate** on the Western Front. However, the tragic failure of the Gallipoli venture gave weight to those army chiefs who asserted that the only way to defeat Germany was by the deployment of massive force on the Western Front; hence their demand for ever more manpower and resources to continue their **war of attrition** in Europe.

Lloyd George became so frustrated with the military leaders that he considered resigning from the Government. What stopped him was a turn of fate that dramatically altered his own position and had a profound effect on the eventual outcome of the war. On 5 June 1916, Lord Kitchener, the war secretary, was drowned at sea after the ship on which he was travelling to Russia struck a mine off Scapa Flow. The original plan had been for Lloyd George to accompany Kitchener on a morale-raising visit to Russia, but he had had to withdraw to attend to the crisis that followed the Easter Rising in Ireland (see page 84). This change of plan both saved Lloyd George's life and led to his taking the post that Kitchener had held.

He became war minister only five days after the launching by the British of the **Somme offensive**, the most costly single campaign ever fought by a British army in any war. At first Lloyd George, believing the estimates that the generals gave him, supported the offensive, but when it became evident that the Somme was a deadly strategic miscalculation, he turned bitterly against **General Haig** and **Sir William Robertson**. From the autumn of 1916 he was at loggerheads with the military.

The removal of Asquith, 1916

Lloyd George's success as an organiser increased rather than lessened the tensions between him and the generals. He came to believe that it was their incompetence that was limiting Britain's success in the war. He could not accept that they were planning adequately or using their resources effectively.

Lloyd George's exasperation with the military soon expanded into the belief that what was needed was a much more committed political leadership. He proposed, therefore, the setting up of a three-man war council with himself as its chairman. This was not simple arrogance. He considered that his achievements at munitions and as war minister indicated that he, more than any other civilian politician, both understood and represented the expectations of the nation. He claimed that he knew the people and the people knew him. He seems also to have genuinely believed that Asquith's duties as prime minister were so heavy that it was unreasonable to expect him to be able to dedicate himself solely to the task of running the war.

Unsurprisingly, the Conservatives keenly supported Lloyd George's initiative. They had never been fully content with Asquith

Key question
What circumstances led to Lloyd George's becoming war minister?

Key terms

Stalemate
Since the early weeks of the war in 1914, the war on the Western Front had settled into a confrontation between two massive sets of entrenched armies, neither being able to inflict a decisive defeat on the other.

War of attrition
Wearing the enemy down by sheer persistence and willingness to suffer casualties.

Somme offensive
On the first day of battle, 1 June 1916, Britain suffered 57,000 casualties; by the time the offensive had petered out four months later the figure had risen to 420,000.

Key figures

General Haig (1861–1928)
Commander-in-Chief of the British armies in France, 1915–18.

Sir William Robertson (1860–1933)
Chief of the Imperial General Staff, 1915–18.

Key dates

Battle of the Somme: July–Nov 1916

Conservatives withdrew support from Asquith: Dec 1916

as war leader, even after the formation of the Coalition in May 1915. Bonar Law and Edward Carson let Lloyd George know that they were prepared to back him against Asquith. A series of complicated manoeuvres followed in the autumn of 1916. The key question was whether Asquith would be willing to allow the proposed war council to function without him.

In the end, judging that this would be too great an infringement of his authority as prime minister, Asquith insisted that he must be the head of the council. Lloyd George offered his resignation, whereupon the Conservatives informed Asquith that they were not willing to serve in a Coalition government if Lloyd George was not a member.

What helped tip the balance was that Lloyd George could count all the major national newspapers on his side. He numbered among his friends at least five of the leading editors or proprietors. This proved of obvious political value to him. In 1916, only the *Daily News* supported Asquith unreservedly. It was an article in *The Times*, asserting that the Prime Minister was 'unfit to be fully charged with the supreme direction of the war', that appears to have finally broken Asquith's resistance.

Key question
Why was the overthrow of Asquith such a significant political development?

The leadership crisis in December 1916 showed that Asquith had no natural allies. The willingness of the Labour Party to support him earlier had reflected a commitment to the war effort generally, rather than to Asquith personally, while the Irish MPs had largely lost interest in English domestic politics following the Easter Rising (see page 84).

