



CHRONICLE OF A CONSPIRACY FORETOLD

MI5, Churchill and the “King’s Party” in the Abdication Crisis

It has long been known that MI5 investigated Edward VIII during the abdication crisis, but little analysis has been devoted to the motives for this or how the operation affected the government’s handling of the affair. Insofar as it is mentioned, it is as evidence that the government was troubled at Edward’s relations with the Nazi regime. In today’s post-Squidgygate world, the engagement of the secret services in the affairs of the Royal family is

taken as routine, but surely this is a bit too casual? Putting MI5 onto Edward VIII was to treat the unchallenged and legitimate head of state as a potential threat to national security. Remarkably, the surviving documentation gives firm evidence as to what was going on and shows that, even at the very beginning, the top level of the machine of government feared that the King's marital dilemma would be exploited by unscrupulous men.

MI5's own comments on the operation make clear it that it had a domestic political role:

.....certain delicate enquiries were made under the Prime Minister's directions in connection with the abdication of King Edward VIII. These were matters touching on the Constitution and ultimate issues of sovereignty and were very far removed from any question of guarding the King's realm from penetration by external enemies or of rebellion by a section of the King's subjects.¹

However, tortuously MI5 expressed itself, it was warding off a conspiracy of some kind against constitutional stability involving as an active or passive participant the King himself. If it wasn't targeting foreigners or rebels, that left men around the King. Almost from the outset the notion of what came to be called the "King's Party" was present in Downing Street thinking and hard-wired into the practical political issue that had to be computed. It is an open question as to whether any particular potential conspirators were in the frame at this stage, but there can have been little surprise at the identities of the men who were prepared to break ranks with the government and support the King.

The key figure is Sir Horace Wilson who was chief Civil Service adviser to Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, albeit without a title or formal remit, since the start of his premiership in 1935. His effective position was very close to that of a modern Cabinet Secretary. In the weeks after the abdication he wrote a report some 50 pages long of the affair, apparently to serve as a briefing document should Baldwin or his successor face challenge of the government handling of the crisis.² Often quite unintentionally, it is a revealing document.

The timing alone of bringing in MI5 gives some idea as to how the burgeoning Royal crisis looked from Downing Street. Wilson had been left as the senior figure there in August and September 1936 whilst Baldwin took medically prescribed leave demanded by the mental strain of dealing with the succession of diplomatic crises of earlier in the year. He had been

almost totally out of touch during this time and the scandal over the King's matter had reached major proportions. The international publicity of his cruise on the *Nahlin* with Mrs. Simpson (albeit unreported in the British press) and his cavalier preference for collecting her from Aberdeen railway station over opening the new wing of the Aberdeen Infirmary had provoked a mass of hostile letters to Baldwin and other establishment figures. Wilson had been growing deeply worried at the threat to national stability posed by the King's behaviour and his account dates almost to the day the decision to engage MI5: shortly after Baldwin's return to Downing Street on 12th October from his convalescence. Baldwin had come back slightly earlier than expected, somewhat mysteriously changing his first plan to base himself at Chequers.³ Almost immediately Baldwin faced pressure from Wilson and others to tackle the King and make him moderate his behaviour, but very soon the scandal of the King's behaviour escalated into a full blown crisis, obvious to informed circles but not to the public at large. News that Mrs. Simpson was suing her husband for divorce became known on Fleet Street on the evening of 15th October, creating the very real possibility that Edward might try to make her his Queen.

Wilson carefully avoids stating when he learned about the divorce case, which justifies a suspicion that he had known earlier, which could, in turn, explain the circumstances of Baldwin's return from convalescence. This suspicion is reinforced by the speed with which the MI5 operation began to yield intelligence. It reported on an audience between the King and Baldwin on 20th October almost immediately after it took place.⁴ Either MI5 had been remarkably efficient or lucky in finding a high level source so quickly, or, more plausibly, it had been working on it for some time before.⁵

