

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 46

“Deeds, Not Words”

Transcript

[music: fanfare]

After a ten year journey in the political wilderness, the Liberal Party was back in power in the United Kingdom for the first time in the new century, after a landslide victory. They had won their way back into power by opposing the excesses of the Boer War, supporting the demands of the working class and the Nonconformists, and by allying with the fledgling Labour Party and the suffragist movement.

But now that they were back in government in Westminster and held the power, what were they going to do with it? How can they keep such a broad coalition together?

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: opening theme]

Episode 46. Deeds, Not Words.

What does a Liberal government want? That’s a more difficult question to ask than, What does a Conservative government want? Conservatives want the status quo. Liberals want change. But “change” is not a policy. It needs to be defined. But the Liberals are a fractious coalition. The Liberal Party encompasses figures from the new Prime Minister, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, a businessman, to the new Chancellor, Herbert Asquith, a barrister, to Lord Rosebery, former Liberal PM whose stances in favor of the Boer War and against Irish home rule cost him a place in the new Liberal government, to the new foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey, a country gentleman, to the new President of the Board of Trade, David Lloyd George, a Welsh lunatic.

This new Liberal government had won so smashing a victory that it held an outright majority in the Commons. It didn’t even need the votes of the Irish Parliamentary Party, as had been the case with past Liberal governments. As a result, although the Prime Minister, Campbell-Bannerman, was personally a proponent of Irish home rule, it was a controversial and potentially divisive issue that the Liberals could safely table, at least for the time being, without fear of it bringing down the government.

On the other hand, the Liberals have made a pact with the fledgling Labour Party, and the Liberals have been trying to position themselves as the natural ally of the working class in

Britain. And so, the new Liberal government passed legislation long sought by advocates of working people—things like worker’s compensation, so workers themselves don’t have to bear the losses and expenses when they are injured on the job, and a law to permit local schools to provide free meals to needy children, even though these new social programs were not exactly in keeping with the classical definition of “liberal.”

You may also recall that, before the dust had even settled on the Liberal landslide, Arthur Balfour, leader of the Conservative Party and former Tory Prime Minister, began to talk about how the Tories could use their perpetual majority in the House of Lords to block Liberal legislation, just as they had blocked Irish home rule all the way back in 1893. Remember that? Remember how the last Liberal majority sweated and strained to get a Home Rule bill through the Commons, only to have the House of Lords vote it down? Balfour confidently told the Conservative Party that it was their duty to preserve the future of Britain, even when the Tories were in opposition.

Okay, but the House of Lords? Are you kidding me? The Lords are an unelected bunch of old fuddy-duddies who inherited their seats and mostly don’t even care enough about what’s going on in government to turn up. Except that they have been known to turn up in large numbers when sufficiently motivated. One such case was the Reform Bill of 1832, which was meant to reform and modernize the methods used to elect the House of Commons. The Lords had threatened to veto that one, too, although the then-King William IV, at the prodding of the Prime Minister, had threatened to exercise his power of ennoblement to make enough pro-reform activists into new Lords to tip the balance in the House of Lords the other way. He didn’t have to go that far, as it turned out. The threat itself was enough to get the House of Lords to relent and allow the bill to pass. And Parliament made its first steps toward becoming a modern representative body.

So, it turns out even the House of Lords can be pressured, if the pressure comes from the King. Hmm. Do you think anything like that might happen again?

If you recall our discussion of some of the issues that had fired up the people of Great Britain into voting Liberal in 1906, you can predict some of the early legislation that the new government passed through the House of Commons. A new education bill to override the features of the Tory education bill that Liberals found so objectionable, especially public money for Anglican and Catholic schools. A Plural Voting Bill that would abolish the long-established practice that landowners could vote multiple times, once in each constituency where they owned land. A Trade Disputes bill to overrule the hated *Taff Vale* decision. Remember in that *Taff Vale* case the House of Lords, sitting in their role as Britain’s highest law court, ruled that labor unions could be sued for financial losses caused by a strike, with had the effect of making strikes basically impossible in the UK, and that was the case had launched the Labour Party into politics.

But the Conservatives in the House of Lords made good on their threats. Two of the three bills I just mentioned, the education bill and the plural voting bill, were rejected by the House of Lords. The Lords did agree to the Trade Disputes Bill, even though that Act overruled their own legal decision. The decision to approve the Trade Disputes Bill may seem surprising, but consider that the pressure to pass it came mostly from trade unions and their Labour Party allies. To defeat that bill would force Labour into a closer cooperation with the Liberals, but the Tory leadership in the Lords were canny enough to realize that their real interests lay in driving a wedge between Liberals and Labour. And so the bill passed.

