

The 1924 Labour Government and the Failure of the Whips

by Michael Meadowcroft

The first Labour government has been the subject of much research aided by a remarkable number of MPs who served in the 1924 parliament who either wrote memoirs or were the subject of biographies. However, though there is a consensus on the underlying strategic aim of Labour to use the arithmetic of the Liberals' political dilemma to deal the party a lethal blow, there has been no focus hitherto on the day-to-day parliamentary process and the lack of a clear Labour strategy in government. There was neither a tactical decision to have measures that the Liberals could be expected to support, nor a deliberate policy to press forward with more socialist legislation that would please its own MPs, or at least the more vocal of them, and deliberately challenge the Liberal MPs. Instead the government continued along an almost day-to-day existence. The Labour parliamentary party had no collective experience of managing parliament and singularly failed to learn the tricks of the trade, not least as a consequence of the failure of the party whips to function effectively. This analysis focuses on the key role of the party whips and on their responsibility for the short nine-month life of the first Labour government.

I have to declare an interest as a paid up member of the Whips' Union having acted as Alan Beith's deputy whip, 1983–86. The importance of the whips in a party system is a neglected field of study. There are few serious studies of the role of whips, or even whips' memoirs. Given their undoubted importance it is a curious gap. The evolution of structured national political parties led to the development of a more formal role for the whips but there is only one significant early biography, that of Aretas Akers-Douglas, the first Lord Chilston, who was a very skilful Conservative whip for ten years, over the period of the Liberal and Liberal Unionist split of the 1880s.¹ The biography of Herbert Gladstone by Sir Charles Mallet² contains a chapter on the chief whip's role and work whereas Gladstone's own memoirs³ are curiously silent on his six years as chief whip. Vivian Phillipps, a key figure in the 1924 parliament, produced a privately published volume of memoirs which contains many useful anecdotes of his travails as chief whip.⁴ Later Liberal whips as diarists, from Percy Harris in 1935 onwards, were dealing with such small forces that their role was survival and to achieve visibility more than being strategic. More recently Tim Renton produced memoirs, not just of his own experience serving Margaret Thatcher, but also giving a history of the office of chief whip.⁵ Edward Short produced an excellent blow by blow account of his two years, 1964-66, as government chief whip with an extremely narrow majority.⁶ Another, wholly unlikely but excellent memoir, is that of Gyles

Brandreth on his experience of the fraught 1992 John Major parliament.⁷ Finally there is a less substantial but readable book by Helen Jones in the 'How to ...' series.⁸ There is an interesting and practical chapter on the role of whips in Frank Gray's 1925 book *Confessions of a Candidate*. Gray was a junior whip in 1924 but his chapter is, curiously, all in the abstract with no references to the actual whips situation.⁹

Any Liberal who does naively oppose the 'Whip System', should be in the House for a free vote – it is chaotic. Members of Parliament, except on the rare occasions when they have a keen interest in a subject and may be unhappy with the party 'line', rely on their whips to indicate into which lobby they should go. With a free vote MPs descend on the lobbies but are given no indication as to any 'line' and have to rely on information from colleagues involved in the debate. But much more important than getting all one's MPs in to vote in the right lobby is the continual negotiation over the parliamentary timetable and one's party's participation. The ability of parliament to function relies greatly on the cooperation between the whips' offices and the Speaker's office. The timing of debates and, usually, of divisions; the introduction of statements and even the names of one's speakers in debates, are all aided and abetted by the whips and usually agreed between them. In almost all circumstances it works smoothly and the public only finds out about the process when it breaks down. It was over the lack of informal, functioning 'usual channels' that the 1924 parliament failed and where the Labour government was so ill-served. This article focuses on the running of the government and the policies and initiatives of it only insofar as they impinge on the necessary machinery for its survival. On the content of the government's nine months in office, the 2006 work by John Shepherd and Keith Laybourn provides a detailed record.¹⁰ The excellent, and well-indexed, *Liberal Magazine* bound volume for 1924 provides a detailed and largely objective record of parliamentary proceedings but with the addition of Liberal speeches.¹¹

The path to 1924

I now return to the Liberal Party and its own travails over its whips. From 1912 the Liberals' whips' team was in the capable hands of Percy Illingworth. Illingworth, as his name implies was a Yorkshire wool man, MP for Shipley from 1906. He was personally popular and his competence was universally respected. Unfortunately he ate a bad oyster in December 1914 and died of typhoid fever only a few weeks later. Had he continued in office the Liberal Party divisions of 1916 and thereafter would probably have been diminished even if not prevented. Lloyd George is on record as stating, in his *War Memoirs*, that Illingworth would have prevented the rift that occurred between him and Asquith.¹² It is curious, and certainly unique, that an unfortunate mollusc played a significant role in the downfall of the Liberal Party.

Asquith offered the post to J. H. Whitley, who had earlier had three years' experience as a junior whip, but he declined the post, ostensibly on health grounds but he had by then become Deputy Speaker and he raised the issue of the propriety of returning to the party fray from that position.¹³ Also he had his sights set on succeeding to the top office – which he duly did in 1921. Whitley was the MP for Halifax and was another solid Yorkshire businessman who might well also have been an able chief whip. Asquith then tried to have a dual whip with John Gulland and William Wedgwood Benn, but this was also rejected. Eventually John Gulland was appointed. He was described as able, loyal but unimaginative. In any case he lost his seat at the 1918 election. This extremely unsatisfactory whips' office situation continued with the dual appointment of James Hogge and George Thorne. After the 1922 election Sir Arthur Marshall was added to make it a triumvirate! However, in February 1923, Thorne resigned on health grounds and Asquith decided to revert to a single chief whip. Hogge was thought to have personal and political defects and, eventually, Asquith's former secretary, Vivian Phillipps, was appointed.

Phillipps was a new MP in 1922 and had problems exercising authority over his troublesome colleagues and, in addition, he had one great fault – in Liberal historian Roy Douglas's words '... he was ... one of the most virulent opponents of Lloyd George and his appointment could hardly be expected to help the cause of reunion.'¹⁴ The die was now cast for the 1924 parliament and thus the final consequence of the bad oyster.

