Winter and Discontent: The December Crises of the Asquith Coalition, 1915–1916

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I

The history of British politics and the First World War can be simply expressed in outline. There were three ministries: the Liberal Government under H. H. Asquith elected in 1910, which took Britain into war four years later; the Coalition formed in May 1915 also under Asquith; a second coalition, formed in December 1916, under David Lloyd George, which presided over the armistice, won the subsequent general election, and would last a further four years until October 1922. The December Crises of the Asquith Coalition, as they may be called, are important as illustrations of politicians at war: the crises were inextricably both personal and political because each centred on the authority of the Prime Minister, and each concerned the conduct of policy. Those issues mattered even more than usual as the government was a coalition and the empire was at war. The first December Crisis required a still predominantly Liberal Cabinet to accept conscription, the second required the Prime Minister to cede authority over the running of the war, with disagreeable consequences for his associates and for the general direction of the war. These catalytic crises are centrally relevant to understanding the politics and the conduct of the war, and

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the fate of the Liberal party, as well as offering broader insights into politics, leadership, diplomacy, human agency, and contingency.¹

A great deal has been written on British politics and the war in general terms.² As much goes for the concerns here: of the role of ideology,³ of ‘escalation’ and ‘compulsion’ as principles of war policy,⁴ and of conscription as a particular policy.⁵ The ‘high politics’ nature of executive authority and decision-making has naturally lent itself to biographies, and to biographical studies, of the leading figures.⁶ Insofar as existing studies have analysed the myriad crises that plagued British government throughout the war, they have tended to focus on the events of May 1915 and the formation of the Asquith coalition,⁷ or on the events of

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¹ The author is grateful to Professor Philip Williamson, Professor R. I. Moore, Professor Patrick Salmon, and Professor Hew Strachan, for their comments on an earlier draft, and to those of two anonymous reviewers. Where no source is given for manuscript references, the documents were part of the uncatalogued new accession to the McKenna papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge.


December 1915 and the adoption of conscription, or on the events of December 1916 and the formation of the Lloyd George coalition. The dominant narrative, such as it is, has been the path to the triumph of Lloyd George, and more broadly, the strange downfall of the Liberal Party. Part of the historiographical problem is that once the chronicles were written, they tended to stay written. A number of primary sources, or those first accounts by historians to take advantage of the opening of personal and institutional archives since the 1960s, were so vividly written as to create a clear sense of time and place. Only with new sources could fresh perspectives be offered, and such sources were rare.

Of the many historiographical debates, the most prominent here is whether relations between Asquith and Lloyd George were damaged by the latter forcing compulsion in general, and conscription in particular, upon the former, or whether Asquith was resigned to the abandonment of what supporters might call ‘liberalism’, and was mainly concerned with managing opinion outside Cabinet, and managing Liberals within. It is the view of this article that there was clear and consistent cleavage but one that could have been managed in December 1916 as it had exactly a year earlier, but for the actions of one participant. The discovery of the private and personal papers of Reginald McKenna – Home Secretary at the outbreak of war, and promoted to Chancellor of the Exchequer on the creation of

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the Asquith Coalition in May 1915 – offered the potential for a new perspective. Not only was he, with Sir Edward Grey, and R. B. Haldane, among Asquith’s most loyal ministerial associates, Asquith chose to abandon Haldane, who was similarly systematically traduced by political opponents both in Westminster and Fleet Street, rather than McKenna, when the coalition was formed. Additionally, and in a way not really appreciated heretofore, McKenna’s wife Pamela played a political role which increased in importance after Asquith’s estrangement from Venetia Stanley, one relationship that has been very well appreciated.13 Insofar as any participants can be rescued from the condescension of posterity, the women of Edwardian and Georgian Liberal politics are leading candidates. Still disenfranchised until the 1918 Representation of the People Act, that they had no material influence on who was in the House of Commons did not mean that they had no effect on them once they were there. The papers available since the 1960s were only a partial selection of what was available; the new discoveries give empirically new interpretations because they demonstrate more clearly than before the conduct of the Prime Minister, and his network of friends and associates. McKenna and his wife are important because they were both close to the Prime Minister, and in different ways were sources of support and influence; increasingly, arguably, destructively. Pamela McKenna also helps unlock the wider role of women, too often overlooked in the discussion of high politics in the years before emancipation, not least as intermediaries. ‘I am most discreet’, her friend, the Cabinet minister J. A. Pease told her, ‘except when I write to Cabinet Ministers or their wives’.14

Such a study is intended to demonstrate how personalities, and political manoeuvring, affected policy, in national – and imperial – circumstances without precedent; indeed circumstances never repeated: subsequent coalitions, perhaps with some kind of political folk memory, were much more coherent than that of May 1915–December 1916. There was a ‘learning curve’ in governing, just as

13 Martin Farr, “Squiff’, ‘Liar George’, and ‘The McKennae’: the unpersuasive politics of personality in the Asquith Coalition, 1915–16’, in Making Reputations: Power, Persuasion and the Individual in Modern British Politics, eds. Julie Gottlieb and Richard Toye (London, 2005), pp. 29–42. Some of Asquith’s female relations have been public for some time. His correspondence, heavily edited: Desmond MacCarthy, ed., Letters to a Friend [Hilda Harrison], 2 vols (London, 1933); Michael Brock and Eleanor Brock, eds., HHA Letters to Venetia Stanley (Oxford, 1982). Asquith’s letters to Stanley’s sister, Sylvia Henley, were utilised in Cassar, Asquith as War Leader. Among the unpublished collections of correspondence known to exist are those with Ettie Desborough, Kathleen Scott, and Violet Tree. Lloyd George maintained a comparable relationship with Frances Stevenson, whom he was to marry.

14 J. A. Pease to Pamela McKenna, 17 August 1915.
there was a learning curve in the fighting. The scale could not have been greater, concerning Britain’s continued participation in a world war, and the precise nature of its contribution to waging war in an alliance with France and Russia, maintaining the support and involvement of the ‘British world’, and particularly of the United States. Britain’s principal global engagements were determined in London SW1, but in Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, a succession of disasters added to the pressures of that eighteen month period. Peripheral geographically, they had cumulatively metropolitan consequences, and the contrast is striking between the great events without and the squabbling within.

II

In British politics, everything in the war before December 1915 was a prelude to the debate over conscription, and everything after it was a consequence. Its story was the story of the Ministry. The continued existence of the increasingly loosely-affiliated Asquith Coalition depended upon, if not reconciling, then at least accommodating, the expressed wishes of each warring section. It was a more than semantic distinction. Political and personal interests were brought to a head by the first December crisis, and found to be resilient enough for the administration to persist, if not to flourish. There was, after all, a great issue at stake: the denial of decisive influence to opponents. Self-preservation was as animating an impulse in Westminster as it was on the Western Front. For his part the Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith, took the matter personally, as he was increasingly to do. ‘Today, alas! The sky is covered with clouds and thick darkness, and a thunderbolt has fallen’, he wrote to a close friend. Earlier in the day, that friend’s husband, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald McKenna, had resigned. The passage through Parliament of the Military Service Bill, which brought in military conscription for unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 41, was indeed the most problematic of all wartime legislation in a period of continual extemporisation and innovation, although not as extemporised or innovative as some wished and agitated for. The state was seeking to compel men to kill; for as unprecedented a measure as could be imagined, to a nation and empire which had hitherto waged war without recourse to such necessities, the difficulties were not perhaps disproportionate.

16 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 28 December 1915.
The formation of the Coalition on 25 May 1915 – for *The Times*, the following morning, already ‘the most remarkable government in our history’ – soon revealed the difficulty of effective statecraft at a time of effective uncertainty. Asquith was discomforted, complaining to Pamela McKenna of having to ‘rub shoulders with uncongenial and unfamiliar personalities’. With the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey’s progressive political disenchantment and physical disability, and the Minister of Munitions David Lloyd George’s increasingly ambiguous yet ambitious political posturing, Asquith came to depend on Reginald McKenna more than he did on any other minister by the winter of 1915: ‘The PMs only confidant’, according to Charles Hobhouse, one of the Liberal cabinet ministers abandoned when the Coalition was formed. There were others similarly resistant to coalition primarily for partisan reasons, but also to the escalation of the war it betokened: Walter Runciman, President of the Board of Trade, Sir John Simon, McKenna’s successor as Home Secretary, and Herbert Samuel, who succeeded Simon, being the most prominent. McKenna has usually been described simply as an opponent of conscription; more nuanced observers have emphasised his resistance as being on grounds of cost rather than morality. His position was actually a combination of each, but part of a much more systematic advocacy of the type of war being fought. For Asquith, ‘[i]t saddened him’; his disappointment derived not least from having his own doubts assuaged through a similarly acute sense of the balance of subtleties upon which a satisfactory resolution of the issue rested. Pressures political and electoral, financial and arithmetical, converged as one upon Asquith, one upon whose will office, if no longer necessarily the issues, ultimately depended. It was a perilous position for the Prime Minister, which McKenna’s ‘dizzy gyrations’ did little to steady.

