

# Marking the David Lloyd George Centenary – appointed Prime Minister 6th December 1916

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On the 6th December 1916 David Lloyd George became the first and only Welsh speaking Prime Minister in British history. Celebrated two years later as ‘the man who won the war ‘ this article looks at some of the tumultuous events that led him to the highest political office in the land.

David Lloyd George was previously known as an anti-war politician and a far from wholehearted supporter of Britain entering the First World War. Once Britain had engaged in the war, however, he would show the resilience, skills and fortitude in seeing the nation through to victory, that his cabinet colleague and lifelong friend Winston Churchill would show a generation later.

At the outset of the war Lloyd George’s role as the Chancellor of the Exchequer was central to ensuring that Britain retained the financial capacity to be able to fight a war both on land and sea. This was mainly through large-scale tax rises and massive debt financing. Both on a scale that the nation had never seen before.

During the war, at his heart was also Wales. Lloyd George’s Welsh nation building came through most prominently in 1914, with him persuading Lord Kitchener (Secretary of State for War) of the need for the creation of a 50,000-strong Welsh Army Corps, as part of the New Army. They marched to war, proudly wearing their new Welsh red dragon shoulder badges. The following February also saw the establishment of the Welsh Guards. The formation of the Welsh Guards now put Wales on the same footing as the other nations, when it came to providing the personal guard of the sovereign.

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By 1915 there was such a grave crisis, with respect to the production of high explosive shells, that it became a major scandal that threatened not only the government’s future but also Britain’s chances of winning the war. It was Lloyd George who then stepped in, once more. As Minister of War he revolutionized the

production of munitions in the UK. He streamlined the government bureaucracy and concentrated on the core objective. He stated his way of working simply as being that:

“The Government has experts, experts, experts, everywhere. In any department where things are not going well, I have found boards of experts. But in our department at least I’ve found a substitute for them. I let twenty experts go and I put in one Man, and things begin to move at once.”

The result was that he not only boosted munitions production, he also boosted national morale. He developed at the same time strong relations with the United States, which would shortly prove vital for both financing and resourcing the war. The following year, 1916, was a busy year for the British Empire and in particular David Lloyd George. Not only was the nation fighting for its very survival in the midst of the Great War but also that Easter there had been an uprising in Ireland that threatened the future existence of the British Isles. With both unionist and

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Irish nationalists fiercely opposed to any compromise over Ireland’s political future, Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, then employed the negotiating talents of Lloyd George. It was he who trod through this political minefield in order, as he put it to the Unionist Sir Edward Carson, “we should get Ireland out of the way in order to press

on with the war”. Whilst Ireland would indeed dominate Lloyd George’s political career over the next six years, it was ‘the great war’ that he was soon called back to concentrate all his efforts on.

Whilst Asquith was reassuring the military top brass he was happy with the running of the war, Lloyd George was not happy at all. By 1916, along with many other prominent politicians, he was becoming increasingly disillusioned and despondent with the slow progress of the war. In June 1916 he succeeded the recently deceased Lord Kitchener as Secretary of State for War. Rejecting US President Woodrow Wilson’s offer to mediate in the war, he now declared that “the fight must be to a finish – to a knockout”. The same skills he had used when he was Minister of Munitions were now put to use in slim lining command and communications in the military. He also believed that British military operation had now become both stalled, overstaffed and defeatist. Together with the Unionist Sir Edward Carson and the future Conservative Prime Minister Bonar Law they put forward a plan that would see the war directed by a much smaller cabinet.

By late 1916 Asquith was looking tired and ill from leading the nation for over two years of war. He had lost the confidence of many in his own party, the opposition

and the national press. The Conservatives were now determined that for the good of the nation 'Asquith must go!'. Lloyd George, himself, threatened resignation unless he was given a free hand in conducting the war; in turn the Conservative leader Arthur Balfour warned Asquith 'that we cannot continue in the old way'. It was either the 'vigour and vision' of Lloyd George at the helm or the Conservatives would withdraw from the government. At the same time Lloyd George had also gathered considerable support from his own party. Particularly from Welsh Liberal MPs. Asquith therefore resigned on the afternoon of 5th December. The Conservatives were asked to form a government by the King but could not do so. The only solution acceptable to Conservatives, Labour and Liberals was a new government led by David Lloyd George. Thus Lloyd George had become Prime Minister without a ballot being cast. Ironically, over the next six years Wales most famous Liberal would now lead a coalition government that was far more Conservative than Liberal in its make-up. But that is another story!

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