

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 56

“The Heavens Themselves Blaze Forth”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The voters in Great Britain had swept the Liberal Party into power in 1906 in a historic landslide. But the Conservative majority in the House of Lords has been using the Lords’ veto power with aggressiveness unprecedented in modern times.

When the Lords vetoed the 1909 budget bill—a bill the Liberals in the Commons had deliberately larded with tax hikes on the privileged in order to provoke a confrontation—a general election was held, and the British public called upon to decide. Who is master of British government, the Lords or the Commons?

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 56. The Heavens Themselves Blaze Forth.

Back in episode 46, as you’ll recall, we saw how Britain’s Liberal government was repeatedly blocked from enacting its policies in spite of an overwhelming victory at the polls by the entrenched Conservative majority in the House of Lords using its power to reject legislation from the House of Commons with unprecedented frequency. The Liberals responded in 1909 by presenting what came to be called “The People’s Budget,” which lowered tariffs, increased social spending, and funded a new round of dreadnought construction, and all this paid for by raising income and estate taxes on the richest citizens of the country—in other words, the sort of people who held seats in the House of Lords. We’re talking here about tax increases of maybe 3 percentage points on incomes that in today’s terms, are above US\$500,000 per year, and higher estate taxes on estates that run into the millions of US dollars.

The House of Commons passed the People’s Budget, and then dared the House of Lords to reject it. For the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, and the Liberal majority, this was a win-win. If the Lords gave in, the government would have a whole new source of funds to further its social reforms, aimed at bettering the lives of the British working class and, not coincidentally, cementing their support for the Liberals and stealing the thunder from the upstart Labour Party.

On the other hand, if the Lords quashed the budget, as expected, it would force a general election, where the question of how much power the Lords should have to frustrate the popular will would be front and center. That was an argument the Liberals were willing, no, *eager*, to take to the British public.

Rudyard Kipling, who had won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1907, becoming the first English-language writer to be so honored, weighed in against the People's Budget with a poem called "The City of Brass," an allegorical tale of an ancient civilization that destroyed itself by, um, increasing income taxes on its wealthiest citizens by a couple of percent? Well, when Kipling tells the tale, a marginal tax increase on the very wealthiest citizens becomes anarchist revolution and leads to utter calamity:

They said: "Who has hate in his soul? Who has envied his neighbour?
Let him arise and control both that man and his labour."
They said: "Who is eaten by sloth? Whose unthrift has destroyed him?
He shall levy a tribute from all because none have employed him."
They said: "Who hath toiled, who hath striven, and gathered possession?
Let him be spoiled. He hath given full proof of transgression."
They said: "Who is irked by the Law? *Though we may not remove it.*
If he lend us his aid in this raid, we will set him above it!

...

For the hate they had taught through the State brought the State no defender,
And it passed from the roll of the Nations in headlong surrender!

Even Lord Rosebery, the former Liberal Prime Minister, denounced what he said was "not a budget, but a revolution." He declared that the People's Budget was socialism, and socialism was the "end of everything...of faith, of family, of property, of monarchy, of Empire."

Yes, to many, the People's Budget was something like a revolution. Keep in mind that, from the Tory point of view, the Liberal government, now almost four years old, was getting long in the tooth. More to the point, the Liberals had not campaigned on anything like this back in 1906, so a reasonable case can be made that the public has not weighed in on the People's Budget, so who is to say whether it's the Liberals or the Conservatives who best represent public opinion?

In November 1909, the House of Lords met to debate the People's Budget. Now, you may recall from all the way back in episode 11, the story of how the House of Lords defeated Irish Home Rule back in 1893, sixteen years ago now. Under normal circumstances, only about fifty of the

Lords, the ones who live in or near London, take the trouble to sit in session and conduct the day-to-day business of the House. Back in 1893, hundreds more lords poured into Westminster from across the country for the privilege of voting down Irish Home Rule. Now, as then, they poured in from everywhere for the even more pressing business of vetoing a tax increase upon themselves. And veto it they did, on the last day of November, by a vote of 350-75. But the Conservative leaders in the House of Lords did offer this concession to the democratic process: if the Liberals called an election, debated the People's Budget before the public, and were returned to government, then the House of Lords would bow to the public will.

The next day, the Prime Minister declared a breach of the constitution. Parliament dissolved, and a new election was called for January 1910.

But before that election can be held, two more contentious issues are going to be added into this already volatile mix. The first is the Parliament Bill, drawn up by the Liberals to be passed in the next Parliament, after they presumably win the election, a bill that would take away from the House of Lords for once and for all the power to defeat legislation passed through the Commons.