So, when Lloyd George complained in November 1915 that ‘we were now living under a McKenna regime’, he was not motivated, entirely, by pique. Their relationship was poor, and got worse, and centred on Asquith. The complaint of the erstwhile Chancellor was one founded on the superficial irritation born of his successor’s intimacy with the Prime Minister. ‘Wh[at] counts for most’, Margot Asquith asked Pamela of her husband, ‘his love for Henry or his hate

18 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 17 June 1915.
20 Kathleen Scott, diary, 11 February 1916, Asquith papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford 152/130.
21 Asquith to Sylvia Henley, 6 February 1916, Asquith papers 542/3/562.
for LI.G?23 The intimacy of one with Asquith was likely to preclude empathy – quite apart from support – directed at the other. Yet McKenna’s concern as Chancellor was not in establishing a regime so much as a regimen. This was the cause of disagreement in most forums of decision-making, and through the mechanisms of policy the policies themselves. Where the policy was ill-defined or not defined at all the imprimatur of Sammlungspolitik in its purest form could be seen. If the effect was merely stasis, a serious flaw in the war effort was evident; progressively, stasis gave way to disruption.

Coalition government ought not to have disconcerted the Liberal Party in the way it did. Certainly, accusations from backbench MPs or journalists of betrayal when Unionists – led by Andrew Bonar Law and including the former Prime Minister Arthur Balfour – and one socialist – Arthur Henderson – joined the Cabinet mistook a change in degree for one in form. Since 1910 the Liberal Government had been constrained by interests outside it, and was dependent on the support of the by-then numerous Labour and Irish members, reflecting as they did, respectively, the fracturing of both class politics and the Union. The significant development was from a coalition of interests outside the Cabinet to a more brittle confection within. What therefore had hitherto been but one consideration in policy making became after May 1915 the dominant component. That policy making had itself been an erratic and imprecise process underlined this; the admission of Lord Kitchener as Secretary of State for War in May 1915 arguably had done as much as that on its own. Asquith may have engineered partisan triumph from the political disaster of May 1915, but he had admitted to the Cabinet room new members with both the motive and the means to transmit their dissatisfaction outside it, to interests both more responsive and less responsible. Ginger groups within Parliament and newspaper editors and proprietors without had virtually been admitted to Cabinet themselves. Demonstrable political dissent was less important than the signal it transmitted.24

The Coalition of 1915 was presented – as were those of 1916, 1931, 1940, and 2010 – as the collaboration of diverse means for a common end. In intent it may have been envisaged by some as an exercise in forward planning, but in effect was anything but: it was offered by a Prime Minister weakened by criticism and fearful of the electoral verdict that (by his own government’s constitutional innovation, the 1911 Parliament Act) had to be delivered no later that the autumn of 1915. The coalition was a product of crisis: the ‘shells scandal’, the disastrous Dardanelles campaign, the resignation of the First Sea Lord (and close friend of McKenna, a former First Lord of the Admiralty), ‘Jacky’ Fisher. If Liberal doubts

23 Margot Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 28 December 1915.
about the war had been allayed by the continuance of Liberals in the key offices of state after May 1915, the infection of Unionism presaged compromise: compulsion, conscription, and all that came with them. Liberal concerns were as much cultural as political. These were, after all, politicians who had been at war for four year before hostilities with Germany had begun, as the targets of the ‘new politics’.25 When Asquith confided to Pamela in May that ‘I prefer a Cad with Liberal ideas to a Gentleman with none’,26 he was not expressing his preferences for coalition-building. In the view of disgruntled Liberal backbenchers the row over the apportioning of comparatively marginal offices to the leading Tories was a distraction. The grievance was their presence in any capacity; Asquith hoped that by balancing personnel, policy would follow. The unwelcome guests were merely ‘disfigurements of the landscape’.27 As far as the warmth of the Liberal family was concerned, Margot implored Pamela of her husband that ‘I hope he will never let Ll. George’s name cross his lips.’28 Margot’s husband described his home as a ‘hellish environment’,29 where his days were filled with ‘interviews with an almost indefinite series of bores, busybodies, and quacks’,30 while his wife despaired of ‘K’s folly . . . Derby’s clumsiness . . . Ll.G’s treachery and baseness’.31 Such were the sinews of war.32

The greatest cleavage was that over strategy, or, an impertinent critic might say, the need for one. That which had necessitated an army without precedent was not the ‘continentalist’ approach against which many Liberals had long been opposed. A mass presence was indeed sought for French soil, if not necessarily to fight there. The problem, as far as McKenna – from his Admiralty days a committed navalist rather than a continentalist – and his allies were concerned, was that whatever the purpose, the effect was the same: size mattered. The larger

26 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 28 May 1915.
28 Margot Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 26 [May 1915]; Ibid., n.d. [November 1915/May 1916].
29 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 10 September 1915.
30 Ibid., 9 July 1915.
31 Margot Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 28 December 1915.
32 Indeed, opposition to conscription was by no means universal amongst Liberal MPs: Matthew Johnson, ‘The Liberal War Committee and the Liberal Advocacy of Conscription in Britain, 1914–1916’, The Historical Journal, 51 (2008): pp. 399–420. Almost as many could be described as committed conscriptionists as actually voted against the measure.
the army the more it cost, and the greater the likelihood of its being invoked to do more by Britain’s allies, further increasing its size. It followed that it was not altogether clear what might constitute victory: prevailing militarily might entail defeat economically. McKenna’s instinctive and continual cost and benefit approach was similar to that of Kitchener, who had to balance the compelling need for more recruits, whether to fight the war or to wage a peace, with a natural preference for the professional soldiery.\footnote{33 War Council Minutes, 27 January 1915, PRO CAB 42/1/25, National Archives, London.} Not for the last time, events compelled attitudes. The new ministry coincided with the launch of the Russian-prompted Dardanelles and Gallipoli campaigns, where a British-led force of Australian, New Zealand, Indian, and Canadian troops successfully recreated the deadlock of the Western Front in the eastern Mediterranean; to the west, the stillborn French-inspired Salonika campaign; to the east, at Kut al-Amara, British-led Indian forces advancing on Baghdad were surrounded by Turks and forced to surrender. At Calais, Kitchener, sensitive to the concerns of Britain’s allies, pledged an army of seventy divisions to the French; in August, at the additional invitation of the French, the British Army engaged the enemy at Loos, losing 50,000 men.\footnote{34 D. J. Dutton, ‘The Calais Conference of December 1915’, The Historical Journal, 21 (1978): pp. 143–156.}

The first December crisis was the culmination of direct concerns over politics, economics, and strategy. It proved more seductive at the time to deal with the separate components, if ultimately less satisfactory. The limit of available manpower as far as McKenna was concerned provided for fifty divisions; the conscriptionists demanded seventy. By October 1915, given the parlous state of Russia and the state of play on the Western Front, the likelihood of British troops being committed en masse increased. With this eventuality in mind, the National Register had been compiled during the summer, ostensibly to obtain data. With conscription still unfeasible politically, a compromise scheme was conducted under Lord Derby, Director General of Recruitment, as an escalation of the National Registration Act, and a pioneering exercise in causative census: unless sufficient numbers had attested to serve by November 1915, voluntarism would be supplanted by compulsion. In the light of the British commitment at Chantilly early in December to a western offensive in 1916, mere attestations would be insufficient. ‘LG declares that conscription is certain’, McKenna told Pamela in September 1915, ‘but the registering of men is not to be in the hands of an incompetent War Office. Another and more efficient department must assume responsibility for the selection of conscripts, presumably the highly successful
office of Munitions, which is recording a series of triumphs in organisation’, sarcasm being one weapon of which there were no shortages.\(^{35}\)

The call for conscription then, though unwelcome to most Liberals, was not unexpected. Throughout August the compulsionist section of the Government colluded with the like-minded along both the backbenches and Fleet Street, more concerned as many were with the visceral than the statistical. In September, the supplementary report of the War Policy Committee, established under the chairmanship of Lord Crewe, Asquith’s most reliable lieutenant, in August, called for conscription. In October the dilemma over strategy peaked when Lloyd George challenged Asquith over the neglect of Salonika. The soft underbelly of the German war effort was a well-worn subject of division within the Cabinet. Lloyd George denounced ‘pitiable’ indecision in support of Serbia while the General Staff continued to complain that there were still too few actors to direct, irrespective of the theatre.\(^{36}\)

The most significant result of the evident inelasticity of manpower was that Kitchener, having exhausted other measures, finally came out for conscription.\(^{37}\) Both those supportive and opposed to the policy recognised that Kitchener’s asseveration, on whichever side, would be the likely determinant. That did not mean that Asquith would not, or would have no need to, inveigle. ‘I am bridge-building’, he told Pamela, ‘a difficult kind of architecture. But it has to be done – or at any rate attempted’.\(^{38}\)

On 16 October he revealed to her that he had ‘circulated a little memo to rattle my scattered colleagues in their week-end retreats’.\(^{39}\) Thus was the Derby Scheme announced. Under the scheme, men were invited to join up, or to attest to join up, but only when required, and those with wives only when the numbers of single or widowed had been exhausted. Action, after the almost requisite delay, produced an exemplary marriage of coercion and permissiveness. Whether the intention was that wedlock be superseded by droit de seigneur, or whether Asquith simply thought time would exhaust the protagonists, the effect was that every point of contention remained, and the patience of the discontented was further attenuated. Lloyd George complained that the Prime Minister was ‘obdurate and obstinate and appears entirely subject to McKenna’s

\(^{35}\) McKenna to Pamela McKenna, 5 September 1915.


