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THE AFTERLIVES OF FORMER LIBERAL PRIME MINISTERS

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Sooner or later, every prime minister becomes a former prime minister. The ‘club’ of former prime ministers is small and exclusive. Over the years, few of its ‘members’ have left Number Ten Downing Street as happy, contented or fulfilled people, or at a time and in a manner of their own choosing. There has been (and there still is) no fixed or established role in public and political life for former prime ministers. What they do after they leave office depends very much on personal choices and on circumstances, including the reaction and attitudes of still-active politicians and of political parties to the former political and governmental leader. There is little in the way of a common pattern.

At one point, in the 1920s, there were, remarkably, three former Liberal prime ministers alive at the same time: Lord Rosebery, Asquith and Lloyd George. Earlier, Earl Russell and Gladstone were Victorian members of the former Liberal prime ministers’ ‘club’. Two other Liberal premiers – Palmerston, who died in office (the last PM to do so) in 1865 aged eighty-one, and Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who died aged seventy-one in 1908, only seventeen days after resigning office (the shortest post-premiership of any PM) – fall outside the scope of this article. Campbell-Bannerman is sometimes described as the last prime minister to die ‘on the premises’ but he is in fact the only prime minister (or, more strictly, former prime minister) actually to die in Number Ten itself. None of the seven British premiers who died while still holding that post died in Downing Street, but at other locations. But it was simply out of the question for the dying C.B. to be moved from Number Ten after Asquith took over.

Leaving Number Ten

Two of the Liberal premiers left office as old men – Russell was seventy-four when he resigned in 1866 and Gladstone was eighty-four when he finally quit the scene in 1894. Russell then lived for another twelve years before dying in 1878, while Gladstone lived for only four years in retirement, dying in 1898. In contrast, the other three left at ages when they did not feel that they were retiring but, rather, still felt they had, and were perceived to have, political futures.

When Rosebery resigned in 1895 he was only forty-eight years old – the youngest former prime minister there had been for sixty-seven years, and there has not been a younger former prime minister since then. He lived nearly another thirty-four years before he died in 1929; no one since Rosebery has had so long a postpremiership. Certainly for the first decade of that postpremiership, there was a widespread expectation that he would soon be back, heading another government or otherwise in high national office. He remained in that period a celebrity figure and a major presence on the political stage. But his star then pretty soon faded, he dropped out of public life and had become a sad, isolated and reclusive figure many years before he died.

Asquith was sixty-four when he lost power in 1916, but he did not want to give up office and resented being forced out in a 'palace coup'. He did not take a peerage and declined the Garter, thus signalling that he did not intend to retire but to stay in frontline politics. He lived for another twelve years, dying in 1928, but his glory days were all behind him.

Lloyd George was only fifty-nine years old, world famous, and still at the height of his powers when he was forced out in 1922. But no one believed that he would be out forever. The King, political allies and enemies, advisers, friends and family members, and Lloyd George himself – all expected that he would return to government, and fairly soon at that. No one suspected that, in the twenty-two more years he would live, he would never be in power again.

We are now familiar with the televised exit from Number 10 of the resigning or defeated prime minister – the brief farewell remarks, the posing in front of the cameras with spouse and family, and the brave waves before the official car speeds them out of Downing Street for the last time. Lloyd George's fall and exit from power in October 1922 was actually the first to be captured on film in this way. A short silent newsreel film shows Conservative MPs spilling out of the Carlton Club meeting after the dramatic party debate and vote there which triggered his resignation, stilted footage of other top politicians of the time and the King, and – with the caption 'I am no longer Prime Minister' – a top-hatted and smartly-dressed Lloyd George, with his wife and daughter, stepping out of Number 10, being saluted by the police constable on duty, and pausing for the cameramen. The film ends with a caption 'In the Wilderness but with one faithful friend at least', showing a relaxed former prime minister, in the country with his dog, about to go for a walk.¹

Some found the practicalities of adjusting to life out of Number Ten easier than others. The Asquiths had nowhere to live as their old house had been let out and a friend had to put them up for a while until they could move back into it. The former prime minister himself sometimes just stagnated and slumped into an easy life with his books, his family and the social round, playing bridge, enjoying his young lady friends and drinking too much. Money was tight with the loss of the prime-ministerial salary as they had no savings but still maintained a substantial domestic staff and a free-spending lifestyle. Asquith had left office much poorer than when he entered it and going back to the Bar was not an option. Eventually, his financial position became so bad that some of his friends organised an appeal through *The Times* for a fund to pay his debts and give him a private pension for the last few years of his life; he left only £9,345 on his death (about £300,000 in today's money).

