

## **Chamberlain, Sir (Joseph) Austen (1863–1937), *politician*** **by D. J. Dutton**

**Chamberlain, Sir (Joseph) Austen** (1863–1937), politician, was born on 16 October 1863 in Harborne Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham, the second child and only son of Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914), politician, and his first wife, Harriet (1838–1863), daughter of Archibald Kenrick of Berrow Court, Edgbaston. Beatrice Chamberlain (1862–1918), later an active anti-suffragist, was his elder sister. His mother died soon after his birth and his father subsequently remarried twice. In his second marriage Joseph Chamberlain fathered a second son, (Arthur) Neville Chamberlain, the future prime minister. Austen was thus destined to be overshadowed at both the beginning and end of his life by a member of his own family.

Born into a political environment or, as Joseph once put it, into a red dispatch box, Austen Chamberlain's education was engineered with a political career in mind. His father was determined that he should follow him in public life, and that his progress up that greasy pole should be relieved of the impediments which the father had had to overcome. After preparatory school in Brighton, Chamberlain moved on to Rugby School shortly before his fifteenth birthday. At Trinity College, Cambridge, from 1882, he read history and graduated in 1885. Thereafter his father was anxious to continue the wider education of the future statesman. Experience of contemporary Europe would add to his understanding of the great issues of the day. Accordingly, Chamberlain spent nine months in Paris, where he attended the *École des Sciences Politiques*. His father's name secured access to leading political circles and he met figures such as Clemenceau, Gambetta, and Ferry. Early in 1887 he went to Germany. Though he stayed there for a year, he never took the country or its people to his heart as he had done in Paris. Lectures which he attended by von Treitschke on Prussian history filled him with alarm because of their repeated emphasis on the superiority of the German race. It is probably no exaggeration to suggest that many of the attitudes which Chamberlain displayed as foreign secretary in the 1920s were in part shaped by these early experiences of Europe.

### **Early political career**

Joseph Chamberlain now determined that his son should enter national politics, without the necessity of an apprenticeship on the municipal stage which had characterized his own career. Austen was formally adopted as Liberal Unionist candidate for the Hawick district in the Scottish borders early in 1888 and set about nursing the constituency while awaiting the next general election. In 1892, however, he seized the opportunity of accepting the more attractive nomination as candidate for the vacant East Worcestershire seat, close to his father's Birmingham stronghold. His election to parliament, unopposed, in a by-election in March characterized the ease with which Chamberlain's early advancement was

achieved. After retaining the seat with a comfortable majority in the general election later that year Chamberlain, already a junior whip for the Liberal Unionists, delivered his maiden speech in April 1893 on the second reading of the Liberal government's Home Rule Bill. It was an impressive performance which won the notice of his opponents, including Prime Minister Gladstone.

In the Unionist government of 1895 Chamberlain accepted the post of civil lord of the Admiralty. More importantly, his father took office as colonial secretary and rapidly emerged as the most powerful man in the government beneath the prime minister, Lord Salisbury. For Austen this transformation in his father's fortunes meant that for a further decade or more he would have to live in the shadow of his illustrious namesake, and see his own political career largely shaped by the causes which his father espoused. The five years which Chamberlain spent at the Admiralty were essentially a period of administrative experience rather than political decision making. It was not particularly exciting work, but Chamberlain found it congenial and progressively enhanced his reputation as a capable administrator and reliable parliamentarian. He could speak effectively, but at no time in his career developed into an orator who really stirred emotions. He was again returned unopposed at the general election of 1900, held during the South African War, and escaped largely unscathed from allegations that he and his father were making money out of the war because of their holdings in armaments firms which had contracts with the government.

In November 1900 Chamberlain was promoted to the position of financial secretary to the Treasury. Though outside the cabinet the post was an important one, and, as he was still only thirty-seven, his appointment was a clear indication that he was well regarded and destined for cabinet rank in the not too distant future. Promotion duly came on 8 August 1902 soon after Balfour succeeded Salisbury as prime minister. Chamberlain now entered the cabinet as postmaster-general to sit alongside his father.

## **The campaign for tariff reform**

The South African War served to highlight the twin problems of national finance and the isolated and potentially vulnerable position of Britain on the international stage. It also emphasized divisions inside the Unionist government. It was in this increasingly strained atmosphere that Joseph Chamberlain delivered his celebrated speech on tariff reform on 15 May 1903 in Birmingham. By proposing a route towards imperial unity while at the same time creating a new source of revenue, Chamberlain offered his solution to the nation's outstanding problems. Austen could not have known how important an event this speech was to prove for his own career. By September, in the face of irreconcilable differences within the cabinet, the elder Chamberlain determined to resign from the government, the better to educate the nation on the merits of tariff reform from the comparative freedom of the back benches. Balfour strove to maintain a balance of interests within his reorganized cabinet. But the fact that Austen stayed on,

and indeed was promoted on 6 October to the senior post of chancellor of the exchequer, may indicate that Balfour himself accepted the broad thrust of the elder Chamberlain's tariff policy and that Austen would act as a bridge between Joseph and the prime minister. Austen himself clearly envisaged that his new role was to act as custodian of his father's cause, but over the years which followed he found it much more difficult than he had expected to induce Balfour to adopt a positive and committed attitude towards tariffs.

