

# SIR ARCHIBALD SINCLAIR, THE LIBERAL PARTY AND THE

How close were the Liberals to backing the King's cause during the abdication crisis in December 1936? **Dr Martin Pugh** assesses the role of Liberal Leader Sir Archibald Sinclair, in his attempt to develop a distinctive and radical Liberal position by giving a lead to the popular support for the King.



# ABDICATION OF EDWARD VIII

**W**ell before the death of King George V in January 1936 the accession of his eldest son was viewed with dismay by the leaders of the National Government. The immediate explanation for this centred on the new King's relationship with Mrs Wallis Simpson and in particular his determination to marry her.<sup>1</sup> However, ministers also recognised an important underlying problem: Edward VIII showed himself congenitally incapable of sticking to his constitutional role. In particular, he had made it clear before succeeding to the throne that he intended to promote improved relations between Britain and Nazi Germany without reference to his ministers. He had also developed an embarrassing habit of visiting areas of high unemployment where he expressed sympathy with the workers and, by implication, criticised the government for not doing enough.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, looked appreciatively at Edward's brother, the Duke of York, who, he thought, would

Sir Archibald Sinclair; King Edward VIII

take the same, proper view of his duties as the old King had done.<sup>3</sup> The accepted wisdom is that Baldwin handled the subsequent crisis most skilfully, manoeuvring Edward into abdication and getting the replacement he wanted. However, this is essentially a propagandist view, narrowly based on Baldwinian sources.

What is clear is that the Prime Minister prepared the ground for the crisis carefully by trying to ensure that it would be impossible for the King to reject the advice of his ministers on the subject of his marriage. On 17 November 1936 he arranged a consultation with a group of senior figures, including the former Liberal Leader, Herbert Samuel. In the course of an hour's discussion they agreed not to ask parliament to enact legislation to allow the King a morganatic marriage.<sup>4</sup> The next step, on 27 November, was a meeting with Clement Attlee, Winston Churchill and Sir Archibald Sinclair. Baldwin had certainly judged Attlee correctly. His generation of Labour leaders were highly conservative in constitutional matters and anxious to conform. Attlee assured Baldwin that he would refuse to

form a government in the event of the King insisting on remaining on the throne and marrying Mrs Simpson.<sup>5</sup> The Labour leaders took the view that the royal marriage was a public and political matter, not a personal one; the monarch must therefore accept the advice of his ministers. The facts that there was support for the King within the Labour movement, and that the breakdown between Edward VIII and Baldwin offered Attlee his best chance of dislodging the National Government from power, were irrelevant.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this, Baldwin had miscalculated. For one thing he got a shock when the crisis finally became public knowledge on 3 December, immediately provoking strong expressions of popular support for the King.<sup>7</sup> Even the Conservatives were more divided than is usually recognised. On 4 December an all-party group of MPs wrote to the King offering support, while on 6 December forty Tory members met to announce their resistance to abdication. Lord Lymington, the former MP for Basingstoke, told the King he could raise north Hampshire on his behalf,

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while the 'Imperial Group' of MPs reportedly offered to take up arms.<sup>8</sup>

Above all, Baldwin had included Churchill in his consultation. This was odd since he was not the leader of a party; but Baldwin presumably hoped to silence him by securing his acceptance of Cabinet policy. This was obviously risky and the tactic backfired. Churchill became rather angry; he sympathised with the King and believed that the Prime Minister was trying to stampede him into abdicating. 'I will defend him. I think it is my duty,' he insisted.<sup>9</sup> The cabinet did not yet realise that a 'King's Party' was already forming in late November based around Churchill, Lord Rothermere and Lord Beaverbrook.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently several ministers realised that Baldwin had made another mistake in agreeing to allow the King to see Churchill, who gave the King shrewd advice; consequently they urged the Prime Minister to insist on an immediate decision from the King.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, Churchill, Rothermere and Beaverbrook were regarded as the usual suspects – troublemakers who were perennially trying to destabilise the National Government. But Sir Archibald Sinclair was not in the same camp; and he was, moreover, the leader of a political party, albeit a small one. Although Sinclair was understood to have adopted the same position as Attlee when they were originally consulted, he had said little. However, when the cabinet met on 4 December they found the Prime Minister's strategy unravelling. Baldwin, understandably miffed, admitted it looked as though the Liberal Leader had changed his mind. When asked whether Sinclair agreed with the '*News Chronicle* view', he commented that he was 'not a person who made very definite statements and he did not know the exact position. He had seemed to agree with the Prime Minister when they talked.'<sup>12</sup>

