



Geoists in history

by Karl Williams

Herbert Asquith (1852-1928)

Each fragile, wounded human being is a mass of contradictions and, despite the enormity of his accomplishments, Herbert Henry Asquith was no exception. Until 1988 he was the longest continuously serving British prime minister in the 20th century, is considered the founder of the British welfare state, and was the prime minister who blundered (rather than led) the British Empire into the monumental debacle that was World War I.

There was nothing particularly noteworthy in his birth and early years, born into an unremarkable middle-class Yorkshire family. Herbert was seven years old when his father died, after which he and his family moved into his maternal grandfather's home. Four years later Fate handed him a break and young Herbert, his keen ambition already stirring, grabbed it with both hands. As we see so often, a solid education often sets up a person for life.

At the age of 11 Herbert was sent to London with his brother to live with relatives and attend the City of London School, then under a celebrated headmaster, Dr. Edwin Abbott. Young Asquith distinguished himself as a classical scholar and, more pertinent to his ultimate career, developed remarkable talents as a public speaker. Winning a classical scholarship, he entered Balliol College, Oxford, in 1870. There he achieved first-class honors in humane letters and, unusually for someone not from the upper class, attained the great honor of being made president of the Oxford Union.

Switching direction, he chose not classical studies but the law for his career and was soon admitted to the bar in 1876, but at first found it difficult to develop his legal practice. He married "well" (i.e. into a fair bit of money), and settled in London.

Ambition inevitably drew him into politics, and he

entered the House of Commons in 1886 as Liberal member for East Fife, a Scottish constituency which he represented for the next 32 years. His extraordinary maiden speech, which came under the notice of political power-brokers, marked him out for future greatness. As the shifting sands of British party politics would have it, opportunities would drop into his lap shortly.

When William Gladstone and the Liberals returned to power in 1892, Asquith, now 40, was given Cabinet office as home secretary and soon after became deputy leader. His boss at the time was Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who was known to request his presence in parliamentary debate by saying, "Send for the sledge-hammer," referring to Asquith's reliable command of facts and his ability to dominate verbal exchange.

The Liberals were then the most closely aligned party to geoist proposals, including being staunch free traders. Thus Asquith was sent out to shadow and refute the protectionist arguments of Joseph Chamberlain.

Asquith's personal life wasn't straightforward, either. His first wife died in 1891, leaving him with five young children. Three years later he married Emma Tennant, daughter of a wealthy landed aristocrat and a woman distinguished in her own right in intellectual and social circles. Brilliant, vivacious and witty, she was a person altogether different from Asquith's first wife, and seemed a potent force behind Asquith's surge to greatness.

He didn't have to wait long. Although Asquith's political prospects had seemed dimmed by the long Tory rule from 1895, the Conservatives divided and fell apart over the tariff issue in 1903. With Asquith's oratory an instrument of revival, the Liberals reunited and took power in 1905. Asquith

immediately took perhaps the second most powerful position in the British Empire, that of Chancellor of the Exchequer as well as deputy prime minister.

Asquith's extraordinary capacity in the Commons made him a leading spokesman for government policy, and when Campbell-Bannerman resigned as prime minister in 1908, Asquith's succession to the top spot was a matter of course. The Asquith government represented the transition from Gladstonian liberalism with emphasis upon "Peace, Retrenchment and Reform" to the "New Liberalism" of the 20th century with objectives of social and economic reform. Under Asquith the Liberal party reached the height of its power but also suffered the first stages in its disintegration.

Asquith in many ways pioneered the modern welfare state, legislating old age pensions as well as national insurance against illness, disability and unemployment. His chief obstacle was the Conservative-dominated House of Lords but Asquith initially managed to win over the Lords to accept his welfare proposals.

However the dark clouds of war were looming on the horizon and government expenditure escalated alarmingly to further finance their extensive expensive naval arms race with the German Empire. From where would the revenue come now?