In the midst of all this the Conservatives played a careful hand, quietly waiting to see how the cards would fall and ready to play their hand with tactical skill. Bolton Eyres-Monsell¹⁵ had been promoted to chief whip in 1923 and served until 1931. He and Baldwin carried on skilfully keeping their Conservative flock in order and contributing towards the undermining of the Liberals. Baldwin saw the clear opportunity to 'smash the Liberals' and the opportunities piled up cumulatively during his time in opposition.¹⁶

Labour had a particular problem with regard to its chief whip. In that office previously had been the experienced and highly competent Arthur Henderson but he was, at least temporarily, out of parliament. In Henderson's absence at the outset of the new parliament, Ben Spoor was appointed as acting chief whip and thus, following MacDonald's appointment as prime minister, the government chief whip. He was never replaced, even when Henderson returned following his victory at the Burnley by-election on 28 February. Ben Spoor remains a shadowy figure despite his crucial role in the 1924 Labour government and its demise.¹⁷ His was an unexpected Independent Labour Party (ILP)¹⁸ gain in Bishop Auckland in 1918, winning the seat on the back of his local government service and his Methodist local preaching. He was very much Henderson's protégé in the House but Henderson was apparently unaware of two of Spoor's incipient problems that would undermine his political career. One was not of his

making: his war service in Salonika caused him to be invalided home with malaria – and the variety of this awful disease was one that recurred sporadically and which consequently impinged on his attendance in the House.

Spoor's other huge problem was his latent alcoholism, which developed rapidly over his years in parliament and which eventually caused his premature death. These two handicaps meant that he was very often absent, leaving an inevitably directionless and uncoordinated parliamentary party. On 4 June 1924, for instance, he sent a message to MacDonald, 'I am sorry I am knocked out this week but hope to be back at work in a day or two'.

The scene was set: a sick and increasingly alcoholic Labour chief whip and an inexperienced and factional Liberal opposite number. What was the parliamentary and political situation that faced them? The replacement of Asquith in 1916 as the wartime prime minister under duress by Lloyd George had created a bitter and deep-seated split within the Liberal Party that was never really healed. The division was compounded at the 1918 'coupon' general election¹⁹ when Lloyd George contested the election at the head of a coalition of pro-coalition Liberals – essentially his personal supporters – and Conservatives (and a handful of Coalition Labour and a dozen other candidates.) The Coalition Liberals fielded 158 candidates, of which 133 were elected. Of the Conservatives, 335 out of 374 were elected and, with 10 Coalition Labour MPs, the government had a massive majority – 478 to 229. The Asquithian Liberals fielded 253 candidates but only 28 were elected. Asquith himself was defeated but was soon returned to parliament at a famous by-election in Paisley in February 1920.

The Conservatives became increasingly fed up with having a majority of seats in the coalition but being led by a Liberal prime minister and, in October 1922, in a meeting at the Carlton Club the MPs voted, against their own leadership, to end the coalition. In the general election a month later the Conservatives had a decisive majority. The Lloyd George Liberals, fighting as 'National Liberals' fielded 162 candidates but only elected sixty-two MPs. The Asquithian Liberals almost doubled their representation, to fifty-four seats. The alarming fact – for Liberals – was that the Labour Party more than doubled its representation – from 63 to 142 MPs – more, in fact, than the Independent Liberals and the Lloyd George Liberals combined.

Stanley Baldwin²⁰ had taken over from Bonar Law²¹ as Conservative leader in May 1923 and, six months later he gave the Liberals a considerable gift in suddenly coming out for protection and tariffs and calling an election on the issue. Asquith and Lloyd George immediately met and declared that all Liberal candidates would be simply and solely described as 'Liberals'. It was clear that only with unity between the two factions could the Liberal Party survive, and the two leaders, despite the bitter recent past, were theoretically reconciled and Lloyd George accepted Asquith's leadership in a united party. Even so, there were many in the Asquithian

Liberal camp who did not trust Lloyd George and who never committed themselves fully to the united party.

It would be possible to go on at length about the December 1923 election results and the interesting differences in Liberal performance around the country but it is not germane to our subject in this article. Suffice to say that the result left the Liberals with a huge dilemma. The Conservatives were the largest party with 258 seats; Labour was second with 191; and, just 127,000 behind in votes, the ostensibly united Liberals were third with 159. Having fought the election on the key issue of free trade versus protection it was clearly impossible for the Liberals to keep the Conservatives in office.²² It was equally difficult, politically, given the immediate past history of a damaging coalition, for them to enter into any kind of formal pact or coalition with Labour, even in the unlikely event of that party being willing. Asquith decided that the constitutional position was that if Baldwin could not get a King's Speech through the House of Commons then the king should ask Ramsay MacDonald,²³ as leader of the next largest party, to try and form a government – and the Liberals would not oppose that initial move. A meeting at the National Liberal Club of almost all the Liberal MPs agreed with this line – and, crucially, Lloyd George endorsed it.²⁴

Asquith seemed not to have seriously envisaged playing for a minority Liberal administration.²⁵ After all, the Liberals had polled almost as many votes as Labour and the two parties had fought the election on the key point of opposing Tory tariffs, and moreover Labour's manifesto had little that could not be endorsed by 'advanced' Liberals. The arithmetic was, of course, somewhat more adverse, but the same principle applied – that the 'second' anti-Conservative party – whichever it was – would have to maintain a permanent presence in the Commons to ensure survival. Roy Douglas regards Asquith's failure on this point as 'Arguably ... the most disastrous single action ever performed by a Liberal towards his party.'²⁶

This is perhaps over-egging it a little,²⁷ but the opportunity was there – and would not have precluded the eventual outcome that happened. Asquith could simply have joined the Conservatives in voting down the Labour proposition to form a government. The king would, presumably, then have sent for Asquith who, crucially with Lloyd George, would have put together a Liberal administration and put this before parliament to see whether Labour would have voted with the Conservatives. It would surely have been worth a try, but he did not take the initiative and, as it turned out, even if it had failed it could not have been more disastrous than the eventual ending of the Labour government after just nine months and the heavy Liberal defeat at the 1924 general election. Maybe Asquith was weary – following eight years as prime minister, including three years of the war, and he was 72 years of age. Having said that, it is clear that he was not attuned to being an opposition leader. He certainly had a brilliant mind and was a superb debater, but it was more a legal than a political style. Lloyd George commented that

