

religious controversy on local neighborhoods. Houlbrooke and Durston express interest in social experience but make no persuasive argument about the political content of social experience or its significance in disputes over religious authority. The fundamental problem therefore remains the absence of an interpretive framework to unite disparate historiographical and research questions in a systematic approach to early modern English society. The books under review demonstrate the process whereby unconscious modes of classification and collective representation in a historical community may inform even the best critical intentions to reproduce the conventional categories of thought, in this case, the categories of religion, politics, and society. I have attempted both to confront the books on their own terms and to suggest the limitations of those terms. A more coherent social history, sensitive to religious symbolism and ceremony in early modern conceptions of politics and society, requires new maps and further exploration. We cannot just stick the maps of the old field system together and connect the lines.

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From National Crisis to “National Crisis”: British Politics, 1914–1931

National Crisis and National Government: British Politics, the Economy and Empire, 1926–1932. By PHILIP WILLIAMSON. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. xvii + 569. \$89.95.

The British General Election of 1931. By ANDREW THORPE. New York: Clarendon Press, 1991. Pp. xiii + 323. \$72.00.

British Politics and the Great War: Coalition and Conflict, 1915–1918. By JOHN TURNER. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992. Pp. xi + 511. \$40.00.

The study of British politics after the First World War has been much influenced by the social and political changes following the Second. Those writing in anticipation or appreciation of social security or full employment after 1945 have tended to dwell on the inadequacies of “reconstruction” after 1918;¹ alternatively, those searching for the

¹ For this view, see R. H. Tawney’s classic article, “The Abolition of Economic Controls,” *Economic History Review* 13 (1943): 1–30; also Paul Johnson, *Land Fit for Heroes: The Planning of British Reconstruction, 1916–1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945* (London: Cape, 1975).

roots of the postwar consensus have tended to treat politics largely as an exercise in class conciliation or the mediation of interests.² Maurice Cowling's example notwithstanding,³ "high political" accounts—which treat political activity as (in the words of one of the authors reviewed here) "a largely autonomous activity with its own complex priorities, procedures, and languages"⁴—have been thin on the ground. This past year, however, has seen the publication of two important and awaited volumes that apply either a convinced (Williamson) or a partial (Turner) "high political" approach to administrations usually studied for their impact on economic and social policy. These two books thus demonstrate in a fairly stark fashion what this approach can offer us—and what it cannot.

I

The terms of the debate over the competence of the second Labour government were set twenty-five years ago by Robert Skidelsky's *Politicians and the Slump*, which, however battle scarred, is still the target against which newer studies take aim. For Skidelsky, writing in the heyday of Keynesianism, the failure of the second Labour government was unquestionably a failure of policy, and specifically of unemployment policy. The Labour government, he points out, took office pledged to do something about unemployment, and in David Lloyd George's public works plans, Oswald Mosley's proposals, and John Maynard Keynes's contributions to the Macmillan committee and the Economic Advisory Council, they had perfectly plausible blueprints for action. They were overtaken not only by economic crisis but by their own political and intellectual incapacity, by the fact that they were unable to envisage any middle ground between Socialist utopia and the "Treasury view." The former being manifestly out of reach, they spent their time in office struggling to balance the budget and defend the gold standard while unemployment figures climbed from 1.5 million to double that two years later.⁵

This account has been undergoing steady revision and correction for years, a process begun when Ross McKibbin questioned the degree to which any coherent "Keynesian" alternative really existed in 1930 and continued by studies that describe the "Keynesian revolution" as a more gradual process or that give more realistic estimates of the

² Most extremely—and controversially—in Keith Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society: The Experience of the British System since 1911* (London: André Deutsch, 1979).

³ Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Labour, 1920–1924: The Beginning of Modern British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

⁴ Williamson, *National Crisis*, p. 13.

