DAVID LLOYD GEORGE

If we cast our minds back to 2010 and the General Election of that year the catchphrase “I agree with Nick “comes to mind. This was a time of severe financial difficulties following the crisis of 2008. 2010 was to mark the end of Gordon Brown’s time as Prime Minister, having taken over from Tony Blair in 2007. As he left Downing Street with his wife and his two young sons I remember a commentator saying “there goes the Grammar School generation”. The new Prime Minister David Cameron is an old Etonian. I am not making any loaded points here but I found the comment very interesting in the wider historical context.

Despite his victory David Cameron would not be able to form a workable government because he did not have a majority. In the aftermath of the defeat of Gordon Brown and the Labour Government some kind of coalition would become inevitable. The situation could not be allowed to continue, all countries must have a Government. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats went into Coalition. It was at this time that “I agree with Nick” became a sort of catchphrase, it seemed as if everyone in Politics wanted to be Nick Clegg’s friend as Leader of the Liberal Democrats. In my view a Coalition was the only possible solution at this time. The subsequent meeting of David Cameron and Nick Clegg in the Rose Garden of Downing Street seemed to cement the Coalition.

Moving forward to 2015, the Election of this year ended in disaster for the Liberal Democrats. They were reduced to 8 MP’s! On the other hand it was something of a triumph for David Cameron. As a History teacher at the time I found this very fascinating. It was in 2010, the first time since 1923, that the Liberals in one form or other had the chance of political power!

I think that my interest and fascination with Lloyd George is in part related to the fact that he reached the top of political life in Britain when it was virtually dominated by people from the higher social classes; the Conservatives representing the old land-owning interest and the Liberals the wealthy industrial classes. Though this is not a total division and should not be viewed as such. At this time the Public Schools were very dominant and it might be argued they still are. The so -called Clarendon Schools or, as they are sometimes known, the Clarendon 9 are worth noting – Eton, Harrow, Winchester, Rugby, Charterhouse, Westminster, Shrewsbury, St. Paul’s and Merchants’ Taylors. The nineteenth century saw a new wave of Public Schools. The Industrial Revolution had helped to create a newly wealthy class of Industrialists and Merchants who wanted a Public School education for their sons. Marlborough, (1841), Cheltenham (1842), Clifton (1862) and Haileybury (1862) are examples of such schools. I would like at this juncture to extend my thanks to the Assistant Archivist at Haileybury. She provided me with much useful information about this School and in relation to Clement Attlee whose Alma Mater it was. He will be discussed later in this article, in the context of the establishment of the Welfare State. His work at Haileybury House, a charitable institution in Stepney London between 1906 and 1909 made him very much aware of poverty and social inequality, and this in turn led him to join the Independent Labour Party in 1908. The rapid expansion of the railways helped boys to travel to school. These schools also enabled parents who worked in the rapidly expanding British Empire to have somewhere that their children could be both educated and cared for. The dominance of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge was as strong then as it is now. These two universities do not just dominate politics but many other important aspects of life in Britain today. Lloyd George by contrast was educated at Llanystumdwy National School before being articled as a clerk in 1878 in Porthmadog. He began to practise as a Solicitor in 1884.