The second was yet another legal decision from the House of Lords, in its capacity as the highest appeals court. You may recall from episode 38 that the *Taff Vale* case had effectively taken away from labor unions the right to strike. Liberal legislation had reversed that case, but the Lords had another bombshell to drop just a couple of weeks before this new election: The *Osborne* decision, which held that labor unions could not expend their funds for political purposes. Not only was this a blow to the Labour Party, which was heavily dependent on union support, but union funds were also paying salaries for Labour Party Members of Parliament, men who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford to serve, since Members of Parliament are not paid public salaries at this time. This decision threatened the survival of the Labour Party, unless, once again, it could be undone by the Commons.

The general election was held in January and February of 1910. The Liberals were confident the voters would back them and their People's Budget, which benefited the many at the expense only of a privileged few. But the voters had other ideas. Apparently dissatisfied with the political fighting and the lack of progress, British voters swung toward the Conservatives and their Liberal Unionist allies, giving them the greatest number of votes. They gained 116 seats in the Commons. This would have counted as a huge victory in any other election, but in 1910, the Conservatives were down so far to start with that even this win only gave them 272 seats in total, not enough to take control of the House. The Liberals lost 123 seats, leaving them with 274, just two more than the Tories, also not enough to make a majority. Labour gained 11 seats, bringing them to 40.

And so, once again, the Irish Parliamentary Party, with their 71 seats, held the balance of power. They supported Asquith and gave him the votes he needed to form a new government, but now, suddenly, Irish Home Rule is again on the national agenda.

You'll recall that over 15 years ago, the last time the Liberals and the Irish were in a coalition government, an Irish Home Rule bill passed the Commons, only to be vetoed by the Lords, the same House of Lords that was now running roughshod over the Liberal Party agenda. So the Irish party was wholeheartedly in favor of stripping the Lords of their veto, but they also wanted another Home Rule Bill as the price for their support. The Irish Parliamentary Party, which basically stood for the proposition that Ireland could win her rights constitutionally, through the existing British political process, had seen their hopes dashed by the Lords, then had been sidelined through eleven years of Tory rule and then four years of Liberal rule. Now, after sixteen years of waiting, they were finally getting another bite at the apple.

Herbert Asquith opened the new Parliament in February by introducing the Parliament Bill, which would formally strip the House of Lords of the power of permanent veto. Under this legislation, the Lords' disapproval could delay a bill's enactment by up to two years, but it could not quash it outright. It would also reduce the maximum tenure of any Parliament from seven years to five. The Prime Minister warned both houses that if the Lords vetoed this bill, he would pull the trigger. He would ask King Edward to ennoble as many new Liberal lords as it would take to overwhelm the Conservative majority and pass the bill through the House of Lords. We're talking here about potentially as many as 500 new lords, a move with dramatic implications.

Was Asquith bluffing? Would the King actually take that dramatic step? No one was sure. The Liberal government was confident that the Tories in the House of Lords would weigh the alternatives and come to the logical conclusion—you can pass the Parliament Bill and lose your veto, but preserve the House of Lords as you know it, or else defeat the Parliament Bill, lose your veto anyway, and spend the rest of your days as a Conservative minority in a much expanded and Liberal-leaning House of Lords that will be nothing like the familiar and comfortable chamber you have now. Surely it is better to lose the veto and save the House than to lose the House and the veto both.

That was certainly how Arthur Balfour, the Conservative Party leader, looked at it. Far better to sacrifice the veto for the sake of retaining the majority in the Lords. But he had to contend with a more extreme faction in the Lords who felt this was a matter of principle and it was better to go down fighting for a noble cause rather than meekly to surrender. These Lords, who tended to be the bluest of the blue bloods, contemplated with horror a House of Lords where they would have to sit cheek by jowl with shopkeepers and solicitors and green grocers and other middle-class riffraff, and they refused to be deterred. This group came to be called the Ditchers, after one of their number proclaimed in a speech that "we will die in the last ditch before we will give in!" Arthur Balfour and his more conciliatory supporters came to be called "Hedgers."

Meanwhile, the People's Budget—do you remember the People's Budget?—passed the Commons again, and this time the Lords gave their approval, fulfilling their pledge to pass it if

the Liberals won the election. But by this time, hardly anyone is noticing. That fight was yesterday's news. The Parliament Bill is now what's getting everyone's attention.