But even so, to defeat two bills so quickly, so soon after a general election in which these very issues had been weighed and decided upon by the voters, represented a slap in the face to the public will. It was a serious break with past precedent, and an aggressive warning from the Lords that they meant to take an active stance in opposition to the Liberals in the Commons.

As for the Commons, at this point, the most they were willing to do about the problem of the Lords was to pass a resolution declaring the Commons' view that in the event of a deadlock between the Commons and the Lords, the view of the elected House should prevail. The Labour MPs, of course, wanted to abolish the House of Lords altogether, but they were few in number.

In 1907, Campbell-Bannerman went to France to meet with his counterpart, Georges Clemenceau. It did not go well. Clemenceau berated Campbell-Bannerman for the Liberal government's reducing military expenditures when everyone else in Europe was increasing them, as well as for being the only major European power not to have compulsory military service. Campbell-Bannerman, for his part, hedged on the idea of deploying British troops to France in the event of a war with Germany, causing an exasperated Clemenceau to blurt out that if that was the position of the British government, then France was finished with the entente.

As it would turn out, though, the Liberal government in Britain would continue the policy of publicly denying it had made any firm commitment to defend France while privately agreeing to joint army and navy deployments in the event of war, sending out decidedly mixed signals. This would continue until August of 1914.

The Campbell-Bannerman government would also agree to self-government for the Transvaal and the Orange River Colonies in South Africa, paving the way for the Union of South Africa in 1910, as we have already seen. This move was hailed as a brave act of political reconciliation among the Boers, but derided as cowardice by Unionists in Great Britain.

Campbell-Bannerman was not a young man, and it would not be his destiny to serve as prime minister for very long. He had a serious heart attack in November 1907. His health deteriorating, he would resign as Prime Minister in April, 1908, and he died just days later, at the age of 71. David Lloyd George eulogized him by saying,

“The masses of the people of this country, especially the more unfortunate of them, have lost the best friend they ever had in the high places of the land. His sympathy in all suffering was real, deep, and unaffected. He was truly a great man—a great head and a great heart. He was absolutely the bravest man I ever met in politics. He was entirely free from fear. He was a man of supreme courage. Ireland has certainly lost one of her truest friends, and what is true of Ireland is true of every section of the community of this Empire which has a fight to maintain against powerful foes.”

[music: *Enigma Variations*]

The new prime minister would be the 55-year old Chancellor of the Exchequer, H.H. Asquith. Herbert Henry Asquith was born in 1852 in Yorkshire. His father was a wool merchant and his family were Congregationalists. Herbert was seven years old when his father died. He was raised by his mother, grandfather, and later moved to London to live with his uncle. He won a scholarship to Oxford and graduated in 1874. He soon became a barrister and married his first wife, Helen Melland, in 1877. They would have five children together, and Herbert would become a prominent and successful barrister. He was first elected to Parliament in 1886. Helen died of typhoid fever in 1891.

When the Liberals briefly returned to power in 1892, Asquith was Home Secretary in Gladstone’s government. In 1894, he married Margot Tennant, the daughter of a wealthy Scottish businessman and Liberal politician. By now, the former Yorkshire Nonconformist was fully ensconced in London society. He would have three children with his second wife, one of whom, Anthony Asquith, would become a film director at a time when that was *not* considered a respectable profession for the son of a gentleman.

The British King, Edward VII, was vacationing at the French ocean resort town of Biarritz, a favorite getaway for royalty in those days, and he refused to cut short his holiday over a silly little thing like the installation of a new Prime Minister, forcing Asquith to travel to France to receive His Majesty’s request to form a government. Asquith remains to this day the only British Prime Minister who was ever forced to leave British soil in order to receive the royal appointment.

Britons seem much more fond of going by their first initials than do we North Americans, but even so, the Right Honourable H.H. Asquith stands in a class by himself for how frequently he was and is referred to only by his first initials. He has to have set some kind of record for being the most prominent person ever, to have a first name known to so few. But, for the record, it’s Herbert, although his second wife preferred to call him “Henry.” Got it? Okay.

The new Prime Minister wasn’t afraid to shake up the Liberal cabinet. He dismissed several ministers in favor of his own appointments. He appointed Reginald McKenna First Lord of the

Admiralty, because he expected McKenna to support Liberal moves to reduce military spending. McKenna, however, would go in the opposite direction, supporting Admiral Jackie Fisher in his plans to build more dreadnought battleships. David Lloyd George was promoted to Chancellor of the Exchequer, Asquith's old job, and Lloyd George's old job as President of the Board of Trade went to Winston Churchill, a surprising move, given that Churchill was only 36 years old at the time, and had only switched to the Liberal Party a few years ago.

