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The Liberal Peerage in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain

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Sir Edward Grey, Liberal Leader of the House of Lords 1923-24.

Introduction

- Britain in the late Victorian era was a place rife with political and social change. The social change had largely to do with the rising power of the middle classes, which correspondingly led to increasing upheaval of the traditional source of political power in Britain – the peerage. Nevertheless, in 1880 their control of available land was vast.

	Number of Landed Elite	Percent of Land Owned	Total Acreage of Land Owned
England	4,736	56.1%	12,825,643
Wales	672	60.78%	1,490,915
Scotland	1,758	92.82%	17,584,828

Abstract

- This presentation discusses the liberal peerage within the following liberal governments:
 - William Gladstone (1880-1884, 1892-1894)
 - The Earl of Rosebery (1894-1895)
 - Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (1905-1908)
 - Herbert Henry Asquith (1908-1916)
 - David Lloyd George (1916-1922)
- For each administration the following questions are asked:
 - What was the position of the peers in a party increasingly opposed to the nobility?
 - What did the peers do to hasten obviously irreparable damage to their class?
 - What were the results?



Archibald Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery.

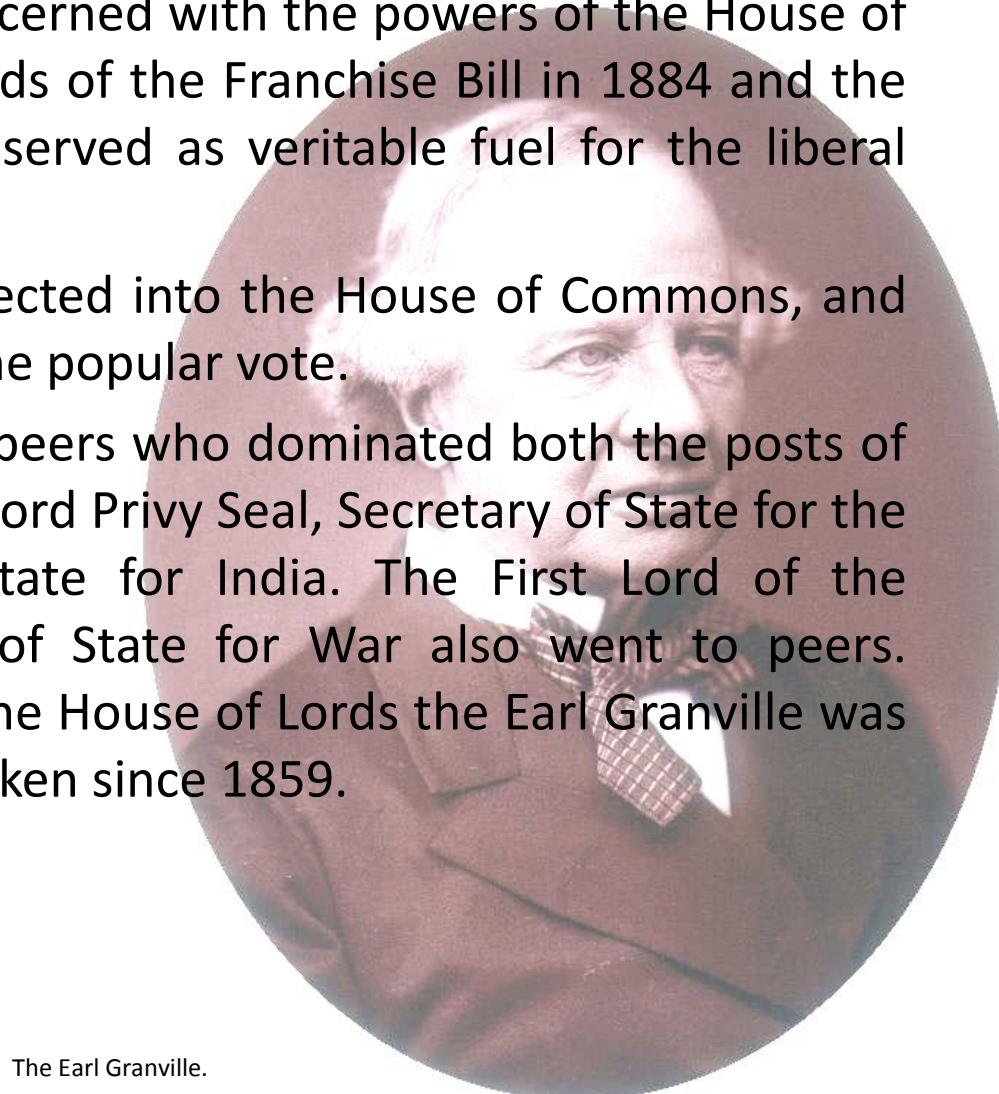
- Even further, three main subdivisions among the peerage may be delineated.