\(^{37}\) Kitchener to McKenna, 31 March 1915.

\(^{38}\) Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 13 October 1915.

\(^{39}\) Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 16 October 1915.
influence'. As Asquith narrated to Pamela, Bonar Law ‘transmitted a sort of ultimatum to me. Monday may see wigs on the green’. The first was that of Sir Edward Carson, champion of Ulster and awkward Attorney General since the formation of the Coalition, resigning, effectively to lead opposition from the backbenches.

Within a fortnight, the Minister of Munitions issued his own threat. ‘About teatime (this is secret)’, Asquith briefed Pamela, ‘I received by special messenger a kind of ultimatum from L.I.G to wh. I did not reply’. Lloyd George and Bonar Law had threatened to resign unless Kitchener was dismissed. ‘Happily I have got the habit of *mens aegna in arduis* and slept peacefully ... I summoned the writer, and in the course of 20 minutes things resumed their true proportions. Then (as I dare say you know) we had a Cabinet at which the Conscriptionists fell upon the author.’ During that meeting McKenna alone had opposed the move to unseat Kitchener, admittedly as much for tactical as for strategic reasons. By way of another compromise, Kitchener was sent off on a spurious mission to the Mediterranean until December. A precedent had been established: it was the first ‘Kitchener Dodge’, the method by which Lloyd George would ensure the Secretary for War’s absence from SW1 and thus from decision making. On the other hand, whilst ‘I can easily reconcile myself to being away from the H. of Commons’, Asquith admitted, he was, nevertheless, occasionally forced into addressing it. Asquith confessed the significance of a speech which resounded to the statement that conscription for married men was ‘a contingency which I do not think is ever likely to arise’, an ambiguity erected upon similar ambiguities. In Kitchener’s absence, Asquith took over at the War Office, and immediately attempted to minimise the exposure of the most disputatious elements by forming a new War Committee for strategic deliberation to replace the Dardanelles Committee, which had itself replaced the War Council in May 1915. Deliberation was, however, principally political, as was membership, which

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40 George Riddell, diary, 16 October 1915, Riddell papers, British Library, London, 62959.
41 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 1 November 1915.
42 Ibid.
43 ‘An even temperament in adversity’, Ibid.
45 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 7 June 1915.
46 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 1 November 1915; Asquith, 2 November 1915, House of Commons Debates, 523; Viscount Esher, diary, 1 March 1916, Esher papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, 2115.
47 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 1 September 1915.
soon swelled. McKenna demanded inclusion, further complicating the endeavour: ‘I have been much exercised (as you know) over the composition of this infernal Committee. It [moves] from day to day like a baffling kaleidoscope, and the final arrangement of the warring and discordant particles [is] an almost desperate leap in the dark’, Asquith informed Pamela. His appreciation of the nature of the debate was inherently unhelpful for it offered no way of reaching agreed conclusions and ample opportunities for delaying them: ‘I realise, and to a large extent sympathise with, the interplaying cross-currents’. As a circumstantial imperative, men again constituted matter: ‘[t]hese personal things are more exhausting and life-taking than a multitude of political and strategic problems’. So it was that a compromise had assuaged Bonar Law, a concession had allayed Lloyd George, and a confidante had placated McKenna.

The Chancellor’s presence was the main complaint of those who had hoped that the new committee, called into existence to redress the balance of the old, would speedily endorse conscription. Lloyd George, noted George Riddell, confidant and proprietor of the News of the World, was ‘much annoyed. He says that McKenna worried the PM into appointing him and that in doing so he had not played the game’. Lloyd George’s expressed understanding was that no minister would press a claim and seek to gain preferment. ‘I stated that I was indifferent whether I was made a member or not’, he told Riddell, perhaps, a sceptic may have suggested, disingenuously. The Prime Minister’s weakness was exposed by the episode, and for many the real soft underbelly of the war effort: ‘[t]he PM has been spending the weekend with the Jekylls [Pamela’s family] and has no doubt been subjected to much feminine influence’, Riddell confided. ‘Mrs McK, LG thinks, has been working hard in the interests of her husband’. Pamela was not alone. Margot had decided to keep the Prime Minister out of town ‘as the gossips will say that Mr McKenna ‘got at’ H[enry] ... [McKenna’s] well advertised hatred of LG make it highly important for us all to be silent – not a word’. Whether or not his prophecy was self-fulfilling, Lloyd George

49 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 11 November 1915.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Riddell, diary, 14 November 1915, Riddell papers 62959; ‘The Prime Minister’s Speech’, The Times, 3 November 1915, p. 11.
53 Riddell, diary, 14 November 1915.
54 Ibid.
55 Margot Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 28 December 1915.
found the committee ‘very unpleasant . . . McKenna opposes almost every project’ of his.\textsuperscript{56} Bonar Law gave a speech very clearly expressing his dissatisfaction, which was applauded in the growing coalition of the critical press.\textsuperscript{57} The diffusion of opinion within its expanded membership had the effect of further disorientating the Prime Minister as to the nature of the challenge. As late as 16 December, he told Pamela, revealing his \textit{modus operandi}, ‘I am just going to face a large anti-conscription deputation – not (I hope and believe) Ephesian Beasts, but nice, more or less tame, peace loving specimens from our old pre-Coalition menagerie. How did you get on with B Law?’\textsuperscript{58}

Reality was soon evident, and the seven days of the second Christmas of the war constituted, for Asquith, ‘in the fullest sense of the word a Hellish week: one of the worse even in my storm–tossed annals’.\textsuperscript{59} On 27 December Lloyd George threatened to resign; the next day McKenna and Runciman actually did tender their resignations. ‘The ground they put forward’, Asquith told Edwin Montagu, McKenna’s deputy and husband of Venetia Stanley, ‘is not the actual decision of the Cabinet: indeed they both say that they will not oppose the proposed bill’.\textsuperscript{60} The ground put forward was that the raising of 67 divisions would not be possible without impairing other resources and obligations. It was a question of degree, rather than kind, and no assurance on Asquith’s part, by or on behalf of Balfour, or more significantly Grey, assuaged them. ‘I am afraid that this is the climax of 6 months of discontent and portent on their part. Can you and Rufus [Isaacs,] do anything with them to–day?’ Their resignation, the war leader thundered, ‘wd be to say the least highly inconvenient’.\textsuperscript{61}

McKenna had ‘rather surprised’\textsuperscript{62} the Prime Minister by his position; presumably in form rather than in substance. Asquith’s dilemma was therefore twofold: the political necessity of retaining his Chancellor and principal lieutenant, and his private sympathy with McKenna’s objections. Anything more than private sympathy would risk the secession of the other side of the Cabinet; the measure’s mitigating concession was that no married men would be taken until all single men had been recruited. The economics were questionable,

\textsuperscript{56} Riddell, diary, 28 November 1915, Riddell papers 62959.
\textsuperscript{57} ‘The Fading Claims of Party’, \textit{The Times}, 16 December 1915, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{58} Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 16 December 1915. The answer is not known.
\textsuperscript{59} Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 1 January 1916.
\textsuperscript{60} Asquith to Edwin Montagu, 28 December 1915, Montagu papers, Trinity College, Cambridge, AS5/1/1/45.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., Walter Runciman to Asquith, 15 December 1915, Asquith papers 15/200. Rufus Isaacs (Lord Reading) led the Anglo-French Loan Mission, and was thereafter Special Envoy, to the United States.
\textsuperscript{62} Asquith to Sylvia Henley, 28 December 1915, Asquith papers 542/2/504.
to say nothing of the morality, though neither concern had hitherto been notable from their bearing. Fortunately for Asquith, McKenna had not been a tenured political intimate without acquiring a similarly resilient sense of expeditious propriety. McKenna’s approach had more chance of advancing if the proponent were in a position to influence political decisions. For all the extemporisation of the war effort, some conventions remained.

