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Edited by F. H. Hinsley

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INTRODUCTORY

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The Foreign Secretary, the Cabinet,
Parliament and the parties

K. G. ROBBINS

In the period before 1914, it was widely accepted that, at any rate in the long run, public opinion could vitally influence the course of foreign policy. But there was remarkably little constitutional provision that it should do so. Dicey, for example, believed that it was 'not Parliament, but the Ministry, who direct the diplomacy of the nation, and virtually decide all questions of peace or war'. He was in the happy position of feeling certain that 'the Ministry in all matters of discretion carry out, or tend to carry out, the will of the House'.¹ While this might indeed be so, there was no certainty, and Radicals placed little reliance on such tacit understandings. They deplored the extent to which the House of Commons and the country were at the mercy of the Cabinet. While it was the case that treaty negotiations frequently led to a government statement in the Commons, it was the prevailing legal opinion that parliamentary sanction was not needed, either for signing, or ratifying, treaties, so long as no changes in the law of the land were involved. All that was required for agreements to be valid was the signature of the Powers concerned – the ratification by the Sovereign and counter-signing by the Foreign Secretary. The sanction of Parliament was required only for treaties which incurred financial obligations or ceded territory in time of peace. The majority of political agreements were signed and ratified without the assent of Parliament, though they were normally published soon afterwards. The exclusion of certain articles from the published version of the Anglo–French agreement of 1904 was an exception to the normal practice of publishing the terms of treaties in full.² Such a situation clearly left immense potential power in the hands of the Cabinet, however much it was normally tempered by conventions of disclosure and debate.

In addition to this constitutional position, external circumstances seemed to strengthen the executive just at the time when pleas for greater democratic control were gaining ground. For it was becoming clear that British freedom of action in foreign policy was no longer what it had once been. There were those who continued to resist this conclusion but, broadly speaking, the mental climate of 'splendid isolation' was passing. The effect of this uncertainty was to strengthen the position of the Cabinet. In protesting against its powers,

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many critics were in fact protesting against the changes in the international system which reduced Britain's freedom of manoeuvre.³

These external constraints were inevitable, but both the Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith Governments suffered from the peculiar circumstances surrounding the formation of the Liberal Cabinet in December 1905. The divisions in the Liberal Party at the time of the Boer War had not resulted in the open split which many at one time had forecast. Nevertheless, suspicions generated at that time had not been forgotten. When it had seemed likely that the Unionist Government would not last much longer, Asquith, Grey and Haldane pledged themselves to force Campbell-Bannerman to take a peerage as the price for their own acceptance of office. When the crisis came, however, the compact did not work. Asquith was the first to be seduced by the prospect of office and when Campbell-Bannerman made it clear that he did not intend to be blackmailed in the formation of his Cabinet, Haldane and Grey eventually fell into line. The despised Sir Henry gained an unexpected triumph and the plotters were trounced.⁴ It is possible that their discomfiture would have been greater if the government had been formed after the General Election of January 1906, which gave the Liberals their unexpectedly large majority. Three of the most prominent 'Liberal Imperialists' were in important positions – at the Foreign Office, the War Office and the Treasury.⁵ Other members of the Cabinet, and of the party at large, believed that the 'Liberal Imperialists' had captured the Cabinet. Such allegations go too far. In the first place, too great a cohesion has been attributed to the 'Liberal Imperialists' as a group. They happened to be close personal friends, but not such friends as to make them indifferent to their own individual interests – the failure of their compact shows this. Secondly, it is by no means clear that their objections to Campbell-Bannerman (and his to them) were particularly the product of disagreement over foreign policy. They felt that he would not be an effective leader if he remained in the Commons at his age; he felt that they were mischievous and too ambitious. Thirdly, as far as such things matter, Campbell-Bannerman's own personal sympathies were probably 'pro-French' rather than 'pro-German'. Whatever the truth, the Cabinet was widely believed to be divided between 'Liberal Imperialists' and the rest. But this simple division makes little sense of the Cabinet's behaviour over the next decade.⁶ The Government was composed of an unusually high number of ambitious men who, at different junctures, formed different alliances with seemingly unlikely colleagues. In this situation, attempts to fix individuals in particular groups are misleading.⁷

It is impossible to tell what Campbell-Bannerman might have achieved if his Ministry had lasted longer, and he had been free from family and personal illness. Initially, however, his authority as a leader surprised his critics. He had no great interest in foreign affairs, but clearly did not wish to abdicate all responsibility for them. In the first great issue of foreign policy – the nature of the Anglo-French relationship and the military conversations – he must