	Number of Families	Average Acreage Owned	Annual Income
Small Landowners	6,000	1,000-10,000	£1,000-10,000
Barons, Viscounts, and Earls	750	10,000-30,000	£10,000-30,000
Dukes	250	30,000-1,358,545	£30,000-290,000

- During the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, there was a quick succession of Liberal and Conservative governments. Concerning political allegiances and party policy, the Conservatives became a relative bastion for the peerage (the rule of the peers was under fire from all sides) and the Liberals became their attackers.
- Outgoing Conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli foretold that “the politics of this country will probably for the next few years mainly consist in an assault upon the constitutional position of the landed interest.” Some noble politicians like Conservative Prime Minister Lord Salisbury agreed.
- Nevertheless, what is truly significant about this period is that **the majority of constitutional attacks upon the peerage occurred during Liberal administrations.** These Liberal administrations included many peers and it is an exploration of this seeming oxymoron that this presentation seeks to do.

The 2nd Administration of William Gladstone

- Elected back into office in 1880, the liberals under the leadership of William Gladstone became concerned with the powers of the House of Lords. The rejection by the Lords of the Franchise Bill in 1884 and the subsequent Third Reform Act served as veritable fuel for the liberal fire.
- 352 liberal candidates were elected into the House of Commons, and the liberals gained 54.66% of the popular vote.
- The cabinet contained several peers who dominated both the posts of Lord President of the Council, Lord Privy Seal, Secretary of State for the Colonies, and Secretary of State for India. The First Lord of the Admiralty and the Secretary of State for War also went to peers. Notably, the liberal Leader of the House of Lords the Earl Granville was had led the Lords almost unbroken since 1859.



The Earl Granville.

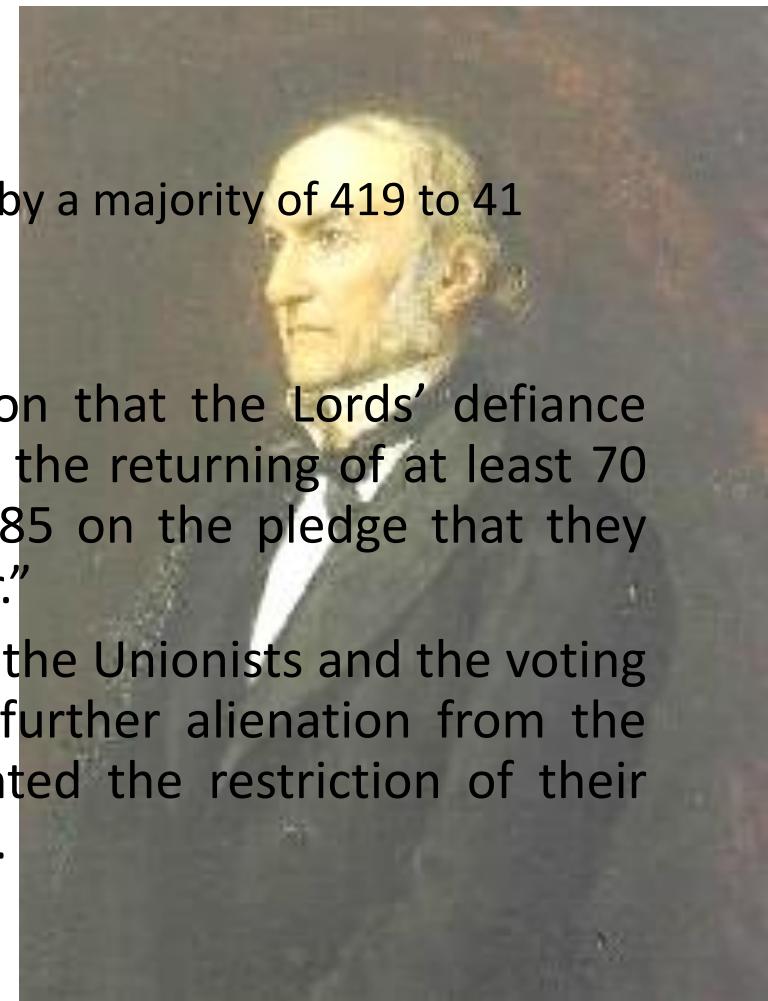
Gladstone Attacks the Peers

A series of bill rejections by the House of Lords led Gladstone to outwardly question the democratic nature of the Lords. These included:

- The Franchise Bill in 1884
- Initial rejection of The Third Reform Act
- Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill in 1893 by a majority of 419 to 41
- The Employers Liability Bill
- Drastically altered the Parish Councils Bill

This resulted in both Gladstone's assertion that the Lords' defiance "could not continue" indefinitely and also the returning of at least 70 liberal MPs in the general election of 1885 on the pledge that they would "abolish the upper house altogether."