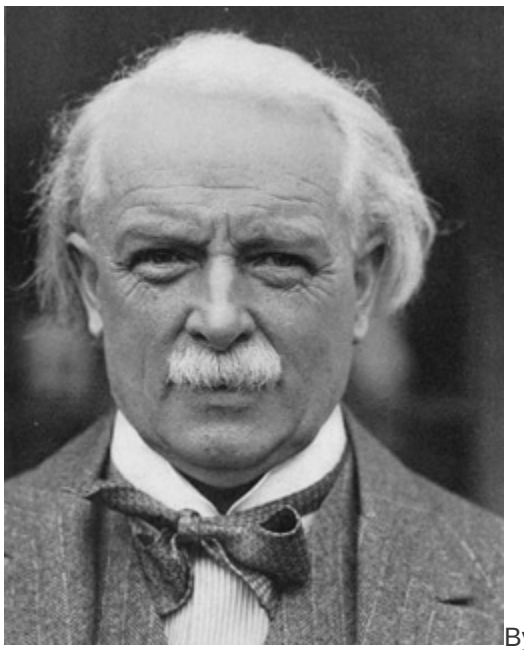
Lloyd George was born on the 17th. of January 1863 in Chorlton-on-Medlock, Manchester, Lancashire. His background has attracted much comment from historians. His father William George was descended from Pembrokeshire farmers, he briefly studied Medicine before he decided to pursue a career in teaching. He was the acting Headmaster of a school in Pwllheli in North Wales when he met and married Elizabeth (Betsy) Lloyd. William George was working as a Headmaster in Manchester when Lloyd George was born. Betsy and her mother ran small shoe-making business in the village of Llanystumdwy. They had moved there after the family had returned back to Pembrokeshire where William George took up farming again, possibly due to failing health. He died in 1864 and the tragedy was compounded by the fact that Betsy was pregnant with a son who she christened William in memory of his late Father. At this point the only real choice for Betsy had been to return to her brother and mother at the house in Llandystunmdwy.

She was not, however, penniless. Her husband had left her £768 and in addition to this the shoe business was fairly profitable. Richard Lloyd the uncle of David Lloyd George was a well-respected

person in South Caernarvonshire and he had a leading role in the small Nonconformist denomination of Campbellite Baptists.

It is worth noting that here Betsy had very strong ambitions for her two sons in terms of them pursuing a professional career. From 1866 to 1867 Lloyd George attended Llanystumdwy National School. Through his late father Lloyd George was to gain a wide circle of friends who were both intellectually able and politically motivated. Lloyd George was articled in 1879 to the Porthmadog Solicitors, Breese, Jones and Casson; part of his mother's inheritance had been used to facilitate this. Another fortuitous gain for him was that Mr. Breese of the firm he now worked for was the Liberal agent in Merionethshire and South Caernarvonshire. This gave Lloyd George the opportunity at the very young age of 17 to canvass for the Liberals in the 1880 Elections. He also spoke at Temperance meetings (these were meetings where the drinking of alcoholic drinks was argued against) in Baptist Chapels and in local debating societies. This gave him much useful experience. Lloyd George was both a very ambitious and determined young man. He was not only very clever but he was also a brilliant orator. It might be worth considering here the background of the man he succeeded as Prime Minister, namely Asquith, who came from a mill-owning family and had attended the City of London School (a leading Public School), and would go on to Balliol College, Oxford.

Lloyd George would go on to win the Caernarfon Boroughs by-election in April 1890. There was so much that followed this that it is not possible to cover it all in the requisite detail and not within the constraints of this type of article. So I will move forward to later events. In 1907 he experienced great personal tragedy when his daughter, Mair, died at the very young age of 17, following an operation for appendicitis. She was a very beautiful and talented young lady. She was a very good musician and she used to play piano for her parents. He was, it seems, never fully reconciled to this tragedy.



By 1909 Lloyd George was Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Liberal Government of the time. A further £16 million was needed in additional revenue. There were two reasons why this was needed, firstly to fund the building of Dreadnoughts, huge battleships that were part of the naval race against Germany and secondly to help fund the Old Age Pensions introduced in 1908. He needed to raise taxes to help the poor; a number of taxes were raised. Death Duties, Income Tax (raised from 1s to 1s 2d), Tobacco and Spirit Duties, Stamp Duties and Charges for Liquor Duties. Taxes were raised on petrol and motor car licences; this was used to start a Road Fund which was becoming necessary to improve roads to cater for the rising number of cars on the road. A super tax on very high incomes was introduced, and at this time, over £3000 a year was said to be such an income. The argument about this tax was to rage for many years into the twentieth century. On the Beatles' Album Revolver of 1966, the opening track by George Harrison was entitled Taxman; one of the lines was "Let me tell you how it will be, there's one for you nineteen for me, cos I'm the taxman..." Surtax at this time had reached 19s.6d in the pound, so for the benefit of younger readers this meant that for every £1 earned 97 ½ p was taken in tax when paid at this very high level!