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take the main responsibility for the failure to bring the matter before the Cabinet. After all, Campbell-Bannerman and the elder statesman, Lord Ripon, both had experiences of previous Cabinets; Grey and Haldane had not. After many years of Cabinet experience, Grey himself subsequently concluded that he ought to have asked for a discussion when Campbell-Bannerman gave him the opportunity. In his memoirs, Grey says that no record has survived of his reply to the Prime Minister's invitation. However, on 22 January, Grey asked that no Cabinet on the French question should be fixed until they had had the opportunity of a personal discussion.⁸ Presumably after such a conversation, possibly at Windsor in the presence of the King, it was agreed that Grey should see Cambon without a Cabinet.⁹ The Foreign Secretary clearly preferred not to discuss the matter in the Cabinet, though he could hardly have objected in principle if Campbell-Bannerman had insisted upon it. Sir Henry also saw the record of these conversations and decided that, although he was not completely happy with them, it was as well to hope for the best.¹⁰ The fatal accident to Lady Grey then called the Foreign Secretary back to Northumberland. Sir Edward's conversations with Cambon were not discussed in the Cabinet and records of them were not circulated. It has been surmised that Campbell-Bannerman, concerned for the unity of the party, did not want to see the matter debated and divisions revealed. But it is an exaggeration to claim that Grey was in the Cabinet not only as an individual, but also as the representative of a party too strong for the Prime Minister to defy.¹¹ Sir Henry had just won a great victory which was believed to have strengthened his wing of the party. Even before this, he had made it clear both to Haldane and Grey that they were expendable. Aware of Haldane as a backstairs operator, albeit a somewhat clumsy one, and finding 'Master' Grey not beyond suspicion, the Prime Minister is hardly likely to have given in to them, and thus set a bad precedent, if he had been seriously alarmed himself.

Lord Ripon had told Grey on his coming into office that there were always some Foreign Office papers that were sent to the Prime Minister and not circulated to the Cabinet, at any rate in the first instance. Besides, it would have been physically impossible to circulate all the private correspondence to each member of the Cabinet. Ministers were not very assiduous in reading those despatches which they did receive. The new Cabinet was a large one, and while there was no formally constituted inner Cabinet, it seems sensible to conclude that the Prime Minister (a former Secretary for War) was content with the arrangement whereby a small group of men in relevant Ministries knew of the position.¹² Since, as seems most likely, Asquith was not informed, it is difficult to believe that Haldane, Asquith and Grey were 'hunting in a pack' in the Cabinet.¹³ Furthermore, despite the fact that Grey stayed in Haldane's house in London after his wife's death, this did not prevent a disagreement between them concerning policy towards Germany in the autumn of 1906. Grey then felt that Haldane's intended visit to Germany would upset the French, '... I want to preserve the entente with France, but it isn't easy, and

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if it is broken up I must go.¹⁴ Rosebery rightly complained subsequently to Haldane that the French had been rather sharp in pressing Grey so soon after his arrival in office.¹⁵ But then, Rosebery, the exemplar of 'Liberal Imperialism', was the leading opponent of the Anglo-French entente.

Grey himself held a very high view of the nature and powers of his office. He did not believe that the Cabinet should control foreign policy, if by that was meant close supervision in detail by its members of all aspects of foreign policy. The fact that such control was also administratively impossible reinforced his convictions. He consulted the Prime Minister quite often, and decided with him what items it was appropriate to bring before their colleagues. Because of this system, Parliament often knew little of what was going on. In any case, during this first crucial two and a half months of the Liberal Government, Parliament was not sitting. Such a situation did not alarm Grey. In October 1905, he had gone out of his way to emphasize publicly his belief in 'continuity' as regards foreign policy.¹⁶ It would be too much to expect that the parties could agree in every detail, but it was essential that the basic foreign policy arrangements should not be disputed between the parties. This was partly because the 'national interest' could be conceived as lying beyond the realm of party political exchanges, and partly because any fundamental changes of attitude would unsettle the international situation and place grave doubts against Britain's reliability. It was not, in fact, difficult to maintain the doctrine of 'continuity' in Parliament. While there had been a very few distinguished critics of the Anglo-French entente, it would be true to say that the arrangement had been accepted by all the political parties. No one seriously proposed the reversal of the entente, but there was considerable Liberal anxiety that it might be transformed into a binding commitment to assist France. The Liberal backbenches contained a considerable number of men who regarded themselves, often with justification, as experts on foreign policy in general, or at least on certain specific areas. The presence of these men was to mean that the Government would receive more criticism from its own backbenches than it did from the Opposition. Yet, while a large section of the party, perhaps one might say a third, shared a 'Radical' outlook, the negative voice of this group was more prominent than its positive. Radicals felt that a Liberal Government ought to be committed to reducing arms expenditure, but apart from a general agreement in principle, there was little unanimity on the best way to achieve it. The 'Radicals' also found themselves in an awkward dilemma. They sniffed anxiously for the least trace of a continental entanglement and at the same time opposed a high level of defence expenditure. To be a reductionist might be sensible. To be an isolationist might be sensible. But was it possible to be both?

