

Churchill was not an obvious Liberal. In particular, his previous hostility to the policy of Home Rule in Ireland, a policy central to the Liberal Party, had seemed to rule out his ever joining them. Yet join them he did. His undoubted talent as an orator and parliamentarian meant that after the Liberals' landslide victory in the 1906 election he was well placed to enter government in a junior post only five years after entering Parliament. His career with the last Liberal government of the century illustrates well how turbulent and troubled these years before 1914 were.

As Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies (1906–1908) Churchill was plunged into the surge of anxiety over Britain's fitness to cope with her imperial responsibilities, an anxiety inspired by her poor performance during the Boer War of 1899–1902. Arguing for restraint and reconciliation, Churchill was instrumental in the establishment of 'responsible government' in South Africa. In 1908 he was rewarded for his industry with a Cabinet post, President of the Board of Trade. Thrust into the arenas of social and working conditions, and of industrial relations, Churchill forged ahead with an ambitious programme of reform. Establishing labour exchanges to help the unemployed and drafting legislation to improve conditions for the 'sweated' trades and for miners made Churchill a highly visible public figure. Working in tandem with Lloyd George at the Treasury, he led a party revival. Together they became known as the 'heavenly twins' of New Liberalism.

ANALYSIS (1): HOW LIBERAL WERE CHURCHILL'S POLICIES IN THE YEARS 1908–1911?

This is a question of definitions. How far was Churchill a politician in the liberal tradition, which had dominated British politics throughout the nineteenth century, or how loyal was he to the doctrine and policies of the Liberal Party, of which he was such a prominent member during these years? And even within the broad base of that party were there policies or beliefs of Churchill's which did not fit, and which placed him at some distance from his political colleagues? Because Churchill defected not once but twice – from the Conservatives in 1904 and from the Liberals in 1924 – the issue of where his loyalties and political beliefs really lay was one that fascinated his contemporaries as much as it does historians today.

Churchill held many beliefs common to the liberal tradition: beliefs in individual freedom, in progress and in reform. He also believed in the goodness of humanity, writing in 1910 that 'it is natural to men ... to be virtuous and honest'.² From this flowed his commitment, while Home Secretary, to a programme of extensive prison reform. Had his tenure there not been overtaken by events it would have been the dominant feature of his work at the Home Office. His reforms were intended to make more humane the prison and punishment system. Thus his reduction of the period of solitary confinement into which all new prisoners were routinely put, from nine months to one; his instructions that the length and gravity of the sentence be appropriate to the crime committed; and his attempts to reduce the number of petty criminals, young offenders and debtors being imprisoned. He introduced lectures and libraries to prisons, to improve conditions not just for prisoners' bodies, but their minds.

Commitment to reform had been a distinguishing feature of the Liberal Party, in contrast to the Tories. And, of course, Churchill had begun his political life as a Tory, leaving it over a matter of political principle. Joseph Chamberlain's campaign for Tariff Reform of 1903 was abhorrent to Churchill, who organised the Free Food League in opposition to it. Free trade had been a central tenet of the Liberal Party since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, as it had been of liberalism. Chamberlain's attempt to abandon this orthodoxy split the Tory Party and led to the ascendancy of the Liberals after their landslide victory at the polls in 1906. Having crossed the floor only two years earlier, Churchill stood to gain much from this victory. Some critics believed his joining the Liberal Party had had more to do with ambition than conviction, and indeed Churchill was rewarded with an office in the new government, as Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies.

In this position Churchill was able to implement a policy that the Liberal Party had only recently adopted. 'The keynote of Liberal imperial policy would be to replace the coercive attitudes of Unionism with conciliatory approaches appropriate to a party of progress and humanity.'³ In his first post Churchill implemented the granting of responsible (or self-) government in the southern African states, establishing a model and precedent for settlements elsewhere that the Liberal Party believed was progressive and right. In this respect Churchill stood in the 'imperialist' faction of the party together with Asquith, as the party struggled to redefine its attitude towards governing an empire whose expansion under the Tories it had traditionally opposed. Having served in the army in various parts of the empire, Churchill was convinced that it was 'a great engine of civilisation and an instrument for good'.⁴

As the son of Lord Randolph, Churchill's position on the Irish problem was much more complex. His father had supported the Unionists of Ulster and coined the phrase 'Ulster will fight and Ulster will be right'. Initially, Churchill had supported this position, which made his conversion to the Liberal policy of Home Rule sensational. His visit to Belfast in 1912, to speak in support of Home Rule in a strongly Unionist region, nearly resulted in rioting and injury to him. Later, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he ordered that warships patrol the coast during the tensions following the Curragh 'mutiny' of 1914, to emphasise the government's intention that Home Rule be established, by force if necessary.

However, it is in the arena of social reform and improvement that Churchill built his reputation as one of the most important Liberal Party members of the day. In partnership with David Lloyd George, Churchill led a revival of the party's fortunes. The so-called 'People's Budget' of 1909 became the benchmark of this new approach. The budget required an increase in the taxation of the wealthy to fund a number of social reforms aimed at the poor. It was radical in the nature of the new taxes to be introduced, the amount of money to be raised, and because its explicit aim was to fund welfare projects for the sick, unemployed and widowed. As President of the Board of Trade Churchill's ministerial responsibilities were in these very areas and he supported the budget from its inception throughout its stormy passage through Parliament. He had already committed himself to the provision of pensions for certain categories of workers through the Old Age Pensions Act of 1908 and was busy with the second half of the National Insurance Act by which some workers would contribute to a fund for the sick and unemployed. Other legislation to improve working conditions included the bill for shop workers and the more successful Coal Mines Act of 1911. Churchill was particularly concerned by the cyclical nature of some jobs and determined to resolve this problem through the 1909 Trade Boards Act, by which a system of labour exchanges (where vacancies could be advertised to unemployed workers) was established. He went further, advocating the creation of a Committee of National Organisation in which a number of ministries would work together to fund and manage a programme of public works to employ workers during times of high unemployment.

Both this proposal and the People's Budget were radical solutions that made explicit use of state powers to create and fund a system of welfare provision. In advocating this, Churchill and Lloyd George contributed to the creation of the policies of their party. Faced with problems rooted in widespread poverty the two men abandoned the Gladstonian principles of low state intervention and low taxation, convinced that only radical solutions would do. Similarly, both of them

were attracted to the notion of cross-party cooperation or government by coalition, so that these problems could be tackled without the distractions of party politics. 'New Liberalism' as practised by Churchill and Lloyd George, both dynamic, energetic and professional politicians, revived the party and gained (briefly) the support of working men. However, although their reforms provided the basis for a welfare state, neither man had intended to create such an institution. Churchill's commitment to social reform stopped well short of socialism, which he claimed, 'seeks to pull down wealth; [whereas] Liberalism seeks to raise up poverty'.⁵ Churchill was a radical Liberal in that he aimed at fundamental changes and reforms to assure minimum standards of life and work, and he was not a revolutionary. His radicalism sometimes even led to him being accused of authoritarianism.