The King, Edward VII, meanwhile, while all this was going on, was on another extended holiday at his favorite resort, Biarritz, in France. The King drew criticism from some, who felt he should be at home during such a contentious debate. But the 68-year old King was in poor health—a fact which was being kept from the public. He had fallen ill with bronchitis at Biarritz and was in no condition to travel. He finally returned home on April 27th, but suffered a succession of heart attacks, and passed away at Buckingham Palace on May 6th.

[music: Beethoven's *Third Symphony*]

Prior to his accession to the British throne, Edward VII had held the title Prince of Wales for longer than anyone else, before or since (although as I record this, his great-great-grandson, the current Prince of Wales, is closing in on this record, and will overtake it in September 2017, assuming no changes in the status quo between now and then.) As Prince of Wales, the late King had made many public appearances and had socialized extensively. He had also become a fashion plate and developed an unsavory reputation as a gambler and a playboy.

Because of this reputation, expectations were low when he became King in 1901. But as we have seen, he displayed an unsuspected gift for diplomacy, reigning over the end of Britain's so-called "splendid isolation," and playing a key role in developing the ententes with France and Russia. Sadly, no similar entente with Germany ever developed. If it had, history might have been quite different, but it seems there was simply too much bad blood, personally, between Edward and his nephew Wilhelm. Indeed, the time would come when Wilhelm would blame the Great War principally on his Uncle Bertie, claiming that the encirclement of Germany by the Triple Entente, along with Jackie Fisher's aggressive naval modernization, which Edward strongly supported, were the underlying causes of that terrible conflict. "He is Satan," the Kaiser once said of his uncle. "You cannot imagine what a Satan he is."

Edward would be the last King to wield real political power in Britain. And it should be noted that his views on race were surprisingly enlightened for the time. He repeatedly argued that no one should be treated differently because of the color of his skin, in an age when that was very much a minority opinion in the Western world.

He was called "The Uncle of Europe." He counted among his nephews, by blood or by marriage, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, Emperor Nikolai II of Russia, King Alfonso XIII of Spain, King Haakon VII of Norway, and Crown Prince Ferdinand of Romania. King Frederick VIII of Denmark and King George of Greece were his brothers-in-law, and the kings of Belgium, Bulgaria, and Portugal were among his cousins.

The King's funeral, held on May 20, 1910, is memorably described in the first chapter of Barbara Tuchman's Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Guns of August*, where she depicts it as the

end of an era. She calls it “the greatest assemblage of royalty and rank ever gathered in one place and, of its kind, the last.” As you may recall from episode 54, the Earth passed through the tail of Comet Halley just the day before, inspiring Tuchman to remind us of Shakespeare’s words in *Julius Caesar*: “When beggars die there are no comets seen;/The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.”

The funeral procession escorted the late King’s coffin from Westminster Abbey to Paddington Station, where it traveled by train to Windsor Castle, where the King was buried. The musicians played the Death March from Handel’s *Saul*.

At the front of the procession rode the new King, George V, the late King’s son. To his left rode the late King’s brother, Prince Arthur, and on his right, the highest ranking mourner, Kaiser Wilhelm II, the late King’s nephew. Behind them rode the next highest rank of mourners, the kings: George of Greece, Alfonso of Spain, Haakon of Norway, Frederick of Denmark, Manuel of Portugal, Ferdinand of Bulgaria, and Albert of Belgium, who had succeeded his uncle, the late King Leopold II, just five months ago.

Next came the two imperial crown princes, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, and Yussuf Efendi of the Ottoman Empire, neither of whom would survive to claim their crowns. Then more royals: Grand Duke Mikhail, the younger brother of the Russian Emperor, the cousins of the King of Italy and the Emperor of Japan. The Prince Consort of the Netherlands, the brother of the King of Sweden, and the crown princes of Serbia, Montenegro, Egypt, and Romania, and a prince of Siam. Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria led a contingent of German royals, who were all related to the British royal family, who were riding in the carriages that followed.

Also in the carriages rode Prince Zaitao, uncle of the infant Emperor of China, a prince of Persia, and the three Republican commoners: Gaston Carlin, the ambassador from Switzerland, Stéphen Pichon, the French foreign minister, and Theodore Roosevelt, the former President and now Special Envoy, from the United States of America.

History looks back on this moment, Edward’s funeral, as something of a high water mark for European royalty. Europe was on the threshold of dramatic changes, as we with the benefit of hindsight can see clearly. Manuel’s reign as King of Portugal would not finish out the year. Prince Zaitao’s Qing Dynasty would be gone within two years.