As a younger son, Russell had been for most of his life at the financially hard-pressed end of the upper classes, admitting at one point that he had never been in debt before becoming prime minister, feeling the loss of a ministerial salary, and dependent on an annuity from his brother (the Duke of Bedford). He was unable to afford a country house of his own befitting his prime-ministerial status, though his position had been helped by inheriting an estate in Ireland (in 1861) and by Queen Victoria giving the Russells a house, Pembroke Lodge in Richmond Park, for their lifetime use. His grandson, the philosopher Bertrand Russell, lived there as a child and recalled the ex-prime minister as an old man: warm, kindly and affectionate in his family circle, being wheeled around his overgrown garden in a bath chair and sitting in his room reading Hansard.

Most of Gladstone's retirement years were spent at Hawarden, interspersed with a number of trips in the winter months to Cannes in the South of France (wealthy friends picking up the bills and providing accommodation). By any reckoning

Gladstone was a rich man. The family's Hawarden estate (which was not actually formally owned by Gladstone himself) amounted to 7,000 acres and produced an income of £10-12,000 a year. He effectively gave away most of his own money in the 1890s, however, settling large capital sums on his children and giving £40,000 and 20,000 of his own books (which he moved himself to the new building in a wheel barrow) to set up St Deinoil's Library at Hawarden. When he died his will was proved at £57,000 (around £3 million today).

Rosebery, who was enormously wealthy, can scarcely have noticed the loss of his prime-ministerial salary. He had inherited his titles, estates and an income of £30,000 a year when only twenty-one, going on to marry a Rothschild heiress, which increased his total income to £140,000 (something like £9 million a year today). He had grand houses at Mentmore, Berkeley Square, Dalmeny in Scotland, The Durdans at Epsom, a villa at Naples, thousands of acres, a yacht. At death he left £1.5 million (equivalent to over £50 million today), a sum that did not include extensive properties made over to his heir several years before. He poured money into horseracing, winning the Derby twice during his short premiership and then for a third time in 1905. He once joked that 'politics and racing were inconsistent which seemed a good reason to give up politics'.

Unlike Asquith, Lloyd George left office substantially wealthier than when he entered it. He turned down offers of City directorships but received an annuity of £2,000 a year from the American tycoon Andrew Carnegie and made serious money from his writing and journalism, being paid one pound per word by the Hearst Press of America for thousand-word articles on contemporary political and international issues which were given world syndication. He has been described as 'the highest paid political journalist of his time', and he once admitted that in his first four years out of office his journalistic income was much greater than the aggregate of his ministerial salaries during his seventeen years in government. It cannot be said that Lloyd George was personally corrupt but he did realise and exploit the fact that, as an ex-prime minister, he was 'a valuable commercial property', as Kenneth O. Morgan says. In his first year out of office (1923) he was able to cash in on his reputation as a world statesman in a triumphant five-week lecture tour of America. He also controlled substantial political funds of his own (totalling several million pounds) – controversially built up from honours sales and the purchase and then profitable resale of the *Daily Chronicle* newspaper – used for organisation, campaigning and propaganda, and to support his energetic ideas-mongering (funding teams of advisers and experts).

Putting pen to paper

All of these former Liberal premiers put pen to paper after they left Number Ten. For a practising politician, Russell wrote a lot over his lifetime, including histories, biographies, and constitutional studies and, as a young man, a novel and a play. However, his memoirs, published in 1875, described as 'disappointing' and 'sour' by one biographer, were written after his memory had begun to fail.²

Gladstone needed a cataract operation in May 1894, which was not wholly successful and left him virtually half-blind, so that reading and writing became more difficult. But he remained intellectually active in retirement, still spending many hours at his desk in the 'Temple of Peace', his library at Hawarden. He published in these years his translation of Horace's Odes, some long journal articles on theology,

and two substantial volumes on the works of Bishop Butler. He had received various offers for his autobiography and Andrew Carnegie had offered in 1887 the huge sum of £100,000 (roughly five million pounds today), but Gladstone signed no contract. He did write some autobiographical fragments and leave papers on some particular episodes but never got down to planning or working on a proper volume of memoirs.