As chancellor Chamberlain was one of the few ministers to enhance his reputation while the government itself drifted indecisively towards the electoral catastrophe of 1906. Two competent, if orthodox, budgets were presented, but Chamberlain found his position inside the cabinet increasingly difficult as Balfour failed to commit the government to a full-blooded policy of tariff reform. He was probably relieved when the prime minister finally submitted the government's resignation in December 1905, making way for a minority Liberal administration under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. The result of the general election of January 1906 was both decisive and yet ambiguous. On the one hand the Liberals secured a landslide victory in terms of seats in the House of Commons. Many of the Unionist leadership, including Balfour himself, went down to defeat. Yet on the other hand those Unionists who were returned to parliament were overwhelmingly in favour of the Chamberlainite policy of tariff reform. Austen and his father were both among the victors and seemed set to dominate the internal dynamics of the Unionist Party. But in July 1906 the elder Chamberlain suffered a severe stroke from which he never fully recovered. For the remaining eight years of his life he was no more than a backstage observer of the political scene, still desperately anxious to see the fulfilment of his political dreams. In such a situation Austen was the obvious instrument through which the stricken statesman could still exert an influence upon national politics.

The younger Chamberlain thus found himself in the most difficult of positions. At a time when he was ready to carve out his own distinctive career in public affairs he was called upon to act as a sort of surrogate version of his father—to be even more his father's son than he had been before. Representing his father forced Chamberlain into uncharacteristic behaviour. The man who for most of his career was renowned for political rectitude found himself the object of scorn and vilification as a result of his actions. His behaviour was often inconsistent with his membership of the shadow cabinet and, in more recent times, would certainly have led to dismissal from such a body.

But for Austen Chamberlain tariff reform was never quite the crusade which it was for his father. His vision of the sort of socio-economic transformation which might result from the introduction of tariffs was always strictly limited. Furthermore, he failed to attract the unquestioning support of those who would have followed wherever his father had led. Deep down, Chamberlain probably wanted to play the role of mediator between the extremes of opinion within the Unionist ranks on the question of tariff reform rather than take the lead on one

side of the debate, as his father's illness demanded. Not surprisingly, Balfour, successfully returned to the House of Commons at a by-election, found it possible to retreat once again into a cloud of ambiguities and imprecision as far as the issue of tariff reform was concerned. His character—'a locked Chinese box of paradoxes which seemed to defy penetration' (P. Brendon, *Eminent Edwardians*, 1980, 70)—proved, as it had done in the years 1903–5, too subtle for Chamberlain's more pedestrian mind.

None the less, as the country's economic situation deteriorated, Balfour became increasingly convinced of the merits of tariff reform on intellectual grounds until it was finally adopted as official party policy. So Chamberlain faced the general election of January 1910, precipitated by the House of Lords' rejection of the government's budget, with some optimism. His influence within the party in the whole period before the First World War was now at its height. For Chamberlain, perhaps even more than for the Unionist Party, the election represented a crucial test, for never before and not again until the 1920s was the cause of tariff reform so central to Unionist strategy. Against this background the outcome of the election must be seen as a considerable disappointment to him. Though the massive Liberal majority of 1906 was now wiped out, the government could still rely on a working majority in the new parliament because of the support of Labour and Irish MPs. Though Chamberlain was reluctant to admit it, the cause of tariff reform had suffered a severe set-back, and as the economic climate improved in the course of 1910 so its appeal diminished still further.

Later in the year Chamberlain was one of a four-man Unionist delegation to the constitutional conference called to try to resolve the impasse between the parties over the powers of the House of Lords. Its failure made another general election inevitable in December. During the course of the campaign Balfour substantially reduced the party's commitment to tariff reform by declaring that, in the event of a Unionist victory, no food taxes would be introduced until after a referendum had been held on this single issue. For Chamberlain this was a considerable blow, not relieved by the Unionists' failure once again to return to office.

At least Chamberlain could now seek refuge in a happy family life. On 21 July 1906, at the comparatively late age of forty-two, he had married Ivy Muriel Dundas (c.1879–1941), daughter of Colonel Henry Dundas of Datchet. This partnership lasted without blemish until broken by Chamberlain's death three decades later. The marriage produced two sons, Joseph and Lawrence, and one daughter, Diane. Chamberlain's private life was always a source of great joy, allowing him to put the cares of the political world into perspective and rescuing him from the many disappointments of his public career.

## **First chance of the leadership**

By the end of 1910 Balfour had led his party to defeat in three successive general elections. This fact, coupled with his equivocal leadership during the Parliament Bill crisis in the summer of 1911, gave rise to calls for his resignation. In November he decided to step down. Chamberlain, despite being a Liberal Unionist in a party dominated by Conservatives, and a Unitarian among Anglicans, was regarded as the front runner for the succession. But he was opposed by Walter Long, representative of the traditional tory landowning squirearchy. At this point Chamberlain suffered from a dual disadvantage of being his father's son. To Joseph Chamberlain's acolytes Austen lacked those qualities of fire and passion which made them unquestioning adherents to his father's cause. To those who held to a more traditional concept of Conservatism, Austen was tarred with his father's brush and stood as a symbol of the vulgar intrusion of 'Birmingham' and all it stood for into the party's ranks. In addition, Chamberlain's die-hard opposition to the Parliament Bill and his membership of the Halsbury Club were not likely, despite his professions of devotion to the outgoing leader, to endear him to Balfour loyalists. Even so, had he possessed his father's determination and ambition, he could probably have secured the leadership on a majority vote.

