

THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT DURING WORLD WAR 1



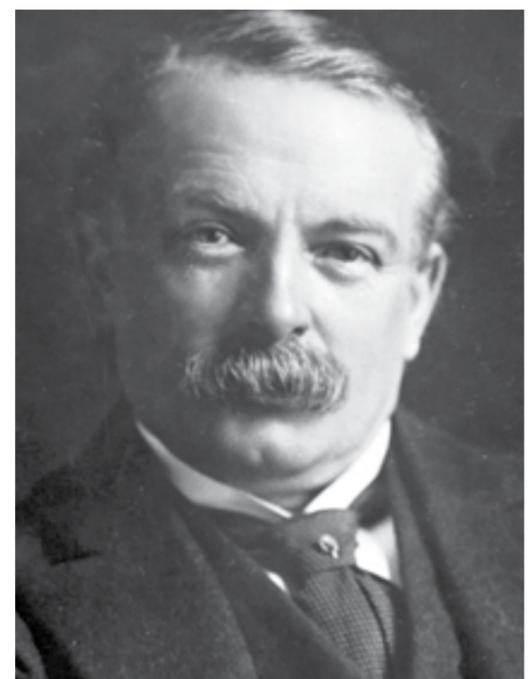
Herbert Asquith

The beginning of the 20th century in Britain was a time of considerable unrest. Working class discontent led to a rise in Trades Union activities, and also to the foundation of the Independent Labour Party in 1893. The new party won 29 seats in the election of 1906, but it was the Liberal Party which swept to power. Led by Prime Minister **Herbert Asquith** [from 1907] and Chancellor **David Lloyd George**, this was one of the great reforming governments of the 20th century. With reforms such as Free School Meals for poor children, the first Old Age Pension scheme, and the National Health Insurance Act to help sick and unemployed workers in times of crisis, they did much to lay the foundations of the Welfare State. To pay for the new benefits taxation was raised on richer people, When the House of Lords tried to block the government's budget, its powers were reduced.

One group who caused the government problems were the **Suffragettes**. For years women had been campaigning to get the vote and in the run up to the war, under the leadership of Emmeline Pankhurst, the Suffragette campaign had turned to militant action. However, when the war broke out,

the Suffragettes suspended their action and pledged themselves to assisting the war effort. Women became actively involved in a wide range of activities from nursing the wounded at the front to working in arms factories. In 1918 they got their reward; they got the vote – but only for women over 30! [See separate boards for details.]

In 1912 the attempt of the Liberal government to bring in a form of **Irish Home Rule** ran into difficulties due to the opposition of the Protestants of Ulster. With Ireland close to civil war by 1914, the government were glad of the excuse to postpone the issue when war broke out with Germany. As elsewhere in Britain the young men of Ireland responded patriotically to the call for soldiers and Protestants and Catholics alike served in large numbers in the British army. However, a minority of Nationalists saw the war as a chance to win their freedom for Britain and this led to the **Easter Rising of 1916**. [See separate board for details.]



David Lloyd George

When the war started, the government immediately passed the **Defence of the Realm Act** giving the authorities sweeping powers to control any aspect of life considered necessary, from press censorship and putting ports and railways under military control, to the imposing of blackout regulations. In May 1915 in the wake of the **shell crisis**, when the shortage of ammunition at the front led to growing criticism of his leadership, Asquith reorganised the government into a Coalition. It now included Conservatives like **Bonar Law** and **A. J. Balfour** as well as **Arthur Henderson** the Labour leader. Lloyd George was put in charge of Munitions. However, Asquith's problems continued. He had difficult relations with the military, especially Lord Kitchener, and his conduct of the war continued to be criticised by many, including those within his own government. He was seen as tired and uninspiring. On a personal level, his son Raymond was killed at the battle of the Somme.

In December 1916 the growing factionalism forced him to resign and **Lloyd George** replaced him as **Prime Minister**. Lloyd George was energetic and decisive and led the country successfully until the end of the war. Among his achievements he persuaded the Navy to use convoys to combat the U-boat menace and he backed the appointment of Marshal Foch as overall Allied commander. He is generally seen as being a great war time leader. However, his quarrel with Asquith left the Liberal party deeply divided and he depended for support on his own Liberal supporters and the Conservatives. He led Britain through the peace negotiations at **Versailles** and in 1921, he secured a peace settlement in **Ireland**, but he fell from power in late 1922. The Liberal party never recovered from the divisions he had caused and was replaced by Labour as the second party in British politics in 1924.