⁵ Robert Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump: The Labour Government of 1929–1931* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

likely outcome of even the most interventionist employment proposals.⁶ Philip Williamson's ambitious study of political realignment in this period shares this more moderate assessment of the government's policy record, but his major intent is to dispute the claim that the fate of the second Labour government was determined primarily by their performance in the area of policymaking anyway. His conclusion puts it like this: "Any other government confronted by the economic recession from 1929 would have suffered enormous difficulties and, in terms of its previous programmes and pledges, would almost certainly have 'failed.' But the Labour government suffered more than another might have done because it lacked resourcefulness and flexibility not just in its ideas but in its words. Unlike later Labour governments, including those of 1945–51, it allowed itself insufficiently plausible explanations for major setbacks. It could not absorb policy defeats. Its failure was not simply in policy, but in politics."⁷ Political inflexibility and lack of finesse were thus a major reason for Labour's weakness, although chance and contingency were also in part to blame. Hampered from the outset by minority status and unanticipated economic and imperial crises, the government was forced into an ever-close reliance on the demanding Lloyd George, now back at the head of a reunited Liberal Party and himself struggling to control dissenters in his ranks.

Williamson argues that it is in this context of party instability—and not, as Skidelsky saw it, of policy failure—that we can understand Labour's fall and the formation of the National Government. And it is here that his work is especially subtle and innovative. Other historians—and especially Stuart Ball—have stressed the degree of division within all parties during 1930 and have noted the spread of calls for greater cross-party cooperation or even a "national government," although Ball points out that Baldwin had regained control of his party by 1931.⁸ Williamson does not dispute this chronology; he does, however, insist that this prior discussion was more extensive than previous historians have recognized and remained important even after it was supposedly silenced. As he points out, in late July 1931, when the May committee recommended drastic social spending cuts and sterling balances plummeted, talk of "national government" quickly resur-

⁶ Ross McKibbin, "The Economic Policy of the Second Labour Government, 1929–31," *Past and Present*, no. 68 (1975), pp. 95–123; Peter Clarke, *The Keynesian Revolution in the Making, 1924–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988). W. R. Garside, in summarizing this debate, offers the cautious conclusion that "Keynesian" measures could have produced results in the thirties, if not necessarily on the scale that Lloyd George would have wanted: "It is still not too late to urge caution in accepting unreservedly the view that Keynesian pump priming would have been of very limited value" (Garside, *British Unemployment, 1919–1939* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], p. 378). Many economic historians would dispute this view.

⁷ Williamson, *National Crisis*, p. 526.

⁸ Stuart Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party: The Crisis of 1929–1931* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988).

faced, testifying “to the extent to which private discussion, public advocacy, and rumour during late 1930 had created an expectation that if an emergency were to occur a coalition might be desirable or else difficult to avoid.”⁹

The process by which this revived rhetoric was transformed into reality was complicated, and Williamson is at pains here—as he has been in his articles—to deny that either the bankers or the king were chiefly responsible for the National Government’s creation. This argument is sustained by a narrative that does indeed demonstrate that key decisions remained in politicians’ hands but that also requires us to accept that they shared Williamson’s extremely narrow conception of what was politically imaginable or constitutionally proper. Thus, Williamson demolishes the old charge of the “bankers’ ramp” by arguing that the bankers’ advice, however “conventional,” was “readily accepted by all politicians directly concerned”;¹⁰ less convincingly, he absolves the king of any real influence with the rather legalistic argument that “to conclude that the King was chiefly responsible for the outcome is to misconceive the true relationship between the Crown and party politics. The King could not command.”¹¹ He rightly stresses that it was tripartite consultation among party leaders, and not pressure from bankers, that led unemployment benefit cuts to be defined as the basis for a restoration of “confidence”; ultimately, a similarly “national” collaboration came to be seen as the best way of sharing out the political responsibility. Williamson thus sees the formation of the National Government as a result of political calculation rather than policy failure, stressing that Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain never lost their concern to safeguard party interest while the politicians most interested in policy rather than party—such as Winston Churchill and Lloyd George—continued to be excluded from its ranks.¹²

Williamson’s revisionist account adds immeasurably to our understanding of the crucial transitional years of the second Labour government. In stressing the importance of the Liberal revival to the instability of 1930 and the reconfiguration of 1931, Williamson provides a realistic portrait of the complexities of party control and governance

⁹ Williamson, *National Crisis*, p. 274.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 292; also Philip Williamson, “A ‘Bankers’ Ramp’? Financiers and the British Political Crisis of August 1931,” *English Historical Review* 99 (1984): 770–806.