Many of the newly-elected younger generation of Radicals with interests in foreign policy were also keenly interested in social questions. Indeed the chief objection to an accelerated naval programme was that it diverted resources which would be more usefully employed in social welfare programmes. Yet,

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however disappointed some of them might feel with their party's achievements, they did not believe that the Tories would do better. So, when it came to debate over foreign policy, they pressed their disagreements so far, but no further. Finally, it was often the case that while general criticism of the Government's policy was easy, when it came to details, as for example in the Balkans, the critics differed almost as much amongst themselves. The fact that, on the whole, the Radicals were largely unsuccessful in their campaigns, tended to heighten their sense of moral superiority, and belief that Government and Opposition were in collusion in the interests of the 'governing class'. Each defeat in battle therefore strengthened their determination to win the war. It was apparent by 1914 that criticism of specific policy decisions had broadened into a general attack on the structure of Government.

Criticism of policy was not, however, confined to the back benches. In July 1906, hardly in distress, Grey commented to Ripon that 'Foreign policy has been discussed so little at the Cabinet.'¹⁷ The Foreign Secretary preferred to operate through a small group of Ministers who received all the important despatches. Campbell-Bannerman rarely took issue with him and, though this is not often admitted, it must be presumed that he was content with the general course of developments. Lloyd George has, of course, painted a picture of Cabinet meetings in which only a select few elder statesmen were expected to comment on the arcane mysteries of foreign affairs. His criticism suffers from a failure to make specific charges about particular years. Certainly, for Grey's early period there seems to be truth in the accusation.¹⁸ But, apart from the inherent unlikelihood of Lloyd George being silenced if his interest was really engaged, the other members of the Cabinet were formally deeply involved in their own departmental responsibilities. However, it cannot be denied that Grey gave a restricted circulation to a number of important telegrams; how malevolent his purposes were is another matter. As far as the Anglo-Russian agreement was concerned, Grey seems to have worked in close collaboration with the Prime Minister, Ripon, Asquith and Morley. Grey's method of operation was not, in fact, so markedly different from that of his immediate predecessors. While Salisbury and Lansdowne consulted the full Cabinet more than Grey, they also made use of a small inner group of Ministers. As regards the Anglo-Russian agreement, nothing was kept from the Cabinet, although Grey was not anxious for Morley to see the full European implications of what was being done.¹⁹ The Foreign Secretary acknowledged that the Secretary of State for India's support was vital. 'Without Morley,' he wrote to the Prime Minister, 'we should have made no progress at all, for the Govt. of India would have blocked every point; Morley has removed mountains in the path of the negotiations.'²⁰ Fortunately for Grey while Morley expressed his reservations about 'anti-Germans' in the Foreign Office, his character was sufficiently complex for him to find pleasure in being regarded as a 'strong man' and not a mere 'doctrinaire'.²¹ Morley's approval of the agreement went some way towards disarming Radical criticisms, but the agree-

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ment as a whole led to the first major clash in Parliament between the Government and some of its own supporters – not to mention the Opposition.

Grey defended his conclusion of the agreement at a time of Russian constitutional crisis. Foreign policy should not be used to interfere, one way or the other, in the internal problems of a country. Those Liberals who had strong sympathies for the Russian constitutional movement profoundly disagreed with him. A Liberal Government which treated with those who suppressed the Duma was not worthy the name. Moreover, what about the ‘independence’ of Persia? Speakers pointed out that peaceful revolution was proceeding in Persia when the convention was signed. Placing the capital of the country and the centres of the reform movement within the Russian sphere was tantamount to handing over the Persian reform movement to the tender mercies of a foreign despotism. Grey replied that the agreement would lead to better relations with Russia at the relatively small cost of losing some trading possibilities in Northern Persia. He professed to believe that the agreement would be kept in good faith, but this was the element of which his critics saw little sign. If the Russians did honour their part of the bargain, then perhaps the parts of the settlements which offended the Liberal conscience, both as regards Russia itself and Persia, might reluctantly be accepted. But if the Russians should misbehave, then the full fury of the critics would turn upon Grey.