Rosebery was a noted writer and having published a biography of William Pitt in 1891 he went on to write studies of *Napoleon: The Last Phase* (1900), *Lord Randolph Churchill* (1906) and *Chatham: his Early Life and Connections* (1910), together with many shorter essays and addresses, after leaving office. Professional historians tended to be sniffy but the books sold well enough. He turned down offers to write the biographies of Gladstone, Disraeli and Lord Kitchener, however, and refused ever to write his own memoirs or an autobiography.

Needing the money, Asquith wrote several impersonal and unrevealing volumes of reminiscences and memoirs, which did not sell as well as Margot Asquith's more colourful and indiscreet autobiography and other writings. The problem was that 'he had no desire to tell the world what really happened', as Roy Jenkins noted, 'and he was insufficiently interested in himself.'

Lloyd George wrote six fat volumes (totalling one million words) of *War Memoirs*, published between 1933 and 1936, followed by two further volumes, *The Truth About the Peace Treaties*, in 1938. Pugnacious, controversial and partisan, they sold well. In them he took the chance to vindicate his record, settle personal scores and refight his battles with the top brass. It was a Lloyd George-centric account of the war, much like Churchill's later Second World War memoirs. Margot Asquith reported with delight her mother's reaction: 'I always knew that [Lloyd George] had won the war but until I read his *Memoirs* I did not know that he had won it single-handed.' Later on, he mused about possibly writing a character study of Gladstone or a book on Welsh preachers (he was a connoisseur of sermons) or even a novel, and given his taste for trashy 'shilling-shockers', one wonders just what sort of novel he might have produced!

Honours

Gladstone always wanted to go down to history as plain 'Mr Gladstone'. He had refused a knighthood in 1859 and offers of a peerage in 1874 and 1885. He was not an egalitarian and had great respect for rank and the social hierarchy, but he always saw himself as a commoner. In 1894 Queen Victoria curtly said that she did not offer her retiring PM a peerage only because she knew he would (again) refuse it. He also encouraged his wife to decline the offer of a separate peerage in her own right.

Rosebery had inherited his Earldom while Russell had accepted his in 1861 and both had been created Knights of the Garter while still active in politics. Rosebery added the Order of the Thistle when he resigned as prime minister, Russell getting a GCMG. Asquith finally accepted an Earldom and the KG in 1925.

Lloyd George had long held the Lords in contempt and once praised Gladstone, Joe Chamberlain, Bright and Cobden for never making the 'mistake' of taking an honour. He remained an MP until near the end and became Father of the House. But, fading rapidly and seriously ill in 1944 it was obvious that he was in no fit state to fight another general election, and in any case his Caernarvon seat was no longer looking so safe. Hints were discreetly dropped with Churchill and, after some last minute agonising over the decision, Lloyd George accepted a hereditary peerage,

the honour being announced to widespread amazement (and, in some quarters, dismay) on 1 January 1945. The new Earl Lloyd-George of Dwyfor died before he could take his seat in the House of Lords, however.

The ex-prime minister as a minor nuisance

Russell was not ready to retire completely in the late-1860s and remained politically active in the Lords, attacking the policies of the Conservative government that succeeded his own and opposing Derby's reform bill. Looking ahead, he tried in 1867-68 to set out an agenda for the next Liberal government, publishing pamphlets proposing Irish church reform and introducing resolutions in the House of Lords calling for a minister of education and improved education for the working classes. He told Gladstone that he had pretty well made up his mind not to take office again, but there were rumours that he wanted to be Foreign Secretary again if the Liberals got back in. Knowing how troublesome the independent-minded Russell could be, Gladstone thought that it might be safer to have him on the inside and when he became prime minister in 1868 offered a seat in the Cabinet without portfolio, but Russell declined.³

He supported some of the Liberal government's policies: the Education Act, the Irish Land Act. He introduced a proposal for life peers that Gladstone backed. But he was often unhelpful and a nuisance, criticising the government or quibbling over the details of its measures in the Lords or the press. He opposed the introduction of the secret ballot in elections, for instance, and though he favoured the abolition of the purchase of commissions in the army he opposed the way in which the government went about it. He was often critical of Gladstone's foreign policy, venting his dislike of his successor's attitude towards the colonies, the empire and the armed forces.