¹¹ Williamson, *National Crisis*, p. 335. His arguments for the overriding importance of the politicians’ responses are summarized succinctly in his response to Vernon Bogdanor’s article on 1931: Philip Williamson, “1931 Revisited: The Political Realities,” *Twentieth Century British History* 2, no. 3 (1991): 328–38.

¹² He points out, for example, that Chamberlain and Baldwin pressed for a quick election even though such a course of action would worsen pressure on the pound—“an outstanding instance of ‘politics’ prevailing against ‘policy’” (Williamson, *National Crisis*, p. 412).

during a hung parliament and convincingly postdates by eight years a process of two-party polarization Maurice Cowling saw to be “complete” by 1924.¹³ Like Cowling, however, Williamson is open to the charge that, by dealing only superficially with constituency-level politics, he has employed a method more appropriate to the period before the Second Reform Act than to the era of mass party organizations and universal suffrage.¹⁴ Here, however, Williamson’s book can be complemented by Andrew Thorpe’s recent study of the election of 1931, a book based on a substantial slice of the manuscript collections Williamson consulted but supplemented by newspaper and constituency records. Thorpe also sees 1931 not only as a sharp defeat for Labour but also as a fundamental realignment of the political landscape. Labour’s fine showing in 1929 (winning 287 seats compared to 260 for the Conservatives and fifty-nine for the Liberals) had been made possible by three-cornered fights in almost every constituency; the fact that the Party faced a straight fight against the National Government in most constituencies in 1931 meant that it would have had to increase its poll dramatically in order to win anywhere near the same number of seats. Instead, Labour’s share of the vote declined from 38 percent to 29 percent (compared to a growth from 38 percent to 55 percent for the Conservatives), a result that left the Party with a paltry forty-six members, facing 554 supporters of the National Government, 470 of them Conservatives. By categorizing constituencies by class and economic base, Thorpe shows the extent to which this decline operated even in previously safe seats; he does not, however, discuss voting patterns by sex—something of a drawback given the recent evidence of disproportionately high levels of support for the Conservatives among women voters.¹⁵

Thorpe sees this result as a reasonable verdict on the performance of the Labour government and is as merciless in his dismissal of some classic excuses for Labour’s poor result as Williamson is in his destruction of the myth of the “bankers’ ramp.” He convincingly demolishes the argument that the election was a nefarious plot to foist protection on a bewildered public by pointing out that Conservatives had every expectation of winning an election before the August crisis and made no effort to disguise their protectionist plans. Less satisfying are his conclusions about the importance of the press: while he does show that the press was “biased” and “scurrilous” across the political spectrum, his own evidence of the extent of Tory press dominance renders his opinion that the press probably mattered only in a few marginal

¹³ Cowling, p. 414

¹⁴ Stuart Ball makes this critique of the application of a “high political” approach to the twentieth century in *Baldwin and the Conservative Party*, p. xiv.

¹⁵ For the Conservatives’ appeal to women in the twenties, see Martin Pugh, *The Tories and the People, 1880–1935* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 177–83; John Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin, 1902–1940* (London: Longman, 1978), esp. chap. 11.

seats rather hard to evaluate.¹⁶ His tendency to see the election as a verdict on the Labour Party in particular—rather than simply a nervous rush toward stability—also sits uncomfortably with his finding that the independent Liberals, led by Herbert Samuel during Lloyd George's illness, suffered even more than Labour in three-cornered fights.¹⁷ Yet it was Labour, and not the Liberals, that needed to rise to the challenge of 1931, and here, as Thorpe insists, they utterly failed. Labour had trouble defending itself because its past action was inglorious, its future plans implausible, and its credibility drastically weakened during the campaign, as the "National Labour" leaders revealed the extent to which their ex-colleagues in the late cabinet had been committed to unemployment benefit cuts—a fact that fully three-quarters of Conservative candidates mentioned in their election addresses.