The view that the Prime Minister’s actions were of a pattern was as depressing to his allies as they were infuriating to his enemies, and matters culminated on 28 December. Runciman complained to his wife that ‘Asquith has thrown over his friends in order to placate hostile colleagues’, and Asquith’s wife wrote to McKenna’s: ‘yr husband and Mr Runciman + others feel that Henry has come down on the wrong side . . . I sympathize. Ll.G’s speech spells his doom. He is a hound of the flimsiest disloyal ungrateful kind’. The meeting later that day was the least encouraging, Runciman went on. ‘McKenna and I went in to see Asquith and had a most unpleasant interview’, Runciman told his wife, ‘ending with not even a handshake’. They came ‘blustering in’, Asquith told Kathleen Scott, and were generally ‘excited and not very nice’. Faith between believers underwent another assault. ‘Probably he complains of us on the grounds that we deserted him, Runciman thought, accurately. When Rufus Isaacs arrived at Runciman’s house that evening on Asquith’s bidding, Runciman suspected that that eternal emissary had been commandeered by a Lloyd George anxious to isolate McKenna. Asquith additionally sent a letter to McKenna, Simon, and Runciman, warning of a ‘shattering blow’ to the national interest in the event of their resigning. The inevitable offer of a committee reached a Runciman finally couched in serenity, ‘Since [Reggie] and, I were bound to leave the Asquith Coalition it has been fortunate that the step should have to be taken at the very moment when he and I are at the top of our reputations’. Nor was McKenna obviously overwhelmed, telling Pamela that evening, ‘Crisis postponed until tomorrow’.

63 Runciman to Hilda Runciman, 28 December 1915, Runciman papers, Special Collections, Robinson Library, Newcastle University, 303/2.
64 Margot Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 28 December 1915; ‘Mr Lloyd George’s Appeal’, The Manchester Guardian, 27 December 1915, p. 5.
65 Runciman to Hilda Runciman, 28 December 1915, Runciman papers 303/2/1917.
66 Kathleen Scott, diary, 29 December 1915, Asquith papers 152/125.
67 Runciman to Hilda Runciman, 28 December 1915, Runciman papers 303/2.
68 Asquith to McKenna, Simon, and Runciman, 28 December 1915, Simon papers 52/26.
69 Runciman to Hilda Runciman, 28 December 1915, Runciman papers 303/2.
70 McKenna to Pamela McKenna, 28 December 1915.
‘A wife can play a big part in a great crisis like this’, Margot told Pamela, demonstrating how the mobilisation of women was one way in which the high politics of the war reflected broader social developments. If McKenna ‘really cares for Henry and believes him necessary to our country just now he must stick to him. A skeleton conscription will keep in all the unmarried men and more than are wanted before we have any bill for compulsion at all. If there are too many men for soldiers this can be easily tested and sifted afterwards . . . Henry has made a clear definite pledge which he must keep at all costs or he goes down forever . . . That is the whole question + by this he will be tested . . . What good in war time is there in a man absolutely necessary to Henry resigning? What will all of us who love him think? On what firm ground does he resign? Too many men or fear of compulsion in any form even an outline or skeleton?’. Margot’s priority was ‘to keep us united for this terrible war’.71 In case Pamela had missed the point, that day she also received a despairing letter from the Prime Minister. ‘I still hope that there may be some clearance, but I am not sanguine. It afflicts me more than I can say’.72

Two days later, Asquith told Violet Tree, ‘we had a Cabinet in the morning which may or may not be fateful’.73 The consequences, were all ministers to act as they had intimated, were clear to the Prime Minister when, with mandarin celerity, Maurice Hankey, Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence since 1912, fashioned a government-prolonging formula. He devised the Cabinet Committee on the Co-ordination of Military and Financial Effort, so named to specify the actual material grounds for grievance: ‘if an agreement could be reached the great expansion of armies might be limited and means found for McKenna and Runciman to remain in the Cabinet with honour’.74 The desire of General William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to establish some objective solidity to the General Staff’s means of support meant that he too wanted McKenna to remain and evaluate the feasible rather than the merely desirable. Hankey was relieved. ‘McK and Robertson met with most satisfactory results as they partially agree on basis of 54 divisions, the utmost McKenna will risk’.75

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71 Margot Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 28 December 1915; Margot Asquith to McKenna, 28 December 1915, McKenna papers, 5/9/9.
72 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 28 December 1915.
73 Asquith to Violet Tree, 30 December 1915, Asquith-Tree Correspondence, British Library, London, 59895/34.
74 Maurice Hankey, diary, 30 December 1915, Hankey papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, 1/1/127; Long to Asquith, 2 January 1916, Asquith papers 16/1.
75 Hankey, diary, 30 December 1915, Hankey papers 1/1/127; Sir William Robertson to Douglas Haig, 27 January 1916, Robertson papers 1/27/19.
There had been, for wartime, a healthy sense of self-preservation in the Liberal reaction. Hankey’s committee was one incentive; the other incentive was the alternative. ‘Constant conferrings between Reggie, EG and me enabled us to take a line of action which would prevent L-G and his Tory friends forcing us into the catastrophe of an election’, Runciman admitted.⁷⁶ Fears of a ‘round up the shirkers’ election were endemic. For non-Bill Liberals, he thought, it would ‘mean annihilation’.⁷⁷ That alone served to ‘persuade one in favour [of] struggling on the Trade and therefore the size of army point. EG holds this strongly, so does Reggie’.⁷⁸ Continuing the struggle within government was preferable, politically if not necessarily personally, to a sudden reacquaintance with time, space, and the backbenches. So, with the steady indentation of present and likely realities, the dissenting ministers, with the exception of Simon, were found to be dissuadable. ‘You ought to stand and make the best of it and persuade R McK’,⁷⁹ Montagu told Grey; instead Hankey sought to persuade R McK: ‘the country cannot afford to lose its sanest elements … as a friend I implore you not to resign’.⁸⁰ ‘McKenna takes the compulsion of single men as settled’, Leonard Hobhouse told C. P. Scott, editor of The Manchester Guardian, each an embodiment of tortured Liberalism. There were ‘fine-spun theories of the decision being contingent and so on, but from McKenna’s manner I am clear… They stole a march on us by dividing the interest of the married and the single’.⁸¹ Orderly withdrawal, while remaining on the battlefield, was thenceforth the priority. ‘If we succeed [with] a reduction of 20 divisions then my trade arguments are largely satisfied’, Runciman wrote. ‘Only the principle of compulsion on 310,000 marrieds remains’.⁸² McKenna and Runciman were happily married; the crisis passed.

‘These two weeks have been hell’, Margot told Pamela, as soon as they were over. ‘Simon thought of his convictions. Mr McKenna and Runciman think of men and money – quite right but these things may be out of proportion – others have thought too much of conscription others too much of freedom or tradition and Ll.G cannot think at all … Loathing for L.G. on all sides Labour, Treasury, Liberals, officials, etc’. All that was clear was that ‘[s]plitting the Cabinet will lose

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⁷⁶ Runciman to Hilda Runciman, 30 December 1915, Runciman papers 303/2.
⁷⁷ Ibid.; Alexander MacCallum Scott, diary, 11 June 1915, MacCallum Scott papers, Glasgow University Library, 1465/6.
⁷⁸ Addison, diary, 14 January 1916, Addison, Four and a Half Years, p. 244.
⁷⁹ Montagu to Grey, 30 December 1915, Montagu papers AS6/10/28.
⁸⁰ Hankey to McKenna, 25 December 1915, McKenna papers, 5/9/5.
⁸¹ L. T. Hobhouse to Scott, 30 December 1915, Scott papers 50908.
⁸² Runciman to Hilda Runciman, 30 December 1915, Runciman papers 303/2; Asquith to Sylvia Henley, 30 December 1915, Asquith papers 542/2/513.
the war more than anything else’. With the crisis over, therefore, there only remained the measure itself. ‘To-morrow I see no loop-holes, as I have to prepare for and introduce this damned Bill. And then?’, Asquith asked Pamela. ‘I hate more than I can say this new and unnatural atmosphere. It must be dissipated’. ‘I am anxious and apprehensive . . . Surely I must be nearing the end of undreamt of horrors and tragedies’. Yet the episode had served to reinforce the Prime Minister. It may have been the case that ‘[l]istening to Simon’s [resignation] speech this afternoon’, Asquith told Pamela, ‘I felt rather like a father who has been publicly hit in the face by his son. These are the things one really minds’, but Simon, Riddell noted, was ‘very sick that McKenna and Runciman did not stand by him’, and Asquith in turn thought that ‘it had been rather a shock to McKenna to see how little the resignation of Simon mattered’. On the contrary, McKenna discerned in tactful self-sacrifice motives more political than principled, speaking later of Simon taking ‘the decision ensuring him the future Liberal leadership’.