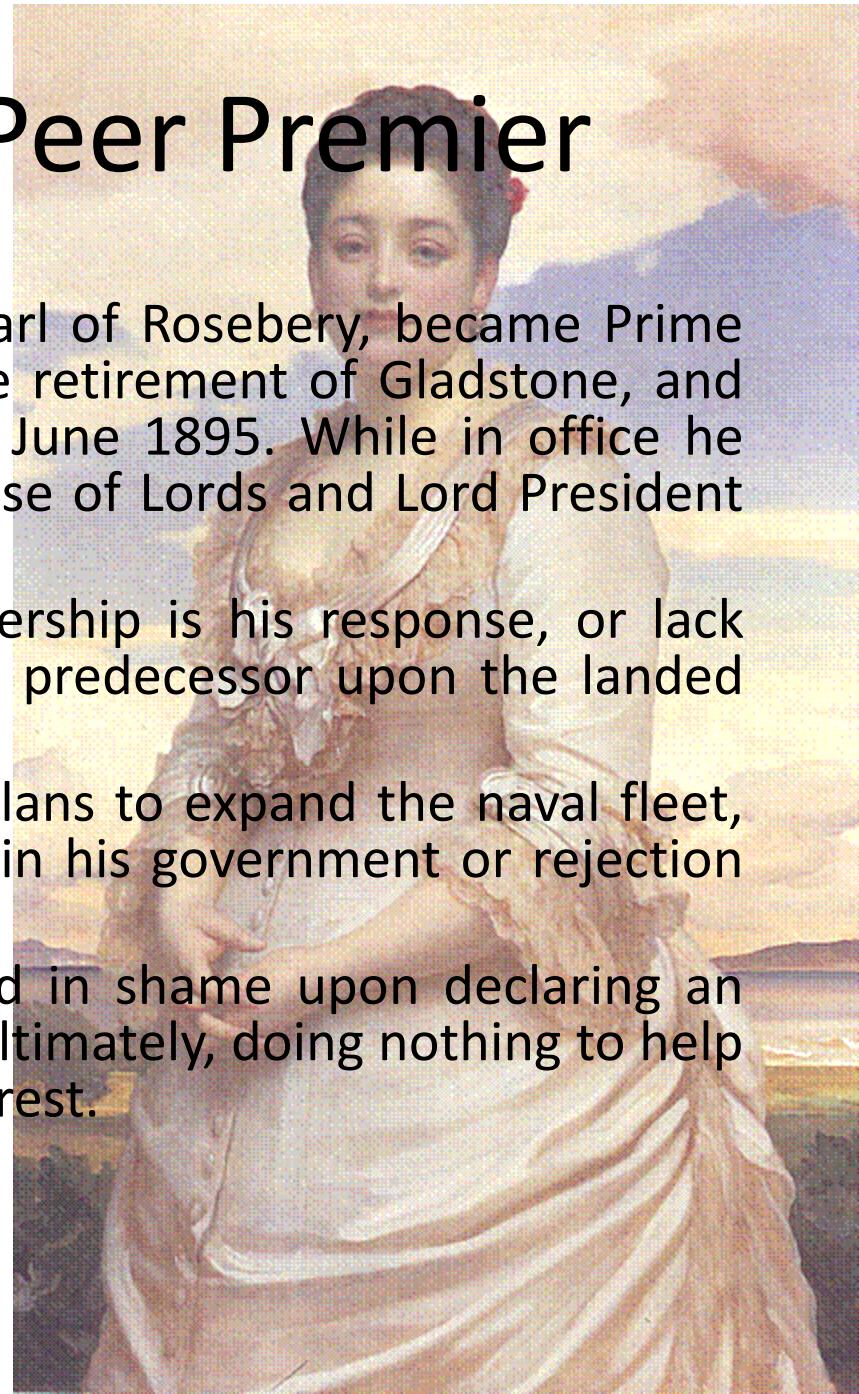
The defection of numerous liberal lords to the Unionists and the voting down of liberal bills caused themselves further alienation from the core principles of their party and fomented the restriction of their powers in subsequent liberal governments.