Asquith could pick up the case to be put forward but, however exciting the idea, ‘the words froze on his lips’!²⁸

The only other possibility would have been some arrangement between Labour and Liberal parties, but there is no evidence that any approaches were made in either direction. Ramsay MacDonald probably thought that he had enough problems with his Left without disturbing them further. Asquith, on his part, was scarred by the recent experience of a split party and the Lloyd George coalition government. Following the election the Conservative leadership havered as to what it should do. Finally, not least because Balfour had pronounced himself in favour of the tactic,²⁹ Baldwin decided, as the incumbent prime minister and still leader of the largest party, to present a King’s Speech. As was known in advance that it would be, it was duly voted down and, with official Liberal support, MacDonald took office, never having hitherto been in any government position. It should be noted, but rarely is, that ten Liberal MPs voted for Baldwin’s King’s Speech!³⁰ A bad omen, as will be seen later. Not all Labour MPs were keen on Labour taking office without a majority – the ‘Red Clydesiders’,³¹ for instance, were opposed but were assuaged by one of their number, John Wheatley, holding out for an important Cabinet office as minister of health – which included housing.

It is at this point that the two whips – I exclude the Conservatives – should have begun meeting regularly and mainly secretly. Given Labour’s wish to succeed, and the Liberals’ expressions of goodwill, their role was (a) proactive – planning the parliamentary timetable; looking at potential problems; liaising with their parties outside parliament; and buying off troublemakers etc in advance; (b) reactive – ready to use standing orders and procedure – and persuasion – to cope with emergencies, and (c) disciplinary – ensuring attendance and voting with the whip’s instructions as published weekly. This clearly never happened, not even at the very basic level of ensuring enough MPs present for the continuation of business. Was this a deliberate snub to the Liberals or incompetence? The evidence for the latter is, I believe, compelling.

Labour in office

The opportunity for Labour – and for that matter, the Conservatives – to use the parliamentary arithmetic to destroy the Liberal Party as a political force was obvious but, from the beginning, MacDonald announced that it was going to be an administration for the longer term. Labour could afford to wait and, indeed the ground had to be prepared if the electorate were to accept yet another early election. The final precipitate ending of the government and the subsequent poor result for Labour make the point vividly. He recognised the difficult arithmetic and made it clear that he would not regard every defeat in the House as a vote of confidence.³² And the

government embarked on a legislative programme which showed almost no signs of rampant socialism. Indeed, Asquith remarked that it was, in effect, a Liberal programme.

Maurice Cowling points out that:

In taking office MacDonald hoped to keep it for a long time. The longer, he seems to have supposed, the better the opportunity to show that the Labour Party need not attract the fear and the hostility which Rothermere³³ and Birkenhead³⁴ had attempted to arouse. . . . It was probably the prominence of the Left which made him prefer the advantages to be gained from a long period of office to the dangers to be faced at an election in which the newspapers would give prominence to [that Left].³⁵

MacDonald himself clearly looked to the government lasting at least for the medium term. C. P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, noted after meeting with him:

He once again remarked that he saw no reason why the Government should not last for a couple of years or so – there was plenty of work to be done on which the two parties were in agreement to occupy at least that time.³⁶

More enlightening is the comment of Beatrice Webb in her diary at the end of April 1924, particularly given that she was opposed to continuing the government:

[MacDonald's] constant insistence that there is no need for an election, that no-one wants it, and that the Labour government is quite prepared to carry on for two or three years, puzzles us. We are so completely outside his confidence that we do not know whether these sayings are said in order to get a longer term or merely in order to throw on the other parties the odium of all the insecurity and upset of the general election which he believes is imminent. We are inclined to think that he consciously and subconsciously desires continuance in office.³⁷

Thus it is important to revisit the events of 18 December 1923 to 8 October 1924. On the failures of the processes necessary to the survival of the government and, in particular, the avoidable series of events that led to its fall, the standard histories are largely wrong, or, at very least, deficient. Essentially, the first Labour government could have accomplished much more and have survived much longer had Labour's – i.e. the government's – chief whip and the Liberal chief whip, been more experienced, more competent and, particularly in the case of Labour, more attentive. The parliament drifted willy-nilly, without direction and without planning. Even worse, the Labour whips failed to rein in the hotheads in their own party who were openly anti-Liberal. The government was under great pressure – it was hugely inexperienced – the prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, had never been even a junior minister, and was also trying to be

his own foreign secretary. Only Arthur Henderson³⁸ had been in the Cabinet previously, having played a vital role in the War Cabinet until the events of the summer of 1917 relating to the efforts of the Kerensky government in revolutionary Russia to promote a meeting of socialist parties in Stockholm, which he was determined to attend, caused his resignation. However, he had lost his seat at the December 1923 election and his absence in the crucial early days was a serious blow to Labour. In addition to Henderson, only Stephen Walsh³⁹ had been even a junior minister.

Henderson – ‘Uncle Arthur’ to junior colleagues – was an expert at winning by-elections but losing general elections! Having lost Newcastle East (from the withdrawal of the Conservative candidate – all whose votes went to the Liberal) at the December 1923 election, he then won a by-election in Burnley on 28 February (thanks to the withdrawal of the Liberal, whose votes went to Henderson.) He had been kept in the frame by MacDonald and he had insisted on heading a ‘service’ department and became home secretary. Henderson was very much a party loyalist and, after the wartime coalition, had taken on the task of getting the party organised; this included acting as chief whip for four years from 1920. Ben Spoor was a poor replacement.

Given the parliamentary arithmetic, it was necessary to cooperate closely with the Liberal chief whip even to keep the House sitting! This was simply not done. It is represented in the histories as a deliberate tactic but I suspect that it was simply a consequence of the gaps and failures of the Labour whips’ office. You might well ask why the other Labour whips did not grasp the situation, well, *The Times* commented on 6 August 1924 on ‘Bad party staff work’:

The Whips’ Room has been heavily handicapped this Session by the continuous absences of Mr Ben Spoor, the Chief Government Whip, and by the breakdowns in health of two other Whips, Mr Tom Griffiths and Mr Tom Kennedy, but it has been obvious to those who have been watching events that the Whips have exercised little influence over the rank and file.