Thorpe's volume is an important complement to Williamson's study, showing the degree to which Ramsay MacDonald's actions were accepted beyond the rarified realm of Parliament. Yet Williamson's account poses a second problem, especially to the historian of social policy. Williamson does have serious claims to make in this area: as he reiterated in the recent controversy in *Twentieth Century British History*, the book is "concerned as much with policy as with politics,"¹⁸ intended, I take it, to provide a more complete understanding of the choices made on both levels. Yet policy choices are treated in this account primarily as tools in the struggle for political advantage; the framework that determined the range of choice—itsself a political construct—is never seriously investigated. This is a particular weakness for a study of 1931, when the range of choices available to the government was conceived very narrowly. Williamson shows the degree to which Labour's room for maneuver was limited by the Party's acceptance of three assumptions: that the gold standard and balanced budgets were a premise for responsible politics, that the unemployment insurance system should be financed through the agreed balance of contributions and not require Treasury subsidies (whatever the state of the economy), and that the government should consult other parties during crises before extraparliamentary "interests." Yet he never really explains how these assumptions came to be established, contenting himself with pointing out that the parameters of "sound finance" were accepted almost across the political spectrum.¹⁹

In part, this lacuna is a result of his time frame, which makes far

¹⁶ Thorpe, pp. 210–11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

¹⁸ Williamson, "1931 Revisited," pp. 329 ff.

¹⁹ "Certainly the Bank had contributed over many years to a political culture which, by prescribing certain conceptions of 'sound finance', imposed constraints upon what governments thought they could do. But then so had civil servants, businessmen and many politicians, Labour as well as Conservative and Liberal" (Williamson, *National Crisis*, p. 292).

more sense for a study of party politics than of the evolution of policy. By beginning his study with the Liberal revival of 1926,²⁰ Williamson excludes the years in which both economic policy and the nature of the constitution were more contested. The policy framework he takes as given was neither so stable nor so accepted in the years immediately after the war—a period that all the political leaders of 1929–31 remembered well and that was much on their minds. Given Williamson's own compelling evidence of the ways in which the evocation of an analogy with the war underlay the rhetorical construction of 1931 as a "national crisis," it is something of a problem that the book never tells us what it was about these earlier political alliances and policy choices that aroused such fear and fascination. I return to this question briefly below, but we can begin to understand some of these links by looking at John Turner's dissection of the politics of Lloyd George's wartime coalition.

II

In tackling the Lloyd George coalition, Turner, like Williamson, has written a political history of an administration more often studied for its influence on economic, social, and industrial relations.²¹ In doing so, he is following up his own insight in an important essay on the organization of wartime government published some ten years ago. There, he offered a pertinent critique of a historiography that had tended to differentiate between the two wartime coalitions by attributing political skill to Herbert Asquith and administrative skill to Lloyd George—a formulation, he argued, that obscured real administrative continuities and underestimated the extent to which Lloyd George's policy successes were premised on parliamentary and political flexibility. "The essential difference between Lloyd Georgian and Asquithian Cabinet government," he wrote, "was political, not administrative: Lloyd George, unlike Asquith, was able to rid himself of significant internal opposition."²²

Turner's massive *British Politics and the Great War* builds on but also qualifies this insight, offering in the process something of a model for the judicious and partial use of a "high political" approach. Any competent prosecution of the war, he shows, depended on the govern-

²⁰ Williamson does argue for the unity of his period in terms of financial and trade policy and of Indian constitutional reform as well, but admits that the Liberal Party provides "in some senses the crucial" source of coherence (*National Crisis*, pp. 14–15).

²¹ This literature is vast, and Turner is well up on it; indeed, his chapter on "Capital and Labour" provides a good summary of the current state of research. See also the valuable collection of essays edited by Kathleen Burk, *War and the State: The Transformation of British Government, 1914–1919* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982).