Wilson's bland description of how MI5 was brought in, both understates colossally the significance of the move and provides a clue as to the true genesis of the operation: "The Prime Minister decided to make certain enquiries with a view to determining how best to approach the King on the subject."⁶ Wilson's notes on the crisis were written at some speed and contradict themselves clumsily and unintentionally point towards something that they were trying to conceal. As written the notes imply that the MI5 operation was conceived to brief the Prime Minister for a single conversation with the King, but the remainder of the notes contain references to a steady flow of intelligence on the King's camp. The notion of a limited MI5 involvement with a single, precise goal has the flavour of the thin end of a dishonest wedge that Wilson might have used to prise open the Prime Minister's scruples

over spying on his King. The MI5 operation was almost certainly Wilson's initiative; nothing that Baldwin wrote or said afterwards suggests that he was even aware of the information that it was supplying. There is no evidence that Baldwin was briefed on the MI5 or any other intelligence operation as the crisis unfolded, so it is perfectly possible that these were essentially intended for the civil servants. The first appearance of MI5 intelligence in Wilson's notes show him using it to check whether Baldwin was taking a firm enough line with the King. The main direct consumers of the intelligence were Wilson himself and Sir Warren Fisher, Head of the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary to the Treasury. Fisher in turn fed tidbits of this from "most secret sources" to Neville Chamberlain, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Baldwin's most likely successor as Prime Minister. More important, Fisher was personally far more in sympathy with Chamberlain than Baldwin. Since early in Edward's reign, Fisher had been pushing for the government to take a hard line with the King and Chamberlain became his chief ally in the manoeuvres to shape policy during the crisis. It provides a revealing snapshot of how the machinery of government worked at this time that civil servants had far better access to intelligence than the second-ranked minister in the government.

The first few weeks of the MI5 operation had little by way of conspiracy to deal with, as the King pursued a strategy of acting as though nothing particular was going on, hoping that the government would not challenge him, but this was to change rapidly. From then on the crisis escalated in a number of distinct stages. The first came when Alec Hardinge, the King's private secretary, warned him of the risk that the government might resign, ending the pretence of normality. The ensuing conversation between the King and Baldwin opened the disagreement. Baldwin claimed that the country would not accept Mrs. Simpson as Queen, but the King believed he was wrong and almost his first step after the conversation was to try to make contact with one of the figures, held in the deepest suspicion by Baldwin and mainstream government circles, Max, Lord Beaverbrook, the press magnate. Beaverbrook had long pursued a vendetta against Baldwin who had tarred him for ever with the phrases "Power without responsibility – the prerogative of the harlot down the ages" when they clashed over Empire Free Trade. The King had sought Beaverbrook's help earlier in the crisis, but with the relatively innocuous goal of keeping the press silent on her divorce proceedings. Now, he required more active support and the King summoned Beaverbrook back from the US where he had gone for a prolonged stay. It took more than a week for

Beaverbrook to return to the UK, during which the crisis took a number of turns, which were to shape the dynamics of the main players.

The next move might have been intended as a search for a compromise, but if it was, this was utterly vitiated by its execution. In the early phases the King had been determined to make Mrs. Simpson his Queen. Esmond Harmsworth, son of the press baron Lord Rothermere and a personal friend of the King, recognised how much this was unacceptable and persuaded Mrs. Simpson to consider a morganatic marriage as a way out of the impasse. She in turn sold the idea to the King, who put it to the government. The morganatic marriage is still occasionally treated as one of history's missed opportunities, but its prospects were marginal at best. The Harmsworths attracted almost as much suspicion as to their motives as Beaverbrook, which seemed to be fully justified when Esmond Harmsworth put the idea to Baldwin on the same day that their *Daily Mail* had published an editorial on the King's visit to Wales, which implied that he had compassion for the poor there, whilst the government was callous. It looked like a clumsy attempt to pressurize the government by an established opponent. Worse, it made the King look as though he had backed away from an undertaking that he had given to Baldwin. The King had not been sufficiently open with Baldwin as to the extent to which he disagreed with him on public opinion, and Baldwin believed that he had promised to go "quietly".⁷ The morganatic scheme thus became intertwined in the government mind with the King's apparent back-tracking. From the outset it looked like a manoeuvre by the government's opponents, rather than a genuine attempt at compromise. Worse, ministers blamed their opponents for the King's his changes of mind. They confused the King's weakness with impressionability. He appeared to have lived up to the fears that he would "listen again to his bad advisers Esmond & Max. The tragedy was that he had no friends & that was why he turned in his desperation to men who comforted him by suggesting that he could count on the country rallying to him."⁸