Gladstone handled the erratic and crotchety ex-PM as tactfully as he could, writing to keep him in touch, giving Russell credit for his achievements and arguing that he was building on them, and claiming that he looked upon him as his 'oracle and master' on constitutional questions. But he complained to Lord Granville about Russell's 'petulant acts' and about him 'leading the mad'.⁴

Overshadowing your successor: Gladstone

Gladstone was an octogenarian during his last premiership: the oldest man ever to be appointed prime minister at eighty-two, and eighty-four when he finally stood down in 1894. He always felt that Wellington and Palmerston had made the mistake of clinging to office for too long, and he ultimately did so as well, most of his colleagues in the end being frankly glad to see the back of him. He had expected and wanted to be formally asked about his successor – and would have nominated Lord Spencer (the top Liberal in the Cabinet most committed to Home Rule). But the Queen did not consult him and sent instead for Lord Rosebery – a choice that dismayed him (he would have preferred even Harcourt over Rosebery).

After Gladstone's resignation, Rosebery's Liberal government lasted only fifteen months. The G.O.M. did not think much of its performance or the new leadership. He disliked the way in which Rosebery abandoned Home Rule. He regretted having brought the 'difficult' Rosebery to the front and making him Foreign Secretary, where they had had policy clashes. 'I cannot understand him – he remains a

closed book to me', Gladstone complained after resigning. 'He never consults me.' Later, in 1896, Gladstone said that 'he gave Rosebery up altogether as a competent man for Liberal leadership – for lack of judgment and even sense.'⁵

Nor did the successor regime please him in other ways. He disliked Harcourt's budget and the new graduated death duties on land. He had reservations about aspects of the Welsh Church Disestablishment legislation and ministers feared that he might intervene to speak out against it at the committee stage (it fell with the government).

The problem was that Gladstone had become out of date and out of touch with the party and the new ideas coming into it. If he had stood aside earlier, the Liberals may have been better able to make the transition to a new and effective leadership and to adapt themselves to new social forces and political challenges.

Gladstone liked to refer to his 'political death' in 1894. But, as Feuchtwanger noted, his 'authority was . . . still so great that any move on his part caused more than a ripple in the muddied waters of Liberal politics. Nobody could be quite certain that he might not sweep back into the arena as he had done before.' Echoing the events of twenty years earlier, it was his controversial intervention on the issue of the Armenian massacres which brought him back briefly onto the political stage, meeting deputations, writing to the press and making his last great public speeches. He called for strong action and argued that the Turkish empire should be wiped off the map. The more direct impact, however, was on the infighting within his own unhappy party. Shortly after Gladstone's September 1896 speech in Liverpool, Rosebery – ill at ease and miserable under his great predecessor's shadow and looking for a way out – resigned as party leader.⁶

Throwing away your chances: Rosebery

Thought still to have a brilliant future before him when he ceased to be prime minister, Rosebery threw it away by his posturing, grandstanding, disloyalty and disengagement from the disciplines of organised party politics.

When he left office in 1895, Rosebery had been prime minister for just one year and 109 days. 'There are two supreme pleasures in life', he later wrote. 'One is ideal, the other real. The ideal is when a man receives the seals of office from his Sovereign. The real pleasure comes when he hands them back.' Yet his defeat and failure as a prime minister had been a shattering experience and Rosebery was haunted by a sense of failure, for the rest of his life brooding on the traumas of 1894-95 and often declaring that he wished he had never accepted office. When chances of a return occurred in the years ahead, part of him always recoiled from them.

Disillusioned and disenchanted with politics, Rosebery had wanted to quit the Liberal leadership and retire from politics, for a time at any rate, immediately after the disastrous 1895 general election. But he continued nominally to head the party, while not giving it any real lead, for more than a year after the defeat until Gladstone provided him with the excuse he had been looking for to jump ship. He wanted, he told friends, to free himself from the 'Gladstonian chains' that he had been bound by ever since he had entered politics and was through with the thankless role of acting as 'Mr G's political executor'. Rosebery believed that the Liberal Party needed to change, developing a new programme and widening its electoral, but he did not want to get involved in the hand-to-hand political fighting necessary to effect that change. He seemed almost to want the party to change and then by acclamation to welcome him back as leader on his own terms.⁷

Rosebery's future was the subject of considerable speculation. He was still relatively young, had experience of the highest offices, and had real political star quality. He sent out mixed and confusing signals, however, and his political intentions and plans seemed changeable, elusive and mysterious even to himself, let alone his often-bewildered supporters in the party and the public. By the time Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman was elected leader in 1898, Rosebery was more popular than he had been as prime minister and many of his supporters regarded Campbell-Bannerman as a second-rate figure, a stop-gap who would just keep the seat warm until their hero was ready to reclaim his rightful place.