²² John Turner, "Cabinets, Committees and Secretariats: the Higher Direction of War," in Burk, ed., p. 78.

ment's ability to command the consent or at least the tolerance of all parties in the Commons: this is the justification for a close focus on Cabinet-level negotiations and for the choice of a chronological narrative style. Where Turner parts company with "high political" assumptions, however, is in his emphasis on the extent to which a concern for the "national interest" (as politicians construed it), and *not* simply the struggle for short-term personal and party advantage, drove political events. Certainly, as Turner shows, personal and party considerations were never far from politicians' minds—and particularly from the mind of Asquith, who clung to the Liberal leadership while engaging in "unpredictable and often petulant ventures into opposition," behavior that further weakened the postwar position of the Liberals.²³ But the Coalition leaders came together in December of 1916 and (still more) stayed together through 1917 and 1918 because they felt initially that the prosecution of the war and later that the stability of the country would be endangered by normal political rivalries. Turner is particularly good at detailing the process by which the idea and mission of the Coalition was elaborated. After the wave of unofficial strikes during May 1917, he points out, Coalition leaders were forced "to come to terms with the possibility of revolutionary change, and to set their minds to containing it at the same time as merely winning the struggle with the Central Powers";²⁴ with the German spring offensive of 1918, even the Tory backbenchers accepted the need to perpetuate the Coalition into peacetime.²⁵

Turner outlines the Coalition's response to this perceived extra-parliamentary challenge in two final, thematic chapters on the Coupon election and on relations between capital and labor—chapters which are by far the most compelling portions of the book. Through a statistical study and a comparison with the election of 1922, Turner demonstrates that the 1918 election was "a deliberate and largely successful effort to hold back the advance of the Labour Party."²⁶ A number of factors contributed to that success—the choice of an early polling date, which helped to ensure the low soldiers' poll; an apathetic electorate as yet unaware of the problems of the peace; and a high vote among newly enfranchised women—a factor that favored the Conservatives not only because of a hard-to-measure "gender gap" but also because the restrictive female franchise resulted in a female electorate more middle-class than the population as a whole.

The discussion of the Coalition's industrial policies is even more important since for all his attention to day-to-day crisis management and the military direction of the war, Turner clearly sees his study as

²³ Turner, *British Politics*, p. 442.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

part of the ongoing historiographical inquiry into the impact of the war on the scope and uses of state power. The appropriate limits of state intervention was the most pressing political question of the prewar period, Turner argues, and one of the main differences between the Asquith and Lloyd George coalitions was their different views on this question. Mediation of industrial disputes, resorted to ad hoc under Asquith, became part of a strategy of counterrevolution under Lloyd George, whose Coalition also tried systematically to incorporate business interests and trade unions as the agents (if not the makers) of policy.²⁷ Yet Turner insists that such “incorporation” did not resemble “corporatism”: since politicians always retained the initiative, and both capital and labor remained divided, incorporation “led in practice to robust conflict as much as to consensus.”²⁸ The irony, he concludes, is that the Lloyd George coalition created both the case for a more extensive use of state power and the reaction against that agenda—a convincing argument in line with recent revisionist work on industrial policy and with McKibbin’s insightful essay exploring the political appeal of deflationary politics in the period between the wars.²⁹

What is not convincing is the elaboration of this argument within the context (once again) of a “high political” periodization, which forces Turner to encapsulate his arguments about industrial relations and economic management within a framework determined by election dates. Turner does to some extent recognize this problem by transgressing the boundary of 1918 in his final chapters, but he does not go nearly far enough in this respect, leaving the impression that the politics of the postwar Coalition were set by the end of the war—a view that overlooks the extent to which political leaders adjusted their strategies in the face of the social unrest of 1919. After all, as Turner himself argues, the Conservatives decided to continue with Lloyd George precisely because they expected a serious and not entirely predictable threat to stability *after* 1918; if their decision gave the Coalition the *parliamentary* position from which to “pacify” the country it could hardly ensure that this “pacification” would be successful. Recent historians might insist that Labour was fearsomely “constitutional” in 1918–19 and any threat from “the country” much exaggerated,³⁰ but the merest glance at Cabinet records shows that many

²⁷ For an excellent study of how such “incorporation” worked in practice, see Gerry R. Rubin, *War, Law and Labour: The Munitions Acts, State Regulation and the Unions, 1915–1921* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

²⁸ Turner, *British Politics*, p. 369.

