



THE TIMES AND THE LIBERALS DURING THE GREAT WAR

Michael Parsons

Université de Pau et des pays de l'Adour

It is something of an understatement to say that the First World War was a watershed in the fortunes of the Liberals. The party entered the war remarkably united in August 1914, despite all the travails of the pre-war years, and emerged in November 1918 very seriously divided. Although there are long-term trends which also need to be taken into account in any discussion of the decline in the Liberal party, the Great War and the strains it placed on the Liberals must loom large. The Liberals struggled to comprehend and then adapt to the unprecedented scale of the war and key Liberal personalities responded to the supreme challenge in different ways, all of which had far-reaching effects. The press played an often pivotal role in these events.

The role of the press was magnified by the diminished role of Parliament. It often seemed that the press stepped in to fill the relative vacuum left by the party truce and provide a sometimes vociferous opposition to the government. Indeed the press reached “an unprecedented level of importance during the First World War, never to attain such heights again” [McEWEN 1982: 459]. Lloyd George said in 1916 that “the Press has performed the function that should have been performed by Parliament” [TAYLOR: 26]. More than one of the “press barons”, the proprietors of the mighty newspapers of Fleet Street, believed that they played a uniquely influential role in the life of the nation in its hour of need.

Undoubtedly the most influential newspaper among the élites in 1914-1918 was *The Times*, owned since 1908 by Lord Northcliffe, who also owned the biggest-selling of the London morning newspapers the *Daily Mail* (and other newspapers, notably the *Evening News*). *The Times* played an important role in all of the crises which shook the country and the government during those eventful years and especially the “shells crisis” of 1915, the long and sometimes agonised debate over conscription, the crisis of December 1916 when Asquith was forced to resign and Lloyd George took his place as Prime Minister and the “Maurice debate” which hardened the tensions between the Asquithian Liberals and those who supported Lloyd George’s coalition. While the *Daily Mail* had an

undoubted impact on popular opinion, *The Times* remained a newspaper which was read by the educated classes and to which they would naturally turn when they wanted to express an opinion, through its "Letters to the Editor". It was moreover a paper which had considerable influence abroad, so much so that it was claimed that foreign governments assumed *The Times* to be a mouthpiece of the British government. Further evidence for the influence of *The Times* is the fact that it was more than once suggested that the paper should be taken over by the government.

This paper will be focussing on *The Times* and its coverage of the most crucial events but will also look briefly at its larger-circulation stable-mate. Northcliffe was much more interventionist with the *Daily Mail* than with *The Times*, whose position and reputation he respected:

Lord Northcliffe was the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mail* was Lord Northcliffe. With *The Times* it was different. Geoffrey Dawson presided there and he aspired to be a great figure independent of his employer and nominal chief.

Northcliffe left the editor of *The Times* with a relatively free hand, at least until the end of the war. Perhaps Geoffrey Dawson shared so much of Northcliffe's own outlook that he did not need to be held under a tight rein. During the Versailles negotiations, however, Northcliffe tried increasingly to force his hand, so much so that Dawson finally resigned when he felt he could take no more pressure from the "Chief", as Northcliffe liked to be called.

War

Northcliffe and the journalists at *The Times* felt that it was their patriotic duty to use the newspaper to support the war effort: *The Times* would do its best to sustain morale but would continue to cast a critical eye on political questions. This course was to lead to a number of clashes, with Northcliffe being accused of being unpatriotic and his newspapers banned in London clubs and burned in the streets.

The first major dispute of the war between the Liberal government and *The Times* was over the question of censorship. *The Times* accepted that some censorship was necessary but felt that its readers were being deprived of information which would have allowed them to appreciate the severity of the task which lay before them. This first skirmish reflects the growing tension that emerged between those who felt that liberal ideals could be maintained despite the war and those who felt that almost no holds should be barred in order to ensure victory. This increasingly became a conflict between the unhurried approach initially adopted by the government (the Prime Minister himself was often criticised for his policy of "wait and see") and the more urgent and energetic stance preferred by those, like Northcliffe, who believed that all available resources and energies should be focused on the absolute priority of winning the war. Telling the readers just how serious a struggle the country was engaged in would, thought *The Times*, encourage recruitment.