In 1899 Rosebery was elected, at the top of the poll, to Epsom District Council. He was unanimously voted chairman but characteristically refused the post, though he was an active member of the council, scrupulously attending meetings through the three years he served. This was very worthy and indeed unique for a former prime minister, but not quite what those who wanted to see him back in political office had in mind.

The three or four years following the outbreak of the South African War in 1899 were the crucial period in which Rosebery might have returned to a position of national or party leadership. But he lost the chance, partly through his own doubts, hesitations and mistakes and partly because of the way the wider political situation developed and changed.

With the Liberal Party in argumentative disarray over the war, Rosebery's ultimate aims were not always clear or consistent. He appeared at some times to be wanting to battle for the future of the party (the Liberal League being formed with him as president to press the Liberal Imperialist case against the anti-war 'Little Englanders' in the party). At other times he apparently wanted to provoke a formal split in the party. His supporters certainly schemed to undermine or displace Campbell-Bannerman as leader. And Rosebery also appeared to hanker after a political realignment and a non-party or above-party political and personal future (latching on to the fashionable 'national efficiency' ideas).

During the infighting in the Liberal Party at this time Rosebery and his acolytes underestimated Campbell-Bannerman (a tougher and shrewder figure than his detractors thought) and overestimated their own strength and support. Rosebery certainly showed his mastery of publicity and ability to command attention and headlines. But Campbell-Bannerman carried with him the centre and the bulk of the party. Any prospect of either a Rosebery-led 'national' coalition or a Roseberyite take-over of the Liberal Party faded as two-party partisanship revived with the ending of the Boer War and controversies over the 1902 Education Act, and were finally ended with Joe Chamberlain's launch of his protectionist crusade in 1903 and the Liberals uniting in defence of free trade. As events moved on, Rosebery was left stranded, his position weakened, looking increasingly marginalised. Behind the scenes, the King had apparently tried to persuade him in 1901 to come back and resume the Liberal leadership and in 1905 again appealed unsuccessfully to him to take office. But by 1904 it was becoming widely understood that the King would send for Campbell-Bannerman when the time came to change the government.

Rosebery's dramatic speech at Bodmin in November 1905, denouncing Home Rule and insisting that he could not 'serve under that banner', was an act of political self-destruction, finally cutting him off from his erstwhile supporters and ensuring that there would be no place for him in the Liberal government that Campbell-Bannerman would soon form. Once Campbell-Bannerman became prime minister,

appointed the leading Liberal Imperialists to senior positions and won a landslide majority, Rosebery was effectively politically finished.

He stayed on the political stage a few years longer, an increasingly isolated and irrelevant figure with virtually no personal followers, sitting on the cross-benches in the Lords, a purely negative critic of the Liberal Government. It might have been better for his reputation if he had taken himself out of the way by accepting the post of ambassador to the United States pressed on him in November 1906 by Sir Edward Grey and the King, but he refused it. His alienation from the Liberals now became even more pronounced and his attitudes and views markedly Conservative.

Having opposed the introduction of old age pensions, Rosebery strongly attacked Lloyd George's 1909 'People's Budget' as 'tyrannical and socialistic' and heralding a 'social and political revolution', and he defended his fellow aristocratic landowners as a 'poor but honest class'. But when the crunch came, he declared that he would not vote against it, fearing that the Lords' actions in defeating the budget could imperil the very existence of the second chamber. Later, although he strongly opposed the Liberals' reform of the Lords powers, he further damaged his reputation by finally voting for the Parliament bill. He was now despised on both sides of the political divide, Liberals viewing him as a reactionary, Tories as a coward. After 1911 he never again entered the House of Lords.

At the age of sixty-four, Rosebery's political career was over. He no longer had the standing, the influence, the following or the appetite for office necessary. 'If I were to join the battle', he told one confidant, 'I should find myself back again where I will not be.' He had come to hate and detest politics – 'this evil-smelling bog', as he called it, from which 'I was always trying to extricate myself'.⁸

When Lloyd George became prime minister in 1916, in an effort to bolster his administration, he offered Rosebery the post of Lord Privy Seal – he would not have departmental duties but serve in a 'consultative capacity' – but he refused the job. It is not clear what Rosebery at this stage would have brought to the government, other than the public appeal of his name.

In November 1917 tragedy struck when his younger son, Neil Primrose – who had been an MP and a promising junior minister – was killed in action while serving with the army in the Middle East. A year later, in November 1918, Rosebery was felled by a massive stroke that left him partially paralysed. For the last ten years of his life before he died in 1929, aged eighty-two, he was a largely forgotten figure, living a lonely and melancholy invalid existence. For all his glamour, gifts and brilliant early promise, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that he had been a political failure: an unhappy and unsuccessful prime minister and then an unhappy and unsuccessful ex-prime minister.