Also Beatrice Webb was less restrained in her diary comments (13 March 1924) ‘Ben Spoor, never a forceful personality, is weakened by malaria and has been absent most of the session ... These senior whips – with the exception of Tom Kennedy who is admirable – either do not attend to the business or fumble it badly.’⁴⁰ And Tom Jones, senior Cabinet official, wrote in his diary, ‘... the position of business in the House almost hopeless, owing to the incompetence of Clynes and the inexperience of the Labour Whips.’⁴¹ The Liberal chief whip, Vivian Phillipps, made the same complaint:

The Government Whips were the last word in incompetence. They would put down motions for the suspension of the eleven o’clock rule without consulting me as to whether a sufficient number of our people would be able to stay after eleven o’clock to see them

safe in Divisions. They would make arrangements with the Tories about the business to be taken on this or that day and would leave me in complete ignorance of the arrangement until the House met.⁴²

Moving forward, to complete the sad story of Ben Spoor, he continued as chief Labour whip into the next parliament, following the election of 29 October 1924 with a Conservative majority of over 200, finally resigning on 9 March 1925 'owing to ill health'.⁴³ Arthur Henderson took over once more and proceeded to reorganise the whole operation. Spoor wrote a number of press articles early in 1926 calling for cooperation between Labour and Liberal parties. In terms redolent of the debate in May 2017 on a Progressive Alliance against the Conservatives, he argued that 'Clynes⁴⁴ has closer community of interest with Wedgwood Benn⁴⁵ than he has with John Wheatley,⁴⁶ and that Ramsay MacDonald⁴⁷ is ultimately nearer to Walter Runciman⁴⁸ than he is to, say, Neil McLean.⁴⁹ If we only have the courage to face facts it is possible that within the next few years a really united people's party may be evolved and an alternative government to the present one secured.'⁵⁰ On 23 February 1926, the Press Department of the Independent Labour Party issued a statement:

The National Council of the Independent Labour Party has considered recent articles by Mr Ben Spoor, MP, on the relations of the Labour Party and the Liberal Party and the attitude of the ILP, and has informed Mr Spoor that they represent a view so divergent from that of the ILP that it would be desirable, in its view, that his official connection with the party, as one of the Members of Parliament for whose candidature the ILP is responsible, should not be continued.⁵¹

Freed from the Trappist vow of chief whip and now of party discipline, he nevertheless rarely spoke in the House thereafter. In four years he made just ten speeches and asked three Oral Questions; his last intervention was a Written Question on 23 May 1928. The following month he announced his intention to retire at the forthcoming election – because of 'persistent ill-health and private reasons.' But he didn't reach the 1929 election, dying on 22 December 1928.

He died in the Regent Palace Hotel and the subsequent inquest is very stark. The chambermaid testified that she had had to put him to bed on a number of occasions, as on the afternoon of 21 December as 'he was obviously ill.' The following morning she found him dead. The pathologist reported heart and liver disease 'accelerated by chronic alcoholism.' The Coroner remarked that Spoor 'had been certified insane' because of his drinking and gave a verdict of death from chronic alcoholism. If he had been certified insane it is odd that the House had not expelled him, as per Charles Leach in 1916.⁵² Such was the sad end of Ben Spoor a formerly respected Labour pioneer.⁵³

In the midst of all the Liberal and Labour machinations of early 1924, Bolton (Bobbie) Eyres-Monsell had been promoted to Conservative chief whip in 1923 and served until 1931. He and Baldwin carried on quietly, keeping his Conservative flock in order and undermining the Liberals.

One has to remember that this administration only lasted nine months so that everything is telescoped. The welter of comments and statements give the impression that they are spread over years but not so! The stresses and strains were day to day and week to week. Just as MacDonald intimated in advance, the government was, indeed, defeated in twelve divisions before being defeated in the final division,⁵⁴ which was regarded by MacDonald as a vote of confidence; some of the defeats were on quite significant issues, such the Rent and Mortgage Restrictions Bill, the Housing Bill and the London Traffic Bill. Curiously, given the different arithmetic, the government was defeated in the Commons more times than in the Lords. Even so, the day-to-day pressures of government, particularly for such inexperienced ministers, are not sufficient reason for the Labour leadership failing to recognise that the party machinery was failing and realising that drastic action was required.

It is important to examine the character of the man who had assumed the historic task of being the first Labour prime minister. First, we need to realise that he only became leader⁵⁵ by five votes, deposing J. R. Clynes in 1922. This had repercussions in that MacDonald felt that he had to appoint Clynes as his deputy in 1924 and, given that MacDonald was his own foreign secretary, he was often absent abroad and Clynes had to deputise. However, the only person who thought that Clynes performed well in the post was Clynes!⁵⁶

There was no sign whatever in MacDonald's background of an antipathy towards the Liberals, indeed he had had considerable involvement with Liberals:

- 1889 – member of the National Liberal Club (until 1895)
- 1894 – member, and secretary and treasurer of the Rainbow Circle from its beginning up to 1900.⁵⁷ He attended a Circle meeting on 5 March 1924 as prime minister.
- 1903 – concluded and enforced the Gladstone–MacDonald pact under which thirty-one Labour candidates were given straight fights with the Conservatives in return for Labour candidates withdrawing in favour of Liberals in other seats.⁵⁸

Also his electoral record is significant. From 1906 to 1924 – up to the election following the 1924 Labour government – he was given straight fights and never had to fight a Liberal candidate in nine contests.

This is not the record of a Labour politician with a grudge against Liberals. (It is interesting that Philip Snowden, who had not had any particular involvement with Liberals, was more sympathetic and wished the government to continue. But then Snowden did not get on with MacDonald). So why the considerable provocations that offended the Liberals? Liberal MPs

understandably complained that while they were incarcerated in the House voting through Labour legislation, the Labour Party in the country was adopting candidates in their seats. It was intolerable. Where were the whips? Who was going to take up the enforcer role that MacDonald had carried out in 1903 following his electoral arrangement with Herbert Gladstone? The answer is no one.