²⁹ See, esp. Rodney Lowe, “The Ministry of Labour, 1916–19: A Still, Small Voice?” in Burk, ed., pp. 108–34; Ross McKibbin, “Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the ‘Public’ in Inter-war Britain,” in his *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), pp. 259–93.

³⁰ Ross McKibbin emphasizes just how deeply constitutional Labour really was in 1918; see *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910–1924* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), esp. p. 99.

Conservative leaders held no such views: they faced the task of demobilizing some three million men and converting the economy to peacetime production with the vision not of Clynes and Henderson but of strikes, mutinies, and Moscow in their minds.³¹ The depth of these fears meant that electoral success did not spell the end of statist initiatives: as Kenneth Morgan has shown, the battle between supporters of intervention and advocates of retrenchment continued to rage during the postwar Coalition,³² its outcome only decided with the reversion to a policy of “dear money” in April of 1920 and the ensuing slump of 1920–21.³³ Turner shows us the process by which party leaders were drawn to construct a Party of Order poised to pursue a strategy of stabilization but then—frustratingly—breaks off his narrative with the challenges and consequences of that strategy unexplored. It may seem ungrateful to argue that he should have done more—especially when what he does do is so well done—but unless one is interested (as Maurice Cowling was) in political machinations for their own sake and is willing simply to leave questions of policy to one side, the cost of adopting a “high political” periodization seems high.

III

My purpose in juxtaposing these two works is to return the study of policy to a slightly broader time frame, a context that allows us to see the extent to which the handling of the “national crisis” of 1931 was conditioned by the legacies of the immediate postwar period. Political responses to both “crises” were part of an effort at stabilization that absorbed most politicians (and not only in Britain) after the shocks of the World War, but that took a very different form under Lloyd George than it did under Baldwin or MacDonald. In its effort at pacification, the Coalition continued to wield state power in ways deeply

³¹ Maurice Cowling implicitly recognized the extent of these fears when he took the precaution of dating his own “high political” study from 1920 (when Labour was clearly “constitutional”) rather than from 1918, since “what [the Labour leaders] would have done if economic collapse had occurred in 1918 instead of 1920 is difficult to know” (Cowling [n. 3 above], p. 40). Of course, this formulation makes the classic “high political” mistake of treating this economic context as given—ignoring the fact that the Coalition deliberately followed inflationary policies in the immediate postwar period *in order* to minimize unrest and keep Labour “constitutional.”

³² Kenneth O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition, 1918–1922* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

³³ The actual magnitude of the post-war slump is hard to measure, given the inflated state of the economy in 1919–20, but Derek Aldcroft suggests that it was far more serious than the 1929–32 slump. His figures show manufacturing production falling over the course of 1920–21 by 22 percent, gross domestic product by 12 percent, and employment by over 14 percent—compared with 10 percent, 4.8 percent, and 4.7 percent, respectively, for the years 1929–32. Derek Aldcroft, *The Inter-war Economy: Britain, 1919–1939* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1970), p. 34.

out of keeping with prewar assumptions, deliberately using inflationary financial policy, a massive extension of unemployment benefits (even to those who had not qualified or had exhausted their eligibility), and overt interference in industrial relations, in order to facilitate demobilization and ease unrest.³⁴ Obviously, such policies—however successful—were tolerable to Conservative backbenchers only so long as there was a credible threat to public order; when deflation and unemployment defused that threat, they jettisoned Lloyd George to come to a “tacit agreement” with Labour—a realignment based not only on a compatibility between Baldwin and MacDonald’s calculations of political advantage³⁵ but also on a degree of convergence at the level of policy. As a range of policy studies have demonstrated, both the Conservatives and Labour increasingly accepted a framework for policy making that restricted the scope of what a “responsible” government could do. Both parties agreed that financial policy should be made “knave proof,” that is, subject to the impartial discipline of the gold standard and balanced budgets;³⁶ further, despite their very different objectives in social policy, at least some sections of the Labour party did come to accept that the insurance system should be freed from reliance on Treasury loans and made less subject to “abuse”—a position that made it hard for the Party to tolerate the levels of borrowing resorted to throughout 1930 and 1931.³⁷ Finally,