William Gladstone.

The Last Liberal Peer Premier

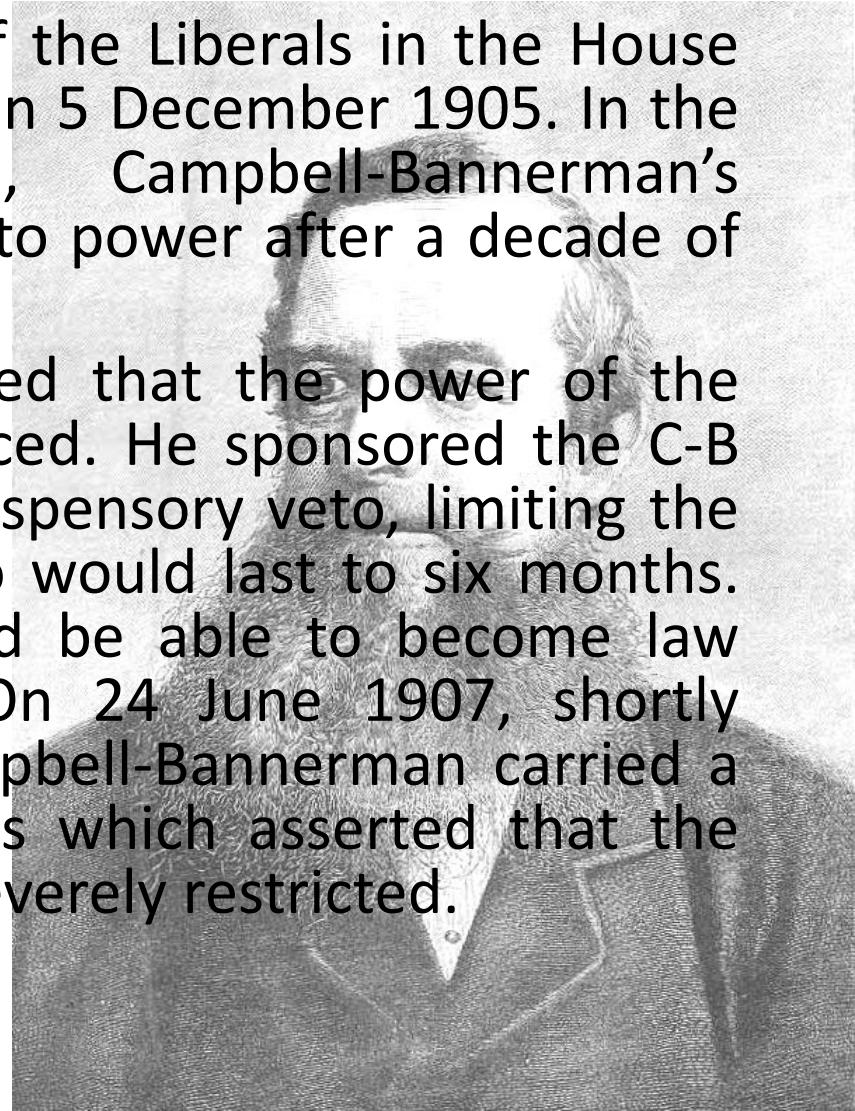
- Archibald Philip Primrose, the 5th Earl of Rosebery, became Prime Minister on 5 March 1894 upon the retirement of Gladstone, and his short premiership ended on 22 June 1895. While in office he held the posts of Leader of the House of Lords and Lord President of the Council.
- The significance of his short premiership is his response, or lack thereof, to the attacks made by his predecessor upon the landed interest.
- The majority of his bills, including plans to expand the naval fleet, were defeated either by dissention in his government or rejection by the Unionist dominated Lords.
- The last liberal peer premier retired in shame upon declaring an election due to a failed budget bill, ultimately, doing nothing to help the position of his fellow landed interest.



Hannah Primrose, Countess of Primrose.