To understand the enormity of what erupted soon after, we need to appreciate how relatively commonplace it was for people – the great and the humble – to understand the land issue at the time. In our arrogance, many of us consider that today's economic understanding has evolved beyond and above that of a century ago – the reality was just the opposite! Henry George had set the world – and especially the English-speaking world – alight in the late 19th century, and his influence was still keenly felt in the UK when Asquith's star was on the rise.

Some newcomers to our movement might not realize that the great Winston Churchill – admittedly a political opportunist later in life – was an outspoken geoist. In 1908, Churchill was promoted to the Cabinet as President of the Board of Trade by Asquith and proclaimed:

"It is quite true that land monopoly is not the only monopoly which exists, but it is by far the greatest of monopolies – it is a perpetual monopoly, and it is the mother of all other forms of monopoly."

.... and

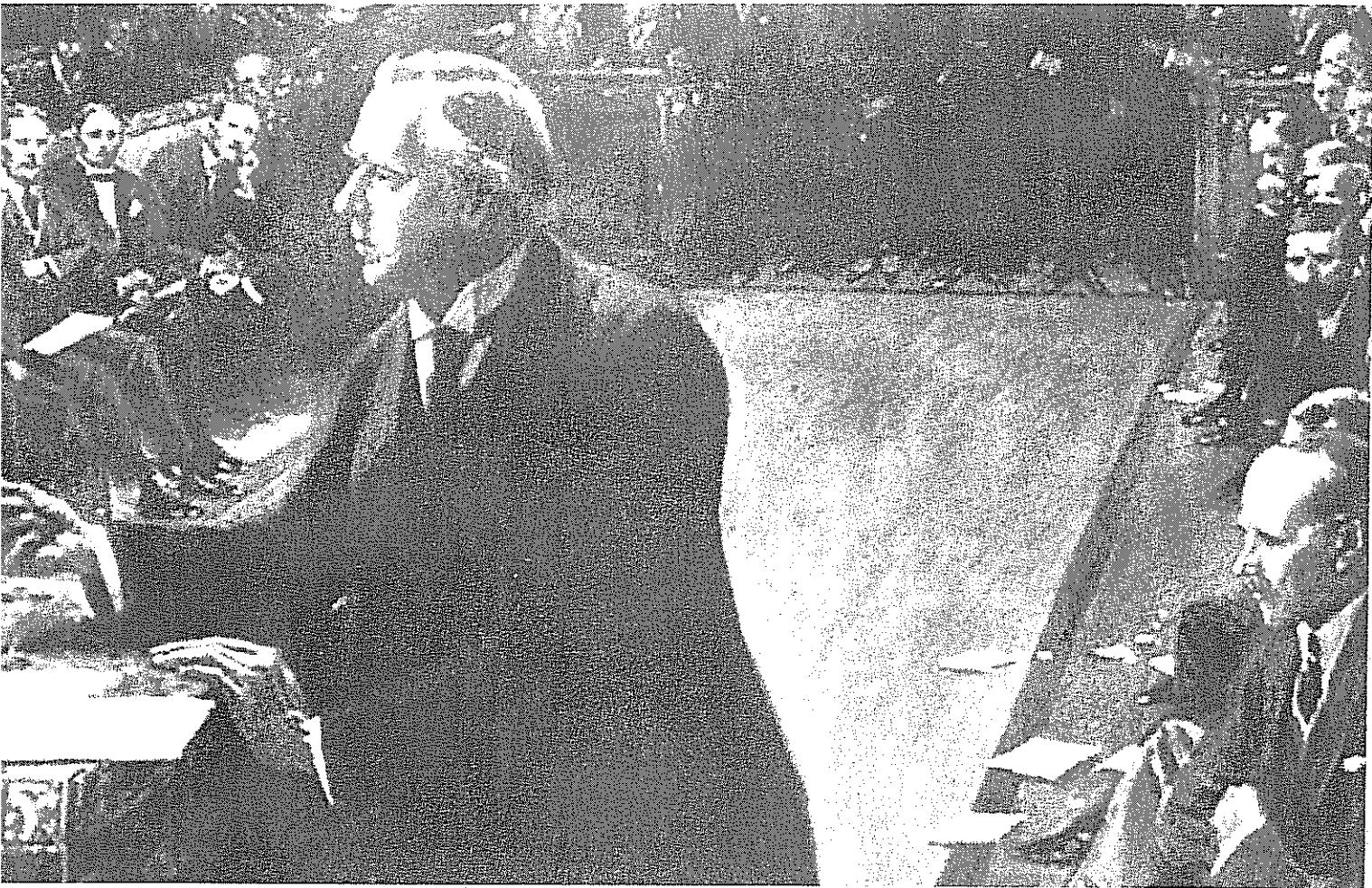
"I have made speeches by the yard on the subject of land value taxation, and you know what a supporter I am of that policy."