More significantly for the future of the Liberal Party, 130 of the 272 Liberal MPs declared their readiness to follow Lloyd George. This created a split that would never be fully healed. Although Asquith ceased to be prime minister in 1916, he continued as party leader, refusing to serve in Lloyd George's cabinet; instead he led the parliamentary opposition. This anomaly meant that in effect the Liberals were divided from 1916 onwards between the Asquithians, who claimed to be the official Liberal Party, and the followers of Lloyd George.

It is possible to view this as marking the final great divide between old-style and new Liberalism. Indeed, some historians have interpreted it as part of the class politics of the time, a revolt of the former outsiders in British politics against the existing political establishment. For example, A.J.P. Taylor writes:

> The Liberal leaders associated with Asquith were men of excessive refinement ... Lloyd George's supporters were rougher in origin and in temperament: mostly Radical nonconformists and self-made men ... None was a banker, merchant, or financial magnate; none a Londoner. Theirs was a long-delayed revolt of the provinces against London's political and cultural dominance: a revolt on behalf of the factories and workshops where the war was being won.
>
> A.J.P. Taylor, *England 1914–45*, 1965

Lloyd George's opponents believed that it was a desire for personal power that led him to bring Asquith down. Modern scholarship, however, tends to view this as a myth. The truth is that Lloyd George was never in a strong enough position to plot Asquith's downfall. It was the refusal of the Conservatives to remain loyal to Asquith that made all the difference. By 1916, Lloyd George may well have been dissatisfied with Asquith's leadership, but he could not have removed Asquith simply by his own efforts; it was the Conservatives who were responsible for making it impossible for Asquith to continue.

Asquith must also take some of the blame for his own downfall. Throughout the political crisis he was blind to the larger issues involved. He seems never to have understood the sincerity of those who opposed him, regarding their behaviour as a betrayal of him personally rather than a genuine attempt to improve Britain's war effort.

Key question
What role did the Conservatives play in ousting Asquith from office?

Lloyd George as wartime prime minister, 1916–18

After 1918, Lloyd George was frequently referred to as 'the man who won the war'. No one person, of course, can win a modern war singly, but as a reference to the inspiration he brought to bear as prime minister it is not too much of an exaggeration. His leadership was extraordinary.

Key question
What special contribution did Lloyd George make to the war effort as PM?

At the time he took over as Premier late in 1916, British morale was at its lowest point in the war. The intense German U-boat (submarine) campaign early in 1917, sinking ships and interrupting supplies of food and raw materials, threatened to stretch Britain's resources beyond the limit. Lloyd George privately confided in April 1917 that if shipping losses continued at their current rate Britain would be starving within a month. In some quarters there was talk of a compromise peace, and defeatism was in the air. But Lloyd George's refusal to contemplate anything other than total victory inspired his colleagues, reassured the waverers, and put heart into the nation.

Key dates
Lloyd George became PM and formed new Coalition government: 1916

U-boat menace threatened Britain's life-line: April 1917

Lloyd George's struggle with the military

Given Lloyd George's dynamism and determination, conflict between him and the military could only intensify. The generals objected to an interfering civilian politician deciding war strategy. For his part, Lloyd George would not accept that the generals were entitled to make their demands for huge numbers of men and vast amounts of material without being directly answerable to the Government for the use they made of them.

Key question
Why were Lloyd George's relations with the military chiefs so strained?

At the root of the conflict was the question of who was ultimately responsible for running the war. This dispute has sometimes been portrayed as a struggle to decide whether Britain in wartime was to be governed by politicians or generals. There are writers who see Lloyd George as having saved Britain from becoming a military dictatorship, but only at the price of its becoming a political one.

This remains controversial. What is undeniable is that while Lloyd George never wavered in his resolution to carry on the war

Key terms

The convoy system
Merchant ships sailing in close groups, protected by a ring of accompanying warships.