Hanging on too long: Asquith

Asquith remained leader of the Liberal Party after 1916 but found being the leading opposition figure in wartime an awkward, unwelcome and constraining position. Many of the senior Liberals had followed him rather than serve under Lloyd George, but he did not want to widen the rift in the party ranks and temperamentally was always basically a ministerialist and not a man for to-the-sword opposition, which he anyway felt would be inappropriate in wartime.

On a number of occasions Lloyd George tried to lure him back into government, despite some doubts about this in his close circle and Lloyd George's

own sense that Asquith was 'sterile' when it came to policy ideas. Various posts were dangled in front of him – Foreign Secretary, Chancellor, Lord Chancellor (with a tempting £10,000 salary and a £5,000 pension) – but Asquith turned them all down. On the only occasion when Asquith did try to turn the heat up on Lloyd George during the war - when he led calls in 1918 for a select committee to be established to inquire into whether Lloyd George had misled parliament about troop levels available to the generals on the western front – it backfired on him and underlined the party split.

The 1918 'khaki election' was a disaster for Asquith. He had little in the way of a positive programme to offer and largely ended up simply warning against giving Lloyd George a 'blank cheque'. His heart was not in it and he expected to lose, but the outcome was worse than he had thought likely. The coalition swept the board while Asquith's Liberals won only 28 seats, being overtaken by Labour, and Asquith lost his own seat. It might have been a good moment to quietly bow out. But with no obvious successor, Asquith chose to soldier on as Liberal leader though he was really in a sort of political limbo. In the first half of 1919 he received not one invitation to speak from any Liberal association in the country. Taking on the job that year of chairing a Royal Commission on Oxford and Cambridge universities was hardly the sort of assignment to bring him back to the centre of the political stage.

It was February 1920 before he returned to parliament via a by-election. But the odds were stacked against a great political come back. He was the leader of a small and unhappy parliamentary force. His own political position was ambiguous, as he was rightly seen as a Whiggish figure but was the leader of the more radical part of the divided Liberal Party. Fatally, he had no real fight left in him and dismayed followers were soon complaining that he gave no strong lead. Graham Stewart has put his finger on 'Asquith's inability to inject new thinking into Liberalism. He offered nothing to suggest he had adjusted to a changed environment, but nor would he step aside for someone who might carry forward the party into the post-war world.' 'Asquith cuts no ice', protested his old ally Edward Grey. 'He is using the machine of a great political brain to re-arrange old ideas.'

Like a general fighting the wrong battle, Asquith took pleasure from the fact that in the 1922 general election his wing of the Liberal Party did slightly better than Lloyd George's, though more significant was that Labour's advance continued. In 1923 the two Liberal factions were brought together by Baldwin's move towards protectionism but the unity was superficial and half-hearted. Asquith remained formally party leader but Lloyd George controlled substantial independent funds and provided the real dynamism and ideas, and tensions and bitter mistrust continued. After the December 1923 election produced a hung parliament, Asquith was the 'kingmaker', rejecting the idea of a coalition and opting to put in a minority and inexperienced Labour government which he judged would not last long and the failure of which would hopefully benefit the Liberals. It was a major miscalculation, for when Labour fell from office in October 1924 and another general election was held, which the Conservatives won, the real casualties were the Liberals, who lost three-quarters of their seats. Asquith was again unhorsed, losing Paisley.

He moved to the Lords and remained overall party leader while Lloyd George led in the Commons. This was an unstable arrangement and an uneasy partnership that could never last for long, and things came to a head in May 1926 when they fell out over how to respond to the General Strike (Asquith backing the government). Asquith then had a stroke after which he resigned the leadership in October 1926. His post-premiership had been a painful and protracted anti-climax and political decline. 'He

had stayed too long in an impossible situation', Jenkins concluded, his reasons for hanging on largely negative, and offering the declining Liberal Party little that was positive.¹⁰

Lloyd George in the wilderness

Certainly up to 1931 (and to a lesser extent after that), Lloyd George remained a critical player and at the very centre of British politics, and he was one of the most creative and exciting politicians of the period, brimming with ideas, plans and schemes. Some of his impact was negative, in the sense that he was a bogeyman to his rival political leaders, haunting their minds and their political calculations as they manoeuvred to thwart him and keep him out. Much of the politics of the 1920s were a reaction against Lloyd George – his methods, record, policies and personality.