The Foreign Secretary also contended that as far as Russia and North Persia were concerned, Britain might have been able to obstruct her progress for a time, but in the long run the concessions made under the agreement could not have been prevented. Other critics, chiefly Conservative, raised little ‘ideological’ objection. Taking their cue from Curzon’s speech in the House of Lords, they argued that too much had been given away in return for too little solid benefit. Balfour was critical of details and procedure, but while he did not believe the convention a great diplomatic success, he thought it brought substantial advantages.²² The bi-partisan tradition was therefore maintained. In turn, when Asquith became Prime Minister in 1908, he invited Balfour to serve on a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence. Balfour accepted – a step amounting to a constitutional innovation – although Asquith later denied that Balfour was, properly speaking, a member of the C.I.D.²³

Confronted by this front-bench consensus, it was left to the Labour Party to make gestures of dissent. The Anglo-Russian Convention remained the chief target of Labour and Radical criticism. When Grey informed the Commons that the King was to meet the Tsar of Russia in the summer of 1908 on the Baltic, a critical motion was brought before the House by Keir Hardie. It failed by 225 votes to 59. The King was displeased and in retaliation banned Keir Hardie and Victor Grayson from the next Windsor Castle Garden Party. He was particularly angry with Arthur Ponsonby, Campbell-Bannerman’s successor as Member for Stirling. Ponsonby, as a son of Queen Victoria’s

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private secretary, should have known better than to vote against the Russian meeting. The visit duly took place, although the Labour Party continued to criticize.²⁴ In the hands of spokesmen like MacDonald, Snowden and Henderson, Labour's attitude to foreign affairs was hardly distinguishable from that of the Liberal Radicals. They merely insisted more frequently upon the evils of capitalism and the inevitability of war while such a system continued. MacDonald, whose knowledge of foreign countries was considerable, praised the Socialist Congresses when they declared that international strife was the result of capitalist activity. These assemblies, in his view, represented the nucleus of the coming 'parliament of man'. But there were other Labour propagandists who did not share this taste for radical rhetoric when it came to foreign affairs. Robert Blatchford and his *Clarion* probably influenced more Labour men than any other figure, but he spoke strongly of the need for national defence, advocated conscription and warned of the German menace. Even among the more orthodox Marxists, divisions on the question of national defence were apparent and 'social patriots' were subsequently to be found lurking in high places.²⁵ In any case, one suspects that the overwhelming concern of the Labour rank and file was with domestic questions and that the internationalist stance of the leadership was not strongly reflected at the grass roots.

The mood of the Liberal Government after the death of Campbell-Bannerman was one of some depression. Although it had been in office for two years, it had achieved disappointingly little. While Asquith was the obvious successor, he did not excite great enthusiasm. Nor did future prospects seem encouraging. The Liberals, to their great dismay, came into office at a time of technological innovation. This played havoc with their good intentions, originally shared by Asquith as much as by Campbell-Bannerman. In departing from the Cawdor programme, laid down by the previous Government, the Prime Minister lost Britain the margin of naval superiority which might have prevented future alarms. As it was, however, the German supplementary naval law of late 1907 prompted Lord Tweedmouth, the First Lord, to ask for increases in the 1908-9 naval estimates.²⁶ The first of the recurrent naval crises then ensued. This clash also led to the first serious challenge to his authority which Grey had experienced. The promotion of Lloyd George to the Exchequer and of Churchill to the Board of Trade brought into greater prominence two energetic men who were both worried by the Government's mediocre performance. In the interests of domestic social reform, they vigorously opposed Tweedmouth's estimates and, though unsuccessful, for a time they seriously imperilled the Government's unity.

Although Grey supported the naval programme, he was aware of the strength of Liberal feeling on the question. He did not oppose exploratory discussions with the Germans, on condition that both naval supremacy and the ententes were preserved intact. In July 1908, he suggested to Metternich, the German Ambassador, the possibility of mutual reductions in naval

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expenditure.²⁷ In August, Hardinge raised with the Emperor the possibility of discussions on the subject.²⁸ The Germans did not respond, and Grey decided to await a more favourable occasion. Lloyd George, however, decided to take on the problem himself. He made a number of public speeches on the need for a rapprochement with Germany.²⁹ These were followed by a visit to Germany to study social legislation. At the same time, he offered to discuss naval questions with German politicians despite his previous promise to Asquith to refrain from making public statements on this matter. Grey, anxious both about his own status and French reactions, protested to the Prime Minister, who ordered Lloyd George to desist.³⁰ 'I don't think any harm has been done by recent utterances', Grey wrote to Lord Sanderson, 'But I have taken occasion to point out the risk that is involved in them.' Some of his colleagues apparently did not believe in the existence of brick walls and it did no harm to let Lloyd George run his head against German examples, 'but there is always the danger that if foreign on-lookers do not understand what is going on there may be direct consequences, which are inconvenient.'³¹ Similarly, he had a dispute with Churchill in December 1908 when the latter intimated his willingness to have talks in Paris on a forthcoming visit. Churchill was told that in Paris only the Prime Minister and himself were regarded by those in authority as 'exponents of the views of H.M. Government in questions of foreign policy'. His interviews might give rise to misunderstandings.³² There was no doubt that the 'responsible men' in London were determined to maintain their authority!