The desire to provide the public with accurate information about the performance of British forces in the early stages of the war was thus not just a classic attempt by a newspaper to ensure that truth should not be the first casualty of the war but also an essential weapon in the struggle to make the public aware of the real nature of the conflict and act accordingly. Northcliffe was one of the few people who believed the war would be a long, drawn-out business. "He foresaw from the start a war of at least three years" [HISTORY OF THE TIMES: 217]. Most people, including the nation's military strategists, thought that Britain's contribution would essentially involve deployment of the Royal Navy and careful use of Britain's economic power; her allies would supply the great armies in a war which was expected to be a war of movement. It was not widely thought that the war would last more than nine months or a year. No reason then to jettison liberal ideals: it would be "business as usual".

Northcliffe made comprehensive arrangements to ensure that his journalists would be able to gather and send back news about the fighting. The government set up a Press Bureau to give newspapers guidance as to what they could and could not publish. When the small, though well-trained and well-equipped, British Expeditionary Force (BEF) reached France it had some initial successes but soon found itself caught up in a major retreat. Stories in the newspapers of successful and resourceful British operations boosted morale. However it soon became clear that the German advance was making rapid ground and one *Times* correspondent in particular sent back a message from Amiens on August 29 which revealed how difficult the situation was, talking even about a "broken army". He did not expect that all of it could be published and some parts were indeed deleted by *The Times* before the text was submitted to the chief censor at the Press Bureau, the Conservative MP F.E. Smith. However the censor not only suggested that the deleted passages should be published but even added a few words of his own to give added weight to what he believed was the really important message: that the BEF needed reinforcements urgently. He wrote that the British Expeditionary Force had "suffered terrible losses and requires immediate and immense reinforcement [...] it needs men, men, and yet more men [...] We want reinforcements and we want them now". *The Times* believed, or claimed it believed, that it had what was almost tantamount to a government instruction to publish, and it did so. F.E. Smith returned the article to *The Times* on August 30 with a private note saying,

I am sorry to have censored this most able and interesting message so freely but the reasons are obvious. Forgive my clumsy journalistic suggestions but I beg you to use the parts of this article which I have passed to enforce the lesson—reinforcements and reinforcements at once. [HISTORY OF THE TIMES: 222]

The article was widely criticised as defeatist and sensationalist and angry questions were asked in the House of Commons during the afternoon of 31 August. One MP noted that newsboys who had called out false news in the streets had been fined and imprisoned, and implicitly suggested that the same thing should happen to *The Times*. Dawson sent a

statement which was read to the House later that day, explaining why he had decided to publish and relating the role of the Press Bureau and the chief censor. F.E. Smith was pressed by the House to go into details about his role in the decision to publish. He tried hard to convince the House that the editors of *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* had acted quite properly. "The *Times* and the *Daily Mail*", he told an excited House of Commons, "have been specially active in cooperating with me, and I am anxious that they should be fairly treated in the matter", and he went on to explain that Lord Kitchener had asked him to assist him in his goal of accelerating the pace of recruitment, that he had added the passages on the urgent need for reinforcements, and that he believed he had been carrying out the policy of the War Office.

One MP, the Irish nationalist John Dillon, understood the general thrust of the justification for publishing the piece and expressed it in graphic language:

How could the public rise to the gravity of the situation? For a fortnight or three weeks the public were fed under the patronage of the censorship with a series of preposterous reports, representing practically half of the Germans as being killed and the others as being in flight.