Ideas about new coalitions or alliances, dividing or breaking up the established parties, seemed never far from his thoughts. Options were kept open and feelers put out to left and right at various times, hoping to attract moderate Labour and progressive Conservatives, and he looked to exploit whatever opportunities came his way as the tectonic plates of the party system groaned and shifted, with five elections in nine years (1922-31) and two periods of minority Labour government (1924 and 1929-31). The underlying problem was that his political space was more and more squeezed as the Liberals lost out to Labour and the Conservatives and as two-party politics was restored. In 1924-29 and even more so after 1931, large government majorities effectively sidelined him. 'Ideas and experts were not enough', as Kenneth O. Morgan argued. 'He needed also supporters, organisation, a party base – above all, public trust. These were assets which Lloyd George, however fertile in ideas and initiatives, conspicuously lacked.'¹¹

While the role of a 'permanent one-man opposition' played to his strengths and was perhaps the only one circumstances really permitted, it was ultimately a cul-de-sac. He thought that his free-wheeling independence was an asset, as John Campbell noted, but the absence of a strong party base actually left him isolated, cut off from the real road to power and, eventually, in the wilderness.¹²

Liberal reunion after 1923 was always rather cosmetic and Lloyd George's relations with Asquith were edgy and uneasy. Had Lloyd George won control of the Liberal Party sooner, he might have been better able to rescue its position and restore its fortunes. 'When Lloyd George came back to the party, ideas came back to the party', one Liberal politician said. What Lloyd George tried to offer in the 1920s was a non-socialist radical alternative, a politics of creative ideas, attractive to moderate and progressive opinion. But while headlines were captured, and the contrast with Baldwin's 'Safety First' and MacDonald's call for 'no monkeying' was marked, the electoral rewards (in 1929) were frustratingly scanty.

Lloyd George and the Liberals were really on a hiding to nothing in helping to prop up a minority Labour government after 1929 but getting little in return. Divisions within the Liberal Party were deepening while Lloyd George was casting about for some formula to escape from the tightening third-party squeeze they were experiencing. He toyed fruitlessly again with the idea of a Centre Party, talking with mavericks like Mosley and Churchill and with dissident young Tories like Macmillan. In February 1931 George Lansbury, on his own initiative, wrote to Lloyd George urging him to join the Labour Party, suggesting he could become its deputy leader. By July 1931 he was closer to regaining office and power than at any other time between

1922 and 1940. The embattled MacDonald, it is suggested, was almost on the brink of bringing Lloyd George and the Liberals into government, with secret talks going on and rumours that Lloyd George would become Leader of the House of Commons and either Chancellor or Foreign Secretary.

With cruel bad luck, however, Lloyd George was knocked out of action at one of the crucial moments in inter-war British politics, falling seriously ill and needing a prostate operation just as the Labour government collapsed in the great political-financial crisis of August 1931 and a 'National' Government was formed. Other top Liberals (Samuel and Reading) joined the Cabinet and Lloyd George's son Gwilym became a junior minister. But he was against any lasting alliance between the Liberals and the Conservatives ('If I am to die, I would rather die fighting on the Left', he declared) and detected a Tory plot to take party advantage of the national emergency in the decision to hold an early election in October 1931, breaking with Samuel and Reading when they went along with it. But he was then completely and humiliatingly shipwrecked by the 'National' government's landslide election victory. Estranged from the Liberals, he was reduced to heading a small 'family' rump group of just four MPs.

In 1935 he stumped the country again and dominated the media with his ideas for a British 'New Deal', campaigning for economic reconstruction and public works to cure unemployment, linked to support for the League of Nations, international disarmament and peace. MacDonald and Baldwin toyed with the idea of co-operation with him and even bringing him into the Cabinet, but backed off when they realised the strength of Tory opposition to doing a deal. He set up the non-party 'Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction', working with the Free Churches to try to tap non-conformist radicalism, and pouring money into sponsoring candidates in the hope of perhaps holding the balance of power after an election. But when the Conservative-dominated 'National' government won another huge majority in November 1935, the game was up.

In September 1936 he made a controversial visit to Germany, meeting Hitler. Unfortunately for the ex-prime minister's reputation, Lloyd George appeared to admire and get on well with the Führer, the two men fascinating and flattering each other. An article he wrote about his visit in the *Daily Express* was so enthusiastic and uncritical it had to be toned down. However, if he had been taken in by Hitler and was an appeaser in 1936 he was certainly not two years later, condemning the Munich settlement and criticising Neville Chamberlain's government for its failures to rearm and to stand up against the aggression of the dictators.