The situation became worse and the entrenched anti-Liberals in the Labour Party, mainly but not entirely on the Left, exploited the lack of internal Labour discipline as an opportunity for free hits against the Liberals who were taking a highly responsible attitude to being present in parliament to maintain the government.⁵⁹ It was eventually agreed that Liberal MPs would consult their constituents during the Easter recess. As part of this, in the course of a long speech to his constituents on 22 April 1924, Lloyd George came out with a vivid ironic image, in effect a warning shot across the Labour bows:

[Labour says] Liberalism is in the way. It has to be killed. There won't be any election for two or three years, so we are allowed to live for a little longer. We must make the best use of our time, and meanwhile we must help Labour. Liberals are to be the oxen to drag Labour over the rough roads of Parliament for two or three years, and at the end of the journey, when there is no further use for them, they are to be slaughtered. That is the Labour idea of co-operation.⁶⁰

The significance of this speech was clear. But despite the clearly expressed Liberal concerns, Labour put up a candidate – for the first time ever – in the Oxford by-election of 5 June effectively causing the loss of this Liberal seat to the Conservatives.

There were other inflammatory speeches, Labour cosying up to the Conservatives,⁶¹ MacDonald whingeing to C. P. Scott,⁶² knowing it would get back to the Liberals,⁶³ and the Red Clydesiders urging more socialist measures.⁶⁴ These latter were, in fact, paper tigers. The success of John Wheatley was a constant reprimand to them and an example of how to make government work, but they had to make their point.⁶⁵ (It was their acknowledged leader. James Maxton, who made the famous quote that 'if you can't ride two horses at the same time, you shouldn't be in this circus.'⁶⁶) Similarly, Asquith's initial comment that a Labour government would be in hock to the Liberals was very insulting and it was a constant Labour complaint that the Liberal grandees were very condescending, as no doubt they were.⁶⁷ (Of course, Labour had huge problems with protocol and dressing up etc. in which ex-Liberal, now Labour, fellow ministers such as Haldane were even more patronising). But here again, it is up to the whips to say, 'Look, don't worry – we have to say all these things to keep the party happy. It doesn't mean anything.' Apparently no one said this.

The frustrations continued unabated on both sides through the months and became noticeably worse following the party speeches made over the Easter recess the significance of which were not heeded. It is a salutary exercise to read through the 1924 volume of the *Liberal Magazine*. It was early on in the session following the recess that the rapprochement and, more importantly, the trust between Asquith and Lloyd George was undermined.

On 22 May the Conservatives had put down a motion a motion to reduce the minister's salary by £100 – the curious House of Commons way of saying that the minister is incompetent – because no measures to reduce unemployment had been brought forward. The Liberals made it known that they would await Ramsay's speech before deciding how to vote. This would ensure – as it did – that there would have to be a constructive speech rather than a political harangue. After MacDonald's positive speech the Liberal MPs met and Asquith said that in view of the tone and content of his speech he was prepared to return to the chamber and to say that the Liberals would support the government and vote down the Conservative motion. The chief whip, Phillipps, stated that this seemed to be the prevailing view. Then Lloyd George spoke; he disagreed and felt that Ramsay's speech had not allayed his doubts. However, he was determined to support Liberal reunion and to be loyal to Asquith and would therefore follow the Asquith line. So far, so good.

Then, when Asquith had thanked him, Lloyd George said that unfortunately he had a dinner engagement and could not be present for the division. He left the meeting. Phillipps relates that a dozen or so Liberal MPs said to him that he must see Lloyd George and persuade him to attend and vote. Phillipps reluctantly went to see Lloyd George, just as he was leaving for his dinner:

He was frankness itself. He did not want to go against the party, but as for actually voting with the Government, that was more than he could stand. Nothing would induce him to do it.

Phillipps states (and one needs to bear in mind his long antipathy to Lloyd George):

This was the beginning of a feeling of distrust and suspicion of him which was a continuing source of difficulty in our work during the remainder of the Session.⁶⁸

Whatever front the party attempted to portray to pretend to the outside world that there was unity, it was certainly not the case behind the scenes at the top of the party organisation.

Occasionally the mask slipped as was the case when Conservative MP, Leo Amery,⁶⁹ met Sir Robert Hudson⁷⁰ long standing head of the Liberal party's central office. Amery's diary⁷¹ diary entry is very revealing:

24 May 1924. In the afternoon I went for a walk with Hudson who was most entertaining on the subject of his unsuccessful efforts to get L[loyd] G[eorge] to disgorge his private Liberal Coalition funds into the common Liberal purse. In his view the only satisfactory solution of the problem of Lib-leadership is for a railway accident to deprive the party of Asquith, Lloyd George and Simon simultaneously and leave them with Donald McLean whom they all trust and like

The government staggered on after the summer recess with much of the business being non-controversial. We can therefore fast forward to the final bizarre circumstances that led to the fall of the government. Looming on the horizon – again apparently without warnings from the whips as to the likely consequences of bringing something controversial forward without fixing support in the lobbies – was the Russian Treaty, and it is stated in most histories that, although, as we shall see, the government fell on a different and relatively trivial issue, it was the tabling of the Russian Treaty which was the real breaking point. I disagree. The 1923 Liberal manifesto stated clearly:

[We] would welcome the reopening of full relations with Russia.⁷²

and this wording gave ample room to manoeuvre. Indeed, it was not even the loan to Russia itself that would have brought inter-party difficulties but only the government's guaranteeing of it.⁷³

As it happens the substantive issue never arose. A comedy of errors ensued whose momentum none of the key players seemed able to arrest and which finally destroyed the first Labour government. Labour's attorney general, Sir Patrick Hastings,⁷⁴ was an eminent lawyer but certainly not an experienced nor savvy politician. The events themselves are convoluted but can be summarised starkly for the sake of focusing on their impact on the government's frailty. The editor (acting editor, as it later turned out) of a Communist weekly paper, the *Workers' Weekly*,⁷⁵ John Campbell,⁷⁶ wrote a front-page editorial urging British soldiers not to shoot fellow workers. Sir Patrick, as the government's chief law officer, gave his opinion that this was seditious and treasonable. The director of public prosecutions therefore decided to prosecute Campbell under an ancient law, the Incitement to Mutiny Act of 1797!⁷⁷

Sir Patrick had no sense of the political furore that would follow from his action. To the government's horror it was soon publicised that, not only was Campbell only a stand-in editor, but also he was a decorated First World War veteran who had been grievously injured in both feet! It didn't take much in the way of representation from MacDonald and others in the government for Sir Patrick gracefully to withdraw the prosecution. This was, of course, naive in that it left him open to accusations that there had been political pressure on the legal process – which was, of course, entirely true, even if justified. Foolishly MacDonald told the House he had

not intervened, even though he had, and even though Sir Patrick Hastings volunteered to take full responsibility.