He seems to have been in a small minority, however. F.E. Smith resigned shortly afterwards, and bore a grudge against the *Times* for having revealed the part he had played in releasing the offending material. One result was that censorship was further tightened; another was that Lord Northcliffe felt wounded by the criticism to which he was subjected, which, he said, "hurt me more than anything else in my life" [THOMPSON: 32]. It would by no means be the last such incident.

Muddling and meddling

As the Western Front gradually settled into the then unfamiliar system of trench warfare, Northcliffe began to feel increasingly worried about what he (and many others) felt were unnecessary sideshows, drawing resources away from the Western Front where he felt the war could be won—or lost—, most notably the unsuccessful expedition to the Dardanelles. He felt that this had been, in part at least, the result of unwarranted civilian "meddling" in decisions about how the war was to be conducted (and blamed Churchill in particular, remaining staunchly critical of Churchill for the rest of his life). Northcliffe—and his newspapers—initially felt that war was a serious thing which should be left to the generals, though towards the end of the war that view changed, most notably as the result of the failed operation at Cambrai in 1918. This view was expressed both in *The Times* and in the *Daily Mail*, which was outspoken in its criticism of Churchill, writing on 13 October 1915 that, "in the Dardanelles affair in particular a megalomaniac politician risked the fate of our Army in France and sacrificed thousands of lives to no purpose". The moral was, it continued in the *Mail's* typically pithy and alliterative prose, that "Ministerial meddling means military muddling".

Northcliffe also felt that the government was not doing enough to ensure that enough men—and the right men—were enlisting in the army. Increasing pressure was brought to bear on the Liberal government to introduce conscription, an extremity which most members of Asquith's government were extremely reluctant to resort to. The government was, felt Northcliffe, simply not prepared to take the radical steps that the situation demanded.

There were other areas where Northcliffe felt there was too much "muddling" and not enough use made of business people who had the skills needed to organise the logistics of the war. The military procurement process was simply not up to the job but those responsible were not prepared to change their ways.

By early 1915 there was increasing disquiet about the way the war was being conducted. In February, Lloyd George began a series of pronouncements on the subject, going so far as to say in a speech to his constituents in Bangor on February 28 that "we are conducting a war as if there was no war". The speech was printed *in extenso* in *The Times* the following day.

Although there had been long some anxiety that everything was not going well it was an article by the *Times'* military correspondent Charles À Court Repington, published in *The Times* on May 14 1915, which finally brought things to a head. Repington had had discussions with his friend Sir John French and had been persuaded by him to make the issue of inadequate munitions public in an almost desperate attempt to persuade Lord Kitchener to get shells to the troops in adequate quantities. Kitchener had tried to persuade the army to be economical in its use of shells, as well as diverting some of the much-needed munitions to the Dardanelles. The result was that the preliminary bombardments which the British could deploy to break down German defences before launching an assault used far fewer shells than the French and were much less effective. Moreover the shells were overwhelmingly of the wrong kind: Kitchener had provided mostly shrapnel shells, which might have been effective in the South African wars and other "small wars" during which he had earned his reputation as a great general but were next to useless in the fields of Flanders. What was needed was high explosive shells which could destroy the Germans' barbed-wire defences and earthworks. The lack of sufficient high explosive shells was causing unnecessarily high casualties among the British soldiers and explained the lack of success of most British initiatives.

Repington's article announced that "the want of an unlimited supply of high explosive was a fatal bar to our success". The leading article, "Shells and the Great Battle", published in the same issue of *The Times*, was sharply critical, claiming that "British soldiers died in vain on the Aubers Ridge on Sunday because more shells were needed. The Government, who have so seriously failed to organise adequately our national resources, must bear their share of the grave responsibility".