The most conspicuous member of the King's Party was Winston Churchill. Churchill was in the depth of his wilderness years having frittered away much of his dwindling stock of political capital on a futile battle against granting a measure of autonomy to India, but his ambitions were undimmed. Earlier in the year Chamberlain had got wind of an intrigue against Baldwin supposedly involving Beaverbrook, Rothermere and Churchill.⁹ Churchill appears to have been moved at least in part by genuine affection and loyalty towards the King, with whom he had been on good terms ever since superintending his investiture as

Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle in 1912. He seems to have regarded it as trivial issue as to who the King might marry.¹⁰ Even though the King had cut off contact with Churchill in the summer when he had advised against Mrs. Simpson's divorce action and inviting her to Balmoral, Churchill had remained loyal and this, combined with unwary opportunism, led him into a series of increasingly damaging mistakes that left him as one of the great losers from the crisis. First, he had declined an invitation from Lord Salisbury to join a delegation of senior Privy Councillors to the King to persuade him to behave more decorously. Suspicions grew and soon a junior Cabinet minister was babbling (drunkenly) that Baldwin would resign, Churchill would form a new party and rule the country.¹¹ In the collective mind of the government Churchill became even more firmly linked to the conspiracy when Beaverbrook told the King and Sir Sam Hoare, Beaverbrook's one ally in Cabinet, that the true author of the morganatic scheme was Churchill. Whilst Churchill had certainly discussed the idea with Beaverbrook in broadly approving terms, this was some days after Harmsworth had launched the idea and there is no evidence that Churchill pursued it.¹² Beaverbrook's motives are obscure; possibly he saw himself in competition with Churchill for the King's ear and wanted to father what he saw as a doomed scheme on it to weaken him. The King believed him, which reached the government via MI5 at the same time as Hoare was reporting the same thing.

The government began to prepare for open conflict.

...it further transpired that the moving spirit [in the morganatic idea] been Esmond Harmsworth who was in close touch with the King and Mrs. S. with Winston Churchill moving mysteriously in the background and it is suggested expressing willingness to form a govt. if there should be any refusal on our part to agree. It was agreed that we must act cautiously, & find out attitude of opposition and of dominions before committing ourselves.¹³

What came to be called the King's Party presented two very different faces. To the top level of Whitehall and Downing Street, it seemed a closely knit conspiracy of the press lords and Churchill, focused on pushing the morganatic scheme. It had been up and running in mid November with Churchill and Harmsworth already in contact with the King.¹⁴ The reality was quite different. There is no evidence now for these supposed early contacts. The ties between the Harmsworths on one side and Churchill and Beaverbrook on the other were at

best tenuous. More important, each of the members was pursuing a separate strategy. Beaverbrook was frantic to use the King's affair to engineer a crisis to remove Baldwin, but was "distraught" the King's unwillingness to listen to advice.¹⁵ Having launched the morganatic scheme Harmsworth was forced to take something of a back seat; he did not have the power to impose his will on editors in a group still ultimately controlled by his father.¹⁶ Churchill wanted above all to keep the King on the throne, and had little affection for Mrs. Simpson. As an old crony of Beaverbrook he was in close touch with him, but until almost the end had no contact with the King.

Baldwin was, of course, alert to the possibility of Churchill intervening in the crisis, but had little fear of his capacities as an intriguer:

I know my Winston. When he came to see me he looked like a cat that has been caught coming out of the dairy & thinks you haven't seen her but you had. And again when L[loyd].G[eorge]. is out for mischief you can see the wash of his periscope but when W. is trying to torpedo you half his hull is out of water.¹⁷

He was also, at best ambivalent about, the intelligence led strategy pursued by Wilson against the King's Party's supposed conspiracy, "S.B. showed signs of his half Highland ancestry by being very suspicious of [Dugdale, his PPS] and Horace Wilson, for they did much delving into the gangster side of this affair; the seamy side not politic for the P.M. to know about."¹⁸ Other, younger ministers also took a fearful view and in the wake of a fraught Cabinet meeting, expressed fears of a *coup d'état* of some kind leaving Churchill in charge of the country with Fascist and some left-wing support.¹⁹ Somewhere in the middle lay a senior back-bencher Leo Amery, who had also known Churchill since their school-days at Harrow. No particular friend of the government, he still offered his support to Baldwin against "Winston... trying to work a big intrigue through the press".²⁰ Amery was full of contempt for Churchill, "never more excited as when he [is] doing a ramp for his own private means.....Winston has thought this a wonderful opportunity of scuppering B[aldwin]. by the help of Harmsworth and Beaverbrook. What a fool he is when it comes to any question of political judgement!"

