

David Lloyd George

David Lloyd George (1863-1945), invariably considered the quintessential Welshman, was in fact born in Manchester on 17 January 1863, the son of a schoolmaster.

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After his father died a year following David's birth, his mother took her two children to live with her brother, Richard, in Llanystumdwy, Caernarvonshire.

An intelligent child, Lloyd George performed well at school, leaving to train as a solicitor, and was articled by the Law Society in January 1879. Upon completion of his training Lloyd George established his own practice in Criccieth, developing a reputation as a lawyer who was willing to defend people against authority.

Lloyd George married in 1888, to Margaret Owen, the daughter of a wealthy farmer. A non-conformist, he worshipped at the Disciples of Christ Chapel in Criccieth, where he honed his skills as an orator.

After joining the Liberal Party and becoming an alderman on Caernarvon County Council, Lloyd George took part in numerous elections, campaigning for an end to church titles, and for land reform.

In 1890 Lloyd George successfully stood for a seat representing the Welsh Caernarfon Boroughs, entering the House of Commons as a Liberal. He developed a reputation for spirited oratory on behalf of Welsh causes, and spoke against Britain's involvement in the Second Boer War (1899-1902).

Lloyd George was appointed to serve in the Campbell-Bannerman government as President of the Board of Trade, from 1905-8. During this time he oversaw passage of the Merchant Shipping Act (1906), the Patient Act (1907) and the formation of the Port of London Authority in 1908.

In the Asquith administration (1908-15) Lloyd George served as Chancellor of the Exchequer and devised the controversial "People's Budget" of 1909. The budget promoted higher land taxes and the introduction of a super tax on incomes over £3,000, so as to fund social reform programmes and rearmament of the Royal Navy.

The budget was rejected by the House of Lords, bringing about a constitutional crisis, with the Lords opposing for the first time a government budget. Lloyd George relished the opportunity of attacking the Lords, which had impeded a number of the Liberal's social justice bills. Consequently the Parliament Act of 1911 severely cut back the powers of the House of Lords, restricting the ability of the upper chamber in opposing finance bills passed by the Commons.

1911 was a hectic year. Lloyd George was responsible for the National Insurance Act that year, which laid the foundations of the modern welfare state. Also in 1911 Lloyd George made his famous Mansion House speech, in which he warned Germany that Britain would not tolerate interference with its international interests. With the outbreak of the First World War, Lloyd George served in Asquith's coalition war cabinet, as minister for munitions and as secretary for war. Unhappy with Asquith's conduct of the war, and ambitious, he connived with the Conservatives to oust Asquith, succeeding him as Prime Minister on 7 December 1916. This episode caused a split in the party from which it never entirely recovered; along with Asquith several other prominent Liberals resigned from the government.

A capable wartime leader, bold and aggressive, Lloyd George often found himself coming into conflict with Sir Douglas Haig, whom he did not trust. In particular, Lloyd George found the cost in human terms of Haig's battles to be reprehensible. Lloyd George also often found himself in disagreement with the Chief of the Imperial Staff, General Robertson.

One of Lloyd George's greatest achievements during the war was in combating the growing German submarine menace, which in early 1917 threatened to starve Britain into submission. He achieved this by forcing the adoption of the convoy system upon a reluctant Admiralty (which included the abrupt dismissal of Sir John Jellicoe on Christmas Eve 1917).

At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Lloyd George exercised a moderating influence on both the harsh demands of Georges Clemenceau and the idealistic proposals of Woodrow Wilson, and to a large extent shaped the final agreement, although he later concluded that the treaty was a failure, predicting renewed war within twenty years. Immediately following the conference Lloyd George was awarded the Order of Merit by the King.

Following the war Lloyd George's administration was effectively kept afloat by support from the Conservatives.

With the return of four million men from the trenches, Britain's economy went into decline and unemployment was rife. Meanwhile in Ireland violence led to the formation of the Irish Free State in 1920. With dwindling support from the Conservative members of his government, Lloyd George's coalition began to disintegrate.

Lloyd George resigned as Prime Minister in 1922 and never served in government again, although he was leader of the Liberals from 1926-1931. During that time, support for the Liberals in the country at large dwindled: the Labour party had taken over from the Liberals as the party of opposition to the Conservatives.

Lloyd George published his War Memoirs from 1933-36 and The Truth about the Peace Treaties in 1938, among others.

Churchill invited Lloyd George, also an opponent of appeasement, to join the war cabinet in 1940, but he declined on grounds of age and health, hoping to the end for a return to the highest office in the country. David Lloyd George died on 26 March 1945. Two months before his death he was elevated to the peerage as Earl Lloyd-George of Dwyfor.