The Liberals Renewed: Government under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman

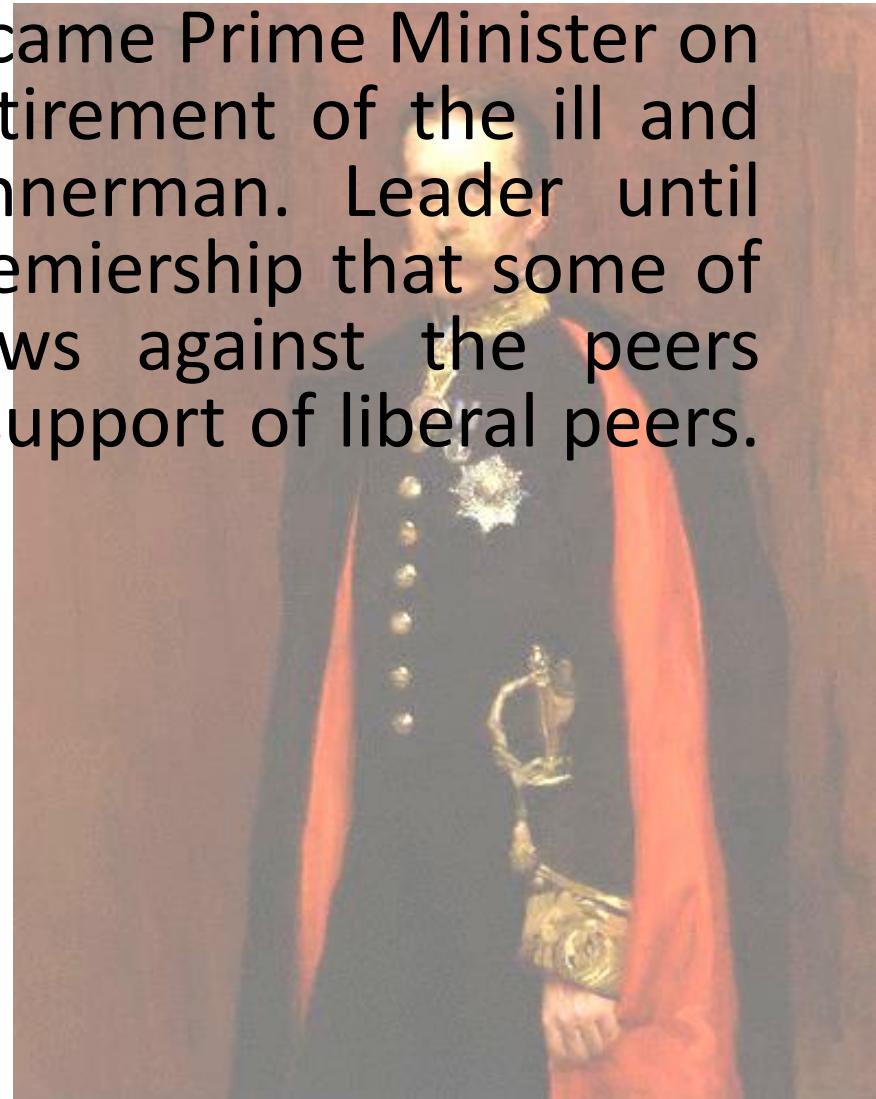
- Campbell-Bannerman, leader of the Liberals in the House of Commons, presumed office on 5 December 1905. In the general election of 1905, Campbell-Bannerman's government venerably swept into power after a decade of Unionist and conservative rule.
- Campbell-Bannerman ascertained that the power of the Lords' veto needed to be reduced. He sponsored the C-B veto plan which purported a suspensory veto, limiting the period in which the Lords' veto would last to six months. Based on this plan, bills would be able to become law without the Lords' consent. On 24 June 1907, shortly before he retired in 1908, Campbell-Bannerman carried a resolution before the Commons which asserted that the power of the Lords' should be severely restricted.



Lord Ripon, Leader of the House of Lords 1908-1908.

The Liberals Attack: the Government of H.H. Asquith

- Herbert Henry Asquith became Prime Minister on 7 April 1908 after the retirement of the ill and soon dead Campbell-Bannerman. Leader until 1916, it was under his premiership that some of the most destructive laws against the peers occurred, many with the support of liberal peers. These include:
 - The Ripon Plan
 - The Finance Act
 - The People's Budget
 - The Parliament Act of 1911