Paul Addison, historian of Churchill's domestic policies, has written that 'He embodied, to a remarkable extent, both the reforming and the conservative potential of the last Liberal Government'⁶ and that 'His policies fully reflected the authoritarian strand in Edwardian social thought'.⁷ Eugenics was one such strand, and greatly interested Churchill during his time as Home Secretary. His proposals for the sterilisation of the physically and mentally 'unfit' stemmed from a belief in the need for selective breeding to strengthen the British race. Unacceptable now as a respectable opinion, he was not alone in his attraction to eugenics then. Influential thinkers like Beatrice and Sidney Webb advocated the concentration of vagrants into penal camps, based on this system of thought. Churchill's support for sterilisation programmes for the 'unfit' stemmed also from his humanitarianism. He believed that sterilisation programmes were a humane solution for disabled people, enabling them to live in the community without 'fear' of passing on their disability to any offspring, and thus releasing them from the institutions in which most were otherwise forced to live.

Much more controversial at the time was Churchill's approach to the social and industrial unrest that appeared to dominate the years 1910-1911. Violet Bonham Carter was a close friend of Churchill's at this time and later wrote of him, 'he was never quite a Liberal. He never shared the reluctance which inhibits Liberals from invoking force to solve a problem'.⁸ Indeed, his reaction to the protests of 1910 and 1911 betrayed his other face: 'He was prepared to countenance social reform, provided it was regulated and ordered by the government; he was not prepared to suffer dictates from below that threatened the social order he held dear'.⁹ So, while prepared to extend the powers of the state to effect social reform, Churchill was not prepared to meet demands that came from the people. In his readiness to despatch troops to various

parts of the country in response to the strikes that dominated this period, Churchill's authoritarianism was revealed. Churchill was 'identifiably different from many of his colleagues',¹⁰ in his Tory, aristocratic and military background. Here, Pelling has written that 'his own reputation as a soldier was against him'¹¹ and that even when he was not to blame for the violence that characterised the industrial unrest of this time, he nevertheless was blamed. His apparent eagerness for confrontation frightened a number of his colleagues in government and ruined his relationship with organised labour for many years.

At base then, Churchill was bound by a belief in, and commitment to, the existing social order. Perhaps he was not so much a Liberal as a Tory Democrat. His father had invented the phrase Tory Democracy without really defining it. At the outset of his career in politics Churchill claimed, 'I am a Tory Democrat . . . I regard the improvement of the condition of the British people as the main end of modern government.'¹² Having declared that 'I think we should try to improve the lot of the masses of the people through the existing structure of society',¹³ it could be argued that this is just what Churchill set out to do. The fact that he did so through holding office in a Liberal government may have been irrelevant to him. Certainly, it was felt that as soon as he moved to the Admiralty in 1911 his previous commitment to social reform appeared to melt away, in favour of a militarism not part of Liberal tradition. Henceforward Churchill was never to show much interest in issues of social policy again.

In 'a career of absolute self absorption'¹⁴ Churchill found little space for ideology of any kind, including religion, a fact which accounts in large part for the ease with which he was able to move from one political party to another, without requiring drastic adjustments to his political beliefs. While following in the broad liberal tradition of British politics, he found it both awkward and unnecessary to commit himself to any one set of party policies. Never a typical Tory or Liberal, he was, however, always a radical who attacked an issue with breathtaking energy and determination to bring about fundamental change and improvement.

Questions

1. Why did the 'People's Budget' of 1909 cause so much controversy?
2. Why did the 'new liberalism' fail to win the support of the working-class electorate?

ANALYSIS (2): WHY DID CHURCHILL ATTRACT CONTROVERSY SO FREQUENTLY WHILE HE WAS HOME SECRETARY?

'The progress of a democratic country is bound up with the maintenance of law and order.'¹⁵ Written while he was at the Home Office, Churchill's words go a long way to explaining how he lost his reputation as one of the foremost social reformers of the Liberal Party. As Home Secretary he was responsible for the maintenance of public order 'and it was a responsibility which he discharged with great seriousness: as he did so at a time of social unrest, his naturally conservative instincts rose to the surface'.¹⁶ This shift, from champion to villain of working-class interests, centred on events during November 1910 during which Churchill was engulfed by a blaze of critical publicity.

A wave of strikes and unrest in the coalmines of South Wales culminated on 8 November at Tonypandy with the accidental killing of a protestor. Earlier that day Churchill had reversed the local chief constable's request for troops, instead insisting that the local police be reinforced with police, not soldiers, from London. He had also made a public request to the striking miners to stop rioting in exchange for prompt and sympathetic attempts to settle their dispute. It was only when this attempt failed and the violent disturbances continued that Churchill decided after all to send in troops. Churchill was immediately criticised for having sent them in too hastily, causing bloodshed. In fact, by delaying their arrival he probably prevented more violence. Nevertheless, his reputation as someone determined to break strikes by force and at any cost was established by this episode. Perhaps the condemnation of Churchill was made all the more bitter by surprise and disappointment that someone who had been, at the Board of Trade, a champion of radical reforms for the benefit of the poor and unemployed had so easily resorted to force when faced with their protests.

The feeling that Churchill's response had been too belligerent was reinforced only days later, on 'Black Friday', 18 November 1910. During the six-hour-long struggle to control suffragette demonstrators outside the Houses of Parliament, the police used inappropriately physical tactics to remove and arrest the mostly female protestors. Once again Churchill, who as Home Secretary was directly responsible for the Metropolitan Police Force, found himself under virulent attack. With very little evidence, he was accused of having given special orders to the police deliberately to bully and humiliate the protestors. In fact, as Addison has pointed out, 'Churchill, who at once recognised that something discreditable had occurred, intervened to order the release of most of the women arrested.'¹⁷ He did so again for the 185

women arrested a few days later during their demonstration in Downing Street. This leniency, together with Churchill's previous concessions to suffragette prisoners by granting them privileges as political prisoners, was given no credit. It was the accusations of brutality, and of incompetence in dealing with the protests, that stuck. As Home Secretary he shouldered the blame for his police force's heavy-handedness at a time when they and politicians alike were inexperienced and uncertain in the face of such unprecedented protest from women.