Lloyd George, who was later to succeed Asquith as prime minister, was also a man deeply imbued with geoist principles. When Asquith became prime minister in 1908, Lloyd George was promoted to Chancellor of the Exchequer, a post he held until 1915. In 1909 Lloyd George announced what became known as the People's Budget, a noble failure in the end but a document that almost turned British politics on its head. Lloyd George said:

"Who ordained that the few should have the land of Britain as a perquisite; who made 10,000 people owners of the soil, and the rest of us trespassers in the land of our birth?"

...and...

"Search out every problem, look into these questions thoroughly, and the more thoroughly you look into them you will find that the land is at the root of most of them. Housing, wages, food, health, the development of a virile, independent, manly, Imperial race – you must have a free land system as an essential condition of these."



And Asquith himself, shortly before he took office as PM:

"There can be no fairer and juster claim on the part of the community than to appropriate to its own benefit for public purposes some part, at any rate, of the added value that comes to land of this kind automatically through no effort of any human being, but which is the result of the general and increasing prosperity of the community."

Among the most controversial parliamentary bill in British history, Asquith and George's People's Budget aimed to systematically raise taxes on the rich through a modest version of land value taxation. With the hitherto untouchable ancestral lands of the Lords being directly challenged, the upper classes pulled out every weapon they could muster to stop Asquith's reforms. The Lords did not traditionally interfere with finance bills but nevertheless this was one bill they could never allow, and they vetoed it. Britain now had a full-blown constitutional crisis.

Asquith hit back hard, prevailing upon King Edward VII to threaten to pack the House of Lords by creating new peers. The Lords bowed to this pressure and passed the budget – an event known since as the Constitutional Revolution in England.

Many other Liberal politicians had attacked the peers to force their retreat at this stage, including Lloyd George who famously proclaimed in a speech "a fully-equipped Duke costs as much to keep up as two dreadnoughts (battleships)" and was "less easy to scrap".

Before the People's Budget could be implemented, the Lords dug further into their bag of tricks and eventually forced the country to a general election in January 1910. This election resulted in a hung parliament, with the Liberals having two more seats than the Conservatives, but lacking an overall majority. The Liberals formed a minority government dependent on the support of the Irish Nationalists. Pressure to remove the Lords' veto now came from the Irish MPs, who wanted to remove

the Lords' ability to block the introduction of Irish Home Rule. They played hard-ball politics with Asquith by threatening to vote against the Budget unless they had their way. More and more peripheral issues thus came to threaten to compromise this, the greatest geoist political reform in history.

King Edward VII did eventually consent to fill the House of Lords with freshly-minted Liberal peers who would override the Lords' veto, but only if Asquith agreed to hold another general election. However Edward VII died in May 1910, before this second general election. Asquith had to use his considerable powers of persuasion to get Edward's successor, George V, to agree to the plan. The new king was hesitant, as packing the Lords would undermine the power of the hereditary aristocracy. Before the December 1910 general election (the second that year but the last held for eight years), Asquith's persuasion paid off, and George V agreed to pack the House of Lords.

The Liberals thus won their second election of 1910, though the balance of power in the government still rested with peers from Ireland, who pressed home their demand for a Home Rule bill as the price of support for Asquith's third government.