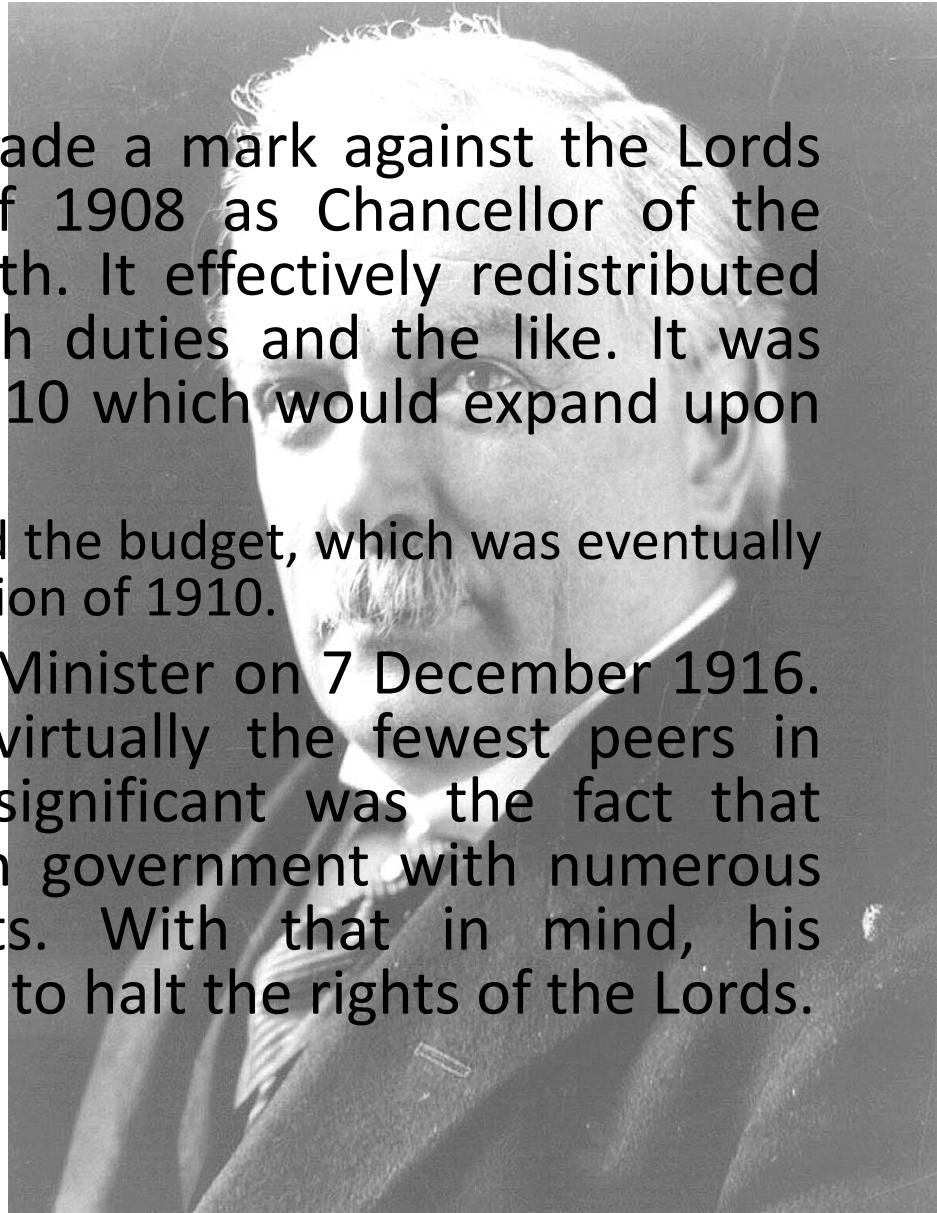


Lord Crewe, Leader of the House of Lords.

- The Ripon Plan
 - A seeming compromise from the C-B veto plan, the Ripon Plan was attributed to the 1st Marquess of Ripon. A peer, Lord Ripon in fact due to ailment did not extend much participation to the plan. However, he attached his support to it: “you are quite at liberty to say that I acquiesce to it.”
 - The plan was actually the work of the Earl of Crewe, Lord President of the Council and eventual Leader of the House of Lords. Lord Crewe participated in attempting a resolution of the ‘problem’ of the Lords.
- The Parliament Act
 - The Parliament bill of 1911 prevented the Lords from rejecting fiscal bills, or rejecting bills more than twice. It effectively emasculated the Lords.