'Garden Suburb'
So called because it was housed in a makeshift building in the gardens of 10 Downing Street.

to complete victory, no matter how long it took, he was appalled by the scale of the slaughter. He believed that there had to be alternatives to the mass offensives which seemed the only strategy the generals were willing to consider. He spent a great deal of his time as prime minister trying to outwit the generals, without at the same time weakening the war effort overall.

Part of Lloyd George's technique was to keep the army deliberately under-resourced while maintaining that his Government was making every effort to meet the demands of the service chiefs. His hope was that this would force the generals to reconsider their unimaginative strategy of mass attack. His success in persuading the Admiralty in 1917 to adopt the **convoy system** as the main defence against the deadly U-boat attacks on the merchant ships showed what could be achieved militarily when new thinking was given a chance.

Key question
In what ways did Lloyd George abandon traditional parliamentary government?

Lloyd George's methods as PM

In keeping with his idea of consensus politics, one of Lloyd's George's first moves as prime minister was to increase the number of Conservatives in the Government.

Table 2.5: Party composition of the Coalition government in December 1916

Liberals	12
Conservatives	44
Labour	2

Key date
War Cabinet formed: December 1916

Furthermore, Lloyd George chose to run the war by means of a small inner War Cabinet that operated largely without reference to either the full Cabinet or parliament. Remarkably, he was the only Liberal in it.

Table 2.6: Party composition of the inner war cabinet in December 1916

Liberals	1
Conservatives	5
Labour	2

The figures suggest a major decline in Liberal influence. The truth was that Lloyd George had turned his government into a predominantly Conservative affair. This was to have very significant consequences for him and the parties.

Lloyd George's centralising style of government was evident in other pronounced ways. To retain central direction and control of the new State agencies, a special cabinet secretariat was set up under **Maurice Hankey**. Still more significant was the adoption by Lloyd George of his own private secretariat, directly responsible to him as head of the War Cabinet. Known as the **'Garden Suburb'**, this secretariat was made up of a group of advisers and experts constantly in touch with the Prime Minister. Lloyd George justified its existence by his need to be in immediate day-to-day contact with the constantly changing war situation; it made possible the instant decision-making demanded by the war.

Key figure

Maurice Hankey (1877–1963)
Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence, 1912–38, Secretary of the War Council 1914–16, Cabinet Secretary 1916–38.

Sceptics detected a more dubious purpose. The workings of the secretariat appeared to them to detach government even further from parliamentary scrutiny. Lloyd George seldom attended parliament between 1916 and 1918. By relying increasingly on outside experts rather than elected politicians, he appeared to be abandoning the traditional methods of parliamentary government. Critics suggested that he was turning the British premiership into an American-style presidency; some even went so far as to accuse him of adopting the methods of a dictator.

Challenge to Lloyd George, 1918

Key question
How did Lloyd George overcome the political challenge he faced in 1918?

Lloyd George's methods did not go unchallenged. In the summer of 1918, Asquith, in a reversal of what had happened to him two years earlier, led an attack on Lloyd George's handling of the war. In May 1918, General Maurice, a former Director of Military Operations, publicly accused Lloyd George of deliberately distorting the figures of troop strength in order to suggest that the British army in France was stronger that it actually was. Maurice's aim was to prove that it was not the army leaders, but the Government that was responsible for Britain's failure to win a decisive breakthrough on the Western Front.

Taking the side of the generals, Asquith used the accusation to justify introducing a Commons vote of no-confidence in the Coalition. Lloyd George bluffed his way out of the problem by claiming that the figures he had originally quoted had been provided by Maurice himself. This was a distortion but Lloyd George defended himself so confidently that it was Asquith who appeared unconvincing. His performance in the debate fell far short of Lloyd George's. Asquith surrendered the initiative and the Commons voted 293:106 in favour of Lloyd George. The result left Asquith and his supporters looking like a group of disgruntled troublemakers who had irresponsibly sought to embarrass the Government at a time of great national danger.

The importance of the Maurice Debate was that it destroyed the chance of Liberal reunification. Asquith's attack on the Government's policy may not have been personally motivated, but it showed how wide the gap had grown between him and Lloyd George. It deepened the divide between the two factions in the Liberal Party and gave shape to politics for the next four years. Those who opposed Lloyd George in the debate were those who would stand as official Liberal Party candidates against him in the general election held in December 1918.