A Private Notice question from the Conservative MP, Sir Kingsley Wood,⁷⁸ essentially censured the government for its action on the Campbell case. This clearly put the Liberals in a dilemma. The last thing they wanted was an election and so, as a way out, they put down a fairly bland motion asking for a parliamentary enquiry to examine the facts. The Tories saw their opportunity – and took it. In the course of the debate, the government said, foolishly, given that they were only dealing with procedural matters rather than the substantive issue, that it would regard both motions as issues of confidence, so the Tories withdrew their motion and said they would back the Liberals' proposed committee of enquiry. The Liberals could hardly avoid supporting their own motion and so they were duly impaled. The received truth is that the Liberals had decided to turn the government out but this is the opposite of the case. The Liberals tried every way to prevent it happening. For instance, Asquith made the magnanimous gesture of giving up any Liberal places on the proposed committee of enquiry. It was of no avail.

Much is down to MacDonald personally. He was desperately tired and he preferred not to have the embarrassment of facing the Commons to explain his errors and omissions on the Campbell case. He seemed to have fulfilled his statement of 14 February:

Dealing with the kind of defeat on which the Government would resign, Mr MacDonald said that it was impossible to give a precise definition, but added:

'I can assure the House of this, and about this there need be no fear, that the Government will not remain in office five minutes after a Division in the House has deprived it of its dignity.'⁷⁹

However, it was *his* dignity that had been impugned – and that, apparently, was enough.

It certainly wasn't the case either that the Labour government was keen to end its life. Arthur Henderson was out of the country and was 'dismayed at the Prime Minister's sudden decision to throw in his hand';⁸⁰ more significantly, the House adjourned after Asquith's speech so that the Cabinet could consider the situation. Chief Liberal whip, Vivian Phillipps, sets out the sequence of events:

The Cabinet conclave went on for about two hours. After it had been sitting for about an hour I received a message asking me to go round to the Prime Minister's room where a leading member of the Government would be waiting outside to have a word with me.

The 'leading member' turned out to be Jim Thomas. He told me that the Cabinet was very divided. 'Did I think anything could be done to avoid a smash?'

I said that I thought it would be a great mistake to rush at a decision, and that it would be wiser for everyone to sleep over the matter when a calmer view of things might prevail on the following day.

I suggested that if this course of action commended itself to the Government, they might announce when they returned to the Chamber, that they proposed to ask the House to adjourn the debate until the following day, when the Prime Minister would ask the leave of the Speaker to make a statement.

Jim Thomas appeared to think this a good idea and asked me, 'Would Asquith agree to such a proposal?' I replied that he could accept it as an understanding from me that if the Government decided to defer their decision to the following day, the Liberals would raise no objection, and that I would arrange at once with Asquith for him to be at the House not later than 10 o'clock [that evening].

He seemed to be much relieved, and left me with the impression that my suggestion would be accepted by the Government.

Nothing more was heard until the Cabinet returned to the Chamber shortly after ten, when, to my surprise and to that of my leading colleagues whom I had kept informed of these latest developments, the Government put up Thomas to denounce our proposal for a Select Committee with bell, book and candle!⁸¹

And so the government fell and MacDonald's request to the king for a dissolution and a fresh election was acceded to. Lloyd George refused to make proper provision from his huge personal fund – around £150 million today – amassed largely from selling honours. He was only prepared to fund 300 candidates. Herbert Gladstone, the party chairman, scraped enough funds together to get 340 candidates into the field. Only forty were elected. A brief flurry under Lloyd George's leadership in 1929 increased that to fifty-nine but it was still pitiful. The decline had been fast and furious, from dominance to marginalisation in just nine years from Illingworth's death whilst in office as the Liberal government's chief whip. Labour suffered a similar serious defeat in a typically unpopular early election in 1924, assisted by the Zinoviev letter,⁸² which later turned out to have been a forgery, but the party was back in office in 1929, this time as the leading party, though without an overall majority.

Conclusion

It is not in doubt that the Labour leadership had it in mind to manoeuvre to use the political situation to choose their moment to have a fresh election with the aim of killing off the Liberal

Party, but the question is when and on what issue? It did not envisage at the beginning of the parliament that it might bring down the Labour Party at the same time. The evidence is strongly that the leadership did not intend to end the government after such a short and largely unproductive period. Further the evidence is also that its image of an effective administration was continually and unnecessarily harmed by the lack of competence of its parliamentary administration. Thomas Jones, from his position as a very astute observer within the Cabinet secretariat, summed it up: ‘The two Whips, Vivian Phillipps and Ben Spoor, were largely to blame for the present estrangement.’⁸³ It is just possible that, if the 1924 parliament had set off with better intent and with effective and cooperative Labour and Liberal whips, and had thus continued, having found a basis for cooperation, there might have been the foundation for a very different politics in the ensuing years. It was certainly not inevitable for it to have foundered on such a capricious and unprepared issue. The obvious question one continually asks is, why did the leaders of both parties fail to notice the failings of the whips and rectify the situation? But, they did not do so and the lessons remain:

- First, political organisation requires efficient and effective whips, managing parliament and liaising with the party in the country. There was an abject lack of awareness of this role, which generally is still the case today.
- Second, party unity is crucial. The split between Asquith and Lloyd George was highly damaging to the Liberal Party from 1916 right through to at least 1935.
- Third, a party without a class base is always more vulnerable under pressure. It has regularly to make the intellectual case for its policies and its actions. It is particularly difficult when there is a government without a parliamentary majority, or with only a narrow majority. Throughout post First World War history a premature general election has been a setback for the Liberal Party – 1924, 1931, 1951, 1966, Oct 1974 and 2017 were all electorally bad for the party. Those who in 2010 favoured allowing the Conservatives to become a minority government should reflect on this.
- Fourth, history *is* important and the history of the nine months of the 1924 parliament is worth studying and learning from.