He also imposed duties on Land Values, in particular, on the “increased increment” in land value to be paid when it changed hands.

This was referred to as the “People’s Budget” by Lloyd George. It naturally caused uproar amongst many of the wealthy and more powerful sections of society. The House of Lords rejected this Budget by 350 votes to 765! The Conservatives had had a large majority in the House of Lords since 1905. They used this majority to defeat many of the Liberal Government’s Bills. A General Election was called in January 1910. The Liberals won and subsequently the Power of the House of Lords was reduced. They would no longer be able to reject any Money Bills that had been agreed to by The House of Commons. This Act confirmed the right of the House of Commons as the peoples’ representatives to control Taxation! The main result of the People’s Budget was the increase in total taxation and the opening up of new sources of taxation. The Parliament Act was to significantly cut the power of the House of Lords.

The Liberal Government was to introduce new reforms. The National InsuranceAct of 1911was a very significant development. A number of working men already insured themselves through Friendly Societies; however, low paid workers could often not afford these subscriptions. Some who could afford them preferred to take a chance! This Act, therefore,introduced compulsory insurance for those who needed it most. Costs were to be kept to a minimum. The 1911 Act also provided separate insurance schemes for sickness and unemployment. Unemployment Insurance began on a small scale applying only those trades like building, shipbuilding and iron founding because work in these trades was known to be irregular.

Workmen over 16, their employers and the State contributed 2 ½d a week. In return for this 7s a week was paid to the unemployed for up to 15 weeks in any one year. Benefits were paid at Labour Exchanges and these were based on German ideas, in fact, like many of the Liberal welfare ideas. The first 83 Labour Exchanges had opened by the beginning of 1910. The other half of the 1911 Act introduced “insurance against the loss of health and for prevention and cure of sickness”. All wage – earners between 16 and 70 had to join the scheme if they earned less than £3 per week. It might be added that these developments were the forerunners of the Beveridge Report whose ideas were implemented by the Attlee Government of 1948 and what we now see as the introduction of the Welfare State. The Attlee Government must clearly take credit for this; the most important development being the National Health Service (in particular the work of the Labour Minister, Aneurin Bevan) but it is worth noting that the author of the Report, Beveridge, was, in fact, a Liberal.

The First World War from 1914-1918 was one of the most defining experiences in the whole of British history, and indeed, the history of the World. Asquith had been Prime Minster at the start of the War and continued until 1916 when Lloyd George took over. 1916 was a very significant year; it saw the Battle of the Somme, and at sea, the Battle of Jutland. Naval power was of vital importance to Britain; Churchill commented that Admiral Jellicoe, Commander of the British Grand Fleet, “was the only man on either side who could have lost the war in an afternoon”. He faced, across the North Sea, a very formidable opponent Admiral von Scheer, Commander of the German High Seas Fleet. Both these battles were very complex and significant. The statistics relating to the Battle of Jutland are very open to historical interpretation but suffice to say that that after the Battle, the German High Seas Fleet did not put to sea again. They concentrated instead on building up their submarine fleet. This was to greatly imperil Britain. In January 1917 they instituted a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. This was a very risky strategy and it would eventually contribute to the USA joining the War on the side of Britain and her Allies. The hope was that they would be able to starve out Britain and France before the USA entered the War! It was at this time that Lloyd George insisted that the Admiralty adopt a convoy system. This meant that Merchant Ships would be protected by warships. This drastically reduced the losses that Britain was experiencing and it meant that the strategic gamble on behalf of the Germans has failed. I find it truly remarkable that he was able to impose his will on the Admiralty, most of who would have come from a much higher social class than Lloyd George at a time when social class mattered so much!