A third and peculiar episode just a few weeks later apparently provided yet more evidence of Churchill's bellicose interventionism. The 'Siege of Sidney Street' in January 1911 was a storm in a teacup, whisked up by anti-immigrant feelings at the time and by Churchill's curious behaviour. A small band of foreign criminals suspected of robbery, the murder of three policemen and of being anarchists had been cornered by police in a house in Sidney Street in the East End of London. Troops had been called and shots fired. Hearing of the siege, Churchill rushed to the scene in time to watch fire break out and burn the house to the ground, leaving the remains of two people inside. Later, the decision to allow the house to burn was attributed to Churchill and, whether true or not, even he admitted his attendance was unwise and that he had been impelled to go 'by a strong sense of curiosity which perhaps it would have been as well to keep in check'.¹⁸ Subsequent newspaper coverage of the episode was sensational and Churchill's role severely criticised. Charmley has written, 'the episode seemed to epitomise Churchill's defects . . . egocentricity and boyish enthusiasm'¹⁹ while Violet Bonham Carter has written that 'despite its relative triviality it is one of the most characteristic and revealing episodes of his life'.²⁰

Of course, Churchill was distinguished from his fellow ministers by the very fact that he alone had a military – not an academic or professional – training. His confrontational style displayed a militaristic approach that was anathema to Liberals. The apparent ease with which he resorted to force became ever more evident throughout the summer of 1911, to the growing unease of his colleagues. This was a summer dominated by unprecedented industrial unrest, fears of economic and even social breakdown, mounting discontent in Ireland, the constitutional crisis and escalating tensions with Germany at Agadir. Strikes by seamen, dockers, transport and railway workers appeared to spread like wildfire from one city to another, so that the supply of basic foodstuffs appeared to be under threat. 'These trade unionists in their crazy fanaticism or diseased vanity are prepared to starve the whole population, including of course their own families and all the ranks of "labour" to ruin the country and leave it defenceless to the world.'²¹ Churchill saw even greater threats than this:

that the strikes were symptomatic of the growth of syndicalism, which would foment social revolution if unchecked. His fears were reinforced by warnings from the mayors of Liverpool and Birkenhead that revolution was imminent, and by the request from the civil authorities of Salford for the despatch of troops.

That workers should be able and willing to challenge the social order was unacceptable to Churchill: 'Militant trade unionism thundered the language of class conflict, forecasting the imminent breakdown of the existing social and economic order. Churchill reacted in kind.'²² He was not alone in fearing the onset of chaos: the summer's events had 'convinced respectable opinion that the world was about to be turned upside down'.²³ Nevertheless, Churchill's actions still attracted more controversy than those of other ministers, as his responses became increasingly heavy-handed. He continued to use the threat of force against strikers, despatching a cruiser to Liverpool after the death of one man, and stationing 25,000 soldiers just outside London during the dockers' strike. This latter dispute ended peacefully and Churchill wrongly concluded that the presence of troops had persuaded the unions back to the negotiating table – so when an unprecedented national railway strike was threatened he had no hesitation in deploying troops again. This time, however, instead of waiting for requests from the civil authorities, as had happened earlier, Churchill authorised the use of the army himself, thus unilaterally sweeping away the Army Regulation. At the time, the Cabinet had supported his actions, reeling from the ferocity of the strikers' antagonism. But when two strikers were shot and killed at Llanelli by soldiers of the Worcestershire Regiment on 19 August, this decision became instantly controversial. The strike was averted not by Churchill's troops but by Lloyd George's negotiation.

He may have been, as Robbins has claimed, 'not unsympathetic to the aspirations of trade unionists or suffragettes but he would not allow them to dictate the appropriate responses to their grievances'.²⁴ Or, more clearly, 'he was not prepared to suffer the dictates from below that threatened the social order he held dear'.²⁵ At heart he was an aristocrat, a privileged member of society. He may have had a genuine desire to improve the conditions of the poor but his progressivism was limited. His innate paternalism was revealed in his reactions to 'the many alarms of a strangely troubled period, in which the rage of the suffragettes coincided with the "great industrial unrest" of 1910–1914'.²⁶ The coming together of these serious protests would have thrown any Home Secretary into the political limelight, but it seemed to many observers that Churchill enjoyed the confrontations too much. Addison has written of his 'two faces' as Home Secretary: his repressive, paternalistic face

that he turned towards the various protestors of the time, and his liberal face. His reputation before becoming Home Secretary had been as a radical reformer and he had entered that office intent on a programme of prison reform. This programme was also not without its controversies.

With his 'strong sense of natural justice, and sympathy for the under-dog'²⁷ Churchill set about an improvement of conditions for prisoners, reducing sentences to fit the crime committed, reducing the amount of time new prisoners had to spend in solitary confinement, and abolishing the practice of preventive detention, by which re-offenders' sentences could be extended by five to ten years, just to keep them in jail longer. These measures attracted criticism, as did his release of some prisoners simply because he disagreed with the severity of their sentences. Perhaps more controversial still were his ideas on the treatment of the 'feeble-minded'. The idea that such people posed a threat to society's genetic integrity was widespread among some intellectuals of the time, although not among Churchill's Cabinet colleagues. He, however, was enthusiastic about the idea that mentally and physically disabled people could and should be sterilised and segregated, 'so that their curse dies with them'.²⁸ His attempts to interest his colleagues in possible legislation along these lines failed and although a bill was eventually made law in 1913, this Mental Deficiency Act did not mention sterilisation at all. So even without the strikes and protests that defined Churchill's period at the Home Office, he was willing to propose legislation that aroused controversy with colleagues and the press alike.

This period was a turning point in his career: the point at which his previous social radicalism appeared to fall away, revealing instead an authoritarian figure. Among the working class he lost his reputation as ally to that of enemy, a reputation he was not to begin to shake off until the Second World War. This unmasking coincided with, and may even have contributed to, the loss of support for the Liberal Party among this same group of people, and thus to that party's long decline. The depth of feeling that Churchill's actions aroused was perhaps a matter of positioning – as he was the minister responsible for law and order at a time when it was being subverted by an unusually large number of people – but is more attributable to his enjoyment of controversy. It was noted that he savoured a political fight and was at his most energetic and ebullient when confronted. This was a characteristic that most Liberal ministers did not appreciate, feeling it to be more suited to a barracks than to Whitehall, and this was to have grave consequences for Churchill. From 1910 he had begun to lose friends and political allies, a fact that was to cost him dear during the crisis over Gallipoli in 1915.

Questions

1. In what ways did the Liberal government's attempts to implement social reform cause conflict with the House of Lords?
2. How effective was the partnership of Churchill and Lloyd George in reviving Liberal fortunes in the years 1908–1911?