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- ¹ Eric Alexander, *Chief Whip: The Political Life and Times of Aretas Akers-Douglas, First Viscount Chilston* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).
- ² Sir Charles Mallet, *Herbert Gladstone, A Memoir* (Hutchinson, 1932).
- ³ Viscount Gladstone, *After Thirty Years* (Macmillan, 1928).
- ⁴ Vivian Phillipps, *My Days and Ways* (privately published, 1943).
- ⁵ Tim Renton, *Chief Whip: The Role, History and Black Arts of Parliamentary Whipping* (Politicos, 2004).
- ⁶ Edward Short, *Whip to Wilson – The crucial years of Labour Government*, (Macdonald, 1989)
- ⁷ Gyles Brandreth, *Breaking the Code: Westminster Diaries* (2nd edn, Biteback, 2014).
- ⁸ Helen Jones, *How to be a Government Whip* (Biteback, 2016).
- ⁹ Frank Gray, *The Confessions of a Candidate* (Martin Hopkinson & Co, 1925). Gray's experience of parliament was curtailed to a mere seventeen months, being unseated on petition for election expense irregularities. The consequent by-election in Oxford on 5 June 1924 was a source of friction between Liberal and Labour parties, as the intervention of the first ever Labour candidate cost the Liberals the seat, despite having the famous sportsman, C. B. Fry, as the candidate.
- ¹⁰ John Shepherd and Keith Laybourn, *Britain's First Labour Government* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- ¹¹ *The Liberal Magazine*, vol. 32 (Liberal Publication Department, 1924).
- ¹² David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, new edition, Odhams Press Ltd, 1938, p. 448.
- ¹³ Whitley to Asquith, 9 Jan. 1915, J. H. Whitley Papers, University of Huddersfield.
- ¹⁴ Roy Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party, 1895–1970* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1971), p. 168. Lloyd George was aware of Phillipps's attitude to him; see C. P. Scott, *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott 1911–1928*, ed. Trevor Wilson (Harper Collins, 1970), p. 451.
- ¹⁵ Bolton Eyres-Monsell, 1881–1969; MP 1910–35; Viscount Monsell, 1935.
- ¹⁶ Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, *Baldwin* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), p. 274.
- ¹⁷ See his entry in S. V. Bracher, *The Herald Book of Labour Members* (Labour Publishing Co., 1923), p. 173.
- ¹⁸ The ILP predated the Labour Party, being formed in 1893. Although affiliated to the Labour from 1903 to 1932, it maintained a separate mainly left-wing existence within the Labour Party.
- ¹⁹ For a description of the Coupon Election and the capricious nature of the despatch of coupons, see Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party*, p. 168 ff.
- ²⁰ See Roy Jenkins, *Baldwin*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1984).
- ²¹ See Robert Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister: The Life and Times of Andrew Bonar Law 1858–1923* (Eyre and Spottiswood, 1955).
- ²² *Liberal Magazine*, Dec. 1923, p. 706.
- ²³ See David Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (Jonathan Cape, 1977).
- ²⁴ Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party*, p. 175 ff. for a vivid account of the proceedings.
- ²⁵ David Dutton – *A History of the Liberal Party* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 93–4 – suggests that Asquith originally considered this tactic but that Lloyd George was unconvinced and when the meeting reconvened Asquith had turned against it.
- ²⁶ Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party*, p. 175.
- ²⁷ Douglas was writing before David Steel's promotion of the Social Democratic Party in 1983 and 1988 as equal in importance to the Liberal Party, and the consequential withdrawal of Liberal candidates and eventual merger, which the present writer regards as equally disastrous.
- ²⁸ Thomas Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, vol. i: 1916–1925, ed. Keith Middlemas (Oxford University Press, 1969).

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- ²⁹ Jenkins, *Baldwin*.
- ³⁰ The ten are named in Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party*, p. 176. They were an inchoate group and the only common thread was their deep-seated anti-socialist views. At the October 1924 election, five of them went to the halfway house towards the Conservatives of standing as ‘Constitutionalist’ but, in the main, still taking the Liberal whip thereafter. Only one, H. C. Hogbin, actually defected to the Conservatives.
- ³¹ See Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Clydeside (accessed 1 June 2017); also William Knox (ed.), *Scottish Labour Leaders 1918–1939: A Biographical Dictionary* (Mainstream Publishing, 1984). For Wheatley, see note 38 below.
- ³² Hansard, HC (series 5) vol. 169, col. 746 (19 Feb. 1924).
- ³³ Viscount Rothermere (Harold Harmsworth), 1868–1940; peerage created 1914.
- ³⁴ F. E. Smith, 1872–1930; MP Liverpool Walton 1906–18 and Liverpool West Derby 1918–1919, when created the first Baron Birkenhead.
- ³⁵ Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920–24* (Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 366.
- ³⁶ Scott, *Political Diaries*, p. 461.
- ³⁷ Beatrice Webb, *The Diary of Beatrice Webb*, vol. iii: 1905–1924, *The Power to Alter Things*, ed. Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie (Virago, 1984), p. 24.
- ³⁸ Arthur Henderson, 1863–1935; MP Barnard Castle 1903–18, Widnes 1919–1922, Newcastle East January–December 1923, Burnley 1924–1931, Clay Cross 1933–1935.
- ³⁹ Stephen Walsh, 1859–1929; MP Ince 1906–1929.
- ⁴⁰ Beatrice Webb, *Diary*, vol. iii, entry for 13 Mar. 1924.
- ⁴¹ Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, vol. i, entry for 20 Mar. 1924.
- ⁴² Phillipps, *My Days and Ways*.
- ⁴³ *The Times*, 10 and 11 Mar. 1925.
- ⁴⁴ John Robert Clynes, 1869–1949; MP North East Manchester 1906–18, and Manchester Platting 1918–31 and 1935–45.
- ⁴⁵ William Wedgwood Benn, 1877–1960; Liberal MP Tower Hamlets St Georges 1906–18, and Edinburgh Leith 1918 to March 1927, when resigned to join Labour Party. Labour MP Aberdeen North August 1928–31 and Manchester Gorton February 1937–42, when created Viscount Stansgate.
- ⁴⁶ John Wheatley, 1869–1930; MP Glasgow Shettleston 1922–30.
- ⁴⁷ James Ramsay MacDonald, 1866–1937; MP Leicester 1906–18, Aberavon 1922–29, Seaham 1929–35, Scottish Universities 1936–7; prime minister January–November 1924 and 1929–35.
- ⁴⁸ Walter Runciman, 1870–1949; MP Oldham 1899–1900, Dewsbury 1902–18, Swansea West 1924–9, St Ives 1931–7, when created Viscount Runciman.
- ⁴⁹ Neil MacLean, 1875–1953; MP Glasgow Govan 1918–1950.
- ⁵⁰ Reported in *Liberal Magazine*, Mar. 1926.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, and *Glasgow Herald*, 24 Feb. 1926.
- ⁵² J. B. Williams, *Worsted to Westminster: The Extraordinary Life of Rev Dr Charles Leach MP* (Darcy Press, 2009).
- ⁵³ *The Times*, 24 and 27 Dec. 1928.
- ⁵⁴ See table in Shepherd and Laybourn, *Britain’s First Labour Government*, p. 120.