A fiercely-determined Asquith was now out to curb the powers of the House of Lords for good through

"We hold, as we always have held, that, so far as practicable, local and national taxes which are necessary for public purposes should fall on the publicly-created value rather than on that which is the product of individual enterprise and industry. That does not involve a new or additional burden on taxation, but it would produce these two consequences - first of all, that we should cease to be imposing a burden upon successful enterprise and industry; and next, that the land would come more readily and cheaply into the best use for which it is fitted. These two things would be two potent promoters of industry and progress."

the Parliament Act 1911, which greatly limited the power of the House of Lords. This upper chamber of Parliament was then restricted to delaying, but not defeating outright, any bill passed by the House of Commons.

But later in 1911 the Liberals were weakened by political alliances and how the House of Lords utilized its ability to delay passage of bills for up to two years. In a tumultuous European world, they were playing for time. Only by dropping the land tax proposals would the House of Lords allow a budget bill to be passed without delay. The Lords got what they really wanted.

Asquith paid off the Irish block with the Third Irish Home Rule Bill, which achieved the Royal Assent in late 1914. However implementation of the law was suspended for the duration of World War I, which the UK had become involved in due to a spiderweb of treaties.

The world seemed to slip into worse and worse turmoil, further distracting the geoist ambitions of both the parliament and the populace. Asquith's efforts over Irish Home Rule nearly provoked a civil war in Ireland over Ulster, only averted by the outbreak of the world war. Ulster Protestants, who wanted no part of a semi-independent Ireland, formed armed volunteer bands. British army officers threatened to resign rather than move against Ulstermen whom they saw as loyal British subjects. Asquith was forced to take on the job of Secretary of State for War himself on the resignation of the incumbent, Seeley.

While the war in Europe was raging, Ireland staged its Easter Rebellion of 1916, which would prove to be one for the factors of Asquith's loss of power. The other was the war, for in May 1915 the Cabinet split over a scandal involving the dearth of munitions available at the front. Asquith ultimately was held responsible for the shortcomings in British war production.

Responding to the discord, Asquith formed a new government, creating a national coalition that included members of the Opposition. But the war continued to shed rivers of blood, and the machiavellian Lloyd George undermined Asquith by splitting the Liberal Party into pro- and anti-Asquith factions. In the end, Asquith had no choice but to fall on his sword and resign as prime minister in December 1916, and was succeeded by Lloyd George.

Asquith, along with most leading Liberals, refused to serve in the new coalition government. He remained Leader of the Liberal Party, but found it hard to conduct an official opposition in wartime.

In 1918 Asquith declined an offer of the job of Lord Chancellor, as this would have meant retiring from active politics in the House of Commons. By this time, Asquith had become unpopular with the public (as Lloyd George was perceived to have 'won the war' by displacing him) and, along with most leading Liberals, lost his seat in the 1918 elections, at which the Liberals split into Asquith and Lloyd George factions.

Despite losing his East Fife seat at the 1918 General Election, Asquith remained leader of the Liberal party until 1926 - that is, among those Liberals who did not support Lloyd George's coalition government. Support for the Liberals was now dwindling.

He returned to the House of Commons in a 1920 by-election and now played a key role in helping the Labour Party form a minority in 1924, which gave Ramsay MacDonald (yet another geoist) his first -

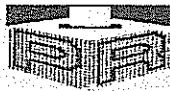
though short-lived - prime ministership. The minority Labour government fell later in 1924, and in the subsequent election won by the Tories, Asquith lost his seat in the Commons.

For a man who had fought and, indeed, reformed the House of Lords so gallantly, it's surprising that he accepted two titles in 1925, as Viscount Asquith of Morley in York as well as Earl of Oxford. Asquith in fact moved over to the House of Lords and finally resigned his Liberal Party leadership in 1926

Exhausted by years of tortuous political machinations, Asquith rapidly declined and died in 1928, leaving a remarkably modest estate for such a prominent person. Trivia flash: among his living descendants is his great-granddaughter, the actress Helena Bonham Carter.

He took on not just the establishment but the whole economic system of privileges in land. Sure, he lost in the end, but it took the whole British aristocracy, a looming Irish civil war and a full blown war world to thwart his efforts.

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