What had happened in the intervening period? On 3

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December Sinclair had appeared on the platform at the Albert Hall with Churchill, Walter Citrine and eighteen MPs for an 'Arms and the Covenant' rally. Unfortunately for the organisers, this coincided with the first public revelations about the King and Mrs Simpson, which marginalised their campaign, at least temporarily. But the importance of the meeting should not be overlooked. The 5,000-strong audience began to sing 'God Save the King' spontaneously, and they cheered when a lady on the platform called out 'Long Live the King'.<sup>13</sup> This proved to be an early symptom of the upsurge in popular support for the King and hostility towards the government over the next few days. But, although it derailed the rally, it may have left an impression on Sinclair.

At all events, when he spoke to Liberals at Surbiton the following day he referred to 'an unfortunate difference of opinion which has occurred between the King and his ministers', an unhelpful way of putting it from Baldwin's point of view. Sir Archibald contended that there was no serious objection to the King marrying an American or a commoner: 'I do not believe that in these days anybody would feel anything but happiness and joy if the King's choice fell upon a commoner'.<sup>14</sup> He insisted that the only issue to be resolved was 'whether an Act can be passed to give the lady whom the King desires to marry status other than that of a Queen'.<sup>15</sup> Noting that Baldwin had rejected this, Sinclair pointedly failed to express any support for him.

He went on to praise the King and urged: 'Let no man summon him to make so great a renunciation as he was asked to make unless that man himself was prepared for any renunciation which might be necessary in the interests of this country.' This sounds like a veiled invitation to Baldwin to resign. In his speech Sir Archibald did not spell out his views on the royal marriage in great detail, but this was hardly surprising if he

was in the process of shifting his position, and had not, presumably, consulted his colleagues in the Liberal Party; but the overall message of detachment from the government was clear enough.

Part of the explanation for this lay in the fact that during the abdication crisis Sinclair was actually staying with Churchill.<sup>16</sup> The two men had been close since the First World War when Sinclair had served as Churchill's second-in-command in the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the Royal Fusiliers. Churchill took a fond and protective attitude towards Sinclair and had encouraged him to enter parliament.<sup>17</sup> During the 1930s they found themselves on the same side as critics of appeasement. It would not therefore be surprising if Sinclair was influenced by Churchill, who doubtless talked continuously about the royal marriage while they were together. On Sunday 6 December Sinclair was present at Chartwell when Churchill convened a meeting of King's supporters including Robert Boothby, to concert plans. Their tactics were to advise the King that, as Mrs Simpson would not be free to marry until next April, he should postpone any decision about abdication; meanwhile tempers would subside, the King could proceed to his coronation and his position would be much stronger by 1937.<sup>18</sup> A letter to this effect was sent to the King carrying Sinclair's name, thereby implicating him publicly with the King's Party.

The importance of the Liberal Leader's action can hardly be overstated. If, as appeared likely at this point, the King had resisted the pressure from Baldwin a little longer, the Prime Minister would have felt obliged to resign. The King's only option would then have been to invite Churchill to form a minority government which would have included Sinclair and, presumably, the Liberal Party itself. In the absence of evidence about consultation, the party's response must be uncertain, though it would probably have been divided; Samuel, for

example, had aligned himself with Baldwin. His biographer records Samuel's 'lifelong horror of sexual deviation', which suggests that he probably shared the upper-class disapproval of the lax conduct of the Prince of Wales and Mrs Simpson and saw her as an immoral influence.<sup>19</sup>