Grey's touchiness on this matter was partly accounted for by the international situation and partly by continuing tension over the navy. In a public speech, Grey had warned of the need to maintain a clear-cut supremacy; there was no half-way house between 'complete safety and absolute ruin'. In face of rumours and evidence of acceleration in the German programme, it was clear that some further step would have to be decided. But, in view of the previous friction, could the Cabinet agree, keep the party with it, and gain an acceptable vote in Parliament? Early in February 1909, Churchill circulated a memorandum to the Cabinet stating his view that the German challenge was much exaggerated.³³ Lloyd George warned Asquith that endless discussions on the Naval Estimates were likely to destroy the spirit of the Government's supporters in the country. The Prime Minister reported to the King that the Cabinet was divided on whether to lay down six Dreadnoughts with an option of two additional ships according to German plans for construction, or to lay down four. On the side of the former proposal were Grey, Runciman, Crewe, McKenna and Buxton, and on the latter, Churchill, Harcourt, Burns and Morley.³⁴ A small committee, consisting of Asquith, Morley, Grey and Lloyd George, was appointed to try to reach a settlement. At the Cabinet on 24 February, the Prime Minister took the initiative. It was agreed that four ships be laid down at once, with power to order four more by April 1910, if German construction appeared to make such a step necessary.³⁵

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It was only with difficulty that the Cabinet survived this crisis. Grey and McKenna had threatened to resign if, as at one time seemed likely, the 'economists' had their way. A year later McKenna acknowledged that 'but for him [Grey] I should have been beaten on the Navy Estimates. . .'.³⁶ Sir Edward believed that the crucial time for the navy would come in 1912–13, and he was not willing to see his foreign policy jeopardized by weakness at that juncture. At one stage in the conflict, Asquith wrote to his wife that he was disposed summarily to cashier both Lloyd George and Churchill for their attitudes, but that Grey had proved a great stand-by.³⁷ Lloyd George, Churchill and Morley meditated resignation – as Asquith commented to Grey, 'the two former cannot help reflecting how they would have looked at this moment if they had resigned with (as Winston Churchill predicted) "90 per cent of the Liberal party behind them"'.³⁸ Such an estimate was a considerable exaggeration. In fact, after listening to Asquith in the Commons, J. E. Ellis, one of the 'economists' recorded: 'Our men scattered like sheep. I do not think at that moment five Liberals would have voted against increase.'³⁹ The critics reluctantly acquiesced, although both sides put their own construction upon the compromise. Asquith wrote that its effect would be 'to make us stronger in 1912 than McKenna's original proposal would have done'.⁴⁰ He was going to have eight and that settled the matter. Others, however, laid stress upon the fact that the four Dreadnought campaigners had 'won' and discounted the possibility of the four contingent ships ever being ordered. Some back-benchers felt that they had been tricked, but there was no need for the Government to rely on Tory votes to get the extra four ships as some had predicted would be necessary.⁴¹ Whatever his rank and file might think, Asquith knew that, whether justifiably or not, the country was rattled. The Government had to face the vote of censure from the Opposition on 29 March for its shipbuilding policy. Grey spoke in strong terms: 'There is no comparison between the importance of the German Navy to Germany, and the importance of our Navy to us. Our Navy is to us what their Army is to them. . .'.⁴² Balfour was not content. He demanded the extra four ships there and then. As he was speaking, the result of the Croydon by-election became known in the House – an election in which the 'Dreadnought' issue was widely believed to have helped increase the Unionist vote. It was better to risk the wrath of less than a hundred of his own supporters than that of the country as a whole. Although some regretted that the position of the Navy, and hence the security of the country, should become an occasion for direct antagonism between the parties, Balfour, afflicted with his self-imposed responsibility for keeping Liberalism 'safe', was determined to keep the question in the forefront. And public opinion, at least as far as the existing electorate reflected it, was probably with him.⁴³

At the Cabinet of 24 July, the further four ships were approved, apparently without much debate. The Cabinet accepted McKenna's request, and did not question him too closely. But some sheep who had scattered in the spring