In the event, both Chamberlain and Long withdrew from the contest, allowing the little-known Andrew Bonar Law to emerge as a compromise candidate. Chamberlain's motivation was a combination of not wanting to split the party, an inner lack of conviction about his own leadership qualities, and a desire to live down his father's reputation as a man who had wrecked two political parties. This was a significant moment in his career. Thereafter, apart from the brief period of his own leadership in the 1920s, he found himself serving beneath men in the Conservative and Unionist Party whom he regarded as his juniors. He developed an exaggerated sense of his own importance and dignity which compounded an already stiff and unbending personal demeanour. With Bonar Law his relationship was never easy, especially when the new leader effectively abandoned tariff reform as a policy option for the foreseeable future.

## **Ireland and the war**

The years immediately before the outbreak of the First World War were dominated by the issue of Ireland. Chamberlain was never fully committed to the Unionist campaign of unyielding opposition to home rule and became increasingly concerned at the seemingly inexorable drift towards violence. His own preference was for a federal structure for the whole of the United Kingdom, or Home Rule All Round as it was usually called, but he failed to convert the Unionist Party to this cause. Joseph Chamberlain finally died at the beginning of July 1914, and Austen took over his West Birmingham seat in the House of Commons. More importantly, he now had the opportunity to carve out his own individual role in British politics, without the need to keep one eye on the wishes

of his father. But he would do so against a background that was very different from anything he had so far experienced in public life. A month after Joseph Chamberlain's death, Britain and Germany were at war.

At the beginning of hostilities Chamberlain played an important part in persuading the Unionist leadership to bring pressure upon Asquith's government to stand by France and Russia and to assure the prime minister of the support of the Unionist Party. Though no coalition government was formed for the time being, the chancellor of the exchequer, David Lloyd George, invited Chamberlain as a former chancellor to hold a semi-official post at the Treasury. On one occasion Chamberlain even took over the chairmanship of a conference at the Treasury when Lloyd George had to leave for a meeting of the cabinet. Significantly, this represented a first step in Chamberlain's association with Lloyd George, a working partnership which would gradually evolve from a mood of suspicion and mistrust towards the feeling of deep loyalty which would cost Chamberlain dear in 1922. When Asquith's coalition was formed on 25 May 1915, Chamberlain entered the government as secretary of state for India, remaining in this post when Lloyd George took over as prime minister in December 1916.

As a passionate believer in the British empire Chamberlain took a keen interest in his new office. Though it did not seem central to the nation's war effort, he did inherit from his predecessor a small military campaign in Mesopotamia under the control of the government of India, designed in the first instance to protect oil fields at the head of the Persian Gulf. Over the following months the scope of the expedition was greatly extended, but by early 1916 it was becoming clear that provision for the sick and wounded had been hopelessly inadequate. The medical deficiencies of the campaign might not have attracted as much attention as they did had not the whole expedition turned sour after an initial run of military success. The decision to advance on Baghdad, which Chamberlain had supported in the cabinet, proved to be a grave mistake, and the Turks were far better prepared to meet the British advance than had been anticipated. After a series of set-backs Major-General Charles Townshend, commander of the 6th division which was besieged at Kut al-Amara, surrendered his 3000 British and 6000 Indian troops. 'In the whole history of the British Army there had never been a surrender like this' (A. J. Barker, *The Neglected War*, 1967, 266).

The combination of military disaster and medical scandal ensured that heads would have to roll. Asquith was obliged to set up a commission of inquiry under the chairmanship of Lord George Hamilton, a former secretary of state for India. Chamberlain's culpability was believed to be marginal. When, however, the commission reported in the early summer of 1917, Chamberlain faced criticism on two counts. He bore a share of collective responsibility for the advance on Baghdad, and over the question of medical provision it was argued that he had not brought his concerns sufficiently into his official correspondence with the viceroy and had not acted quickly enough to bring about an inquiry. The new

prime minister, David Lloyd George, offered Chamberlain the chance of a move to the Paris embassy, but the latter determined to stay where he was. When, however, the cabinet decided to set up a court of inquiry to decide against which individuals action should be taken, Chamberlain determined to resign from the government on 12 July 1917. He accepted without hesitation—though many thought unnecessarily—the doctrine of ministerial responsibility.

## **The post-war coalition**

By the end of 1917 Chamberlain was again exerting political influence. From the back benches he voiced concern about Lloyd George's increasingly close association with the magnates of the press. The prime minister seems to have concluded that Chamberlain was too dangerous a critic to be left outside the government, and on 18 April 1918 he was appointed minister without portfolio with a seat in the war cabinet. He retained this office when it was decided to extend the life of the coalition beyond the armistice of November, before becoming chancellor of the exchequer again on 10 January 1919.