The Representation of the People Act, 1918

The divisions over the Maurice Debate in May 1918 have tended to overshadow a major piece of legislation that became law a month later. The main terms of the Act were:

- All males over the age of 21 were granted the vote.
- The vote was extended to women over 30.
- Servicemen over the age of 19 were entitled to vote in the next election.

Key dates
Lloyd George survived the Maurice Debate: May 1918

Representation of the People Act became law in June 1918: passed in Feb 1918

Key term
Free vote
Individual MPs allowed to vote without instructions from their party.

- Candidates were to deposit £150 in cash, which would be forfeit if they did not gain ⅛ of the total votes cast.
- Constituencies were to be made approximately equal in number of voters (around 70,000).
- The number of seats in the Commons was increased from 670 to 707 to accommodate the enlarged electorate.
- All voting was to take place on a designated single day.
- Conscientious objectors had their right to vote suspended for five years after the war.

Key figure
Constance Markiewicz (1868–1927)
The daughter of an Irish landowner, she married a Polish aristocrat; she became a suffragette and a member of Sinn Fein. Although elected in 1918, she was one of the 73 Sinn Feiners who refused to take up their seats at Westminster.

To a modern audience, one of the most interesting features of the reform was the extension of the vote to women. The clause in the Bill relating to women's voting rights was overwhelmingly accepted by the Commons on a **free vote**. Nearly all the ministers who had opposed it earlier now voted for it. In explaining his own change of heart, Asquith probably spoke for all those who now believed that the vital role women were playing in the war made the demand for 'votes for women' irresistible. 'Some years ago I ventured to use the expression, "Let the women work out their own salvation." Well, Sir, they have worked it out during this war.'

In 1919, a Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act allowed women to stand for parliament, enter most professions, including the law, and serve on juries. The first woman to be elected as an MP was **Constance Markiewicz**.

The Coupon Election, December 1918

Key question
What was the political importance of the Coupon Election?

At the end of the war in November 1918, Lloyd George and Bonar Law, the Conservative leader, agreed to continue the Coalition into peacetime. A joint letter carrying both their signatures was sent to all those candidates who were willing to declare themselves supporters of the Coalition. This written endorsement became known as 'the coupon', a wry reference to the ration coupons introduced during the war, and led to the election being referred to as 'the Coupon Election'.

Key dates
Armistice on the Western Front: November 1918

Lloyd George won the 'Coupon Election': December 1918

Table 2.7: 1918 election results

	Seats won	*Votes*	*% of total votes cast*
Coalition Conservative	335	3,504,198	32.6
Coalition Liberal	133	1,445,640	13.5
Coalition Labour	10	161,521	1.5
(Coalition total)	(478)	(5,121,259)	(47.6)
Labour	63	2,385,472	22.2
Asquith Liberals	28	1,298,808	12.1
Conservatives	23	370,375	3.4
Irish Nationalists	7	238,477	2.2
Sinn Fein	73	486,867	4.5

Judged purely as a piece of opportunism, the election was a remarkable success for Lloyd George and the Coalitionists. However, in the light of later developments, which saw the Liberal Party decline into impotence, it can be argued that Lloyd George's

decision to perpetuate the Liberal split by carrying the Coalition into peacetime permanently destroyed any chance the Liberal Party had of reuniting and recovering. A leading modern scholar, Kenneth Morgan, describes the Coupon Election as 'the greatest of disasters for the Liberal Party and the greatest of tragedies for Lloyd George'. This modern estimation reinforces the view expressed nearer the time by Herbert Gladstone, the former Liberal Chief Whip:

> The result of 1918 broke the party not only in the House of Commons but in the country. Local [Liberal] Associations perished or maintained a nominal existence. Masses of our best men passed away to Labour. Others gravitated to Conservatism or independence. Funds were depleted and we were short of workers all over the country. There was an utter lack of enthusiasm or even zeal.
>
> Herbert Gladstone writing in 1919, quoted in Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party, 1900–76*, 1976