That appointment to the Cabinet almost ended Churchill's political career. The law of the time was that when an M.P. joined the Cabinet, he had to resign his seat and run for it again in a by-election, to prove that he retained the support of his constituency. But Churchill lost his by-election, in part because of vigorous women's suffrage protests, a topic we will come back to in a bit. News of his defeat was received gleefully by the Tories, who saw it as a sign that the pendulum was already swinging back in their direction.

But the Liberals soon arranged for Churchill to stand in another constituency and he returned to Parliament to take up his new Cabinet post as planned. Lloyd George and Churchill would be the noisiest critics in the Cabinet of McKenna's dreadnought program, and Churchill would later succeed McKenna as First Lord of the Admiralty.

Together, Lloyd George and Churchill would shepherd through the Commons some key social legislation of behalf of the Liberal Party, which was meant to cement its relationship with Labour and the trade unions. An eight-hour day for coal miners. Old age pensions. Workers' compensation, minimum wage legislation. Again, the strategy in the House of Lords was not to pick a fight over bills important to Labour, and so it approved them without argument. And it was working. The Liberal and Labour parties were drawing farther apart. Labour was feeling their oats. They had clout with the Liberals, and they were determined to use it. The Trade Disputes Bill had made strikes possible again, and the unions went at it, causing dissension in the Liberal Party, which has many industrialists and men of business among its leaders. The Liberal-Labour pact that had put the government in power was no longer in effect, and Labour was contesting Liberal seats in by-elections. They picked up two seats in 1907 at the Liberals' expense. So great was the socialist uproar in Britain becoming, that Kaiser Wilhelm reportedly joked that he would take his army and launch an invasion, not as the German monarch but as the loyal nephew of the British King, come to restore order and re-establish his uncle's royal prerogatives.

That Kaiser Wilhelm. What a sense of humor.

In 1908, however, the battle between the two Houses of Parliament resumed when the Lords began exercising their power to amend bills sent to them by the Commons and, most notably, voting down the Licensing Bill, a bill to reduce the number of public house licenses. This was meant as a nod to the growing temperance movement, which mostly came out of the Nonconformist churches, which were a key Liberal constituency, so there you are. But reducing

the number of pubs was an unpopular move in Britain, surprise, surprise, so this was a case where the public was on the side of the Lords, so not exactly the kind of issue you want to plant your flag on, is it?

The Liberals agreed to the construction of four new dreadnoughts, inspiring the Conservative slogan, “We want eight and we won’t wait!” You may recall from episode 2 that this was the era of invasion mania, when fears of the German naval buildup inspired invasion fiction like *The Invasion of 1910* and *When William Came*. It was a core principle of Liberalism that militarism is foolish and expensive, but here the public was also on the side of the Tories, and in the end, Jackie Fisher got his ships.

The movement in Britain to give women the right to vote had been gathering momentum since the 19th century. In those days there were also battles over other women’s issues, like the right of married women to own property separate from their husbands. By the late 19th century, most of those disputes had been resolved, and women had won the right to vote in local elections and to serve on local councils.

1897 saw the formation of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, an umbrella organization bringing together local suffrage groups from across the country. For the next twenty years, this group, known as the suffragists for short, would be led by Millicent Fawcett. You may remember Millicent Fawcett from our discussion of the Boer War and her role as chair of the Fawcett Commission, in investigating the concentration camps in South Africa.

Fawcett was a Liberal herself, and like most folks, she figured Liberals, who made the extension of voting rights to more and more men one of their core policies for decades now, ought to be supporting suffrage for women. The Conservatives were hopeless. Conservative politicians were queasy enough about letting *men* vote, let alone women. And so, the long dry spell from 1895-1905, when the Conservatives were in government, was frustrating for suffragists like Fawcett. But they pressed on, holding meetings, publishing articles, and meeting one-on-one with Members of Parliament to press their case, adopting the slogan, “Votes for Women.” By the 1906 general election, the suffragists were organized by parliamentary constituency, ready to pressure the local constituency parties to put up pro-suffrage candidates.