The peak of the German success was in April 1917; Britain lost 430 ships and was down to its last six weeks supply of corn. Lloyd George had much experience politically; he had been President of the Board of Trade from 1905 to 1908. He had been Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1908-1915. The outbreak of the War saw him as Minister of Munitions from 25th. May 1915 to 7th. July 1916. He was also Secretary of State for War from 6th. January 1916 to 5th. December 1916. His skills were clearly

needed at this time and, as stated earlier, he became Prime Minister on 6th. December 1916, a post that he held until 19th. October 1922. During the War he had proved to be a very capable and energetic leader. The First World War was an unprecedented situation for any Prime Minister or Government to have to face.

The First World War ended on 11th. November 1918 at 11 a.m. The Treaty of Versailles of 1919 imposed a peace settlement on the defeated Germans. Other Treaties dealt with other defeated combatant nations. At Versailles Lloyd George was to meet and work with George Clemenceau the French Leader, and President Woodrow Wilson of the USA.

A key question that might be asked is whether or not Lloyd George won the War for Britain and her Empire? I feel that Professor Steven Constantine of Lancaster University addresses this issue with great clarity. He states that "his contribution to the Allied and particularly the British war effort was enormous. He recognised earlier than many how this war would have to be fought, and he above all had the instincts, the experience and confidence to mobilise resources and direct operations, at least on the home front, in the necessary way. It remains legitimate to regard Lloyd George as "The Man Who Won the War".

There is much that followed World War 1 and there is far too much to cover in this type of article. As I stated earlier, his life has always fascinated me. He was the first Welshman to be Prime Minister; he was, in fact, Welsh–speaking and English was his second language. His family spoke Welsh in the home. In religious matters he was a Nonconformist at a time when the Church of England was very powerful, both politically and socially. He was apparently the only Solicitor to be Prime Minster; there have been a number of Barristers. A great Prime Minister? In my view yes. However, the question remains about that fall of Asquith and the rise of Lloyd George and how this created factions within the Liberal Party.

The Strange Death of Liberal England was a book written by George Dangerfield published in 1936. In this he identifies reasons before 1914 that he believes effectively destroyed the Liberal Party as a Party of Government. The late nineteenth century had been dominated by the towering figures of Disraeli (Conservative) and Gladstone (Liberal), so the decline of the Liberal Party is certainly a phenomenon that is worth noting.

Lloyd George continued to be a political force for many years. He met Hitler in 1936. This should not, in my view, be seen in any way as detrimental to him as at this stage the immense horrors of the Nazi regime were yet to be fully known. In 1940 Churchill offered him the post of Ambassador in Washington; he did not take up this post.

His first wife Margaret died in January 1941 and in October 1943 he married Frances Stevenson she had been a long term friend. In September 1944 he moved from Surrey to Ty Newydd in Llanystumdwy. He was ennobled in 1945 he was made Earl Lloyd George in the New Year's Honours list. He died on 26th. March 1945 and he was buried by the Afon Dwyfor. Returning to the question of to what extent he had been responsible for the decline of the Liberal Party? This is an extremely difficult question. The emergence of the Labour Party as a radical party in the early years of the twentieth century perhaps negated much of the need for the Liberal Party. I remember a discussion as an A Level student studying History and an argument being propounded that in the British political system there was room for one conservative party and one radical party. Margaret Thatcher's three Conservative administrations could claim to be both very radical and reforming. This, I suppose, is where we get into semantics!

It might be argued that Lloyd George's own family mirrors these developments. His son Gwylim became Home Secretary in the Conservative administration of Anthony Eden. He was, in fact, the person who had to decide that fate of Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be hanged in Britain; the Home Secretary was the final person who would make the decision in capital offences. His daughter Megan became a Labour M.P. 1957! Both people had been loyal to their Father but in 1945 both had drifted away from the Liberal Party.

Returning to the present day, the new leader of the Liberal Democrats, Tim Farron, addressed their Conference in Bournemouth in September of this year. The speech he gave was very impassioned

and was well received in general. The extent to which Liberal Democrats can recover, despite a surge in membership, from the catastrophic losses in the General Election of 2015 will remain to be seen.

John Hodson