McKenna comported himself in a way consonant with collective responsibility, if not necessarily with the tenor of the Coalition. While opposing the measure personally, he supported it publicly, and privately, as Montagu told Asquith, ‘has been playing a noble game . . . in persuading members to vote for the Bill’. Since McKenna’s doubts had always been about the precedent established more that the principle conceded, it was the only tenable course once resignation had been resisted. A committee – another committee – offered time and chance. It also meant that McKenna’s strategic conception was placed on a reformed footing because a pressing political necessity had pre-empted what he held to be economic propriety. A leading Liberal’s view of military conscription as being one based on economically–sustainable increments did not inspire confidence in other Liberals whose principles were not quite so mannered. For the future it was encouraging, however, since the committee would ensure that McKenna’s calls would be at least indirectly heeded: nothing beyond the capacity to provide could be effected, by definition, and

83 Margot Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 7 [January 1916].
84 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 4 January 1916.
85 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 5 January 1916.
87 Riddell, diary, 16 January 1916, Riddell papers 62960.
88 Kathleen Scott, diary, 11 February 1916, Asquith papers 152/130.
90 Montagu to Asquith, 6 January 1916, Asquith papers, 16/3.
economic capacity was his central concern. Ultimately this approach prevailed, but not before attempts had been made by opponents to remove any restrictions. Capacity thereafter maintained a form which permitted the war effort to continue through military failure until the doubts of American creditors compelled contraction in the ‘November crisis’ of 1916. ‘There is some risk’, *The Times* opined, ‘that the public may be confused by the rapidity with which one Cabinet crisis is giving place to another’.91

Gingerists advocating an escalation of the war effort included the Unionist Business Committee, the Liberal War Committee, which included those Liberals who supported conscription, and the Unionist War Committee, much larger and was more representative of Unionist feeling on the issue. Nor was it considered a domestic matter. The British world was growing in importance, and its constituent parts became the object of the attentions of other lobbyists, such as the Empire Resources Development Committee and the Imperial Unionist Association. The importance of imperial manpower for the mother country had the unintended consequence that daughter nations were being consecrated on the fields of Western Europe: for Australia and New Zealand at Gallipoli in 1915 and Pozières in 1916; for Canada at Beaumont-Hamel in 1916 and Vimy in 1917; for South Africa at Delville Wood in 1916; and even for India in the East African, Gallipoli, Palestine and Mesopotamian campaigns.92 It was publicly-recognised that the Dominions were an essential and growing source of manpower.93

As important as imperial issues were in Britain having gone to war, imperial means were increasingly recognised for its successful prosecution, and Dominions became models. Two Liberals MPs asked that if ‘national service [for] our daughter nation, Free Australia’ were possible, then there was no reason why it

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91 ‘The Cabinet and the Army’, *The Times*, 3 January 1916, p. 11.
should not be for the mother. The free Australians even put the matter to popular vote, and elsewhere conscription was held up as the only democratic method of recruitment. From March 1916, on his tour of Britain, compulsionism – and imperialism – received vocal support from Billy Hughes, Prime Minister of Australia, who was as keen to see Asquith replaced as were Lloyd George and Lord Northcliffe, proprietor of the *The Times*, both of whom associated themselves with him. The visit was a great success, demonstrating the popular appeal of forceful clarity in war matters. It also demonstrated the ease of being popular far from home; Hughes lost both votes back in Australia. He was followed, less volubly, in the autumn, by William Massey, Prime Minister of New Zealand, who had happily handed over all to the cause. Even Louis Botha, of South Africa, visited trumpeting his army engaging the enemy in German South West Africa. The most frequent visitor of the Dominion heads of government during the Asquith coalition was Sir Robert Borden, keen to use the war to construct a stronger imperial sensibility. The incipient press lord Max Aitken, who as Lord Beaverbrook would crusade for the issue, prompted published an account of the Canadian army on the Western Front. Himself a Scots Canadian, Aitken obtained a preface by another, the Colonial Secretary Bonar Law, and introduction by a third, Borden. The war might be just what the empire needed; the benefits of attacking Turkey, for instance, could be as much psychological as strategic. Indeed, the contribution the war could make to the

empire might be as important as that of the empire to the war. All served to embolden the escalationalists in a British world at war.

Domestically, the pressures that had provided for conscription while preserving the ministry would not rest there. Where McKenna’s concerns were based upon a sensitivity to existing methods and the likely effects of acceleration, the equivalent thinking from compulsionists considered in the main no variation other than the potential for, and the effects of, defeat. What Asquith, as the principal mediating body, required, was a constancy that a close associate could offer only by ignoring reality, or at least his view of it. When the Prime Minister complained about McKenna’s contortions, it was through frustrated sympathy rather than, simply, irritation. Contorted or not, the Chancellor was far from contented. The novelist and family friend Arnold Bennett bumped into McKenna’s brother in the Reform Club on 15 January, who ‘told me that Reginald was still quite determined to leave the Cabinet if it tried to outrun the constable’. Runciman was similarly inclined. With somnambulist efficiency the committee conducted its business. Meetings were convened elsewhere of what Hankey called the ‘shadow’ or the ‘real’ cabinet. Asquith noted during a weekend break in the country how ‘McKenna and Hankey talked army and Bd Trade figures half the day’. There were other shadow cabinets, just as there was also the invariable negativist perspective. ‘Who can have told you that I regarded this horrible and dangerous imbroglio as a great joke ... was greatly mistaken’, Augustine Birrell, one of the most pacific of Asquith’s old pre-Coalition menagerie, told Pamela. ‘Happily for my own individual peace of mind I have no doubt whatever that just now nobody has any business to resign’, rather there was a novel application of what would become known as ‘attrition’: ‘The greater the public danger in any particular or threatened course of action, the more imperative


106 Runciman to McKenna, McKenna papers 5/9/23.

107 Hankey diary, 12 November 1915, Hankey papers 1/1/101; Hankey diary, 3 July 1915, papers 1/1/48.

is the duty to remain and fight it inch by inch, and bit by bit until it becomes impossible to remain a moment longer ... to go away and leave the enemy in possession is downright folly ... To do so is to deliver over the keys of the fortress.\textsuperscript{109} The proprietorial imperative was yet to succumb.

III

McKenna went to see Runciman, the Cabinet’s almost perpetual convalescent, in his sickbed, on 4 August 1916. ‘We discussed politics and agreed [the] time has come for [the] governmen[t] to go out’.\textsuperscript{110} There appeared little inclination to share this conclusion with the Prime Minister. ‘As for political crises, they are so much a normal condition of our life that I cease to be greatly interested in them’.\textsuperscript{111} The Chancellor’s prominence during the climacteric first week of December 1916 was therefore perhaps unexpected, with the Treasury marginalised, and relations with much of the Cabinet having long since broken down. That summer, in the space of four weeks, a major naval engagement, Jutland, and a major land engagement, the Somme, had failed.\textsuperscript{112} The general priority for the remaining Liberals appeared increasingly one of avoiding public censure. The victory of Pemberton Billing, a bellicose self-publicist, in a by-election in March 1916, was a portend: a ‘Khaki’ election could have only one winner. ‘Reggie and I’, Runciman told his wife ‘talked of all the possibilities in case of Asquith’s sudden collapse. We must have our minds and if necessary our men’.\textsuperscript{113} Asquith had been conveying to Pamela his own slowly deteriorating state of mind,\textsuperscript{114} and the death of his son on the Western Front only hastened the process.\textsuperscript{115}

The progressive weakening of the Prime Minister, both personally and politically, did nothing to mitigate the heightened concerns on the part of his allies to their prospects, or those of their policy priorities. Fear of electoral extinction served to reaffirm the importance of Asquith, or at least of unity. For the Asquithians, their fate and that of the Coalition was tied to the authority of the Prime Minister, which was unfortunately the problem as by the autumn of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{109} Birrell to Pamela McKenna, 5 January 1916.
\item \textsuperscript{110} McKenna to Pamela McKenna, 4 August 1916.
\item \textsuperscript{111} McKenna to Runciman, 21 July 1916, Runciman papers 149/1.
\item \textsuperscript{112} Admiral Sir John Jellicoe to Pamela McKenna, 18 June 1916.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Runciman to Hilda Runciman, 6 September 1916, Runciman papers 303/2; McKenna to Pamela McKenna, 18 August 1915.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 10 September, 6, 12, 16, 24 October, 2, 13, 29 November 1915; 11, 19 February, 17, 27 June, 24 October, 1916.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 20 September 1916; Asquith to Ettie Desborough, 25 October 1916, Desborough papers D/ERv/272/23.
\end{itemize}
1916 the authority of the Prime Minister was no longer obvious. The final arbiter in all disputes had to remain the Prime Minister, as it did, when he chose to arbitrate. The Chancellor, faced with the Prime Minister’s sensibility, had justifiable cause for concern, if not for the possibility of the Prime Minister failing, then certainly for the consequences. There was by the autumn of 1916, if there had been before, no alternative to Asquith as war leader if McKenna wanted to remain in office, and, indeed, retain any purchase on the war effort. Yet, as with Runciman and Grey, McKenna had lost much of what attachment he had ever had to the Coalition. With an appreciation of Asquith’s eloquent torment, the sense of uncertainty was unambiguously reinforced. By November 1916 the Prime Minister, even if he had retained that of most Liberals, had long since lost the confidence of Unionists. Yet he could not now continue without the Liberals, just as they could not without him. Most significantly, en masse or separately, they were in a minority at a time when the state of the war gave no indication of improving. Worse, too, for the Asquithians was the increasing sense that the most likely successor would be the man who was the newly-appointed Secretary for War, Kitchener having drowned en route to Russia on HMS Hampshire after the cruiser struck a German mine: David Lloyd George.