Chamberlain was apprehensive about returning to the Treasury, not least because of his expectation that the government was bound to confront severe financial problems and industrial unrest as a direct consequence of the war. The conflict had been largely financed through borrowing, so that the national debt stood at £7435 million by the end of the financial year 1918–19, compared to £650 million at the start of the war. His first budget announced a substantial reduction in planned public expenditure while reducing the rate of the excess profits duty. In 1920 there were violent fluctuations in the state of the British economy as an inflationary boom rapidly gave way to a severe recession marked by industrial stagnation and high unemployment. Though he has been much criticized for his management of the Treasury in this period, for first taking too long to respond to an overheating economy and then for making the slump more severe than it need have been by increasing the bank rate to 7 per cent, Chamberlain had little alternative but to pursue the chancellor's traditional role of exercising restraint over the spending plans of his ministerial colleagues. His budget of April 1920 increased both direct and indirect taxes, while at the same time he sought ever greater economies in the government's spending programmes. Overall it was to his credit that a deficit of £1690 million for the financial year 1918–19 was turned into a surplus of £238 million in 1920–21.

In a broader context the Chamberlain who emerged from the war was a subtly different figure from the politician of 1914. He was more conscious than most of his contemporaries that the political environment of Edwardian England could never be recreated. Gone was the somewhat reluctant radical of the pre-war era, replaced by someone who was determined to preserve the existing fabric of ordered society against what he saw as the new threat of socialism, and ready to abandon some of his earlier beliefs to secure this greater end. In other words, he now developed into a natural Conservative, a transition eased by the formal

fusion of the Conservative and Liberal Unionist parties which had taken place in 1912. His inherent conservatism was emphasized by his appearance and dress. With his monocle and frock coat he readily gave the impression of being a relic from an earlier age. He was one of the last MPs to maintain the old tradition of wearing a top hat inside the chamber.

The evolution in Chamberlain's thinking shaped his attitude towards the coalition government and towards erstwhile political enemies in the Liberal Party. It was his long-term hope to combine in one party men of differing political traditions in order to avoid a peril more dangerous even than the war which had been so narrowly won. He did not believe that the Conservative Party standing alone would be able indefinitely to resist the challenge from the Labour Party. The maintenance of a coalition with Lloyd George's Liberals, even though the parliamentary strength of the Conservatives now gave them compelling claims to control a single-party government, was a necessary preliminary to such a political realignment. These calculations helped transform his attitude towards Lloyd George. His close association with the prime minister brought him a clear perception of the latter's qualities, and he developed a high regard for, and loyalty towards, Lloyd George which were ultimately to prove disastrous for him. It was an unlikely partnership between two men of vastly differing characters and public images, but it developed into the key axis of the coalition government.

## **Party leader**

Late in 1920 Chamberlain was offered, but turned down, the Indian viceroyalty. A few months later a different and unexpected prize fell into his lap. On 17 March 1921 Andrew Bonar Law was forced to resign from the government on the grounds of ill health, and Chamberlain faced no serious challenge for the succession to the leadership of the Conservative Party in the House of Commons. His election was proposed at the Carlton Club by Captain E. G. Pretymann, who in the course of his speech coined the idea that Conservative leaders 'emerge'. In Chamberlain's case the word helped to convey the breadth of support which he now enjoyed. He took on his new role, which involved leaving the exchequer and becoming lord privy seal and leader of the Commons, 'as a clear duty but I wish that the call of duty had not come' (Chamberlain MSS, AC 4/1/1204). Such reluctance reflected doubts about his own leadership qualities which events were to justify.

Chamberlain's elevation made him more than ever conscious of his dignity, while his lack of the common touch proved a serious handicap. He made few efforts to cultivate the support of Conservative back-benchers, many of whom had come into the Commons only since the war and knew very little of their new leader. More specifically, he proved a poor communicator. In this period he had developed into one of the more perceptive observers of the contemporary political scene. But he singularly failed to convey his understanding of the party-political struggle to those beneath him, most of whom were reluctant to submerge



their identity inside a coalition headed by an increasingly unpopular prime minister. As a result, there developed a mutual failure of comprehension between leader and led.

The ending of the First World War brought the issue of Ireland back to the forefront of the political agenda. Chamberlain's involvement in this question did little to strengthen his position as Conservative leader, though he himself came to look upon it with a sense of pride and satisfaction. As has been seen, Chamberlain's views on Ireland had never been those of an orthodox Unionist, and during the war he had become ever more prepared to consider a radical departure in Britain's Irish policy. He was among the first to urge negotiations with the Sinn Féin leadership and was one of the government's delegation when talks began. Though it was Lloyd George who shaped the course of the negotiations, Chamberlain was an enthusiastic supporter of the articles of agreement which the Irish representatives signed on 6 December 1921. He had played an important part in moving his party from the absolutist stance on the Union with which it had been associated in the pre-war period. The Free State became a dominion under the crown, while the prospect of Irish unity receded into the distant future. Like many later British politicians, he tackled the Irish problem in a spirit of well-meaning compromise, but this approach was bound to disappoint those who held more extreme positions on this most contentious of issues. In particular, Chamberlain, by his part in the negotiations, succeeded in alienating a substantial number of right-wing Conservatives for whom the Union afforded no possibility of compromise. Thereby he further eroded his basis of support within the party.