SOURCES

1. THE SIEGE OF SIDNEY STREET

Source A: Winston Churchill wrote about his role in the Siege of Sidney Street

I thought it my duty to see what was going on myself and my advisers concurred in the propriety of such a step. I must, however, admit that convictions of duty were supported by a strong sense of curiosity which perhaps it would have been well to keep in check... But the situation almost immediately became embarrassing. Some of the police officers were anxious to storm the building at once with their pistols. Others rightly thought it better to take more time and to avoid the almost certain loss of three or four valuable lives. It was no part of my duty to take personal control or to give executive decisions. From my chair in the Home Office I could have sent any order and it would have been immediately acted on, but it was not for me to interfere with those who were in charge on the spot. Yet, on the other hand, my position of authority, far above them all, attracted inevitably to itself direct responsibility. I saw now that I should have done much better to have remained quietly in my office. On the other hand, it was impossible to get into one's car and drive away while matters stood in such great uncertainty and moreover were extremely interesting... At about half-past one a wisp of smoke curled out of the shattered upper windows of the besieged house, and in a few minutes it was plainly on fire... Suddenly, with a stir and a clatter, up came the fire brigade, scattering the crowds... The inspector of police forbade further progress, and the fire brigade officer declared it his duty to advance. A fire was raging and he was bound to extinguish it. When the police officer pointed out that his men would be shot down, he replied simply that orders were orders... I now intervened to settle this dispute, at one moment quite heated. I told the fire-brigade officer on my authority as Home Secretary that the house was to be allowed to burn down and that he was to stand by in readiness to prevent the conflagration from spreading.

improve conditions below decks. The most significant of his reforms were to create a naval war staff at the Admiralty to parallel that of the War Office and to convert all Royal Navy vessels from coal to oil. This latter decision was taken to secure superiority of speed over the German Navy, but in choosing Anglo-Persian Oil as the supplier, and by buying the majority of its shares, Churchill committed the British government to yet another sphere of influence, in Persia, which would have to be defended. His greatest achievement was that the fleet was ready for war in 1914.

Churchill's fall from power, precipitated by crises over the Gallipoli campaign and the shell shortage, plunged him into despair. His arrogant and ruthless use of his power had won him no friends at the Admiralty or in Parliament. Ostracised, he enlisted, spending six months at the front. He returned in 1916, hoping to return to political life in the Coalition government of his old ally, Lloyd George. But his path was blocked by both Tories and Liberals. Perhaps his partial exoneraton with the publication of the Dardanelles Commission Report in March 1917 smoothed his path back into government, although Lloyd George also recognised that an enemy as great as Churchill's should be harnessed to, not against, the government. And so Churchill's career was revived with his appointment as Minister of Munitions in July 1917. He attacked the job with characteristic vigour so that after the Coalition's victory in the general election at the end of 1918, he stood poised to take office in Lloyd George's first peacetime administration.

ANALYSIS (1): TO WHAT EXTENT CAN CHURCHILL BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FAILURE OF THE DARDANELLES CAMPAIGN?

The failed naval campaign in the Dardanelles and the subsequent futile attempts to take the Gallipoli peninsula in 1915 haunted the rest of Churchill's political life. The entire campaign was judged to be badly planned, poorly coordinated and timidly executed. Churchill was identified as its strongest advocate, so when it failed so dismally, he took the blame. The failure of the first landings at Gallipoli in April 1915 led directly to his ousting from the Admiralty. As the campaign was reduced to stalemate he was forced out of government altogether and resigned his parliamentary seat in November 1915. The issue of Churchill's

responsibility for the failure of the campaign has been muddled by the high emotion the campaign itself aroused at the time, by the findings of the Dardanelles Commission, and by Churchill's own explanations of the affair.

The plan to wrest control of the Dardanelles – the narrow channel that links the Black Sea to the Mediterranean – was initially a purely naval one. Using old battleships, the Dardanelles would be 'forced' by a slow, methodical bombardment of its defensive forts on land. It was assumed that the forts were so old they would crumble easily, and that once under attack the Ottoman Empire would capitulate. It was only as the bombardment began that Kitchener offered troops. Therefore, it was only a naval campaign, not a joint campaign with the War Office, which Churchill had planned and presented to colleagues for approval. His enthusiasm for it stemmed from several important considerations and assumptions, which he believed outweighed the risks that were involved.

His major concern was one he shared with a number of his Cabinet colleagues and which posed a threat to their unity. By the end of 1914 the Western Front had reached stalemate. To some ministers the front's insatiable need for men and ammunition seemed an extraordinary waste, given that no progress was being made. The idea that the war would be won only by killing more German soldiers than they killed British and French (a war of attrition) was repugnant to many politicians. Thus one group of ministers, Lloyd George and Churchill included, had begun to search for alternatives. So while the 'westerners' continued to clamour for more supplies for France, the 'easterners' looked to other regions of Europe from which to launch another attack on Germany and her Allies. On the outbreak of war, Churchill was quickly convinced that the Ottomans would soon drop their neutrality in favour of Germany, an opinion strengthened when they closed the Dardanelles to all shipping in September 1914. He advocated a pre-emptive attack and put his thoughts to Prime Minister Asquith in December 1914: 'Are there not other alternatives than sending our armies to chew barbed wire in Flanders? Further, cannot the power of the Navy be brought more directly to bear upon the enemy?'¹

Clearly Churchill's motivation for supporting an alternative theatre of war can be ascribed to his frustration with the lack of progress on the Western Front, but many also suspected him of wanting to spearhead a large naval campaign for his own ambitions. Nevertheless, his plan for a naval assault on the Dardanelles was accepted in principle, and was unopposed by the War Council on 13 January 1915. The War Council had been set up to deal with the issues arising from being at war and consisted of a mixture of Cabinet ministers, senior military advisers

from the War Office and Admiralty, and Arthur Balfour, leader of the opposition. Although it met less often than the Cabinet, it was responsible for taking all decisions on the conduct of the war. Churchill's plan was a very brief proposal, written at his request by the admiral stationed in the Mediterranean, and was not detailed. Yet it was approved by the War Council as viable, without reference to either maps or military intelligence of the area to be attacked. It has been argued that Churchill practically bullied the War Council into accepting the plan and that 'there can be little doubt but for his unrelenting pressure, it would never have been undertaken'.²

However, 'Churchill was not alone in believing that the Dardanelles were a short cut to victory',³ and the rewards for a successful campaign were rich and tempting. In knocking the Ottomans out of the war and seizing control of the Dardanelles (the rapid defeat of 'the sick man of Europe' was taken for granted at this stage), Britain would have been able to send vital supplies to Russia all year round via the warm-water ports of the Black Sea, and thus help to sustain her faltering war effort on the Eastern Front. In addition it was assumed that in taking the offensive in the Balkans, its neutral states, such as Greece, Bulgaria and Romania, would have been persuaded to join the Entente. These political possibilities outweighed the military considerations so that the plan was unanimously approved.

