The First World War – often referred to as the ‘Great War’ endured from 28th July 1914 to 11th November 1918. As is often the case for nations involved during wars, there was a large amount of pressure put on the British government throughout this period, as a consequence of having to make bold decisions as well as due to the trauma of a war on the nation involved. However, the First World War saw a period of significant changes politically for Britain – perhaps most notably a change in Prime Minister as well as in the leading party. The war began in an all-Liberal leading government led by Herbert Henry Asquith, but by the time peace was agreed in 1918 the country was in a Liberal Conservative coalition, with David Lloyd George as Prime Minister. While this in itself is a dramatic political consequence of the First World War in Britain, there were also a number of other significant changes within the political system as a product of the war. These include the decline of the Liberal party, and subsequent rise of the Labour party; the reformation of the voting system bringing more equality to Britain, and the various acts passed during the war itself – including the Defence of the Realm Act.

As the Liberal Party were in control of the British political system for just under the first year of the Great War, the Party’s performance during this period can be analysed through decisions made and changing roles within it. War puts any government under unimaginable strain, but the First World War raised issues which split the opinions of members within the Liberal Party to the point that the Party itself divided. Naturally, the decisions made by the government under the Liberal Party were a direct reflection of the power of Asquith as a Prime Minister. One of the most controversial decisions within the Party was the introduction of the Military Service Act in 1916. The original Act depicted that any men between the ages of 18 and 41 had to go to war for Britain, with the exception of males who were married or widowed with children, or otherwise were employed in “one of a number of reserved professions” – these listed professions generally applied to those working in industrial positions, however also to clergymen (Duffy: 2009). Over the next two years of the war, the Military Service Act was redrafted numerous times; on each occasion a retraction or alteration of a previous condition of exemption was made, finally culminating in the extension of age eligibility from 17 to 51 and the application of the legislation applying to men in Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (Duffy: 2009). Between August 1914 and the introduction of the first Military Service Act, three million men volunteered for military service under the Derby Scheme. In the period of January 1916 until the ending of the war, a further 2.3 million men were called to duty as a result of conscription (Duffy: 2009). Asquith was not in favour of conscription, and by allowing himself and his government to be pushed from utilising the voluntary system of the Derby Scheme into the formal legislation of the Military Service Act – as favoured by Lloyd George – he created a perception of himself as weak.

Further controversy for Asquith’s government came as a result of the munitions scandal – it was reported that British forces were suffering from a lack of ammunition, and that under Asquith’s government “British munition production was not operating at full efficiency nor anything approaching it” (Duffy: 2009). This again was a poor reflection of Asquith as a war time leader, as it implied a lack of support given to the British services in combat. Additionally, allegations the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey had made “secret pledges of military support for France” and had failed “to conduct effective diplomatic talks to prevent war occurring” (Wrigley: 2003) created a sense of betrayal from Asquith’s government. These combining factors forced Asquith to create