Summary diagram: The politics of Britain at war, 1914–18

Asquith's Liberal government August 1914–May 1915

↓ Liberal values challenged by needs of war

↓ Defence of the Realm Act

↓ Lloyd George's wartime budgets

Asquith's Coalition government May 1915–December 1916

↓ Conservatives return to share government

↓ Lloyd George's dynamism as Munitions Minister and War Minister

↓ Conscription issue divides the Liberals

↓ Lloyd George and Conservatives combine to bring down Asquith

Lloyd George's Coalition government December 1916–November 1918

↓ The struggle with the military

↓ Lloyd George as inspirational war leader

↓ Lloyd George's centralising methods as PM

↓ The Maurice Debate

↓ Electoral Reform Act

↓ The Coupon Election

3 | The Impact of the War on the Political Parties

Key question
Was the Liberal Party fundamentally changed by the 1914–18 war?

a) The Liberals

By the end of the war an increase in State power had occurred that would have been unimaginable, let alone acceptable, in peacetime.

- Large areas of British industry had been brought under central control.
- All public transport had been brought under government control.
- Military conscription had been imposed.
- Food rationing had been introduced.
- Controls had been imposed on profits, wages and working hours.

In 1917 alone, the worst year of the war for Britain, six new ministries came into being:

- Blockade
- Food
- Labour
- National Service
- Pensions
- Shipping.

This growth in government power led to a huge extension of State bureaucracy. The civil service, in terms of personnel and premises, underwent a rapid expansion. In the face of these developments, the traditional Liberal suspicion of bureaucracy was swept aside in the rush to adapt Britain's institutions to the needs of war.

Challenge to Liberal values

The measures were justified by reference to the struggle for national survival, but there were Liberals who protested. They saw the growth of State control as a challenge to the principle of individual liberty. They were usually the same protesters who had opposed the declaration of war; their voice, however, sounded faintly against the general clamour for war and for the reorganisation of society that the war effort demanded. Lloyd George declared: 'a perfectly democratic State has the right to commandeer every resource, every power, life, limb, wealth, and everything else for the interest of the state'.

Even those Liberals who had supported the war from the first were unhappy when faced with the fundamental changes that were being brought about by the war effort. Of necessity, British government during the war became illiberal. DORA, restrictions on free trade and the introduction of conscription were outstanding examples of a whole series of measures and regulations which Asquith's and Lloyd George's governments felt obliged to introduce. The Liberal State at war was very different from the Liberal State at peace.

Irrecoverable lost ground

There is no doubt that the Liberal Party was greatly changed by its experience of war. To put it in negative terms, if the 1914–18 war had not intervened, Asquith might not have resigned, the Liberal social reform programme might have continued with Lloyd George as its main promoter and the challenge to traditional Liberal values would not have become as demanding as it did.

The Liberals lost irrecoverable political ground because of the war. The existence of the **Union of Democratic Control**, representing the Liberals' anti-war tradition, was a constant reproach to the Government. The Irish Nationalists felt betrayed by the Government's policy towards Ireland. Asquith was heavily criticised for the British handling of the Easter Rising, as was Lloyd George for his use of the Black and Tans (see page 86). The Irish Catholic vote in England switched significantly to Labour, while in Ireland the Nationalists moved to Sinn Fein.

Most of the signs indicate that the Conservatives, still wounded after their defeat over the People's Budget and the House of Lords, would not have been able to oust the Liberals in the foreseeable future. Much of this, of course, is speculation. We cannot know what impact the Ulster question would have had on party strength and alignment had the war not led to the shelving of this issue, but it is highly improbable that the traumas and transformations experienced by the Liberals would have occurred without the pressure of the war years.

Key terms

Union of Democratic Control, 1914–18
A pressure group of Liberal and Labour politicians and journalists set up to protest against the war and urge a negotiated peace.

Ministry of Reconstruction
A body which drew together the various committees that had come into being during the war, its main task being to plan the improvement of social conditions.

The impact of Lloyd George's premiership

Key question
How did Lloyd George's conduct as PM damage the Liberals?