Churchill proceeded to give the government ample reason to suspect his motives. When Baldwin sounded him out along with the opposition leaders when the morganatic scheme was

aired. Clem Attlee for Labour and Sir Archibald Sinclair for the opposition Liberals had both unhesitatingly offered to support Baldwin, but Churchill had reserved his position with the Delphic comment that “his outlook was a little different”.²¹ He seems, though, to have accepted that he would not contact the King without Baldwin’s authority.

Things changed radically when the newspapers finally broke their silence on 2nd December as a stray piece of finger wagging at the King’s perfunctory religious observance by a conservative bishop in the course of an interepiscopal squabble over the form that the coronation service should take, was made to read as a criticism of the King’s broader private life. This created a public platform for Churchill which, with unerringly bad judgement, he converted into a scaffold for himself. To begin with the damage was contained. His first intervention in the House of Commons insisting that “no irrevocable step” be taken without informing the House attracted some support, but things got worse. It was only with difficulty that Sir Walter Citrine, the TUC Secretary, prevented him from hijacking in the King’s cause a huge meeting in favour of rearmament that he himself had organized at the Albert Hall.²² This was a sad display of Churchill’s dangerous impulsiveness. He had patiently and astutely assembled representatives from all sections of political opinion to support the meeting.²³ The meeting was organized under the patronage of the League of Nations Union and its slogan “The Arms and The Covenant” directly channelled the League’s massive popular appeal. But for the blind chance of coinciding with the height of the abdication crisis, it could have marked not only a reversal of Churchill’s political fortunes but also launched a viable counter to appeasement. He allowed himself to be brought into the King’s fore-doomed plan to broadcast to the country over the head of the government. Whilst he was almost entirely passive in this scheme, Downing Street and Wilson saw yet another hostile move. They “knew from other sources [MI5 presumably] that the King was being urged to press his request: it was one phase of the attempt to set up a ‘King’s Party’.”²⁴

The fatal turn in Churchill’s involvement in the crisis came on Friday 4th December when Baldwin publicly ruled out a morganatic marriage. This came as an unexpected and infuriating blow to the King and to Churchill, who went “completely on the rampage” ranting at fellow MPs in the Smoking Room.²⁵ The King’s response was petulant and futile: he bounced Baldwin into acquiescing in him speaking to Churchill.²⁶ The King was behaving in a thoroughly duplicitous fashion. He had already opened negotiations on the terms for his going, but claimed emphatically to Churchill that he had not discussed abdication with

Baldwin.²⁷ He ignored Churchill's advice to stone-wall, but left Churchill with the entirely erroneous impression that he was willing to fight. Almost simultaneously, worn down with frustration at the King's uncooperativeness, Beaverbrook was almost relieved when the government headed him off from further efforts on the King's behalf with a rather exaggerated account of how close the King was to abdicating. Whilst Beaverbrook famously told Churchill "our cock won't fight", he held back from passing on what he had been told about the King.²⁸ Churchill was left fighting for a cause, which had been deserted by its other principal backer and almost abandoned by its intended beneficiary. His old allies Sir Archibald Sinclair and Bob Boothby tried to restrain him, and thought they had succeeded in persuading him to back away from advocating unadorned stone-walling to the King in favour of a public statement that he would respect ministers' advice on his marriage.²⁹ At the last moment Churchill succumbed to the blandishments of his former "die hard" partners in opposition to Indian self-rule, now operating as a right-wing pressure group within the party and critical of Baldwin's handling of the crisis.³⁰ On the afternoon of Monday 7th December Churchill repeated his call to the House that nothing irrevocable should be done, but this time he was treated to a brutally different reception. He was howled down with cries of "twister" and called to order by the Speaker when he persisted.