The *Daily Mail* was similarly outspoken in its attacks. For example, in an editorial entitled "The Tragedy of the Shells: Lord Kitchener's grave

error" published on May 21, a week after Repington's article, the newspaper wrote,

The admitted fact is that Lord Kitchener *ordered the wrong kind of shell*—the same kind of shell that he used against the Boers in 1900. He persisted in sending shrapnel—a useless weapon in trench warfare. He was warned repeatedly that the kind of shell required was a violently explosive bomb which would dynamite its way through the German trenches and entanglements and enable our brave men to advance to safety. The kind of shell our poor soldiers have had has caused the death of thousands of them. Incidentally, it has brought about a Cabinet crisis and the formation of what we hope is going to be a National Government.

This was greeted with outrage: *The Times* was accused of giving sensitive information to the enemy and of undermining military and civilian morale. Copies of *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* were burnt in the streets and *The Times* was banned from a number of London clubs. Northcliffe was, for many people in the British establishment, a cad. Northcliffe however stuck to his guns and fought back, probably earning grudging admiration in some quarters for having done a considerable service to the cause of the war. Others probably never forgave him, whether he was right or not.

It gradually became clear that there was a genuine shell shortage. However this was not the only issue which threatened the government. At least as significant in weakening the government's political position was the resignation on 15 May 1915 of Lord "Jacky" Fisher, the First Sea Lord, over the Dardanelles.

The government came under increasing pressure to do something to deflect criticism away from it and Asquith was forced to form a coalition, although most of the key positions were still held by Liberals and he remained Prime Minister. Churchill was made to bear most of the responsibility for the fiasco of the Dardanelles and lost his place as First Lord of the Admiralty. The main beneficiary of the change was Lloyd George, who was appointed Minister for Munitions. *The Times* greeted this appointment enthusiastically and predicted a sea-change in the conduct of the war. It was not at the time seen as a first step in a campaign to replace Asquith: indeed Asquith was very grateful to him for having enabled him to stay on as Prime Minister and Margot Asquith wrote that Lloyd George "came grandly out of this—he has the sweetest nature in the world".

One must assume that the controversial publication was not motivated by purely commercial reasons: circulations of both *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* fell in the wake of the shells crisis, though both recovered rapidly. Northcliffe's motives were no doubt genuinely patriotic. His success, however, probably went to his head. As Winston Churchill (whose relationship with Northcliffe was, it has to be said, atrocious) wrote,

Henceforward [after the shells crisis] Lord Northcliffe felt himself to be possessed of formidable power. Armed with the solemn prestige of *The Times*

in one hand and the ubiquity of the *Daily Mail* in the other, he aspired to exercise a commanding influence upon events." [THOMPSON 1999: 66]

Although shell production did increase under the stewardship of Lloyd George (he injected a new vigour into the whole industry, introducing controls on raw materials, improving working conditions, accelerating the contribution made by women and generally bringing munitions production to the levels required for total war, and was praised for this by the Northcliffe press), the course of the war after the shells crisis was not notably more successful. Lloyd George made a remarkable speech in the House of Commons on 20 December 1915 explaining that the government was always "too late":

Ah! Two fatal words of this War! Too late in moving here. Too late in arriving there. Too late in coming to this decision. Too late in starting with enterprises. Too late in preparing. In this war the footsteps of the Allied forces have been dogged by the mocking spectre of "Too Late"; and unless we quicken our movements damnation will fall on the sacred cause for which so much gallant blood has flowed. I beg employers and workmen not to have "Too Late" inscribed upon the portals of their workshops: that is my appeal.

Others, like Lord Lansdowne, believed that the right way forward was to talk with the Germans to achieve "peace through negotiation". Lansdowne had initially written to *The Times* to put forward his proposals for a negotiated peace but the Editor had declined to publish it. Lansdowne then sent it to the *Daily Telegraph* which did publish. Northcliffe regretted his editor's decision: he would have preferred to have published the letter in *The Times* and print alongside it a damning article criticising the initiative as disgracefully defeatist.