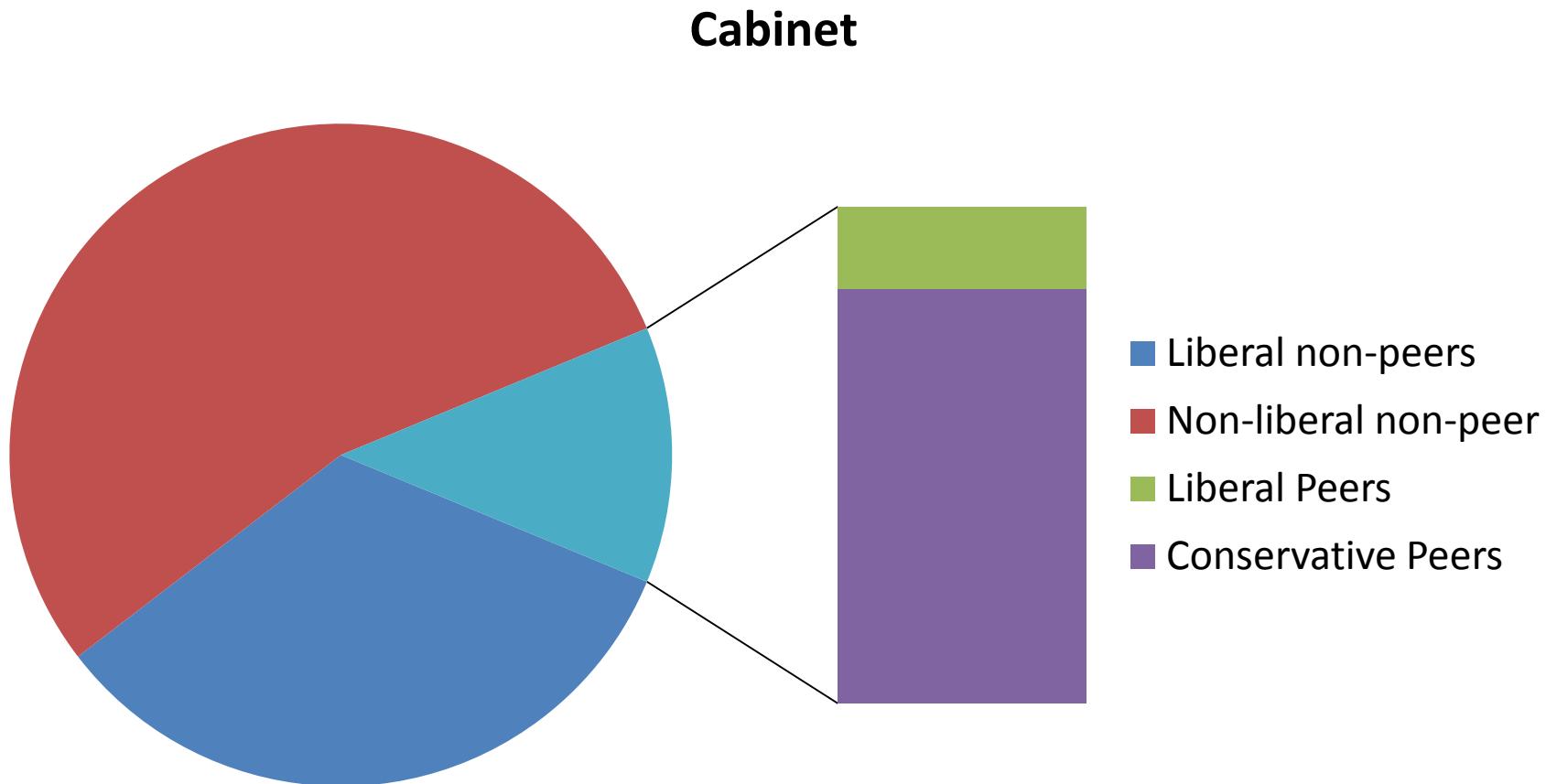
Lloyd George's Government

- Lloyd George had already made a mark against the Lords with his People's Budget of 1908 as Chancellor of the Exchequer under H.H. Asquith. It effectively redistributed landed wealth through death duties and the like. It was similar to the Finance Act 1910 which would expand upon these ideas.
 - The Lords immediately vetoed the budget, which was eventually passed after the general election of 1910.
- Lloyd George became Prime Minister on 7 December 1916. His government contained virtually the fewest peers in Britain's history. Especially significant was the fact that Lloyd George led a Coalition government with numerous Conservatives and Unionists. With that in mind, his administration did little more to halt the rights of the Lords.