It was one of the most savage setbacks of Churchill's Parliamentary career. Immediately afterwards J. C. C. Davidson was reading the ticker tape in one of the corridors when Churchill joined him and said that his political career was finished. Days later he was still profoundly depressed by what had happened.³¹ All the effort that he had devoted to rebuilding his credibility around the "Arms and the Covenant" campaign to counter Nazi rearmament had been destroyed: he had "undone in five minutes the patient reconstruction work of two years."³² Tellingly though, the rebuke was severe enough for Amery to soften his opinion, acknowledging that genuine loyalty to the King as well as opportunism had led to his downfall: "I may have been a little un just to Winston in thinking his action entirely due to the desire to work up an anti-Baldwin campaign. He is personally very fond of the King and the thought of the King's difficulties may also have helped to upset his judgement."³³ Firmly on the side of mainstream Conservative thinking, Lord Tweedsmuir, the former novelist John Buchan now Governor-General of Canada, gloated that the crisis had brought the "gain...that the power for mischief in Winston and is like has now been killed".³⁴ Curiously Tweedsmuir was being less perceptive than one of Churchill's most dedicated critics through the crisis, Nancy Dugdale wife of Baldwin's Parliamentary Private Secretary,

who saw though the immediate setback and recognised his resilience, observing shrewdly, but not necessarily charitably, that he had received “a rebuff from which only a ferro-concrete man would recover” but that “It is astounding you cannot kill Winston with any known political axe.”³⁵

All dates 1936

¹ NA KV 4/1

² NA PREM 1/466

³ Self, Robert (ed.), *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters Vol. IV*, Chamberlain to Ida 11th October

⁴ NA PREM 1/466

⁵ For a tentative identification of MI5’s source see Phillips *The King Who Had To Go* pp 315f

⁶ NA PREM 1/466

⁷ Tom Jones *A Diary With Letters* p288

⁸ Neville Chamberlain papers NC2/23-24, Chamberlain diary 2nd December

⁹ Chamberlain to Ida, 13th April 1936

¹⁰ Hardinge, Helen, *Loyal to Three Kings*, p 102, Lesley *The Life of Noel Coward* p210

¹¹ Channon, Chips & Rhodes James, Robert (ed.), ‘Chips’: *The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon*, 22nd November

¹² Spencer-Churchill papers, Churchill to Clementine 27th November

¹³ Chamberlain diary 25th November

¹⁴ NA PREM 1/466

¹⁵ ‘Chips’, 30th November

¹⁶ Beaverbrook papers, BBK G/6/19

¹⁷ Chamberlain diary 2nd December

¹⁸ Crathorne papers, Dugdale Diary

¹⁹ Alfred Duff Cooper papers, DUFC 15, Duff Cooper diary

²⁰ Barnes, John & Nicolson, David (eds.), *The Empire At Bay: The Leo Amery Diaries 1929-1945*, 4th December

²¹ Dugdale diary

²² Lord Citrine *Men and Work*, p357

²³ Harold Macmillan *Winds of Change* pp478f, R. A. C. Parker *Churchill And Appeasement* p110

²⁴ NA PREM 1/466

²⁵ Amery diaries, 4th December

²⁶ Chamberlain diary, 4th December

²⁷ Churchill papers CHAR 2/264, Memorandum The Abdication of Edward VIII

²⁸ Beaverbrook ed. A. J. P. Taylor *The Abdication Of King Edward VIII* pp81f

²⁹ Churchill papers CHAR 2/264 Churchill to Edward VIII 7th December

³⁰ Churchill papers CHAR 2/264 Boothby to Churchill 11th December, Kenneth de Courcy papers, memorandum 10th December

³¹ Dugdale, Blanche & Rose, N. A. (ed.), *Baffy: The Diaries of Blanche Dugdale 1936–1947* 13th December

³² Nicolson, Harold, *Diaries and Letters 1930–39*, p284

³³ Amery diaries, 7th December

³⁴ Baldwin papers, Tweedsmuir to Baldwin 12th December

³⁵ Dugdale diary