Holding up the Flag of Britain …
with Sustained Vigour and
Brilliance or ‘Sowing
the seeds of European Disaster’?
Lloyd George and Balfour at
the Paris Peace Conference

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George Curzon, the British foreign secretary from 1919 until 1924, believed that he had been bequeathed a fatally flawed inheritance by his predecessor at the Foreign Office, Arthur Balfour and by David Lloyd George, the first of three prime ministers whom he served as foreign secretary. In a sustained and vituperative attack written at the Lausanne conference in late 1922 and early 1923 ‘for use by my biographer’, Curzon accused the two men most responsible for conducting British policy at the Paris Peace Conference of disregarding the professional advice and expertise of the Foreign Office and, whether for that reason or others, of failing to provide a lasting solution to the problems that had created war in Europe in 1914 and which had been exacerbated by the ensuing conflict. Indeed Curzon went further and suggested that they had sown the seeds of a future war.

Curzon was uncompromising in his criticism of Balfour. From an early stage he – a former Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister of the British Empire – allowed himself to be displaced in Paris and pushed aside. He allowed the Big Four to assume:

exclusive control of the main proceedings meeting at times without even a secretary, and circulating no report of their meetings.
Though he (Balfour) was living on the floor immediately above Lloyd George's rooms in Paris he did not know, was not told, and was as a rule too careless to enquire, what was going on. Balfour freely admitted it, and in his half cynical half nonchalant way expressed his ignorance and astonishment as to 'what the little man was doing'.

Curzon's view of Lloyd George, the 'little man', was equally jaundiced:

I feel convinced that it was his ill judged and calamitous interference in Foreign Affairs that brought about his doom. He had no instinctive appreciation of diplomacy, no knowledge of his subject, no conception of policy. He despised and disliked the instrument through which he was obliged ostensibly to work viz the Foreign Office...

His overall assessment of their performance in 1919 was damning:

So the drama went on throughout that fatal year – Lloyd George was supposed to be holding up the flag of Britain and Balfour that of the Foreign Office with sustained vigour and brilliance in Paris. In reality Lloyd George was sowing the seeds of European disaster, Balfour was signing the abdication of the Foreign Office.

To what extent are these fair criticisms? There is no doubt that the Foreign Office had high expectations of the peace conference. Accepting reluctantly that diplomacy in wartime had stricter limitations, and as inevitable some loss of influence in British decision making, the Office nonetheless hoped to reassert its authority when the fighting ended. Charles Hardinge, the Permanent Under Secretary, had strengthened his hand by poaching the talented members of the Information Bureau from the Ministry of Information and turning them into the Political Intelligence Department (PID) of the Foreign Office. Under the nominal leadership of William Tyrrell but effectively headed by James Headlam-Morley, the nucleus of the post-war historical and international relations disciplines (E.H. Carr, Lewis Namier, Arnold Toynbee, Harold Temperley, Charles Webster, Alfred Zimmern – truly a 'ministry of all the talents') conducted propaganda, assessed political intelligence and prepared briefings for