³⁴ On the Coalition’s postponement of the return to “dear money,” see Susan Howson, “The Origins of Dear Money, 1919–20,” *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 27, no. 1 (1974): 88–107; for a succinct summary of the government’s hurried extension of the soldiers’ out-of-work donation to civilians and their vast expansion of unemployment insurance, see Garside, *British Unemployment* (n. 6 above), pp. 34–43. Note also ministers’ continued efforts to conciliate trade union leaders, especially during 1919, when they believed, as Bonar Law put it in Cabinet, that “the Trade Union organisation was the only thing between us and anarchy” (Public Record Office, Cab. 23/9, War Cabinet 525 [February 4, 1919], p. 4).

³⁵ Cowling points out that political stability after 1924 was based on Baldwin’s understanding that MacDonald would promise “constitutionality” if allowed to supplant Asquith and Lloyd George as the main opposition leader. This realignment was built around “a tension of connivance between MacDonald, who was compelled by his situation to mean no harm, and Baldwin, whose situation compelled him to feel confident that no harm would be done” (Cowling, p. 429; see also pp. 380–81). Cowling also notes Baldwin’s willingness to accommodate and win back Lloyd George’s allies, but his absolute unwillingness to negotiate with the Liberal Party or Lloyd George himself (pp. 382–405, 411).

³⁶ The phrase is P. J. Grigg’s, private secretary to Snowden in 1929, quoted in *National Crisis*, p. 74. James Cronin’s recent book makes clear the extent to which Labour’s financial policies moved in a conservative direction in the twenties: while the Party continued to support progressive tax policies, they abandoned the capital levy and remained firmly committed to debt reduction and the defense of gold. James Cronin, *The Politics of State Expansion: War, State, and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1991), esp. chap. 7.

³⁷ On unemployment policy in the twenties, see especially Alan Deacon, “Concession and Coercion: The Politics of Unemployment Insurance in the Twenties,” in *Essays in Labour History, 1918–1939*, ed. Asa Briggs and John Saville (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 9–35.

substantial sections of both parties had reason to dislike any hint of corporatism and to support efforts to make Parliamentary politics into that “relatively autonomous” realm that Williamson sees it to be. It was the Conservatives who went furthest in attempting to craft a definition of citizenship that extended the civil rights of individuals (especially women) while simultaneously treating interest group politics as fundamentally antithetical to Parliamentary sovereignty.³⁸ But some within the Labour movement as well found MacDonald’s belief in a strict division between the political and industrial wings of the Labour movement a welcome relief after the corrupting embrace of Lloyd George—although the Trades Union Congress (TUC) came to regret this division when they found MacDonald and Snowden more willing to listen to other party leaders than to trade unionists during the financial crisis.

A decade of Conservative dominance punctuated by minority Labour governments thus succeeded in reestablishing “sound finance,” “actuarially-sound” insurance, and the supremacy of party over interest—all precepts that the Coalition had violated—as premises (and not choices) of “responsible” government. It was this framework that was challenged by the political instability and economic crisis in the late twenties, and that Baldwin, Chamberlain, Samuel, MacDonald, Philip Snowden, and others—all old anti-coalitionists—ultimately combined to protect.³⁹ Since they saw this framework as the basis both of their own political recovery and of “constitutional” government, the suggestion that the country was falling into a “national crisis” comparable in seriousness to the war raised the specter not only of Lloyd George but of a return to social unrest, “irresponsible” finance, and industrial intervention. These fears were illusory because the analogy between 1931 and 1918 was false: after all, the National Government went off gold without any serious political consequences, and the trade union movement was far too battered to force any return to industrial conciliation. Lloyd George himself seems to have recognized this: as Williamson notes, while he was happy to pose as the “man of emergency” in 1930, “as someone who had faced and surmounted genuine national and world crises, he had the experience to be sceptical and relaxed

³⁸ Here Lloyd George’s unwillingness to see the general strike as a threat to “constitutional” government stands in sharp contrast to the views of Baldwin, John Simon, Jimmy Thomas, and Neville Chamberlain (all key National Government ministers), who saw the strike, in Chamberlain’s words, as “constitutional Govt. . . . fighting for its life.” For Chamberlain’s views, see David Dilks, *Neville Chamberlain*, vol. 1, *Pioneering and Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 470–1, 478.