Churchill later claimed that 'the genesis of this plan and its elaboration were purely naval and professional in their character'.⁴ This stretches the truth somewhat. By the time that the War Council had authorised the campaign to go ahead, he had discussed it with only a select few. The Admiralty Board, Sea Lords who should have acted as expert advisers, had not been consulted. Only Fisher, the First Sea Lord, had talked it over with Churchill in any detail, although Fisher's lack of honesty in these discussions caused Churchill much trouble later. In presenting the plan to the War Council as one that the whole Admiralty had agreed, Churchill himself was less than honest, and inadvertently sowed the seeds of his own downfall. The Dardanelles Commission (established to investigate the reasons for the campaign's failure) reported that: 'It is clear that Mr Asquith was ill-informed as regards the methods under which Admiralty business was conducted'.⁵ Churchill's lack of candour had grave consequences, for it contributed to the ease with which a flawed plan was implemented, at the cost, eventually, of many lives.

In fact, the naval bombardment came tantalisingly close to success on 18 March 1915; so much so that offers of troops for the campaign were made by France and Greece, and in the USA grain prices fell dramatically in the expectation that soon the Dardanelles would be open to

shipping and Russian grain would flood the market. That the advantages gained on 18 March were not pursued to victory was not Churchill's doing. It was at this point that he lost all direct control over the campaign. The commanding officer on the spot, De Robeck, had been shaken by the loss on that day of three battleships to mines. He decided to postpone further bombardment until the channel could be swept. This postponement was then extended to await the arrival of the troops, lately promised by Kitchener, to the region, so as to coordinate a landed assault with further shelling of the forts. The decision meant a delay of at least three weeks, but there were further problems and the landed assault did not take place until 25 April. None of these decisions can be attributed to Churchill since they were taken with little reference to his wishes, but with much to those of Kitchener.

Having first denied that any troops could be sent to support the naval attack, he had agreed that the 29th Division could be despatched to the Aegean at a War Council meeting of 9 February. But on the 19th Kitchener again changed his mind and retracted this commitment, only to announce on 10 March that the 29th Division would go after all. Of this Churchill later wrote, 'The workings of Lord Kitchener's mind constituted at this period a feature almost as puzzling as the great war problem itself'. . . The repeated changes of plan were baffling in the last degree.⁶ Kitchener's domination of the War Council explains the fact that it accepted, without question, his unilateral decision to convert what had been a purely naval assault to a combined one, and allowed the campaign orders for the landings to be given out without having seen or discussed them first. He had dominated the War Council since its establishment in 1914 when he had been appointed Secretary of State for War. His public reputation was immense, having been Commander-in-Chief during the Boer War and served in both India and Egypt – cornerstones of the British Empire. His apparent imperturbability together with the flash of inspiration that led him to declare the war would be long, not over by Christmas, and to recruit the largest army yet raised in Britain, added to his reputation of infallibility. In appointing him, Asquith had hoped to instil confidence in the leadership of the war. But Kitchener has been described as 'Autocratic in manner and disdainful of politicians',⁷ qualities which did not bode well for the smooth running of an experimental government in which military and civilian leaders would work in tandem.

His influence was made all the greater by the fact that the War Council itself was flawed in its operation. Its procedures were ill defined, minutes of meetings were kept but not circulated or agreed by the participants, and the military members believed that their role was to speak only when

spoken to. This meant that members could leave a meeting without any clear idea of whether a decision had been reached, or whether everyone supported it. That its members were to be collectively responsible for its decisions is a mockery in the light of these serious flaws. The Dardanelles Commission reported that 'the atmosphere of vagueness and want of precision which seems to have characterised the proceedings of the War Council'⁹ contributed to the difficulties of the Dardanelles campaign, in its inception, refinement and prosecution. The Commission did not feel it appropriate to comment on Kitchener's role in the campaign as he was the only one of the main protagonists who was no longer alive to put his case, and his reputation among the public was still high. But A. J. P. Taylor has argued that his lack of strategic skill meant that 'civilian ministers were provoked into devising strategy themselves – some of them not at all reluctantly'.⁹

Churchill indeed showed no reluctance when plunging into the planning of a number of military campaigns, of which the Dardanelles had been just one. His ability to become utterly immersed in one issue meant he could always be accused of becoming obsessed to the point of blindness, as he was over the Dardanelles. Working within the flawed system by which strategy was devised and agreed, Churchill's persistence won. Thus in public and political arenas, he was identified as the main protagonist for the campaign; so when it failed he was obviously to blame. Yet it was the land campaign, for which Churchill could take less responsibility than Kitchener, which failed at such high cost. Churchill's naval campaign had resulted in the loss of a handful of battleships, not in thousands of lives. But by May 1915 his fall from power was inevitable. His responsibility for the failure of the Dardanelles campaign mattered less than the way in which he had gone about securing its approval. Both his Liberal colleagues and Conservatives had grown to distrust his motivation and methods, so that when his First Sea Lord, Fisher, resigned on the same day that news broke of the shell supply crisis to the Western Front, his position was very vulnerable. While Kitchener's reputation remained intact (in public, at least) his position in the government remained unassailable. But some dramatic change of personnel was necessary if Asquith was to keep his administration in power and maintain the political truce with the opposition. Neville has commented that 'the total failure of Gallipoli allowed the Tories to demand the head of the most hated member of the Liberal Party'.¹⁰ And that head was Churchill's. Here, after a meteoric, unconventional and controversial rise to power, was Churchill's come-uppance. He had to pay the price not so much for a weakly planned and executed military campaign but for his willingness to manipulate facts to build his case

and his failure to build any support for his case among his military or civilian colleagues.

Questions

1. Should Churchill have been forced from office following the failure of the Dardanelles campaign?
2. What weaknesses in the system of wartime government did the Dardanelles campaign reveal?

ANALYSIS (2): WHAT CAN A COMPARISON OF LLOYD GEORGE AND CHURCHILL REVEAL ABOUT THEIR POLITICAL CAREERS?

'He grappled with the giant events and strove to compel them, undismayed by mistakes and their consequences. Tradition and convention troubled him little.'¹¹ Churchill wrote this about Lloyd George's leadership during the First World War, but it could have been equally applied to Churchill's. The careers of these two men intertwined for the best part of half a century, sometimes in harmony and sometimes not, so it is fascinating and illuminating to compare the careers of these two giants of early twentieth-century British politics. Apparently unlikely allies, they consistently defied convention throughout their careers, resisting the mould of party politics to suit their own convictions, and redefining the role of the office of Prime Minister.

The most obvious comparison is of their leadership during the two world wars: Lloyd George's during the first and Churchill's in the second. Both men were made Prime Minister not by election but in response to crises of confidence in the government of the time, and both were leaders of coalitions. By this stage in their careers neither man commanded the loyalty of any single political party. Neither could be counted a party politician, being attracted instead to the idea of coalition or of a centre party, even in peacetime. Churchill had attempted to form a centre party as early in his career as 1903, and had supported enthusiastically Lloyd George's suggestion of a coalition in 1910. 'Traditional party loyalties were not sacred to either man, particularly where issues of high national policy, as interpreted by them, were concerned . . . These two great mavericks of modern British politics were both to find final and lasting greatness in coalitions of sorts.'¹² Thus their subsequent positions as leaders of coalitions come as no surprise, since they enabled these two mavericks to work outside the limits of party political programmes.