As in the events of twelve months before, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Robertson, was central. Where in December 1915 he effected reconciliation, in December 1916 it was division; where in the earlier instance Robertson took the initiative, in the second his was a passive presence, which produced aggression. ‘L.G. tried to shove me over to Russia’, Robertson complained to Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the Expeditionary Forces in France and Flanders in November. The King took up the matter strongly & it was dropped. The idea was to let L.G. become top dog here & have his wicked way. Like he used to get rid of poor old K’. The ‘Kitchener Dodge’ had been revived as a recurring manoeuvre months after the original object of the exercise had been lost to a German mine. In addition to an earlier effort with Robertson, Lloyd George had tried unsuccessfully to send Grey, according to Hankey, to Salonika, and, according to Robertson, to Russia. Robertson told Asquith ‘it would be absolute folly for me to go’. Nor did Asquith and Hankey succeed in sending Lloyd George to Russia.

116 Robertson to Haig, 8 November 1916, Haig papers 3155/109.
117 Hankey, diary, 6 March 1916, Hankey papers 1/1/3; Hankey, diary, 17 November 1916, Hankey papers 1/1/273; Hankey, diary, 28 November 1916, Hankey papers 1/1/279.
118 Robertson to Asquith, 13 November 1916, Robertson papers 1113/21a.
119 Esher, diary, 17 October 1916, Esher papers 2/17; Esher diary, 26 October 1916, Esher papers 2/17.
Yet with Robertson’s succession as CIGS, Lloyd George had cause to resist restrictions attained and attempted. Over both the personal and the political – authority and strategy – Lloyd George and Robertson were opposed. Lloyd George’s enemies were likely friends of McKenna, a reasoning which led Lloyd George and his friends to see McKenna as an additional source of intrigue as well as of obstruction. Lloyd George’s suspicions were correct in one respect. Robertson described McKenna to Haig as ‘a friend of ours’. 120 That the leading voluntarist could be regarded by the leading conscriptionist as a friend was thought an illustration of Robertson’s political naiveté, as well as of the Chancellor’s vaunted duplicity; perhaps it was merely another exigency of war. Given their mutual sympathies, usually covertly expressed when they were expressed at all, mutual accord between Robertson and McKenna was actually less fanciful than it appeared, not least as the CIGS was wholly dependent on Asquith’s patronage, a situation altogether recalling that of Kitchener. 121 Of McKenna’s attempt to use Robertson in the war of attrition within the Cabinet there could be no doubt. There was by that point little else McKenna could do in attempting to sustain political initiative. The ‘Nigeria debate’ of 8 November was a focal point for the gingerists and further challenged the war as it was being fought. 122 The experience further empowered Lloyd George and the compulsionists. A week earlier, McKenna had made an improbable trip to visit Haig in the field, and made supportive noises above the gunfire. 123 ‘I have seen McKenna’ Robertson told Haig after the Chancellor had come back from the front, ‘& he says he will stick to me’. 124

Where collective responsibility still obtained, plotting was policy by other processes. Robertson discerned wider ambitions in the collusion between Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, hankering for a return to government, and Lord French, Commander in Chief of home forces. 125 When Hankey raised the subject of the ‘Kitchener Dodge’ on 9 November, Lloyd George ‘at once disclaimed the remotest intention of anything of the

120 Ibid.
121 Esher, diary, 2–13 November 1916, Esher papers 2/17; Esher, diary, 6 November 1916, Esher papers 2/15.
123 Haig diary, 2 November 1916, Haig papers, 3155/109/ XI/3; McKenna to Haig, 6 November 1916, Haig papers, 3155/109/21.
124 Robertson to Haig, 8 November 1916, Haig papers, 3155/109.
125 Hankey, diary, 9 November 1916, Hankey papers 1/1; Esher diary, 17 and 26 October 1916, Esher papers 2/17.
kind’. At the War Committee on 21 November, Lloyd George complained that ‘he had lost influence with Robertson owing to the fact that someone had poisoned the latter’s mind’ with the ‘K Dodge’. Lloyd George told colleagues present that it was McKenna, but admitted afterwards that he did not know who it was, and had only guessed. The desired effect was nevertheless obtained, and the Chancellor had been diminished in the eyes of his colleagues. The incident was thereafter cited as an illustration of how, by his obsession with Lloyd George, McKenna had made the normal operation of the executive machinery impossible. The further damaging of relations as a result of the various ‘dodges’ was a necessary prelude to the disintegration of the ministry. Yet McKenna’s concordat with Robertson was not without precedent; Lloyd George’s hostility to the CIGS had been for some time maturing; and the Secretary for War did indeed desire his removal, permanent if possible, temporary if necessary.

As a result of the impasse within the Cabinet, members turned to routes outside. Fleet Street was a much more significant thoroughfare during the second December crisis than it had been in the first. It marked an evolution in distrust: even more than war, newspapers were the continuation of politics by other means. Ministers found grievances more eloquently – and publicly – aired in Fleet Street than in Whitehall or Westminster. By late 1916 it was easily forgotten that there were reasons for the separate existence of each. What for many Liberals was a common denominator so low as to be nearly imperceptible, was for Lloyd George and his new allies a necessary endeavour. The Coalition fell in part because the newspaper editors who resisted its continuance, as with the politicians who displayed, as W. B. Yeats would put it shortly afterwards, the more passionate intensity. Some discerned gradual change as betokening a transformation, with that particular vintage of (relatively) ‘new’ journalism – progeny of the tabloid press and the previous war – compelling politics to conform to their requirements. With the likes of Lord Milner near the centre of events, as Minister without Portfolio rather than High Commissioner for South Africa, as he had been during the Second Anglo-Boer War, the continuity was obvious, and the

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126 Hankey diary, 21 November 1916, Hankey papers 1/1/275; Esher to Haig, 25 November 1916, [copy], Esher papers 417.
128 Ibid.; Riddell, diary, 10 December 1916, Riddell papers 62978; Hankey, diary, 22 November 1916, Hankey papers 1/1/276.
129 McKenna to Pamela McKenna, 4 August and 5 September 1916; Riddell, diary, 19 February, 30 April and 22 June 1916, Riddell papers 62960; McKenna to John Burns, 26 October 1914, Burns papers, British Library, London, 46382; McKenna to J. L. Garvin, 28 May 1908 [copy], McKenna papers 3/13/4a; McKenna to Runciman, 22 May 1917, Runciman papers 161/7.
effect was that politicians and newspapermen had a relationship no longer defined by distance. Attraction in abundance was felt by Unionists, who saw in Fleet Street a useful circumambulation around the May 1915 settlement. In contrast, the indifference of Liberals in general and Asquithians in particular to the press was more than relative.\textsuperscript{130} It was for their opponents an attitude emblematic of the all-too undogmatic prosecution of the war thus far, and a by then obviously cyclical process continued. Lloyd George was responsible for the apogee – or nadir – of that process, at the end of September, when he gave an interview to the \textit{New York Times}, forcefully repudiating nascent peace overtures.\textsuperscript{131} McKenna was furious, complaining to C. P. Scott that the ‘affront to America was sheer lunacy’, and one made worse by the interviewee’s doctoring of the text to accentuate his positives; indeed he ‘had no doubt Lloyd George had written the whole thing very likely interpolations and all’.\textsuperscript{132}

The nature of the fourth estate revealed much about the changes to come. Where the Unionist Press was one of mass-market newspapers and large proprietors, the Liberal Press had smaller circulations and larger editors, who regarded themselves as the equals of the politicians. Tory was better served by what the press could offer than was Liberal. The attitude of other Liberals was such that the effect of serious and trenchant writing was muffled; faint resonance of the changing order. The effect of the Liberal press on the government was less notable than that of the Unionist, except insofar as it adopted a Unionist agenda. The lesson seemed to be less that Liberalism could not wage war than that it could not function during war; the effect was the same. The \textit{ad hominem} nature of events masked tactful political compromise up to and including December 1916. Individuals could be blamed even when individuals were not at fault. While leading Liberal editors were on closer terms with Liberal ministers than Unionist editors were with Unionist ministers, the effect was muted because the Liberal press was less and less the mass press, unless, as demonstrated by Scott, it ceased to be a Liberal Party liberal press at all. If Liberalism could no longer rely on traditional constituencies, the likelihood of affecting the non-Liberal sections of public and private opinion was reduced. Unionists had more success with their story because it was a simpler story to telegraph; Liberalism had become too

\footnote{130 Hugh Spender to Runciman, 18 December 1916, Runciman papers 153; Isaac Marcosson, \textit{Adventures in Interviewing} (New York, 1919), p. 127.}

\footnote{131 ‘Lloyd George calls all peace talk unfriendly’, \textit{The New York Times}, 29 September 1916, p. 3; MacCallum Scott, diary, 27 November 1916, MacCallum Scott papers 1465/7.}