King George of Greece, the uncle of the new King George of the United Kingdom, would be assassinated by an anarchist in 1913. Franz Ferdinand of Austria would be assassinated in 1914. Grand Duke Mikhail would be killed by Bolshevik extremists in 1918, just weeks before his brother, the Emperor. And Wilhelm will abdicate four months after that, at the dissolution of the German Empire.

But none of this was known to the crowds who turned out for the funeral procession that day. The crowds cheered Wilhelm, and the *Telegraph* newspaper expressed the hope that the Kaiser,

now the patriarch of what was increasingly becoming a pan-European royal family, might step into his uncle's shoes and become Europe's next maker of ententes. In fact, Wilhelm was these days much more popular with the crowds lining the streets of London than he was in his own country. The German public had had their fill of the Kaiser's antics, and the new chancellor, Bethman-Hollweg, saw himself as a public administrator, a servant of the German state, not of its Emperor. And Wilhelm himself was becoming detached from the day-to-day administration of his Empire. Only in the area of the German Navy would Wilhelm refuse to yield control, backing Tirpitz to the hilt. Even though Bethman-Hollweg fully understood that the key to reversing Germany's increasing diplomatic isolation was an entente with Great Britain, and such an entente was impossible as long as Tirpitz had his way with the Navy, yet on this one point the Kaiser remained unmovable.

[music: *Tombeau in C minor*]

Because King Edward's illness had been a closely kept secret, his death appeared sudden to those not in the know, and for the hardest of the hardcore Tories, the explanation was obvious. The strain caused by the hate-filled class conflict fomented by the Liberals had killed him.

The new King, the 44-year old George V, felt entirely unprepared for his new responsibilities. He had been a private man, comfortable among the aristocracy. He had had a limited education, and spoke no foreign languages. That's because he had been the second son, not expected ever to reign himself, not until his older brother, Albert Victor, died of pneumonia in 1892.

The world of politics was utterly alien to him. He was by nature and conviction a conservative man, who brought back some of the Victorian dress and customs that had disappeared during the reign of his father. He would have swept away the Liberal Party and Labour and all of their reforms if he'd had the power. But he didn't, and he lacked the political acumen to get his way by more devious means. It is with George V that we begin the tradition of British monarchs wholly uninvolved in the political questions of the day.

The role of the House of Lords was still the most burning question of 1910, but it was felt improper to thrust the new, and clearly nervous, King into the midst of this far-reaching constitutional debate. Instead, during the summer and autumn of 1910, leaders of the two main parties held a series of conferences in the hopes of hashing out some kind of compromise. There were moments when compromise seemed possible, but it never quite came.

One important reason was that the Lords' veto was now tied up with the question of Irish Home Rule, since it was perfectly clear that the Liberal-Labour-Irish coalition was poised to pass a Home Rule Bill. The Conservatives floated the idea of giving up the Lords' veto generally, provided it were kept in place with regard to Home Rule, but the Liberals turned that down.

David Lloyd George approached Arthur Balfour privately with a suggestion that a coalition government be formed, consisting only of the more moderate factions of both major parties.

Because, Lloyd George confided, he didn't really want to see five hundred new peers either. It would take no time at all, he figured, before the hordes of Liberal shopkeepers and solicitors appointed to the Lords became as stuffy and unyielding to reform as the most elderly Duke in the realm.

Did the Prime Minister know that Lloyd George was up to this, or was Lloyd George offering to throw Asquith overboard in order to resolve the crisis? We'll never know for sure, because Balfour turned him down. He was opposed in principle to such coalition governments, except in times of a national emergency, and he didn't feel the current dispute qualified as a national emergency.

As 1910 drew to a close, and it was clear that no compromise was forthcoming, Asquith prepared to make good on his threat. He met with the new King and asked for the King's promise. Assuming the Liberals also won the new election, an election in which the Lords' privileges would be front and center, and the Lords continued to refuse, would the King appoint a sufficient number of Liberal Lords to ensure the government prevailed? Asquith posed the question in so elliptical a manner that the King agreed to it, but only realized three days later what it was he had agreed to. The King considered retracting his promise, but his own advisors urged him to carry it through.

And so a second general election was held that year, in December 1910. The British public, which never felt terribly invested in this debate, was becoming weary of it, and the results closely resembled the January election. The Irish Parliamentary Party picked up three seats; Labour two. The Liberals lost two seats, and the Tories lost one, giving the Liberals now a one-vote edge over the Conservatives. In terms of the balance of power in the House of Commons, basically nothing had changed.

