



Two monarchs, Victoria and Edward VII, with whom C-B had cordial relations and, right, Asquith a 'Regulas man' who succeeded him as Prime Minister

hopelessly divided over the burning issue of the day, the Boer War. But C-B took his new job very seriously and set about reviving Liberal fortunes. He took an uncompromising stand in opposing the war in South Africa, to the delight of the young Lloyd George and the horror of the leading Liberal Imperialists like Rosebery, Haldane and Asquith. At the height of the war the so-called Khaki Election was held in 1900. The Liberals lost very little ground, although C-B's own majority in Stirling fell to a few hundred. When the war ended the increasing problems of the Conservative party weakened their grip, and in December 1905 Prime Minister Balfour resigned in the hope that C-B would find it impossible to form a coherent Liberal administration. He was almost right.

The triumvirate and their emasculation

Back in September, when it was becoming obvious the Conservative government's days were numbered, three leading Liberals - H.H. Asquith, R.B. Haldane and Sir Edward Grey - met at Grey's fishing lodge at Relugas in Scotland to try to put pressure on C-B. They were all very able men, much more able (they thought) than the party leader. Moreover, he was a 'little Englander', they were Imperialists; and he was a radical while their reforming instincts were more moderate. Convinced that no successful Liberal administration could be formed without them, the three decided to send C-B an ultimatum. He would, of course, be party leader and titular Prime Minister, but would go to the Lords. Asquith would take over Commons' leadership, Haldane would become Lord Chancellor and Grey Foreign Secretary. Thus, they would control the ministry and C-B's freedom of manoeuvre be reduced almost to nothing. When the Conservative government fell in December, this 'Relugas Compact' as it was called was put into effect.

Bereavement and eccentricities

But Campbell-Bannerman held firm. With a mixture of strength and skill he outmanoeuvred the three plotters, and yet still managed to keep them within his government. He remained in the Commons, Asquith became Chancellor of the Exchequer, Haldane Secretary for War and Grey did go to the Foreign Office. A month later the Liberals won a landslide victory in the General Election and C-B now held all the aces. The stop-gap Premier who was to be shunted into the Lords where he could do little harm was now firmly in control both

of party and government. For two years, in spite of poor health and increasing age, he pushed forward his reform programme at a staggering rate in the teeth of much opposition from the Conservative-dominated House of Lords. In the midst of all this his beloved wife died. He coped with grief by working himself even harder. Also, in widowhood, some of his little eccentricities became more pronounced. He loved trees and talked to them. When he returned to his Scottish home after staying in London, he would take a walk around the park wishing each tree 'Good morning'. He had a collection of walking sticks, and after choosing one for his morning stroll he would apologise under his breath to the others for leaving them behind. In his desk was a drawer filled with the stubs of old pencils. They were old friends, he said, who ought to be properly cared for when their day was done.

Always very neatly turned out, he was, in fact, a bit of a dandy. He got on extremely well with Edward VII who appreciated his impish sense of humour. On one occasion a photograph appeared in the newspapers showing King and Prime Minister in earnest conversation at Marienbad. Both had grave faces, the King was striking his hand on his palm, and C-B was listening intently. The caption-writer assumed it was a discussion about the serious crisis in the Balkans. C-B later confided to a friend: 'Would you like to know what the King was saying to me? He wanted to have my opinion about whether halibut is better baked or boiled.' But by early 1908 King and colleagues both realised he was burning himself out. In February he took to his room in 10 Downing Street never to leave it again. Heart trouble was diagnosed, and for two months he grew steadily worse. At the beginning of April he resigned the Premiership but was too ill to be moved from Number Ten. He died there on 22 April and was buried beside his wife in a churchyard near his Scottish home. His successor was Asquith, the man who had so seriously underestimated him three years earlier, the man who, 15 years later, acted as pall bearer at the funeral of another Scottish Prime Minister, Bonar Law. 'It is fitting that we should have buried the Unknown Prime Minister by the side of the Unknown Warrior' he said on that occasion. He could equally well have said it of Goderich or Derby, Rosebery or Campbell-Bannerman. It can be said no more. The horrors of modern publicity have made the Unknown Prime Minister an extinct species - whether to the benefit or otherwise of his or her fellow countrymen and women is very much a matter of opinion.

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