By the beginning of 1922 attention was turning to the question of the next general election and, more specifically, the basis upon which the Conservative Party would contest it. Chamberlain remained one of the most committed advocates of maintaining the coalition. He was still convinced that, if it were to break up, the inevitable consequence would be to divide the moderate and constitutional forces into two hostile camps, leaving the Labour Party as the electoral beneficiary. Such thinking played its part when he declined Lloyd George's offer in February to step down from the premiership in his favour. Badly advised by those around him, Chamberlain seemed largely unaware of the strength of feeling against the continuation of coalition government which was now running through much of the Conservative Party. In private he may well have expected to succeed Lloyd George after the forthcoming election, but he found it difficult to articulate this in public, thereby giving the impression to many rank-and-file Conservatives that he was prepared to acquiesce indefinitely in a Lloyd George premiership. He could not understand, he told an audience at Oxford in March, 'the attitude of those who would desire needlessly to quarrel with our Liberal allies and to engage the constitutional forces in a fratricidal struggle' (Petrie, 2.179). At all events matters came to a head at a party meeting held at the Carlton Club on 19 October 1922.

Chamberlain badly misjudged the mood of the meeting. He gave an unimpressive performance which highlighted his deficiencies as party leader. But the key factor was the re-emergence of Bonar Law, apparently restored to good health, as the champion of independent Conservatism. Making the issue one of confidence in himself, Chamberlain forced Conservative MPs into a position where they had to choose between loyalty to the leadership and, as they saw it, loyalty to the party, and they chose the latter. A motion for independent Conservative action at the next general election was carried by a large majority. The coalition was at an end and Lloyd George resigned immediately. The king now invited Bonar Law, elected Conservative leader in Chamberlain's place, to form a new administration. Chamberlain, bitterly resenting what had happened, stayed aloof from the new government, although the appointment of his half-brother, Neville, to the position of postmaster-general caused some strains within the Chamberlain family. Though Bonar Law succeeded in securing a large parliamentary majority for the Conservatives at the general election of November 1922, Chamberlain did not alter his analysis of the longer-term political situation. Noting the rise in the Labour vote, he continued to believe in the desirability of fusion between Conservatives and Lloyd George Liberals.

## **Out of office**

Bonar Law's physical recovery proved short lived. By the spring of 1923 it was clear that he was a sick man, and in May he was obliged to resign, suffering from inoperable cancer. Had Chamberlain managed to reconcile himself to the verdict of the Carlton Club meeting, the party leadership, and therefore the premiership, would almost certainly have now reverted to him. In March Bonar Law, using Beaverbrook and Rothermere as intermediaries, had invited Chamberlain to return to the government as lord privy seal, with the expectation of succeeding him by the autumn. As it was, Chamberlain was still outside the government when Bonar Law resigned and had little chance of being considered for the succession, which passed to Stanley Baldwin. The latter did not feel able to offer Chamberlain a place in his government, and relations between the two men were badly damaged when the prime minister rather ineptly suggested that Chamberlain might like to consider becoming ambassador in Washington. Baldwin's decision to call a general election in December 1923 on the specific issue of tariffs brought about a partial reconciliation, and after the election, which resulted in Britain's first Labour government, Chamberlain resumed his place on the Conservative front bench. Neville played an important part in bringing Baldwin and his brother together, but Chamberlain still found it difficult to accept the new hierarchy of the Conservative Party. He remained a disgruntled and touchy colleague, looking down with some disdain from the eminence of his long parliamentary and ministerial career upon the inadequate efforts of the far less experienced Baldwin, whom chance and fate had installed as his leader.

## The foreign secretaryship

Lacking a majority in the House of Commons, Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government fell when Conservatives and Liberals combined to pass a vote of censure on its mishandling of a relatively minor legal case. The resulting general election of October 1924 produced an overwhelming Conservative victory. Baldwin was in a position to construct a government which would last its full term. Chamberlain, faced with a choice between the Foreign and India offices, inclined at first towards the latter, largely because it was a field of government where he already had experience. In the event he opted on 6 November for the more senior post. He did so with the diffidence and misgivings which accompanied most of the new initiatives of his career, but soon found his feet. Foreign affairs, in fact, now became the absorbing concern of the remainder of his life.

The most important issue facing the new secretary of state was the future of the Geneva protocol, an ambitious and somewhat idealistic agreement negotiated by the previous Labour government, which was designed to supplement and strengthen the covenant of the League of Nations. By creating an exhaustive machinery for the definition of aggression and automatic procedures to deal with it, the protocol might well have had the practical effect of making Britain, as the leading league power, the world's policeman with unlimited obligations to fulfil. Chamberlain was no isolationist. He saw the vital need for Britain to make a firm commitment to the continent of Europe. 'If we withdraw from Europe', he told a cabinet colleague, 'I say without hesitation that the chance of permanent peace is gone' (Chamberlain MSS, AC 52/38). But for him the most important point was to define the extent and limits of Britain's commitment. The other key element in Chamberlain's thinking was his appreciation that there would never be real stability in Europe until France acquired that sense of security which she had failed to derive from the treaty of Versailles. Indeed, Baldwin appointed Chamberlain to the Foreign Office at least in part to put right the damage done to Anglo-French relations under the last Conservative foreign secretary, Lord Curzon.

