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Revision

Lloyd George and the decline of the Liberal Party

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Alun Wyburn-Powell's article on Lloyd George suggests that Lloyd George's leadership had a negative impact on the Liberal Party and could be partly responsible for its decline. This topic often features as an exam question, for either AQA 1G or OCR Y141.

Take the typical essay question:

To what extent was the leadership of Lloyd George the main reason for the decline of the Liberal party by 1918?

Getting to grips with the question

You should notice that this is a factor-based question, sometimes known as an 'iceberg' question. This means you need to look for alternative factors to create the debate.

Spot the factor

The question is essentially asking you to explain why the influence of the Liberal Party had declined by 1918. You should identify the factor in the question, which in this case is the leadership of Lloyd George, and then identify the other factors involved.

You should tackle the factor in the question first. There is a lot to say about the leadership of Lloyd George so think carefully about how you could organise the information. For example, you could break this section down by looking at Lloyd George's handling of the wartime cabinet, explaining the divide over total conscription and the impact of the Easter Rising. You could also link this to the split in the Liberal Party created by the rivalry between Lloyd George and Asquith. You could also include here the suggestion that Lloyd George was over-reliant on the support of the Conservatives and therefore undermined the Liberal Party. Then you could extend this into his peacetime coalition and his decision to continue coalition, and the impact of the 'coupon' which meant Asquith lost his seat and only 26 'Squithite' MPs remained.

Debate the split

You should also make sure you debate the significance of Lloyd George's role in the split and consider the leadership of Asquith in war. You could point towards the 'shellshock scandal', the failure of the Dardanelles campaign and the resignation of Fisher as examples of failure attributed to Asquith's government. You could also refer here to the Conservatives' presentation of the coalition government as a weakness of the Liberals, and the fact that they were anti-war (refer to the split over the Boer War) and therefore damaged their own reputation by joining Bonar-Law.

Consider the long-term causes

You should consider the longer-term causes of the problems for the Liberal Party as they had been showing signs of decline before the First World War. You could point towards the nineteenth-century problems of tariffs and free trade, and the splits surrounding the Boer War. It might be appropriate here to discuss the effects of the nineteenth-century franchise reforms and the strengths of the Conservative Party in the 1890s. You could also include here the Lib/Lab pact of 1903 and the detrimental impact this might have had on the Liberal Party.

The rise of Labour

The longer-term problems would link well here to discussing the rise of the Labour Party and the implication of this on the Liberal Party. You should consider the changes for the working classes and the need for greater political representation. The importance of trade unions could also be assessed here in conjunction with the rise of the Labour Party.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, you need to weigh up the significance of Lloyd George's leadership in comparison with other contributing factors. You might decide that it was the context of the First World War which put too much pressure on the already split Liberal Party and that wartime coalition made an impossible situation for the Liberals. Alternatively, you might conclude Lloyd George made a number of poor decisions, including his rivalry with Asquith, which cost the Liberal Party heavily. However, you might consider the longer-term issues to have been overwhelming for the Liberals, such as the growth of the Labour movement or nineteenth-century franchise changes, which meant the Liberals lacked a relevant platform and their decline was unavoidable.

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