In 1903, a group of women who were frustrated by the lack of progress on suffrage formed a new and more militant organization: The Women’s Social and Political Union, led by Emmeline Pankhurst. This new organization was only open to women members, and pursued a more militant approach, since it seemed Fawcett’s suffragists with their moderate reasonableness just weren’t getting the job done. Members of this group came to be called suffragettes. Got that? The moderates are suffragists; the militants are suffragettes. The suffragettes were willing to embrace civil disobedience. They started by shouting down politicians and disrupting party meetings. In 1905, in the waning days of the Balfour government, a Liberal MP was persuaded to introduce a women’s suffrage bill in Parliament, but it went nowhere.

The election of 1906 had not only put a broad Liberal majority into the Commons, it also, by the suffragists' count, put over 400 pro-suffrage MPs into the Commons, which was enough to pass a women's suffrage bill. Liberals might be a much more natural party to support women's suffrage, but even the more moderate suffragists like Fawcett became outraged when the new Liberal government failed to put forward that bill. Campbell-Bannerman told them to be patient. Asquith said the same thing. In truth, the Liberals had been happy to accept suffragist political support, and most of the Liberal rank-and-file in the Commons were pro-suffrage, but the older men in leadership, like Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, were personally opposed.

The suffragettes began harassing the Liberal party and its politicians. Even the suffragists endorsed the strategy of opposing Liberals in by-elections, often supporting the Labour or socialist candidate instead, which is what contributed to Churchill's by-election defeat.

These suffragettes embraced the slogan "Deeds, Not Words," and turned to aggressive protest. They crashed speeches and political meetings, ringing bells and shouting slogans. They hounded Members of Parliament, sometimes physically attacking them. They broke windows and set fires. They chained themselves to the railing at the Ladies Gallery and chanted "Votes for women!" drowning out the business of Parliament.

Inevitably, this led to suffragettes being arrested, tried, and sent to prison, where these middle-class women were treated like common criminals. This further offended the suffrage movement, who felt their members were political prisoners, and deserved better than to be lumped together with pickpockets and prostitutes. By 1909, the prisoners had had enough and began hunger strikes to protest their treatment. The first was Marion Wallace Dunlop, a woman who had been arrested for pasting a suffrage poster onto a wall at the Palace of Westminster, and given the choice between a £5 fine and a month in prison, she had taken the month in prison and began a hunger strike in July, 1909. After she took no food for 91 hours, the panicked authorities released her. Predictably, suffragette prisoners across the country followed suit. The Liberal government wasn't willing to order a mass release of every suffragette, however, and so began a program of forced feeding, where the women were strapped into chairs and rubber tubes forced down their throats or noses, in order that liquid sustenance could be delivered directly into their stomachs without their consent, a horrific practice that was as degrading to the prison officers as it was brutal to the prisoners, and provoked further suffragette outrage.

[music: *Enigma Variations*]

If the Liberal government seems strangely indifferent to these women's suffrage controversies, perhaps it's because the Cabinet is distracted that other big issue: its battle with the newly assertive House of Lords. The Right Honourable Mr. Asquith and his government have had just about enough of Mr. Balfour and his Lords. They have won an historic electoral victory and have the backing of the people. It's about time the Lords recognized that.

It has also not escaped the Liberal leadership that the Tories have been very strategic in their vetoes, making war on Liberal policies and constituencies, while giving a pass to Labour and its constituencies. The Tories must have loved to watch the conflict between the middle class suffragettes and the Liberals, thinking that it would further splinter the Liberal vote, while I imagine the Liberals despaired of getting votes for women past the House of Lords even if they got it through the Commons. The Lords had already exercised their veto to protect plural voting. You think they're going to shy away from an attack on women's rights?

On April 29, 1909, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, delivered the Liberal counterattack in the form of a budget bill. It would come to be called "The People's Budget," and it was nothing like anything the United Kingdom had ever seen before. If the Tories were going to be driving wedges between the Liberals and Labour, well, two can play at this game.

One of the problems facing the Liberals was how to fund all the new spending they'd just approved. Old age pensions? Dreadnoughts? They're both expensive. Liberals traditionally don't like taxes, right? Well, traditionally, taxes means tariffs, which Liberals double especially don't like. But tariffs aren't the only game in town. So the People's Budget of 1909 included some radical changes in British taxation. A higher income tax on incomes about £2,000 per year, which is about US\$250,000 per year in today's currency. The People's Budget also increased inheritance taxes and, most radical of all, proposed a 20% tax on gains in the sale of unimproved land.