³⁹ Many of the key supporters of the National Government had reason to remember the wartime and postwar coalitions with hostility: Neville Chamberlain had been humiliated by his spell as wartime minister for National Service; Baldwin had fought Lloyd George over the Coalition’s spendthrift ways; Herbert Samuel and John Simon had followed Asquith into opposition; the latter two—along with MacDonald and Snowden—had lost their seats in the Coupon election.

about the idea of ‘crisis.’”⁴⁰ Had the “national crisis” of 1931 truly come to resemble the national crisis of 1918, not only would language have changed but it is arguable that Baldwin and MacDonald would have gone the way of Asquith in 1916 and Chamberlain in 1940, the country demonstrably preferring such obvious rule breakers as Lloyd George and Churchill during times of real national emergency.

Williamson shows how Baldwin and MacDonald were able to use the specter of “national crisis” to bring about a very different alliance from that desired by those “politicians with a nostalgic interest in coalition” who first called for a return to “national government.”⁴¹ What he does not show is the degree to which this alliance was the culmination of a political realignment and a course of policy that dated not from 1926 but from the reaction against the Coalition in the early twenties. Given this legacy, it is unsurprising that the evocation of the war put party allegiances under strain, the Liberals deserting their leader and the Labour leader his followers to adhere to painfully constructed definitions of responsible government. Liberals had always tended to repudiate Lloyd George’s interventionism in private, and the decision of both the Samuelites and the Simonites to support the National Government merely made those preferences explicit;⁴² on the other hand, MacDonald’s obsession with “constitutionality,” acceptable when Labour’s membership was in full flight from the sully of the wartime state, was less tolerable with the TUC undergoing its own Keynesian transformation. The Commons configuration in the mid-thirties, in which a fiscally conservative National Government faced an opposition made up of a tiny Lloyd George group, a Labour Party more conscious of its ties to the trade union movement, and, occasionally, a few maverick “one-nation” Tories, was an accurate reflection of that policy polarization.

IV

John Turner and Philip Williamson’s studies will probably become the classic accounts of the course of high politics during the two periods they discuss. Both books serve as important correctives to the historiography of the seventies, reminding us that political outcomes cannot simply be read off policy failures or the changing relations of interests and classes. But only Turner recognizes fully the extent to

⁴⁰ *National Crisis*, p. 155.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴² David Dutton’s recent biography of Sir John Simon and Bernard Wasserstein’s exemplary life of Herbert Samuel stress that their subjects both found Lloyd George’s unorthodox financial policies and maverick leadership incomprehensible and somewhat irresponsible. David Dutton, *Simon: A Political Biography of Sir John Simon* (London: Aurum, 1992), esp. pp. 75–110; Bernard Wasserstein, *Herbert Samuel: A Political Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), esp. pp. 312–34.

which politicians' actions were driven not only by their search for personal and party-political advantage but also by their efforts to contain a perceived challenge to stability brought on by the war. This effort did not end with the collapse of the Coalition in 1922, although it did take a very different form. Yet Williamson does not place his study of the "national crisis" of 1930–31 within the context of this effort. His account is, then, a compelling but partial one: it can explain how politicians manipulated the rules, *as they were then*, to their own advantage but declines to explain how these rules were constructed and hence to assess whether they were really in danger of breaking down. It helps us understand how well or badly politicians played their hand but is silent when asked what enabled them to treat politics as a game in the first place. We should read Williamson's book, then, with the memory of an earlier national crisis in mind, a crisis that was social and constitutional as well as financial and parliamentary and whose successful mastery made Baldwin and MacDonald's framework—and, equally, a form of history writing that takes this framework as given—possible. The ghost of Lloyd George, and not MacDonald, should be at our elbow: in many ways the author of this postwar settlement and—partly in consequence—the most absolute "high political" loser.

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