These factors made Chamberlain inherently hostile to the Geneva protocol, which was too wide-ranging in its ambitions, and led him towards a bilateral pact with France. Opposition within the cabinet towards Chamberlain's preferred option was, however, too strong, and, very much as a second best, the foreign secretary was obliged to take up proposals put forward by the German foreign ministry for a multilateral security pact in western Europe to guarantee the Franco-German and Germano-Belgian frontiers and the demilitarization of the Rhineland. Herein lay the seeds of the Locarno treaties, which were eventually concluded in October 1925 and for which Chamberlain's foreign secretaryship is best remembered. Though the agreements were not Chamberlain's in their origin, he adopted them with enthusiasm and played the key role through the spring and summer of 1925 in bringing his French and German opposite numbers, Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann, together.

## The importance of Locarno

At the time the Locarno treaties were widely hailed as the most significant contribution towards a lasting peace in Europe of the whole inter-war era, marking a final end to the divisions of the war years and, because it was now agreed that Germany should become a member, setting the League of Nations on a new and more hopeful course. 'This morning the Locarno Pact was signed at the Foreign Office', wrote George V in the privacy of his diary. 'I pray this may mean peace for many years. Why not for ever?' (H. Nicolson, *King George V*, 1952, 409). Chamberlain himself was well rewarded for his efforts. A knighthood of the Garter and the Nobel prize for peace were the most tangible of the accolades showered upon him. But, especially in the light of what happened in the 1930s when Locarno was violated with impunity, the verdict of history has been less enthusiastic. It must always be remembered that Locarno began life as an initiative of German foreign policy, whose overriding purpose was the revision of the Versailles peace settlement. Moreover, by defining those frontiers of Europe where Britain felt committed, Chamberlain was advertising the fact that there were other frontiers where Britain was less vitally involved and which might be subject to revision without British intervention. After Locarno, therefore, certain parts of the Versailles treaty were endowed with a greater degree of sanctity than others. Granted existing French commitments in eastern Europe, this had the potential to create problems for Britain, as the 1930s demonstrated.

Locarno's impact upon the League of Nations must also be considered. Chamberlain always maintained that the treaty should be seen as supplementing the league by adding specific obligations to the general ones inherent in the covenant. But this was true only in the context of the league as Chamberlain saw it—a limited body which had a useful role to play in international affairs but which had in no sense transformed the intrinsic nature of diplomacy. 'I am sometimes more afraid of the League's enthusiastic friends than its contemptuous opponents', he once told a meeting of the League of Nations Union (*The Times*, 17 March 1937). Objectively, Locarno may be viewed as a first step in Britain's abandonment of the sort of principles which underlay the covenant, with its belief in the indivisibility of peace, and a reversion to old-style foreign policy based on the priority of national self-interest.

To his credit Chamberlain saw that Locarno alone was not enough. He once said that it should be seen as the beginning of the work of European appeasement and reconciliation and not its end. Locarno did provide for arbitration conventions between Germany and her neighbours in eastern Europe, and Chamberlain clearly hoped that what had been done in relation to Germany's western frontiers could be replicated by comparable regional arrangements in the east. But it would be for other powers than Britain to take the lead in this respect. As he once memorably wrote, in a deliberate misquotation of Bismarck's famous words, the Polish corridor was something 'for which no British Government ever will or ever can risk the bones of a British grenadier' (Chamberlain MSS, AC 52/189). In the

event these so-called Eastern Locarnos failed to materialize. What he could not have foreseen was the rise of a new generation of German politicians for whom the traditional norms of diplomatic conduct had no meaning, men who were prepared to use the loopholes which Locarno offered in the east to begin their assault on European peace. But for the rise of Hitler, it would be easier to view Locarno as Chamberlain's honest attempt to resolve the dilemma of limited resources and over-extended obligations which confronted all the custodians of British foreign policy in the inter-war period.

## **The Foreign Office after Locarno**

With what appeared to be the supreme accomplishment of Locarno behind him, Chamberlain became something of an elder statesman before his time. Locarno was his achievement and he revelled in it. But it is easy to forget that he remained foreign secretary for nearly four more years after its signature. Unhappily, the level of achievement was not maintained. He was the first British foreign secretary to attend meetings of the League of Nations on a regular basis. His primary purpose was to maintain personal contact with the other architects of the Locarno agreements. Thus began the so-called Locarno 'tea parties', a pattern of diplomacy whereby the representatives of the Locarno powers met in private in one another's hotel suites to discuss the outstanding international issues of the day. Though it has been argued that these meetings did not, in fact, divert business from its rightful forum in the league assembly, they did serve to emphasize the uniquely personal basis upon which the post-Locarno détente in European affairs was grounded. Personal chemistry, however, could not disguise the fact that serious differences remained between France and Germany. Even Germany's entry into the league was mishandled, with Chamberlain receiving much of the blame. Little of the spirit of Locarno survived Stresemann's death and Chamberlain's loss of office in 1929.