As prime minister between 1916 and the end of the war, Lloyd George was necessarily preoccupied with ensuring the nation's survival in war. This diverted both him and the Liberals from the progressive policies they had followed before the war. Lloyd George's very success in persuading many of his colleagues to accept increasing State intervention had the effect of diluting his own Liberalism and detaching him from the radical element in his party. Conscious of this, he made a number of important moves towards reconstruction in the last year of the war. His aim was partly political in that he hoped to prevent the radicals from becoming too disgruntled over the slowing down of social reform. It was this that lay behind his 1918 election promise to make Britain 'a land fit for heroes to live in'. The idea took particular shape with the creation of the **Ministry of Reconstruction**.

One of the most notable products of this was the Education Act of 1918, whose main terms were the:

- raising of the school leaving age to fourteen
- abolition of fees for elementary education
- introduction of compulsory medical inspections of secondary school pupils
- authorising of LEAs to set up nursery schools

- creation of day release colleges at which young people at work could continue their formal education one day a week
- restriction of the employment of children of school age.

Key figure

H.A.L. Fisher (1865–1940)
Liberal MP, 1916–26, Vice Chancellor of Sheffield University, 1912–18, President of Board of Education, 1916–18.

This measure was largely the work of **H.A.L. Fisher**, a university vice-chancellor and one of the outside experts that Lloyd George had invited into government. It was a further step in the provision of state education as a universal, compulsory system.

Liberal reaction to the growth of the State

While a particular measure such as Fisher's Act could be seen as enlightened and progressive, many Liberals were left with the feeling that, overall, four years of war had undermined their most cherished values. By 1918, the principal causes that had characterised pre-war Liberalism had been jettisoned or gravely compromised, namely:

- Britain's entry into the war destroyed the image of the Liberals as a peace party.
- The economic regulation of the State by the wartime governments effectively marked the abandonment of free trade.
- Conscription undermined the concept of the freedom of choice of the individual.

Furthermore, important though the play of politics at parliamentary and government level obviously was, attention must also be drawn to developments in the country at large. Historians have begun to stress the importance of what was happening at constituency level. On balance, the Conservative and Labour parties gained politically from the war, while the Liberals suffered.

The main problem for the Liberal Party was that, although the majority of its members came to accept that the war was justified and, therefore, had to be fought to the utmost, it was hard to accommodate it easily within the Liberal programme as developed since 1906. Having struggled to establish the primacy of welfare issues, the Liberals now found themselves diverted from social reform by the demands of war.

Having overcome the reactionary opposition of the Unionists on a whole range of issues before 1914, the Liberals now had to contemplate the reality of their leaders making common cause with their political opponents. All this tended to take the heart out of party activists at grassroots level. Liberal morale sank. The Conservative Party was always less compromised by the war than either the Liberals or the Labour Party. They had never had any doubts about the correctness of Britain's entry into the conflict. Their traditional claim to be the 'patriotic' party stood them well in wartime and led to a considerable recovery of popularity in the constituencies.

The impact of electoral reform

Key question
How did electoral reform in 1918 work to the disadvantage of the Liberals?

An equally important factor accounting for Liberal Party decline was the electoral reform introduced in the last year of the war. The 1918 Representation of the People Act (see page 60) swelled the number of voters from some seven million to around twenty-one million. A number of historians, including Martin Pugh, regard this trebling of the electorate as having had momentous political consequences. Not all the newly enfranchised working class voted Labour in the 1918 election; nonetheless the Labour party's share of the vote rose proportionally with the increase in the electorate from seven per cent to twenty-two per cent and its number of MPs increased from 42 to 60. The trend towards the replacement of the Liberal Party by Labour as the second largest single party had been established.

In a notable book, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party*, written in 1966, Trevor Wilson suggested that the war was the essential reason for the decline in Liberal fortunes. Other historians have queried this and have argued that the war accelerated the decline rather than causing it. More recently, Martin Pugh has suggested that the key factor was not so much that the war undermined the Liberals as that they failed to seize the opportunity that the war offered. Diverted by the demands of war from their progressive policies, the Liberals gave ground to the Labour Party as the new force of reform.

