

Hostage to history



Lord Faulkner
investigates the
“Coupon” election of

1918 – the last time a Coalition
Government has faced the
voters as a single entity

We shall not know for sure until 2015 whether Disraeli’s assertion that “England does not love coalitions” holds good in the 21st century, but certainly the omens for Mr Clegg and his Liberal Democrats are pretty bleak, with latest polls showing that they may lose up to four-fifths of their seats in the House of Commons.

The defeat of the alternative vote referendum was the greatest catastrophe for them in the present Parliament. Had it passed, Conservative and Liberal Democrats could have stood against each other at the election, as coalition partners, with voters encouraged to give their candidates their first and second preferences.

Instead they have all sorts of difficult tactical decisions to take. Do they follow Lord Oakeshott’s advice and dump Mr Clegg now, presumably with Vince Cable in as leader? Do they soldier on until the end of the Parliament, and take their chance with the voters, claiming that they had reined the Coalition back from the worst right-wing excesses of the Conservatives? Do they pull out from the Coalition some time in 2013 or 2014, continuing to support a minority Tory administration in votes of confidence and on supply, like they did with Callaghan’s Government in the days of the Lib-Lab pact between March 1977 and September 1978?

The last time the Liberals approached an election as part of a coalition government was in 1918. Their man – David Lloyd George – was Prime Minister, having taken over from Herbert Asquith in acrimonious circumstances in December 1916. Asquith however retained the leadership of the party, and declined to serve in the Coalition Government headed by Lloyd George. Their falling-out had catastrophic consequences for the Liberals, as some joined L-G in Government and others stuck with Asquith.

The turning point was a vote in the Commons on 9 May 1918, when Asquith led 98 of his fellow Liberals in a division





As the 1918 general election approached, David Lloyd George was Liberal Prime Minister, while Herbert Asquith (pictured) was party leader

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against the Coalition on a motion which demanded:

“That a Select Committee of this House be appointed to inquire into the allegations of incorrectness in certain Statements of Ministers of the Crown to this House, contained in a letter of Major-General Maurice, late Director of Military Operations, published in the Press on the 7th day of May.”

Although Asquith denied it was a vote of confidence, it was seen as one, as Maurice had alleged that Lloyd George and Bonar Law (the Conservative leader and Chancellor of the Exchequer) had lied about the strength of the British army in France.

Although he won the vote comfortably – by 293 to 106 – Lloyd George realised that if he were to remain Prime Minister for another term once the war was over, he would need to have a political machine under his control. His principal lieutenant in this venture was the Coalition Government’s chief whip, Captain Freddie Guest, who was charged with forming a pro-Lloyd George party of Coalition Liberals, and negotiating with the Conservatives over which seats each would fight. L-G wanted to field 150 Coalition Liberals, all of whom would avoid having to face Tory opponents in the election when it came.

Guest was also instructed to get agreement to a joint Coalition manifesto, and by 20 July was able to put a draft agreement on candidates and policy to Lloyd George and Bonar Law. By 29 October he told L-G that Bonar Law had agreed that there would be 150 Lloyd George Liberal candidates who would receive Conservative support. No-one who voted for Asquith’s amendment at the end of the Maurice debate would be on the list. All supporters of the Coalition (Conservative Unionists, Lloyd George Liberals and 18 members of the new National Democratic and Labour Party – a splinter group of former Labour politicians led by George Barnes) received letters signed by Lloyd George and Bonar Law, confirming that they had the support of the Coalition. It was this letter which became known as the “Coupon”.

Guest’s other role was to raise money for what became known as the “Lloyd George Political Fund”. The sale of honours was the principal route, with knighthoods costing £10,000 (between £210,000 and £250,000 in today’s money), baronetcies £30,000 (today’s £600-700,000), and peerages from £50,000 upwards (well over £1 million today).