The great spring offensive on the Somme became rapidly bogged down and doubts began to be raised about the way in which the war was being conducted. Lloyd George increasingly felt that one of the reasons why things were not improving as fast as he had hoped was that the War Cabinet was too big, too unwieldy, and this view was shared by *The Times*, which had been running a relentless campaign to reform the decision-making institutions responsible for the war. It had criticised what it called the "recruiting muddle" (20 March 1916), deplored inefficiency in such areas as the provision of clothes (the "army clothing muddle", 14 October 1915) and pilloried a government policy of "wait and lose" (27 March 1916). The "rush to Baghdad" was also severely criticised ("The Fall of Kut", 1 May 1916). "New Methods" were needed (3 May 1916). Northcliffe was accused of deliberately disturbing national unity and wielding "immense personal power with no responsibility" and publishing inaccurate information, so much so that a written question on 6 December 1915 had asked the Prime Minister whether,

in view of the fact that *The Times* newspaper is regarded on the Continent as having a semi-official, if not official, character, and in view of the importance of preventing the dissemination of news that misrepresents the position of the country and the Allies, he will consider the advisability of taking it over and running it as a Government organ until the close of the war?

Asquith declined to take on this extra responsibility [HISTORY OF THE TIMES: 282-283].

The campaign was one of the factors which led to Asquith's resignation and Lloyd George becoming Prime Minister. The precise circumstances of the crisis have been much discussed and there still remain a few shadowy areas. *The Times* continued to plead for a small and effective Cabinet to replace "weak methods and weak men" (1 December 1916). Asquith was initially inclined to agree; however, an editorial written by Geoffrey Dawson and published on 4 December 1916 summarised the events which had taken place so comprehensively that Asquith felt sure that Lloyd George must have been behind it. One of the last straws, if not the last straw, was the offensive remark which Dawson inserted into the editorial, suggesting that Asquith's closest supporters had persuaded him that "his own qualities are fitted better [...] to 'preserve the unity of the nation' (though we have never doubted its unity) than to force the pace of a War Council".

Asquith changed his mind and decided to reject the arrangement for a small War Cabinet which he would not chair. In a speech to the Reform Club a few days later Asquith quoted at length from the newspaper to substantiate his claim that there had been a "well-organised, carefully engineered conspiracy" against him [ASQUITH & GREY]. *The Times* was of course not the only influence pressing on Asquith, but it was the instrument whereby the unkindest cut of all was delivered.

Lloyd George was able to form a coalition government and Asquith retired hurt. The extent of the influence of *The Times* in this pivotal crisis may be debatable but it is clear that it did play an important role. Roy Jenkins writes that it was not so much the hostile and insulting tone of the article itself—after all, he points out, Asquith was used to being criticised by the Northcliffe press—but the fact that it suggested publicly that "Asquith, persuaded even by his 'closest supporters' that he was ineffective as a war leader, had made a complete surrender of power to Lloyd George" [JENKINS: 444]; he may have used the leader as an excuse for renegeing on his agreement with Lloyd George the previous day on the smaller committee. At the time Edwin Montagu certainly identified the leading article as one of three reasons why Asquith had withdrawn his proposals, suggesting that Northcliffe had published it simply to "wreck the arrangement" and that Asquith had allowed him to succeed [MORGAN: 175].

Lloyd George, Prime Minister

Lloyd George's premiership was undoubtedly made especially difficult by the fact that he had no party behind him and many in his own party who would be happy to see him go. The greatest challenge to his position came in the form of a letter to the editor of *The Times* by General Maurice, published on 7 May 1918, claiming that the Prime Minister had given inaccurate statistics about the strength of the army on the Western front, suggesting that this had been done deliberately to disguise the diversion of resources to other fronts. Lloyd George was able to

undermine General Maurice's allegations by pointing out that the figures came from his department: his speech brilliantly refuted the charges made against him (although Maurice was probably essentially correct in his accusations). The vote in the House of Commons which followed this speech seems to have been used more or less as an indicator of who Lloyd George's friends were.