CHANCELLOR, 1924–1929

BACKGROUND NARRATIVE

The 'khaki' election of December 1918 returned Lloyd George's coalition to power. Churchill was appointed Secretary of State for War and Air. His first task was to demobilise the largest army in British history, which he did by scrapping existing and unpopular plans, replacing them with a fairer scheme that successfully diffused tensions. It was his suggestion that led to the adoption of the 'Ten Year Rule', in 1919, that military spending be based on an assumption that British forces would not go to war within the next ten years. It was this same rule that led to military spending cuts, which he was to argue against in the 1930s. He presided over the creation of the Royal Air Force as a separate force, convinced as he was that air power was going to change the nature of warfare in the future.

More controversially, Churchill vigorously campaigned for greater allied intervention in the Russian Civil War. He was appalled at the nature of the Bolshevik regime, instinctively disliking its ideology and use of terror. His criticisms were vehement and, some felt, alarmist. His ambitions for further intervention were thwarted by a Britain exhausted by the Great War and facing war in Ireland. Initially, Churchill supported Lloyd George's punitive policies in Ireland, but by 1920 was participating in the negotiations to bring about a settlement. During his tenure as Secretary of State for the Colonies,

he successfully steered the controversial legislation for the establishment of the Irish Free State through Parliament, and managed to settle disputed borders in the Middle East.

By 1922 Lloyd George's position as Prime Minister was increasingly challenged by critics of the Irish settlement, and by the threat of war during the 'Chanak Crisis' in August. The Conservatives voted to withdraw from the coalition at a meeting at the Carlton Club in October, forcing the Prime Minister to call an election. The coalition government fell from power and Churchill lost his seat. He didn't enter Parliament again until 1924. Instead he spent his time travelling and painting, lecturing and writing. Politically his drift to the right, noticeable since just before the Great War, continued. The adoption of protectionist policies by the Conservatives in the 1923 general election delayed Churchill's return to them, as he considered himself a free trader. But that election result was decisive for his future: the Conservatives lost and subsequently abandoned protectionism, while the Liberals chose to support the formation of the first Labour government.

Churchill naturally deplored this decision for allowing the 'menace of socialism' to take power. By early 1924 he had negotiated a return to the Conservatives as a 'Constitutionalist'. MacDonald's Labour government did not live long. The general election in October 1924 was dominated by the scandal of the 'Zinoviev letter', which created a hysterical backlash that Churchill was happy to exploit. The Conservatives were returned to government and Churchill to Parliament.

ANALYSIS (1): HOW SUCCESSFUL WAS CHURCHILL AS CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER, 1924–1929?

Baldwin's appointment of Churchill as his Chancellor caught everyone, even Churchill, by surprise. In comparison with most of his new Cabinet colleagues he had the most political experience behind him. Yet he was not an economist. This, and the fact that he had been out of political favour since 1922, meant he was more willing than usual to follow orthodox policies. Churchill was anxious to prove to his readopted party that he was politically sound and deserving of their trust.

His first budget confirmed the return to the Gold Standard, valuing the pound at its pre-war rate of £1 to \$4.86. At the time, 'the overwhelming

consensus of financial opinion was in favour of the return to gold, at pre-war parity'.¹ But this same policy 'is commonly regarded as the greatest mistake of that main Baldwin government, and the responsibility for it came firmly to rest upon Churchill'.²

In accepting the arguments in favour of returning to the Gold Standard – and Churchill undertook a thorough investigation into the matter before committing himself – he followed financial orthodoxy and the political consensus of the time. Previous governments had been committed to the principle of returning to the Gold Standard. One of the few exceptions to this consensus was the young economist J. M. Keynes. His pamphlet, 'The Economic Consequences of Mr Churchill', stated that the pound had been overvalued by 10 per cent, and warned this would lead to British exports becoming too expensive. The consequential fall in exports would cause industry to reduce wages and employment in the effort to remain profitable. Keynes was one of only a few dissenters. It wasn't until later, when the expected benefits of returning to the Gold Standard had failed to materialise, that these criticisms were acknowledged as having any basis. Instead of stimulating Britain's stagnant economy, the overvalued pound led to a fall in exports. Jobs were cut and wages forced down as industries struggled to survive, leading to the unrest and strikes that characterised the early years of the Baldwin government.

Churchill took the blame for his fateful decision. He later claimed it had been 'the biggest blunder in his life',³ but it seems unlikely that he could have done any differently. Most of Britain's main trading partners had returned, or were about to return, their currencies to the Gold Standard. In his final debate with pro- and anti-Gold Standard advisers, conducted over dinner, he came to understand that while the economic consequences of a return were unpredictable, it was politically expected that the country return to the pre-war 'normality' of convertibility with gold. Later economic historians have calculated that had Churchill valued the pound at 10 per cent less than its pre-war value, unemployment could have fallen by as much as 727,000. This failure to reduce unemployment blighted Baldwin's administration, costing it the election of 1929. More immediately it resulted in a dramatic rise in industrial conflict, ruining any chance of good relations with the trade unions.

In particular, the coal industry, in crisis since the end of the war, was devastated by the high exchange rate. Unable to export its coal, the industry threatened wage cuts. The government subsidised the mines while a Royal Commission attempted to find a solution, but in the end was reluctant to intervene in this privately owned industry. Both miners and owners then proved too stubborn to negotiate a settlement themselves. A lockout ensued, other unions came out in support, and Britain's first

General Strike had begun. Churchill had a hand in trying to end the miners' crisis, coming closer than Baldwin to succeeding. His inclination was to be much more conciliatory towards the miners than were his colleagues, believing that 'the country was suffering debilitating economic bleeding and that it was the duty of the government to staunch the flow at the earliest possible moment'.⁴ The enormous cost of this, and of the General Strike, was the dominant influence on Churchill's budgets of 1926 and 1927. It was only through some creative thinking and ingenious juggling that he was able to make his budgets appear to balance.

He did this by emptying the Road Fund over two years, ignoring the fact that this money had been set aside for spending on roads. He raised more money to cover the deficits of these two years by introducing a betting tax, increasing taxes on luxury goods, and speeding up the payment dates for brewery taxes. He also insisted on swingeing cuts in naval and army spending, making him very unpopular with some of his Cabinet colleagues. Excepting the immediate post-war years of 1918–1920, Churchill ran the largest budgetary deficit of the inter-war period, at nearly £37 million in the years 1926 and 1927. Yet he also contrived a small decrease in the national debt and in income tax.