The importance of personality

Whatever weight is given to the different interpretations, it is evident that the war was a highly formative experience in the history of the Liberal Party, and indeed in British politics. An issue that commands attention is one of personality. Parties are not only about principles; they are also about people. The roles of Asquith and Lloyd George were critical. Asquith's continuing resentment at what he regarded as Lloyd George's disloyalty and betrayal in 1916 meant that a genuine ***rapprochement*** between the two was impossible.

Key term
Rapprochement
Resumption of working relations.

The fracturing of the Liberal Party left Lloyd George dependent on the support of Bonar Law and the Conservatives. Whether this amounted to his being the 'prisoner of the Conservatives' is another of the lively debates among historians. It has to be said that many Conservatives at the time did not regard Lloyd George as a prisoner; on the contrary, they saw their party being dragged along behind this maverick and dangerous ex-Liberal leader.

b) The Labour Party in wartime

Key question
What did the Labour Party gain from the war years?

Although the Labour Party was relatively small in 1914 there were serious divisions within it over the war. The basic question in August 1914 was whether the party should support the war at all. The majority of party members in the Commons and in the country decided to do so out of a genuine sense of patriotic duty. They were also worried on political grounds that if the party went against the tide of public opinion, which was overwhelmingly in favour of war, it might damage itself beyond recovery. **Arthur Henderson**, who became leader of the Labour Party in parliament at the beginning of the war, represented this viewpoint.

Key figures

Arthur Henderson (1863–1935)
Chairman of the party 1914–17; the first Labour Party member to hold a Cabinet post, Paymaster General 1916.

James Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937)
Labour Party Chairman 1911–14, Labour Party leader 1922–31, PM 1924 and 1929–35, Leader of National Government 1931–37.

The reward for mainline Labour's support of the war came with the inclusion of Labour ministers in the Coalition governments that were formed under Asquith in 1915 and Lloyd George in 1916 (see page 59). However, there were also strong pacifists in the party, such as **James Ramsay MacDonald**, who resigned his position as leader of the Labour MPs in the Commons in August 1914 and remained consistently opposed to the war throughout its duration. In addition, there was a vocal Marxist element on the left of the party who condemned the war as a capitalist conspiracy against the workers. It was this section of the party which became involved in such bodies as the **No-Conscription Fellowship**, and who attempted regularly throughout the war to organise disruptive strikes in the war industries.

The Stockholm Conference, July 1917

A curious incident was to lead to the end of Labour's wartime co-operation with Lloyd George. In July 1917, a meeting was called in Stockholm, the capital of neutral Sweden, by the socialist parties of all the counties still fighting the war. The aim of the gathering was to consider ways of bringing about a negotiated peace. The cue for this had come from the new Russian government, set up after the **February Revolution**, which had proposed that a peace settlement should be considered on the basis of all sides abandoning the demand for **war indemnities**. For obvious reasons all this was regarded by the governments of the combatant countries as undermining the war effort.

Key terms

No-Conscription Fellowship
A body set up in 1914 devoted to resisting any attempt by the State to introduce a general call-up to oblige citizens to fight.

February Revolution
In February 1917 the tsar, Nicholas II, had abdicated and been replaced by a provisional government.

War indemnities
Reparations paid by the losing side for the cost of the war.

Lloyd George had at first agreed that Arthur Henderson, who had earlier gone to Russia on an official government visit, could attend. However, when the French, who were committed to the imposition of heavy post-war penalties on Germany, complained, he backtracked and withdrew his permission. Henderson promptly resigned from the Cabinet.

In the event, this worked to Labour's advantage. Now that Henderson, the Labour Party leader, was no longer a minister, he was able to put his energies into improving the party's organisation and shaping its proposals for both the peace settlement and the domestic policies that Britain should follow after the war was over. This helped to lessen the differences within the Labour Party and give it a more responsible image in the country at large. This contrasted favourably with the divided Liberals and a Conservative Party that appeared willing to subordinate itself to Lloyd George for the sake of being in government. There was a sense in which the Labour Party came out of the war far less damaged politically than either of its two rivals.