During the latter part of the war *The Times* was generally sparing in its criticism of Lloyd George. Perhaps it was more difficult for Northcliffe to instigate any serious criticism as he had been sent to the United States by Lloyd George to chair the British War Mission to the United States. There can be no proof that the Prime Minister did so to keep a troublesome critic at arm's length but this was widely believed to have been at least one of the motives behind the decision.

After the war relations between Lloyd George and Northcliffe deteriorated rapidly, particularly over the Versailles talks. Northcliffe was disappointed that he had not been involved and sniped at Lloyd George from the columns of his newspapers. Lloyd George told the House of Commons on April 16 1919 that this was the result of Northcliffe's "diseased vanity", something which would not matter in Britain but did abroad, because, he said, "they still believe in France that *The Times* is a serious organ. They do not know that it is just a threepenny version of the *Daily Mail*".

Conclusions

There can be little doubt that the almost relentless campaign waged by the Northcliffe press for a more vigorous handling of the war, and hence a constant barrage of criticism of Asquith and support for politicians believed to be better able to deliver energetic leadership and efficient management, were instrumental in weakening the Asquith government in May 1915 and played a role in the "palace revolution" of December 1916. However it would be wrong to exaggerate its influence. The crisis of 1915 was as much about tension over the Dardanelles, between "Westerners" and "Easterners", as about shells, and *The Times* had no particular impact on opinion concerning the campaign. Equally, while *The Times* leader of 4 December 1916 "grew to a fame unmatched by any similar emission until 1938", as Roy Jenkins puts it [JENKINS: 444], it may not have been so crucially important in Asquith's decision to reconsider the arrangement he had apparently made with Lloyd George to accept his Minister of War's proposals for a smaller more effective Cabinet from which he would be largely excluded. It may simply be that Asquith had thought afresh about the significance of this arrangement and, after discussing it with some of his political allies, had decided that he simply could not accept it. Nor does the fact that General Maurice decided to publish his allegations against the Lloyd George administration in *The Times* signify that the newspaper played any significant role in the debate which followed. Nonetheless the relentless complaints published in both *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* against the Asquith governments' inability to lead the country in wartime with sufficient determination must have had

an effect—even though for many readers it simply reflected a vindictive vendetta pursued by Northcliffe against Asquith himself.

Insofar as *The Times* did play a role in ousting Asquith and paving the way for a coalition under Lloyd George, it was an important factor in the decline in the Liberal party's fortunes and its ultimate demise as a party of government.

References

ASQUITH, Herbert. "Asquith and Grey at the Reform Club, December 1916". Liberal Democrat History Group, http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/item_single.php?item_id=56&item=history, consulted September 25 2011.

JENKINS, Roy. *Asquith*. London: Collins, 1978.

McEWEN, John M., "The Press and the Fall of Asquith", *Historical Journal*, 21-4 (Dec. 1978) : 863-883.

_____. "The Struggle for Mastery in Britain: Lloyd George versus Asquith, December 1916". *Journal of British Studies*, 18-1 (Autumn 1978) : 131-156.

_____. "Northcliffe and Lloyd George at War, 1914-1918". *Historical Journal*, 24-3 (Sep., 1981) : 651-672.

_____. "The National Press during the First World War: Ownership and Circulation". *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Jul., 1982), pp. 459-486

MORGAN, K.O. *The Age of Lloyd George: The Liberal Party and British Politics, 1890-1929*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1971.

TAYLOR, A.J.P. *English History 1914-1945*. Oxford: University Press, 1965.

THE TIMES. *The History of the Times: The 150th Anniversary and Beyond, 1912-1948, Part 1: 1912-1920*. London: *The Times*, 1952.

THOMPSON, J.L. *Politicians, the Press and Propaganda: Lord Northcliffe and the Great War, 1914-19*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1999.

_____. *Northcliffe: Press Baron in Politics 1865-1922*. London: John Murray, 2000.