More important, though, was the fact that Churchill did not challenge financial orthodoxy. Despite being desperate to find ways to inject life into the economy, he did not intend to run a deficit to adopt a loan-financed programme of public works. Such Keynesian economics were not to be accepted and adopted as national policy until the Second World War. Churchill did come up with a kind of solution: his de-rating scheme announced in his budget of 1928 was intended to stimulate the economy by freeing industry and agriculture from having to pay rates (a tax) to their local authority – the theory being that it would release more money into the economy. In the absence of any other major initiatives this de-rating scheme, plus Chamberlain's reorganisation of local government, formed the backbone of the Conservatives' re-election platform. But the scheme did not have the dramatic effects Churchill had anticipated and few people were impressed enough with it to vote Conservative.

What Churchill was up against was an economy facing fundamental change. The traditional industries (such as coal and steel) were in decline, fighting cheaper imports, and new industries faced the uncertainties of an unstable world economy. And he was straitjacketed not only by the insistence that the country not go further into debt, or increase public spending, but by the refusal to contemplate protectionist policies. Since their defeat at the polls in 1923, when they had promoted tariff reform, the Conservative Party had retreated from this position to support instead

the continuance of free trade. During his Chancellorship Churchill did introduce a small number of duties, on silk, wine and sugar, for example, but he also reduced or abolished some, such as those on tea and dried fruits. Thus prevented from being able to raise significant income from import duties, Churchill had a limited range of options. 'With hindsight, Churchill's Chancellorship can be seen as a final, spirited attempt to revive the political economy of 1914 before it was overwhelmed in the Slump.'¹⁵

A return to 1914 proved impossible, of course. Taxation was no longer high enough to cover government spending. Pre-war budgets of £197 million were unrealistically low, given the increased national debt and cost of social benefits for the unemployed, retired and sick. Eight hundred million pounds proved to be a much more realistic sum for budgets of the inter-war years. Churchill's own lack of expertise in finance probably contributed to the failure to experiment, but the overall consensus was of financial conservatism. To overcome this Churchill needed an expertise and confidence in finance that he simply did not possess.

What he did have was a commitment to social reform. Now that he was Chancellor, he aimed to make the Treasury 'an active instrument of Government social policy'¹⁶ by increasing spending on pensions, social benefits and housing. The main domestic legislation of Baldwin's government was in social reform, taking up some of the themes of the pre-war Liberal administrations. Churchill felt comfortable financing social reform, so that – unusually – the relationship between the Treasury and Neville Chamberlain's Ministry of Health was a cooperative one. As a result, several important schemes were implemented: the Widows and Old Age Pensions Act of 1925 and the National Health Insurance Act, increasing the number of people eligible for pensions and unemployment benefit. In addition, Churchill's Treasury agreed to finance a fifteen-year scheme to subsidise the construction of houses by local authorities, and Baldwin's government saw a more than fourfold increase in the number of new-build houses. That Chamberlain could work with such a supportive Chancellor meant he was able to implement substantial reform in local government too, which enhanced his reputation more than that of his rival. Churchill's budget of 1928 showed flashes of ingenuity in financing this scheme and his own de-rating proposal through introducing a new tax on petrol.

'[T]o finance these impressive schemes of social welfare meant imposing a rigorous policy of retrenchment elsewhere' so Churchill could not share the political rewards for these achievements. This retrenchment, combined with the inflated value of the pound and an

unreadiness to consider Keynesian solutions, meant Churchill's Treasury lacked the resources to tackle the deep-seated problems of an economy in the throes of great structural change. Along with other finance ministers of the time, Churchill failed to comprehend the depth and significance of these changes, and was therefore unable to lift Britain out of the depression. His policies had lacked consistency and had produced mixed results. After the financial crisis of 1931, Churchill himself recognised how out of date his economic ideas and understanding had been. Free trade and the Gold Standard were no longer enough to stabilise Britain's economy. But, as Addison has since written, 'In defence of Churchill it had to be asked whether, in the circumstances, anyone else would have done any better.'¹⁸

Questions

1. 'The return to the Gold Standard in 1925 was a more significant cause of depression in Britain than the Wall Street Crash in 1929.' To what extent do you agree with this view?
2. What economic problems did Churchill fail to address during his years as Chancellor of the Exchequer?

ANALYSIS (2): TO WHAT EXTENT WERE CHURCHILL'S ACTIONS DURING THE GENERAL STRIKE IN 1926 TYPICAL OF HIS ATTITUDE TOWARDS LABOUR?

Upon the outbreak of the General Strike, Baldwin is reputed to have remarked, 'I'm terrified of what Winston is going to be like.'¹⁹ His reputation for belligerence towards labour protest was well known and was reinforced in many people's minds by his actions and words during the tense days of the General Strike. His colleagues in government, too, condemned his attitude towards the trade unions, but they thought his approach was too conciliatory during the long-running miners' strike. What, then, to make of this contradiction? Churchill's reputation with the labour movement is still poor today, linked as he is with events at Tonypandy in 1910, and the labour problems of the immediate pre-war and post-war years.

Churchill's behaviour during the General Strike showed many similarities with these earlier clashes with labour. 'Churchill's mood was of the utmost bellicosity and, some of his colleagues thought, utmost irresponsibility as well.'¹⁰ He argued that tanks should escort the food convoys into London and that machine-guns be set up at key points along the routes to counter any attack. He also advocated a government

takeover of the BBC, to broadcast state propaganda. These seemed extreme to other Cabinet ministers, who feared he was spiralling out of control. As the historian Addison admits, 'he was all for heightening the conflict. Needless to say he did not intend to risk a bloody civil war. But he wanted to shake an intimidating fist at the strikers.'¹¹ Baldwin successfully diverted Churchill's energies into running the *British Gazette*, the government's emergency newspaper. He proved ideally suited to filling the information gap left by the national strikes.

What his colleagues found so disturbing about Churchill's reaction to the strike was his apparently instinctive recourse to militaristic action. Another of his biographers, Norman Rose, has stated: 'in principle, he was not different from the rest of his Cabinet colleagues. What separated them was his style and manner of behaviour.'¹² Most of the Cabinet believed as he did that the General Strike was a constitutional challenge to the government. Where perhaps he differed was in believing it to be 'a dramatic and conscious challenge to the constitution',¹³ and that he therefore saw his behaviour during the strike 'as a continuation of his crusade against Bolshevism'.¹⁴

He had never viewed socialism with anything but extreme suspicion. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 he grew to fear it, too. Indeed the Bolsheviks had committed themselves to exporting socialist revolution abroad, something they appeared nearly to succeed at during 1920, when at war with Poland. Churchill believed 'this band of cosmopolitan conspirators are aiming to constantly overthrow all civilised countries.'¹⁵ and as an aristocratic, paternalistic politician, he could imagine nothing worse than the destruction of the existing social order. Carlton has argued that Churchill believed the whole labour movement – trade unions and the Labour Party alike – 'had been dangerously infected with the Bolshevik virus'.¹⁶ He had information that the Comintern (the Soviet body for exporting revolution abroad) had been sending money to British strikers since early 1926. This just reinforced his fear that Bolsheviks were plotting revolution in Britain, and that the General Strike was part of the plot. He could recall the narrowly averted national railway strike of 1911, when he had had information of German support for the strikers. Unlike his colleagues in 1926, he had personal experience of this episode. Then, too, he had amassed troops. When the threat of national action was over, he came to believe that his threat to use the military had forced the unions to back down. In 1926 he was merely repeating this tactic, but this time, surrounded by the moderates of Baldwin's Cabinet, his tactics looked even more extreme. The episode 'exposed in Churchill the lack of steady English restraint for which he had so often been criticised'¹⁷ but for which his colleagues were renowned.