In the summer of 1918 it



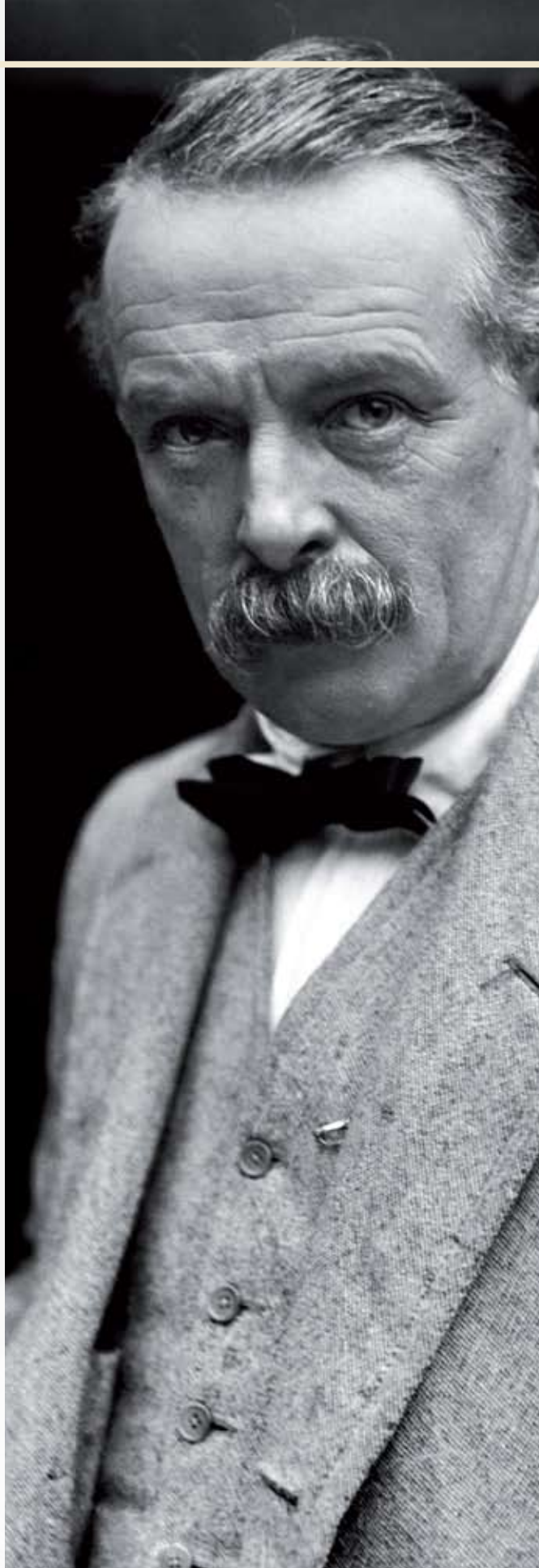
was unclear when the election would be. The Parliament was already eight years old, and the electorate was three times as large as it had been in 1910, with the accession to the electoral roll of women over 30 and virtually all men over 21, so there was a strong argument for having the election sooner rather than later. There was however a fear that the war could go on until 1919 or even 1920, and there was a feeling that the Armistice should be signed before the country was convulsed in electioneering.

The issue was resolved by the breakthrough on the Western Front in the autumn of 1918, and the war came to an end in November.

Electioneering got under way almost immediately, but first Lloyd George (right) had to decide what to do with Asquith. Following the Armistice he was offered a seat in the House of Lords and the position of Lord Chancellor, together with the right to nominate two secretaries of state, and six junior ministers. Asquith didn't respond, but his henchmen, Simon, McKenzie and Runciman declared "relentless hostility", according to Lloyd George's biographer, K. O. Morgan.

The election took place on 14 December 1918. Archie Guest had succeeded in getting the number of Coalition Liberals in receipt of the "Coupon" up to 159, along with 364 (Conservative) Unionists and 18 National Democratic and Labour candidates.

The outcome was a landslide of greater proportions than had



ever been seen before or has happened since. "Coupon" supporters elected totalled 534, of whom 384 were Unionists, 136 Lloyd George Liberals, four Labour, and 10 National Democrats. The Asquith Liberals were reduced to just 27, with Asquith himself defeated in East Fife (even though the Coalition did not run a coupon candidate against him), along with all of his senior colleagues.

Labour became the official opposition, with 61 seats – their ranks included five Liberals who joined them as soon as they were elected – the Irish Nationalists went down to seven, and there were five without party labels, thus making the number of active opposition MPs 100. The other victors of the election were Sinn Féin, who won 73 seats, including the first woman MP, but they had already announced that they had no intention of taking their seats at Westminster.

Even though Lloyd George had done well to get 136 Coalition Liberals elected, and had benefited massively through his own popularity as the man who was seen as having won the war, he was soon perceived as the prisoner of the Conservatives in his Government, and there was an inevitability about the Tories' decision to pull out in 1922, following their historic meeting at the Carlton Club, and Lloyd George never held office again. 🏰

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