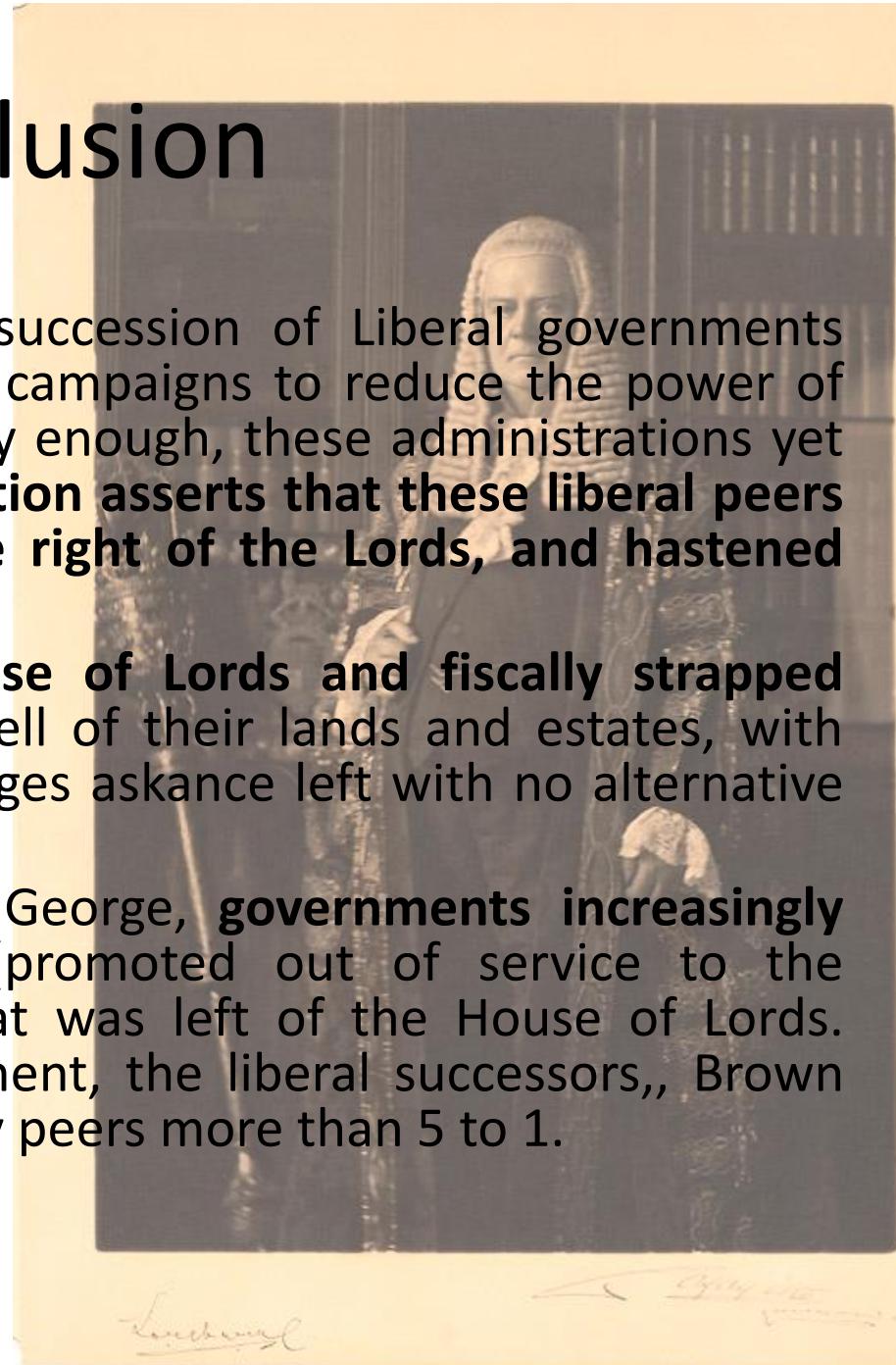
David Lloyd George.

The Presence of Peers in the Cabinet of Lloyd George



Conclusion

- Beginning with Gladstone, a succession of Liberal governments since the 1880s led successful campaigns to reduce the power of the House of Lords. Surprisingly enough, these administrations yet contained peers. **This presentation asserts that these liberal peers were complicit in denying the right of the Lords, and hastened their demise.**
- The result? **A weakened House of Lords and fiscally strapped peers.** Many were forced to sell off their lands and estates, with their hereditary political privileges askance left with no alternative but to join the workforce.
- Made ever popular by Lloyd George, **governments increasingly created landless life peers** (promoted out of service to the government) to dominate what was left of the House of Lords. Today under a labour government, the liberal successors,, Brown life peers outnumber hereditary peers more than 5 to 1.



Honours thesis supervised by:
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