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- ⁵⁵ Technically ‘Chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party’ 1906–21 and ‘Chairman and Leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party’ 1922–70.
- ⁵⁶ J. R. Clynes, *Memoirs, 1896–1924* (Hutchinson, 1937). For a different view, see Richard Lyman, *The First Labour Government, 1924* (Chapman and Hall, 1957); Cowling, *Impact of Labour*, p. 425; Shepherd and Laybourn, *Britain’s First Labour Government*, p. 117; Chris Cook, *The Age of Alignment: Electoral Politics in Britain 1922–1929* (Macmillan, 1975), p. 208 (quoting Beatrice Webb,); and Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, vol. i, pp. 264 and 273.
- ⁵⁷ The Rainbow Circle was a Liberal–Labour dining club. Its proceedings are tabulated in Michael Freedon (ed.), *Minutes of the Rainbow Circle, 1894–1924* (Royal Historical Society, 1989).
- ⁵⁸ The best accounts of the MacDonald–Gladstone pact of 1903 are in F. Bealey and H. Pelling, *Labour and Politics, 1900–1906: A history of the Labour Representation Committee* (Macmillan and Co, 1958), pp. 125–59, and in Philip Poirier, *The Advent of the British Labour Party* (Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 187–95.
- ⁵⁹ For a powerful account of this period see chapter 14, ‘Liberals and Labour’ in Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914–1935* (William Collins, 1966).
- ⁶⁰ Reported in full in *Liberal Magazine*, May 1924, pp. 269–74.
- ⁶¹ See for instance *Liberal Magazine*, Jul. 1924, p. 391.
- ⁶² Charles Prestwich Scott, 1846–1932; editor of the *Manchester Guardian* 1872–1929; MP Leigh 1895–1906.
- ⁶³ See Scott, *Political Diaries*, p. 454.
- ⁶⁴ Iain McLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (John Donald, 1983), pp. 204–18.
- ⁶⁵ In fact John Wheatley’s Housing Act is generally regarded as the one lasting success of the 1924 Labour government. See *Liberal Magazine*, Jul. 1924, pp. 386 ff. and 424 ff.
- ⁶⁶ *Daily Herald*, 12 Jan. 1931.
- ⁶⁷ See Ramsay MacDonald’s discussion with C. P. Scott: Scott, *Political Diaries*, pp. 453 and 460.
- ⁶⁸ Phillipps, *My Days and Ways*, p. 196.
- ⁶⁹ Lieut.-Col. Rt Hon Leopold Charles Maurice Stennett Amery, MP, CH, (1873-1955), Conservative MP, South Birmingham 1911-1918 and Birmingham Sparkbrook, 1918-1945.
- ⁷⁰ Sir Robert Hudson, 1854-1927, Secretary, National Liberal Federation, 1893-1922, and Hon Secretary, Liberal Central Association, 1893-1927.
- ⁷¹ The Leo Amery Diaries, edited John Barnes and David Nicholson, Volume One, 1895-1929, Hutchinson, 1980
- ⁷² F. W. S. Craig, *British General Election Manifestos, 1918–1966: Conservative, Labour, Liberal* (Political Reference Publications, 1970), p. 26.
- ⁷³ See *Liberal Magazine*, Nov. 1924, pp. 665–8.
- ⁷⁴ Patrick Hastings, 1880–1952; MP Wallsend 1922–1926 (resigned).
- ⁷⁵ The *Workers’ Weekly* was the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain, established in February 1923. The publication was succeeded by *Workers’ Life* in January 1927 following a successful libel action against the paper. This was in turn replaced by *The Daily Worker* on the first day of January 1930.
- ⁷⁶ John Ross Campbell, 1894–1969; in the First World War he served in the Royal Naval Division; he was wounded in action and awarded the Military Medal for bravery.
- ⁷⁷ Even whether he had authorised the prosecution was challenged. The whole confused situation is set out in Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, vol. i, pp. 287–9, and 292–7.
- ⁷⁸ Howard Kingsley Wood, 1881–1943; MP Woolwich West 1918–43.
- ⁷⁹ Hansard, HC (series 5), volume 169, cols. 1094-1095 (14 Feb. 1924).
- ⁸⁰ Mary Agnes Hamilton, Arthur Henderson – A Biography, William Heinemann, 1938, p. 252.

⁸¹ Phillipps, *My Days and Ways*, p. 123.

⁸² This was a letter, dated 15 Sep. 1924, purporting to be from I. K. K. Zinoviev on behalf of the Executive Committee, Third Communist International, Presidium, to the Central Committee of the British Communist Party. It urged the latter to prepare for direct action against a future bourgeois government and offered practical help. It was particularly damaging when it suggested that there were elements within the Labour Party also sympathetic to such a course of action. See Lewis Chester, Stephen Fay and Hugo Young, *The Zinoviev Letter* (Heinemann, 1967).

⁸³ Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, vol. i, p. 278.