In the years after Locarno the multiplicity of problems facing Britain in the international arena became far more apparent than it had been in the first twelve months of Chamberlain's foreign secretaryship, serving to remind him that Britain remained a worldwide and imperial power with interests across the globe. During the second part of his ministry he was confronted by serious problems relating to Britain's position in Egypt and in China and to the country's relations with the Soviet Union and the United States. The discovery that the All Russian Co-operative Society was a front organization for Soviet espionage led to the severing of diplomatic relations in May 1927. Relations with the Americans became particularly strained over the question of arms control and stand as one of the least distinguished aspects of his tenure of office.

Faced with the diversity of calls upon his time and attention, Chamberlain's energy and health began to fail. Never endowed with a robust constitution or an infinite capacity for work, he complained repeatedly of the strain and tiredness brought on by the demands of the Foreign Office. In 1928 he suffered a complete

collapse, after which many observers believed that he was never quite the same man again. By the time of the 1929 general election his star was no longer in the ascendant. The hopes engendered by Locarno had begun to fade and there was widespread criticism of his performance which was not restricted to the ranks of the Labour opposition. He was generally believed to have been too indulgent towards French wishes, especially when these were expressed by Briand.

## **Elder statesman**

Chamberlain only narrowly held on to his West Birmingham seat in the election which brought the Labour Party back to power. In part this was testimony to his failings as a constituency MP. Certainly he never cultivated his Birmingham base as assiduously as did his father and half-brother. In opposition he became ever more critical of Baldwin's performance as party leader. He had never known 'so blunt a spearhead' or a man who 'left so large a gap between the recognition that he must act and action' (Self, 348). But by this stage of his career Chamberlain was careful to do nothing which might jeopardize Neville's claims to the succession. He had despaired when Neville had been persuaded to accept the party chairmanship in 1930 and had worked hard to extricate his brother from this commitment. He played no part in the crisis which led to the formation of the National Government in August 1931 but, with some reluctance, agreed to become first lord of the Admiralty without a seat in the cabinet. His official career would thus close with an odd symmetrical precision, as his first appointment thirty-six years earlier had been as civil lord of the Admiralty. In this position it fell to him to deal with the naval mutiny at Invergordon. He renounced any claim to further office after the general election in October, though he had some regrets about this decision when he saw the Foreign Office pass to the Liberal lawyer John Simon.

A ministerial career spanning three and a half decades thus came to an end. Early assessments of Chamberlain's public life tended to be shaped by two considerations—comparisons, generally unfavourable, with his father and half-brother, and attempts to attribute his failure to secure the premiership to some underlying character defect. He was the only Conservative leader of the twentieth century not to rise to this position. He might have found it easier to carve out his own political identity had it not been for a strong physical resemblance to his father, which he emphasized with his inevitable monocle and orchid. But there were physical differences between the two men which perhaps symbolized differences of character. Tall and slim like his father, his features were smooth and calm. His relaxed frame lacked the taut and wiry qualities of the older man. His appearance is well captured in portraits by I. M. Cohen, owned by the Cordwainers' Company but now hanging in committee room 6 of the House of Commons, and by Sir William Rothenstein at Reading University. Yet there is no need to consider him in terms of the post he did not attain or in comparison with members of his own family. He was a major figure in his own right. Only chance and his own decision stopped him becoming prime minister in 1922 or 1923. He

played a significant role in the development of British political history from the turn of the century until shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War. He held the exchequer and Foreign Office at difficult periods and performed creditably in both posts. Leo Amery's assessment, written shortly after Chamberlain's death, remains balanced and fair: 'He just missed greatness and the highest position, but his was a fine life of honourable public service' (J. Barnes and D. Nicholson, *The Empire at Bay*, 1988, 437).

Though out of office, Chamberlain now embarked upon a last, and by no means undistinguished, phase of his long political career, emerging as one of the leading critics of the National Government. Ironically, in his last years his influence inside the House of Commons was probably greater than when he had held high office. He was now the most respected of Conservative back-benchers and it was to him that young members, particularly those who found themselves at odds with the foreign policy of the National Government, looked for leadership and guidance. It was a reflection of the authority which he still enjoyed that the government persuaded him to join the executive of the League of Nations Union in February 1932.

Whatever they later claimed, very few parliamentarians of the 1930s genuinely merited the description of 'anti-appeaser'. As far as Nazi Germany was concerned, Chamberlain belonged to this exclusive group. He wasted no time in drawing attention to the menace posed by Adolf Hitler after the latter became German chancellor on 30 January 1933. Fundamental to Chamberlain's assessment was his belief that Hitler's likely behaviour in the international arena could not be divorced from the nature of his domestic regime. He was adamant that the new German government was not one to which concessions could be granted. As early as 13 April 1933 Chamberlain declared:

What is this new spirit of German nationalism? The worst of the old-Prussian Imperialism, with an added savagery, a racial pride, an exclusiveness which cannot allow to any fellow-subject not of 'pure Nordic birth' equality of rights and citizenship within the nation to which he belongs. Are you going to discuss revision [of the treaty of Versailles] with a Government like that? (Petrie, 2.392)