I should explain this. Land taxes were a bold new idea at that time, an idea that's largely been forgotten today, but the concept is this: people who buy a tract of unimproved land, and then sell it later at a profit haven't actually contributed anything to the economy. The fact that the land has increased in value is usually a result of population and economic growth in the community around the piece of land and in the nation at large. So if a landowner's land is worth more today than what they paid for it when they bought it back when, it isn't because of anything the owner did, it was because of things the community and the nation did. Therefore, it was not unjust for the community and the nation to claim a share of the profits. In fact, many at that time advocated a 100% tax on the increased value of unimproved land, seeing no reason why a landowner should get to keep even one penny of that markup.

The new revenue these new taxes would bring in would fund the dreadnoughts and the old age pensions and the rest of it, with money left over for more reforms aimed at easing the lot of the working classes and their Labour allies. And the new costs were aimed squarely at the landed aristocracy in the House of Lords. I want to call this a shot across the bow of the House of Lords, but that doesn't quite capture it, I think. It was more like a shot into the hull of the House of Lords just below the waterline at point blank range.

When the Chancellor, David Lloyd George, introduced this budget, he said, "This is a war budget. It is for raising money to wage implacable warfare against poverty and squalidness. I

cannot help hoping and believing that before this generation has passed away, we shall have advanced a great step towards that good time, when poverty, and the wretchedness and human degradation which always follows in its camp, will be as remote to the people of this country as the wolves which once infested its forests.”

Having dropped a bomb into the laps of the Lords, Lloyd George and the Liberals sat back to see what they would do. The House of Lords had not rejected a British budget bill in more than two centuries. To pass this budget amounted to the Lords giving consent to heavy new taxes on themselves for the sake of the working class. To reject the budget would force a general election, one in which the major debate would be the role of the House of Lords in modern British government. Do the Lords really want to see their ancient privileges put up for a vote?

It took the Lords six months to decide what to do. The King, Edward VII, privately pressed the Lords to swallow the bitter pill and approve the budget. Lloyd George seems to have been having the time of his life. In October 1909, after five months of inaction in the Lords, Lloyd George gave a speech in which he famously declared, in weighing budget priorities, “a fully equipped Duke costs as much to keep up as two dreadnoughts, and Dukes are just as great a terror, and they last longer.” And, mocking the Lords, that, “The question will be asked whether five hundred men, ordinary men, chosen accidentally from among the unemployed, should override the judgment of millions of people who are engaged in the industry which makes the wealth of the country.” And, “Who ordained that a few should have the land of Britain as a perquisite; who made ten thousand people owners of the soil and the rest of us trespassers in the land of our birth?”

Perhaps because of rhetoric like this, the Lords voted in November to reject the People’s Budget. Liberal firebrands like Lloyd George and Churchill were jubilant. In their view, the Lords had fallen into a trap. Because there had to be a general election now. You see, a government might fall if it loses a vote of confidence in the Commons, but no government may fall due to any action taken by the House of Lords. Except this one. Because technically, if there is no budget, then the government can exercise no power.

And so, a new general election was held in January 1910, and the issues raised by the People’s Budget were front and center in the electoral debate. The Liberals went into the election confident. Surely the broad masses of the British public were not going to vote in favor of the privileges of the few, and against broad new programs to benefit the many. Are they? Surely the voters will back the Liberals, and the Lords will have to back down, and the United Kingdom will take a big step toward a more equal and democratic system. Right?

Well. We’ll have to stop there for today. *The History of the Twentieth Century* podcast is now one year old, and I can hardly believe it. There are a couple things I want to do to celebrate this milestone. First and most important, I want to thank all of you, my listeners. You make it all worthwhile. And a special thanks to those of you who visit the website, post on Facebook, tweet

on Twitter, write reviews and post ratings, and those who have donated to help cover the expenses of the podcast. I appreciate it. And a special shout-out to Martin, Rasmus, and Francisco, for their recent contributions.

The other way I want to mark our first anniversary is by setting aside politics for a bit and turning to a topic I've already been asked about: human flight. Because, spoiler alert, flight is going to be big in the twentieth century, so we might as well get that plot thread going now. So I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we look at the early days of human flight. In true *History of the Twentieth Century* fashion, we'll begin the story in 4,000 B.C. and work our way forward from there. That's beginning next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The British colony of New Zealand flirted with becoming part of Australia in the 1890s, but ultimately decided against it. In 1907, during the premiership of Henry Campbell-Bannerman, New Zealand was granted dominion status within the British Empire. That's not exactly full independence, but New Zealand independence was a gradual process, and it's hard to find a place to draw a clear line. This one is as good as any, I think, so, happy birthday, New Zealand. This is for you.

[music: "God Defend New Zealand"]