\footnote{132 Scott diary, 2–3 October 1916, Scott papers 50903/74; c.f. Lord Hardinge to Sir Cecil Spring-Rice, 5 October 1916, Hardinge papers, British Library, London 36/191; Sir Frederick Ponsonby to C. P. Trevelyan, 6 October 1916, Trevelyan papers, Special Collections, Newcastle University Library, 60; Esher diary 29 November 1916, Esher papers 2/17.}
elusive a doctrine upon which to build a solid circulation. So it was that Asquith’s disdain, and Lloyd George’s appreciation, was reciprocated.133

The measure of the press was its support for Lloyd George in December 1916. The Asquithians could count only on J. A. Spender and his Westminster Gazette; Lloyd George could prevail at least in part because he could count as supporters to varying extents and for varying reasons such disparate pressmen as Scott at The Manchester Guardian, and Lord Northcliffe at The Times, Henry Dalziel, owner of Reynolds’s Newspaper, J. L. Garvin, editor of The Observer, Leopold Maxse, editor of the National Review, Robert Donald, editor of the Daily Chronicle, and H. A. Gwynne, editor of The Morning Post. It was a coalition the like of which henceforth would always matter. Politicians, having made the press what it was in influence and stridency, feigned surprise as a party truce was subverted and a National Government undermined in time of war. It had been governmental atrophy that had provided for the dominance of the Unionist Press, and since parliamentary leadership could not by then be without the Unionists, it had to be with them. Liberal newspapermen, as with their backbench cousins, hankered after firm leadership; there had been enough apostasies to the glory of infirm leadership: the doctrinal consideration was minimal. Hence the appeal of substituting procrastination under Asquith for peace under Grey. If not quite the required deus ex machina, it was at least a proposition of sorts. The inroads of Unionism meant, however, that any replacement for Asquith would not be a Liberal dedicated to ending the war by negotiation, but a Liberal who would end the war by victory, of one side or the other. So it was that Lloyd George prevailed.

Duly stimulated by his outmanoeuvring of McKenna over the Kitchener dodge, Lloyd George issued a memorandum on 25 November, demanding a new war committee, a ‘civilian General Staff’.134 The move reflected longstanding concerns about the machinery of the executive. The War Committee, twelve months old, was pregnant without expectation, as membership had increased arithmetically and decisiveness decreased geometrically. McKenna was still regarded as an obstacle to the form of the war effort as ideally envisaged. Since the new committee would omit the service ministers, it would also marginalise Robertson; as it would omit departments not directly concerned with the war effort, it would marginalise McKenna. The Chancellor’s objection to Lloyd George’s proposal, particularly since he would not be included, was to be expected. Asquith duly rejected the proposal on 26 November, explicitly stating the need for any committee to involve the service ministers. It was, however, clear

134 Memorandum, 25 November 1916, Bonar Law papers, 63/A/3.
that a crisis of potentially greater significance than that of December 1915 was developing. He declared to Pamela, with a whiff of greasepaint, ‘Alas! the whirlwinds are blowing, and the windmills are whirling: in short I am in the centre of an aerial tornado, from which I cannot escape’.135

On 27 November, the Federal Reserve Board in New York discouraged involvement in British investments, publishing its warning, suitably, in the New York Times.136 Three days later Asquith notified the King of the matter in what would prove to be his last Cabinet report.137 The following day, 1 December, Lloyd George met the Prime Minister, certain that it was Asquith’s presence on the committee which was the critical issue. Since McKenna’s influence on the Prime Minister was by then regarded as absolute, Asquith’s absence was insisted upon.138 Lloyd George proposed a war committee of three, two of whom were the service ministers, the third being the Chairman, obviously Lloyd George, and that the committee would report to the Prime Minister and give orders to departments, though Asquith would retain both the right of veto, and the supreme authority for decisions.139 This Asquith rejected, chiefly on the grounds that he thought the Prime Minister should be chairman. He did however, concede the need to reconstitute the existing War Committee, and his wife recorded, ‘begged me not to believe all the stories McKenna was spreading about that he [Lloyd George] wanted to take my place, and was disloyal etc’.140 Balfour thought that, once again, ‘LG had put a pistol to the head of the PM’.141 ‘I don’t think during the war, I have had a worse 48 hours’, Asquith, by now running out of superlatives, told Pamela.142

McKenna, Grey, and Runciman, knew their fate in the event of Lloyd George being appointed Chairman, and, even in Asquith’s own proposal, there appeared to be no room for the Chancellor on so pared a committee. The preferred triumvirate was Lloyd George, Bonar Law, and Carson. Once again it was as much the manner of premeditated action as the substance that aroused and marshalled resistance. With Northcliffe personally intent on undermining the Prime Minister’s authority, as he had been for some time, McKenna mobilised his

135 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 27 November 1916.
137 Asquith to George V, 30 November 1916, CAB 41/37/ 42.
138 Riddell, diary, 16 October 1916, Riddell papers 62959.
139 Frances Stevenson, diary, 20–22 November 1916 in Taylor, ed., Lloyd George, pp. 126–7; Riddell diary 8 December 1916, Riddell papers 62960.
140 Margot Asquith, diary, 3 December 1916, Margot Asquith papers, d.3215/141.
142 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 1 December 1916.
own, rather less prepossessing, pressman with the message that ‘McKenna would resign unless he is included in the war council’.143 ‘As you know my Sabbaths are rarely spent in this most damnable town’, Asquith wrote to Pamela from Downing Street on 3 December, but ‘I was forced back here by Bongie and Montagu and Rufus to grapple with a “Crisis” – this time with a very big capital C. The result is that I have spent much of the afternoon in colloquing with messrs Ll. George and Bonar Law’ with the result that ‘[t]he “Crisis” shows every sign of following its many predecessors to an early and unmourned grave. But there were many Wigs very nearly on the green’.144

Asquith’s confidence did not survive his reading the following morning’s Times, which carried an account of events that clearly conveyed to Asquith that Lloyd George must personally have briefed Northcliffe to pre-empt him.145 The report was only the most recent, but the most damning, piece of evidence that a coup was being attempted.146 This included refusing any revised executive machinery on which he was not the Chairman, and, indeed, speaking to Lloyd George.147 ‘R. had an early morning letter from Margot saying the P.M. had written to Ll.G. refusing his terms’, Pamela later told Beaverbrook. ‘Violet lunched with me and seemed to think a modus vivendi would be reached’.148

In the Commons that afternoon, Asquith, McKenna and Runciman, could be found sitting alone on the Treasury bench.149 Having reconciled himself to Lloyd George’s proposals, he met McKenna on the morning of 4 December and then, in Crewe’s words, ‘declined to become a Merovingian ruler’.150 Northcliffe complained ‘that in every step the P.M. has taken in the crisis he has acted on McKenna’s instructions as to what he should do’.151

That evening, the Cabinet Liberals met and Montagu proposed an ad hoc constitutional conference to resolve the situation. ‘My suggestion was derided, and McKenna most helpfully asked me if I wanted four Prime Ministers, or, if

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143 Riddell, diary, 3 December 1916, Riddell papers 62960.
144 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 3 December 1916.
146 L. T. Hobhouse to Scott, 3 December 1916, Scott papers, 50909/44.
147 Riddell, diary, 1 September 1919, in Lord Riddell, Lord Riddell’s Intimate Diary of the Peace Conference and After, 1918–1923 (London, 1933), p. 121.
151 Stevenson, Diary, 6 December 1916, p. 133.
not, which one I wanted’. 152 Montagu then asked what they should do ‘if they were invited to join a Bonar Law and Lloyd George Government. McKenna said he would have no difficulty in deciding as he was not likely to receive an invitation’. 153 The general view, led by McKenna, was that Asquith was right to refuse any subordinate position. 154 Grey equivocated, demonstrating the little will he had to continue: liberation tangible, he wondered aloud if it was wrong to want to be out of office. 155 For Montagu, the Foreign Secretary was the key, and ‘had tried to get hold of Grey, but had failed. McKenna had succeeded in capturing him’. 156 Hours after the meeting broke up, McKenna went at midnight to Downing Street to bolster the Prime Minister. 157 On 5 December Asquith sent his letter of resignation to the King, expecting to be preferred as Prime Minister over Lloyd George, who had also resigned, with Bonar Law. 158 On 6 December, the King invited Lloyd George to be Prime Minister. 159 ‘I have been through the Hell of a time for the best part of a month, and almost for the first time I begin to feel older. In the end there was nothing else to be done, tho’ it is hateful to give even the semblance of a score to our blackguardly press’, Asquith told Pamela later that day, when he had heard – and had declined to serve under his successor: ‘colleagues to-day were unanimous in thinking – what seems obvious to me – that it is not my duty to join this new government in a subordinate capacity. Apart from the personal aspect of the matter, it would never work in practice. So we are all likely to be out in the cold’. 160 McKenna telegrammed his friend, the Liberal MP William Wedgwood Benn: ‘Asquith and all his late liberal colleagues in Cabinet are absent from new government’. 161