The Labour Party constitution

A critical result of Henderson's efforts at restructuring the party was the adoption in February 1918 of a Labour Party constitution. Before then, it had not put its various principles and aims into a clearly stated programme. The constitution was an attempt to define the party for the twentieth century. It was largely the work of Henderson and Ramsay MacDonald, and drew heavily on the ideas of Sidney Webb (see page 31), who prepared the various drafts on which the constitution was finally based. Its key features were:

- the party to be composed of the affiliated: trade unions, socialist societies, co-operative societies, trade councils, local Labour parties
- the party to be managed by a party executive of 23 members elected at the annual party conference
- the annual conference to vote on the policies to be followed
- the means of production, distribution and exchange to be taken into common ownership, i.e. nationalised (Clause IV)
- a commitment to the taxing and redistribution of surplus wealth
- co-operation with the trade unions in the formation of policy
- block voting to be allowed (e.g. affiliated trade union delegates entitled to cast the total votes of all their members).

Key date
Adoption of the Labour Party constitution: February 1918

Throughout the following decades there would be continued debate and disagreement among party members about the constitution's strengths and limitations, but at the time it helped give the Labour party a sense of stability. It emboldened the Labour members in Lloyd George's Coalition to break free of him; as soon as the armistice had been announced in November 1918, all the leading Labour ministers resigned, thus reclaiming their political independence. It was a remarkable move for a parliamentary party barely a decade old and hinted at the confidence Labour's brief experience of government had brought it.

c) Conservative gains from the war period

Key question
How had the war years worked to the benefit of the Conservative Party?

The Coalition governments which Asquith and then Lloyd George formed involved a governmental restructuring that resulted in Conservatives taking key executive posts in the inner Cabinet. Thus, without winning an election victory, the Conservatives found themselves in positions of authority for the first time since 1905.

In addition to becoming the majority in Lloyd George's Coalition, the Conservatives derived a number of other unplanned gains from the war period. The marked increase in the size of the electorate that followed the 1918 Representation of the People Act certainly helped the Labour Party, but not exclusively so. Not all working class voters supported the Labour Party. Indeed, it is

calculated that in all the elections from 1918 onwards approximately a third of working-class voters in practice opted for a party other than Labour. A similar proportion of trade unionists did the same. One reason for this in 1918 was the Conservatives' wholehearted and consistent support for the war. It is reckoned that their record on this won them substantial support among servicemen and their families in the 1918 Coupon Election.

There was the further factor that, as the electorate grew in size, constituencies had to be reshaped to accommodate this. How the Conservatives benefited from this is neatly summed up by Stuart Ball, a modern expert on the history of the Conservative Party: 'Conservative seats in the Home Counties with expanding populations were sub-divided to form several new constituencies, whilst many Liberal seats with small electorates in the West, the North and in Scotland disappeared.'

These electoral benefits were in a sense accidents; the luck had fallen to the Conservatives. But there were other advances that they could be said to have earned for themselves. They gained, for example, from their willingness to learn the social lessons that the war had provided. This applied particularly to the Conservative officer class who by tradition came from a privileged background. Their experience in mixing with the men they led and lived with in the hazardous conditions of war often had the effect of breaking down their prejudices. Young Conservatives like **Harold Macmillan** came back from the trenches with a respect for the serving men that easily transformed into a wish to make the world a better place for them and their families in peacetime. Such an attitude was to help modernise the Conservative Party in its thinking and make it adaptable to the democratic politics of the twentieth century.

Key figure
Harold Macmillan (1894–1986)
An MP for 38 years, served as an officer in both world wars, Foreign Secretary 1955, Chancellor of the Exchequer 1955–57, Leader of the Conservative Party and PM 1957–63.

The newfound confidence among the Conservatives showed itself in the eagerness with which the party went about reorganising itself as an electoral force. In marked contrast to the depression and faintheartedness with which the Liberals approached the 1918 election (see page 62), the Conservatives began to streamline their local constituency branches with a view to getting their supporters out in strength at elections. It was a sign that the Conservatives were coming to the realisation that politics was no longer a matter of relying on its traditional block support. The task now was to win over the new electorate.