However, the industrial turmoil of 1911 or 1926 were in themselves extreme. When faced by more typical strike action, Churchill's reaction was neither militant nor confrontational. His attempts to find a fair solution to the miners' dispute of 1925–1926 stand out as a 'sustained pacific effort'.¹⁸ His efforts were thwarted in the end not by the unions or miners, but by the mine owners and later by his own colleagues. Both owners and ministers rejected his suggestion that the miners' wage settlement be based on a national minimum wage because they believed it conceded too much to the strikers. Churchill's proposal that a Royal Commission investigate the state of the coal industry in 1925, his agreement to pay a subsidy to the industry to tide it over until the Commission could report, and his attempts to reach a compromise in the summer of 1926 reveal his determination to find a fair, not punitive, settlement for the miners.

He made a clear distinction between the miners' strike, which he saw as being based in genuine grievances, and the General Strike that to him was a purely political act. This distinction is what formed Churchill's opinion that the former required a fair hearing and solution while the latter had to be met by force if necessary. This had been the case sixteen years earlier at Tonypany. It was Churchill's hesitation over the use of troops that had led to the deaths there, not that he had deployed them in expectation of bloodshed. Here is Churchill's conviction that the trade unions should be separated from politics. It was what he most distrusted about the Labour Party, that its finances, authority and policies were all rooted in trade unions that he suspected of being infiltrated by Bolshevism.

There were in fact few such extremists in either the Labour Party or British trade unions, but he remained convinced that if Labour should come to power chaos would ensue. He abandoned the Liberal Party in 1923 because he was infuriated by the decision to support Labour, enabling the latter to form its first government in Britain. During the election campaign of 1924, he leapt upon the 'Zinoviev letter', now recognised as being a probable fake, and 'played the anti-Bolshevik card for all it was worth'.¹⁹ His campaigning revolved around this scare, that the Comintern was urging the British Communist Party to prepare for revolution. More notoriously, he launched vicious attacks on the Labour Party during the election of 1945. He claimed that if Labour were elected, it would have to establish a Gestapo-like organisation in order to govern effectively. This attack was astonishing because Churchill had been sharing power with Labour in the wartime government of 1940–1945, the purpose of which had been to defeat the fascist state of Nazi Germany. It lost Churchill a great deal of respect; even his

daughter reprimanded him for poor judgement in making such wild and unsubstantiated allegations.

There had been times when he had been able to work in harmony with both elements of labour – the trade unions and the political party. During the latter half of the 1930s, his rearmament campaign gathered some support from within the labour movement. He spoke at trade union demonstrations in favour of increased military spending, alongside men like Ernest Bevin, against whom he had battled during the General Strike. Indeed, when he came to form his first War Cabinet in May 1940, Churchill recognised the need to retain the loyalty of the workforce and ensured that the post of Minister of Labour was given Cabinet rank. Furthermore, he proposed to the Labour leader Clement Attlee that Bevin, then Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, be appointed Minister of Labour. Despite habitual suspicion of each other, they came to recognise each other's talents and, on the whole, to work well together.

Churchill's attitude to labour was, then, complex. It was rooted in the fact that he was a profoundly conservative man. Able to accept that the working classes could have grievances in genuine need of fair resolution, and that it was the responsibility of the ruling class to meet this need, he could never accept that labour had the right to raise a direct challenge to the established social and political order. He knew that that order was undergoing inevitable and radical change, but he could not contemplate that Britain could succumb to anything so drastic as revolution. He was convinced she should manage change as she had in the past, through incremental and constitutional change. He failed to see the differences between the ideologies of the British Labour Party and trade union movement, which was a moderate one under the leadership of men like Walter Citrine, and those of the Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union. He equated them all with the most extreme form of socialist thought. His rejection of socialism meant that he therefore also rejected the Labour Party – until the dire circumstances of 1940 forced him to think otherwise. His offer of alliance to the Soviet Union in the following year was probably the most personally difficult political decision he had to take, since Stalin's Soviet Union embodied the very revolution against which he had fought so strongly.

His actions during the General Strike were typical, then, of his attitude to only one aspect of the labour movement – its ability to raise the spectre of social revolution. And it was typical of his attitude in 1926. This underwent changes that Churchill could not possibly have foreseen in the shattering years of the Second World War.

Questions

1. Was the General Strike of 1926 an 'attempted revolution'?
2. What evidence is there in Churchill's career to 1929 to support the view that he was an enemy of labour and the trade union movement?

SOURCES

1. CHURCHILL'S YEARS AS CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER

Source A: extract from 'The Economic Consequences of Mr Churchill', by J. M. Keynes, published in 1925

The prices of our exports in the international market are too high. About this there is no difference of opinion... We know as a fact that the value of Sterling money abroad has been raised by 10 per cent, whilst its purchasing power over British labour is unchanged. This alteration in the external value of Sterling money has been the deliberate act of the Government and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the present troubles of our export industries are the inevitable and predictable consequences of it.

The policy of improving the foreign-exchange value of Sterling up to its pre-war value in gold from being about 10 per cent below it, means that, whenever we sell anything abroad, either the foreign buyer has to pay 10 per cent *more in his money* or we have to accept 10 per cent *less in our money*. That is to say, we have to reduce our Sterling prices, for coal or iron or shipping freights or whatever it may be, by 10 per cent in order to be on a competitive level. If Mr Churchill had restored gold by fixing the parity lower than the pre-war figure, or if he had waited until our money values were adjusted to the pre-war parity, then these particular arguments would have no force. But on doing what he did in the actual circumstances of last spring, he was just asking for trouble. For he was committing himself to force down money-wages and all money-values, without any idea how it was to be done. Why did he do such a silly thing?

Partly, perhaps, because he has no instinctive judgement to prevent him making mistakes; partly because, lacking this instinctive judgement, he was deafened by the clamorous voices of conventional finance; and most of all, because he was gravely misled by his experts.