153 Montagu’s account of his part in December 1916, Beaverbrook papers, BBK/G/2/21.
154 Arthur Murray, diary, 6 December 1916, Elibank papers 8815/16; MacCallum Scott diary, 4 February 1917, MacCallum Scott papers 1465/8/36.
156 Ibid.; Elibank, diary, 6 December 1916, Elibank papers, 8815/17.
158 Asquith to Lloyd George, 4 December 1916, Balfour papers, 49692/190-2; Balfour to Asquith, 5 December 1916, Balfour papers, 49692/193; Elibank diary, 6 December 1916, Elibank papers, 8815/16-7.
160 Asquith to Pamela McKenna, 6 December 1916.
161 McKenna to William Wedgwood Benn, 10 December 1916, Stansgate papers, ST/24/1/2.
Intransigence had been mutually reinforced. There had still existed differences in outlook between McKenna and Lloyd George, in terms of the pace of the war effort, in terms of strategy, and in terms of personnel. Those differences were not in fact as great as either thought at the time, or others subsequently. What it did mean was that the second obstacle, of enmity, was the one that was effective. Eighteen months of mutual denigration had rendered any working arrangement inconceivable, not to say impractical, even if Lloyd George had been prepared to have McKenna in the new, lean, War Committee. McKenna, having endeavoured throughout to elevate the concerns of the Treasury to the consciousness of the Cabinet, would not have been prepared to serve simply as a member of a Cabinet to which executive decisions were cursorily referred for assent, or (perhaps recognising the irony) as a departmental chief whose decisions were decided by other departments. For McKenna to remain in the Cabinet, Asquith would have to retain both the Premiership and the Chairmanship, which was unacceptable to his arrogator. McKenna thus convinced Asquith, reinforced by the Prime Minister’s own reluctance to accept demotion, particularly as the fallen fruit of agitation by underlings. That Lloyd George ascendant meant McKenna absent was secondary.

Asquith’s own temptation to abandon his Chancellor and effect a renewed working arrangement with Lloyd George rested on his Chancellor’s political isolation. Nothing but further dissent and discontent would flow from retention. Moreover, the Prime Minister would better withstand McKenna’s departure than he would that of Lloyd George. How close he came to abandoning McKenna was never clear, and remained another measure of subjectivity. Asquith’s draft memorandum of 25 November omitted McKenna from a civilian General Staff; others maintained that that was Asquith’s position as late as 1 December. Montagu wrote, as much perhaps in hope as in expectation, that in the new administration Runciman would go to the Admiralty and Crewe to the Exchequer, the option Asquith had deliberately not pursued in May 1915. The rationale for so controversial an appointment no longer obtained. The consensus was that McKenna would go. Montagu in fact expounded the view that McKenna urged Asquith’s continued resistance in the hopeful expectation that he be forcibly removed from office ‘because his difficulties at the Exchequer are notoriously insurmountable’.

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163 Ibid.; Montagu to Asquith, 2 December 1916, Montagu papers AS5/1/19.
164 Montagu, memorandum, 9 December 1916; Montagu to Asquith, 5 December 1916, AS1/12/25.
The degrees of disaffection within ministerial Liberalism constituted the impenetrable core of the second and final December crisis, and were central to the subsequent inquests. Some ministers wanted Asquith to resign and watch Lloyd George fail to convert vapour into matter, so heralding the indispensable’s second dispensation; others wanted Asquith to resign because they themselves had. McKenna, motivated more than anyone else to confound ‘Lliar George’ was also the remaining willing spokesman for restraint in the conduct of the war. Grey clearly lacked the will, Crewe the energy, and Montagu and Samuel the seniority, and Runciman the health. Sufficient Liberal support could be ensured for McKenna’s removal, for while most Liberals remained attached to Asquith, and would have preferred him to continue in harness with Lloyd George, there was some mistrust of Asquith’s lieutenants. Praetorian weariness, and the abrasion of political antennae, meant that there was little remaining support; competence was as potent a manifesto as any promised policy changes. Loyalist Liberals thus despaired that through a clash of style as much as of substance between his principal lieutenants, the Prime Minister was the victim; the Chancellor was, by most impressions, the principal wrecker.

IV

‘This is a bit of a cataclysm isn’t it’, the former Prime Minister wrote, with a noticeably shaky hand, to Sylvia Henley. The personification of the period had precipitately curtailed Liberalism’s belle époque. Whether that moment came in December 1916, or December 1915, or May 1915, or, indeed, August 1914, depended on which Liberal was asked. Once the Coalition was replaced with another, there was correspondingly little that could be employed. While the new regime was an unalloyed success in the eyes of neither the public nor the General Staff, there was by that point, in an overused phrase,
‘no alternative’.\textsuperscript{169} While the disintegration of the Asquith Coalition was not one of degree – there had never really been much coherence – the Lloyd George Coalition was at least bound by the sinews of formerly displaced opposition. Asquith’s concern throughout was that if personnel could be balanced – a balance of men as much as of measures – then stability would ensue, stability from which conduct of the war could be rationally assessed. It was not an executive conception to enhance the reputation of Asquith as first among equals, not least because the personnel were such that commonalty of ends was unlikely when there was no agreement on commonalty of means. Thus McKenna and Lloyd George both thought of themselves as applying reason in the face of dogmatism.

The Government as it was constituted in May 1915 was an exercise in artificial life. That it lasted eighteen months was regarded as a testament to the determination of the Prime Minister, and that it fell as it did was adduced as a demonstration of his insoluble irresolution. Neither quality need have been decisive. The Coalition was a problem not of form so much as of intent. The impediment was not that there were too many ministers, but that there were two men of contrasting conceptions of the war Britain and its empire were fighting who found themselves as the spokesmen of those alternatives. By December 1916 there had been both strategic coalescence and personal contraposition. At the end the ministers who had participated were in any case no longer on speaking terms, and personal antagonism was so compressed by pressures outside the Cabinet that it soon reached a readily combustible form. The difference between the Asquith and the Lloyd George Coalitions was that the later ministry was composed of individuals above issues. Those individuals were, moreover, free from departmental responsibilities in a way not possible before, when departments pioneered their own progress. The new regime marked an organisational rather than a strategic upheaval.

There was one respect in which the Asquith Coalition reflected Liberal priorities, as expressed colloquially by McKenna, Grey, Simon, Runciman and Hankey: political requirements were not advanced in a summary fashion, and thereby summarily incurring dissent which in turn would undermine the consent upon which everything ultimately rested. Adopting conscription earlier than January 1916 would have meant losing the Liberal wing of the Cabinet and destroying the Government. Resisting the calls for conscription for much longer than the ministry was in the end able to, would probably have prompted the secession of the Unionist/Georgian section of the Government, and a similar fate.

What Asquith did was manage public and parliamentary opinion through increments, and prepare for conscription while keeping nation, or at least coalition, together. It was a considerable achievement, but a model of political promiscuity.

The December Crises were the Asquith Coalition writ small. Themes recurred: dependence on the Prime Minister, which came to be supplanted by the dependence of the Prime Minister; fulsome dissatisfaction from every quarter; the succour and agency of women; a pall inside the Cabinet Room; the incessant rustling of newspapers. The Coalition having been born of division, a harmonious development was unlikely. This provided Fleet Street with orientation, and pressmen came to desire the promise of news more than they did its reporting (another development to endure). Where in December 1915 they found themselves in thrall to events, in December 1916 they could shape them, sustained as they were by the exertions which had enervated the ministry. Perhaps Asquith, ‘the last of the Romans’ himself, did feel betrayed, though not by orthodox dissenters. Asquith had followed the advice of those closest to him, only peremptorily to find himself first among erstwhiles. This may explain a starchy letter written to McKenna shortly after, while Pamela found herself apprised of Asquith’s inner thoughts less frequently. Yet in his last two years as Prime Minister, Asquith, deaf to the overtures of those who were to prevail, remained wedded to a man apparently isolated by recent events just as he has been by subsequent consideration. It is doubtful that McKenna, unlike Grey and Runciman, wanted to be invalided out of the war, if only because it would have left their enemy commanding the field of battle. Obstacles had been negotiated, or, rather, not negotiated, as a result of the working relationship of the likes of Lloyd George and McKenna. Never close, and temperamental opposites, the two Welsh MPs were driven apart increasingly by a divergence of political will, and increasingly by a divergence in political method. Asquith’s tragedy was that, having considered personnel politically, he did not realise that the personal was also political. If politicians realised that that which is ironic is often that which prevails, episodes such as the second December crisis might never occur. Perhaps if historians became Cabinet ministers they would not. The inevitable ironies were that there was by December 1916 little in the way of disagreement, and everything in the way of animosity. The debate between manpower and strategy had been resolved, if politicians counted as manpower.

170 Asquith to McKenna, 17 December 1916.