In 1916 Lloyd George had offered the energy and the will to win the war. But in 1939-40, in his final significant appearance on the political stage, it was very different. He seemed in fact pretty pessimistic and defeatist, convinced that Britain could not win the war and defeat Germany by itself, and that it might actually lose the war. He believed a negotiated compromise peace was possible and would be better than another long and costly war. Some indeed saw Lloyd George as a potential British Pétain.

He helped to bring Neville Chamberlain down with his last great parliamentary speech in May 1940 – 'the Prime Minister should give an example of sacrifice . . . [and] sacrifice the seals of office'. For the final time, it seemed that he was on the brink of a return to office. He might be good for only six hours work a day, it was said, 'but they would be six hours of pure radium'. One idea was that if he was not capable of running a department, he should become a sort of food or agriculture supremo, chairing a food production council. Churchill appeared to be

anxious to have Lloyd George with him and, in discussions in late-May/early June 1940, offered a post in the War Cabinet but he turned it down, unwilling to serve with Chamberlain. He may also have felt that the call had come too late and doubted his physical capacity and resilience. Perhaps too he doubted whether Churchill would succeed and thought he should hold himself back 'in reserve': 'I shall wait until Winston is bust'. Later, in December 1940, he also turned down the offer to become British ambassador to the United States on health grounds.

After that, Lloyd George went into sharp physical and political decline. He was very jumpy, terrified of German air-raids, and had a deep and luxurious underground shelter built at Churt in which he would sleep. He became very bitter about Churchill and his conduct of the war, seeming to take a perverse delight when things went badly and there were setbacks. In February 1943 he cast his last vote in parliament, voting against the government and with Labour rebels in support of the Beveridge report. He last set foot in parliament to listen to Churchill's statement on the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944.

Discontented ghosts?

The authors of *The Federalist Papers* conjured up a memorable image of former American presidents 'wandering among the people like discontented ghosts, and sighing for a place which they were destined never more to possess.'¹³ The label has a wider application and relevance. The Liberal prime ministers considered here mostly found giving power up, or being brushed to one side, and then life after Number Ten, difficult and frustrating in different ways. The role of ex-prime minister is a tricky one to play and get right. The problems experienced by Asquith and Lloyd George in the 1920s reflected the wider difficulties of Liberal division and decline, but their personal feud also contributed to the situation. Russell and Gladstone showed that old prime ministers and leaders do not often go gently into that good night, causing headaches and problems for their successors. Rosebery discovered that ex-prime ministers cannot have a constructive continuing role in British politics if they try to 'go it alone'.

¹ The film, 'End of an era for the "Welsh Wizard"', can be seen on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYeLTdW2b4c> and on the Number Ten Downing Street website at: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/Page11749>.

² Prest, *Lord John Russell*, p.420; Scherer, *Lord John Russell*, p.336.

³ Scherer, *Lord John Russell*; Prest, *Lord John Russell*.

⁴ Prest, *Lord John Russell*, p.419.

⁵ J.B. Conacher, 'A Visit to the Gladstones in 1894', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 2, no.2, 1958, p.159; Shannon, *Gladstone*, pp.567-568; *The Personal Papers of Lord Rendel* (London: Ernest Benn, 1931), pp.135-136.

⁶ Feuchtwanger, *Gladstone*, p.273; Conacher, 'A Visit to the Gladstones', p.160; Magnus, *Gladstone*, pp.430-431.

⁷ Rhodes James, *Rosebery*, pp.386, 392, 402; H.C.G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp.23-24.

⁸ McKinstry, *Rosebery*, pp.504, 508-509, 514-515; Rhodes James, *Rosebery*, p.474.

⁹ Koss, *Asquith*, pp.244, 249-255; Graham Stewart, *Friendship & Betrayal: Ambition and the Limits of Loyalty* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007), pp.336-337.

¹⁰ Jenkins, *Asquith*, p.517.

¹¹ Rowland, *Lloyd George*, p.591; Morgan, *Lloyd George*, p.181.

¹² Campbell, *Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness*, pp.9, 177; Charles Loch Mowat, *Lloyd George* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p.55.

¹³ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay, *The Federalist* (London: Dent, Everyman's Library, 1970), pp.370-71.