## **Outside interests**

Freed from the constraints of high office, Chamberlain had the time to develop his interests outside politics. Having already served when foreign secretary as rector of Glasgow University, he was chancellor of the University of Reading (1935–7) and chairman of the governors of Rugby School. He also took seriously his chairmanship of the London School of Tropical Medicine and of the governing body of the British Postgraduate Medical School. He held honorary degrees from the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, London, Birmingham, Glasgow, Toronto, and Lyons. Chamberlain was never a particularly rich man. The need to

economize had already, in 1929, necessitated the sale of Twitt's Ghyll, the country home in Sussex which he had bought a decade earlier and whose garden had been a source of enormous pleasure and satisfaction to him. Sir Robert Vansittart described his last years, spent in 'straits and a small flat' from which he emerged 'immaculate in frayed white shirt and a shiny tail coat' (R. Vansittart, *The Mist Procession*, 1958, 549). But Chamberlain, always concerned for the financial security of his wife and children, may have exaggerated his own poverty. Out of office he found several lucrative sources of income. None the less, the expense involved was a compelling reason behind his decision to decline the sinecure post of lord warden of the Cinque Ports in October 1933. The desire to make some money provided an incentive to put together a volume of autobiographical essays, published in 1935 as *Down the Years*, though Chamberlain experienced some difficulty in spinning out the book to its required length. *Politics from Inside*, based on his letters to his stepmother during the period of his father's illness after 1906, appeared in 1936.

A volume of cultural reflections, *Seen in Passing*, based on Chamberlain's travels on the continent, was published posthumously in 1937. This book reflected the interests of a man for whom politics was never an all-consuming passion. 'There are moments', he once suggested, 'when I ask myself whether the game is worth the candle and whether any public duty calls upon me to slave and endure at so thankless a task' (Chamberlain MSS, AC 18/1/10). It was on the advice of his father that he had found himself a hobby. Rock gardening became one of the passions of his adult life. Even at the height of his political career in the 1920s he would absent himself from a League of Nations meeting at Geneva for a couple of hours in order to pursue a particular alpine plant. But the concepts of public service and civic duty were deeply embedded in his personality and help explain why he remained in politics for so long. Though born into a tradition of nonconformity, religion did not play a large part in his life and he found it difficult to conceptualize any notion of an afterlife.

## **Final years and death**

Though he was by then seventy-two years of age, there was serious speculation about Chamberlain's return to government at the end of 1935. His reaction was recognized to be crucial in determining whether the government could survive the parliamentary outcry which followed the disclosure of the details of the Hoare–Laval pact, by which the British foreign secretary hoped to defuse the crisis created by Italian aggression in Abyssinia. It seems that a strong hint from Baldwin that he would be asked to return to the Foreign Office encouraged Chamberlain to tone down his criticism of the government's conduct. The cabinet survived, but it was Anthony Eden and not Chamberlain who succeeded Hoare as foreign secretary. 'Poor man', reflected Winston Churchill, 'he always plays the game and never wins it' (M. Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, 5, pt 2, 1981, 1363). A later offer of a non-departmental post in the cabinet to advise on foreign affairs and defence was unceremoniously rejected, with Chamberlain convinced



that Baldwin was not looking for his experience and advice, but merely for his name to patch up the government's tarnished reputation. The following year saw Chamberlain and Churchill co-operating closely as vigilant critics of the National Government's foreign policy. The German remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936 left the former convinced that the independence of Austria was now the key to the European situation, for 'if Austria perishes, Czechoslovakia becomes indefensible' (Elletson, 264). Thereafter Germany would be left dominant in central Europe, with enormous consequences for the whole of the British empire. Chamberlain remained active to the end, before suffering a mild heart attack on 12 March 1937. He died at his London home, 24 Egerton Terrace, four days later after suffering a more serious attack. After a funeral service at St Margaret's, Westminster, he was buried in St Marylebone cemetery, East Finchley, on 19 March.

D. J. DUTTON

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## Likenesses

B. Stone, photograph, 1897, NPG □ Spy [L. Ward], caricature, 1899, NPG □ W. Stoneman, photograph, 1920, NPG □ D. Low, chalk caricature, 1926, NPG □ gravure, 1926 (after D. Low), NPG □ B. Partridge, ink and watercolour caricature, 1927, NPG □ W. Stoneman, photograph, 1931, NPG □ S. de Strobl, bronze bust, 1935, NPG □ S. Mrozewski, two wood-engravings, 1935–6, NPG □ W. Rothenstein, oils, 1936, U. Reading □ H. W. Barnett, photograph, NPG [see *illus.*] □ Bassano, photograph, NPG □ I. M. Cohen, oils, Palace of Westminster, London; version, Cordwainers' Company, London □ T. Cottrell, cigarette card, NPG □ O. Edis, photograph, NPG □ P. A. de Laszlo, portrait, priv. coll. □ J. Lavery, oils, Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin □ A. P. F. Ritchie, cigarette card, NPG □ J. Russell & Sons, photograph, NPG □ Stone, photograph, Birm. CL; repro. in Dutton, *Austen Chamberlain*

## Wealth at death

£45,044 18s. 1d.: probate, 24 May 1937, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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