The Asquith government introduced its Parliament Bill in February 1911, along with the threat that if the Lords refused to pass it, the King would appoint as many new Liberal Lords as needed to get the bill enacted. Names began to leak of prominent Liberal commoners said to be on the list for mass ennoblement: Sir Thomas Lipton, the self-made tea magnate. Sir Abraham Bailey, the South African diamond tycoon. The philosopher and pacifist Bertrand Russell. Friend of the podcast Robert Baden-Powell, now just getting his Boy Scout organization going. The novelists Thomas Hardy and Anthony Hope, authors of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *The Prisoner of Zenda*, respectively, and the playwright James Matthew Barrie, author of the 1904 stage play *Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*.

The confrontation with the House of Lords festered over the summer of 1911. This was the summer that the appearance of the German gunboat *Panther* at Agadir in Morocco sparked an international crisis and at home, the railway unions joined in a dockworker's strike, essentially bringing Great Britain to a grinding halt. The Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, sent in the army to keep the trains running.

It was also the summer of the King's official Coronation. Constitutional crisis or no constitutional crisis, the aristocracy pulled out all the stops for a summer of polo, cricket, horse racing, and an endless string of social events. The Ballets Russes came to London for the first time, to perform at Covent Garden, and Sergei Diaghilev even hired out Vaslav Nijinsky for private performances at garden parties.

Two weeks after the Coronation, while the new King and Queen were touring Ireland, the House of Lords amended the Parliament Bill to restore their right of veto and specifically to exempt Home Rule from the laws that could be enacted without the Lords' assent. Asquith officially notified Balfour that he would ask the King to appoint the new Lords, and make the request public on the floor of the Commons, unless the Lords relented and passed the original bill, as written. Fifty-three Ditcher peers told Lord Lansdowne, the Conservative leader in the Lords, that they would vote "no" on the original bill, no matter the consequences.

On July 24, Asquith rose in the House of Commons to make his announcement. The opposition would not let him. For forty-five minutes, they shouted and howled in a demonstration never before seen in the House of Commons. Whenever Asquith opened his mouth to speak, the opposition would drown him out with cries of "Traitor!" and "Dictator!" and "Who killed the King?" Asquith would wait patiently for the noise to die down, then try again. And again they would drown him out. The Speaker, unable to restore order, finally adjourned the House.

No Prime Minister in history had ever been treated so shabbily. It meant nothing in the end, of course, as Asquith simply had his statement printed in the press. Now it was up to the Conservatives to decide what to do. Balfour asked the Conservative Lords to abstain during the vote on the Parliament Bill. There were about 75 Liberals in the upper House. Let them vote yes, and let a few Ditchers vote no, and let the rest of the Lords abstain.

The problem with this strategy was that the Ditchers had at least 60 votes and were hard at work recruiting more. They just might corral enough votes to overwhelm the small number of Liberal Lords and win the day. The only way the Tory leadership could assure the vote they wanted was to recruit Lords of their own. Lords who detested the Parliament Bill, but could be persuaded to vote for it anyway, if necessary, to stop the Ditchers.

Debate was held on August 10, and it lasted almost until midnight before the vote was called. The final tally: for the bill, 131, against, 114.

The very next day, the House of Commons passed a Payment of Members Bill, authorizing for the first time that a salary be paid to Members. £400 per year initially, a crucial victory for the Labour Party, in light of the *Osborne* judgment. Austen Chamberlain grumbled that the result would be "an intolerable type of professional politician."

In light of these defeats, a movement arose to replace Arthur Balfour as the Opposition Leader. They needn't have bothered. Balfour resigned as Tory Leader in November. Times were

changing, he said in his resignation speech, and what was needed now were Members ready “to be politicians and nothing but politicians, to work the political machine as professional politicians.” The government of the world’s greatest Empire had now become more than just a gentleman’s hobby.

We’ll have to stop there for today, but I hope you’ll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at the early days of the automobile. Come away with me, Lucille, in my merry Oldsmobile. That’s next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The new Tory leader would be the Canadian-by-birth, Scottish-by-ancestry Andrew Bonar Law, who had made his fortune in the iron industry, and had been a Conservative Member of Parliament since the general election of 1900. He will eventually become Prime Minister, although that is still some time ahead of us, and remains to this day the only Prime Minister of the United Kingdom to have been born outside the British Isles.

[music: Closing Theme]