Some colleagues doubtless thought that by associating with Rothermere and Beaverbrook, Sinclair had put himself in dubious company for a Liberal. On the other hand, in the ensuing general election Liberal candidates would presumably have enjoyed the backing of the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, and *Daily Mirror* as well as the *News Chronicle*, a novel experience to say the least. Among prominent Liberals, Lord Lothian reportedly favoured a morganatic marriage.<sup>20</sup> More significantly, Lloyd George, who was in Jamaica during the crisis, adopted the same view as Churchill on tactics. He told Megan: 'if he wished to marry her it could have been arranged quietly after the Coronation ... If the King wants to marry his American friend – why not?'<sup>21</sup> Characteristically, Lloyd George saw the issue in populist terms rather than constitutional ones: 'I cannot help thinking the Govt. would not have dealt so brusquely with him had it not been for his popular sympathies. The Tories never cared for the little man. Labour have as usual played a cowardly part.' From this one may conclude that Lloyd George would have been another powerful voice in the King's Party in an election.

It is also important to recognise that Sinclair's position was much less eccentric than it appears in the context of the traditional view of the abdication. Contrary to the assumption that Baldwin enjoyed public backing, he became the target of angry crowds and his policy was attacked by the newspapers that commanded a large majority of press circulation: the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror* and *News Chronicle*. Sinclair was in tune with rank-and-file Liberal

opinion as vigorously expressed in the pages of the *News Chronicle*. Editorially the paper pointed out how far the moral and constitutional notions upheld by Baldwin and the upper-middle class had become anachronistic. It argued that:

The King is a bachelor. A true love match – and a democratic one at that – would be popular. Now that Kingship is no longer endowed with the qualities of semi-divinity, but has in effect become a hereditary Presidency, the public is little disposed to interfere with the King's personal affairs.<sup>22</sup>

The *News Chronicle* therefore made a distinction between the King's free choice of wife and Parliament's right to determine who should be Queen. Over successive days the paper urged Baldwin to modify the law to allow marriage with Wallis Simpson without her becoming Queen.<sup>23</sup> This view elicited many supportive letters from readers showing marked resentment towards the Prime Minister for trying to impose his ideas without consulting the people.<sup>24</sup> The *News Chronicle* attributed popular reactions partly to the King's earlier record of service and partly to the honesty he had shown in wanting to marry Mrs Simpson, in contrast to the hypocrisy shown by the government and the upper class who preferred him to keep a mistress but be discreet about it.<sup>25</sup>

In the event Sinclair found his strategy collapsing beneath him when the King suddenly gave way. By 8 December he had decided to quit and on 10 December he signed the Declaration of Abdication. This left the King's Party in a rather exposed position. In the debate in the Commons on 10 December, Sinclair beat a hasty retreat; referring to the morganatic marriage he declared, 'it is only right to tell the House that I could not have supported it', which seems inconsistent with his earlier comments.<sup>26</sup> His biographer suggests

that his role in the crisis damaged him, though there seems to be little to substantiate this.<sup>27</sup> No doubt Sinclair's association with Churchill, whose reputation certainly suffered, offended some people. It is also clear that if he had joined a Churchill administration he would have been part of an ill-assorted group including some extreme right-wing elements that had backed the King out of contempt for parliamentary democracy. Edward VIII's own Nazi sympathies were scarcely consistent with the hostility of both Churchill and Sinclair towards appeasement and Hitler.

Above all, the whole episode throws an interesting light on Sinclair's approach to the leadership of the party, which he had assumed after the 1935 election. Under his predecessor, Herbert Samuel, the Liberal Party had been made ridiculous, becoming for a time an adjunct to Conservatism. Samuel had inspired the idea of a National Government in 1931 and took the Liberal Party in and out of it in a short space of time. Sinclair showed himself willing to take some risks with the party in order to put it back at the centre of radical politics. This was to become clearer during 1937–39 when he gave his backing to the Popular Front strategy even though this involved withdrawing some Liberal candidates.<sup>28</sup> His instincts in the abdication crisis were similar. Samuel, who had started out as an outsider in politics and worked his way into the heart of the Establishment, emerged as a supporter of Baldwin during the abdication crisis and of Chamberlain over appeasement. By contrast, Sinclair was securely within the system and thus felt less inhibited about rebelling against it by giving a lead to populist causes. With the National Liberals now blurring the distinction between Liberalism and Conservatism, it was all the more important to recreate the party's distinctive radical credentials. In this respect

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Sinclair's instincts were sound, even if he never quite succeeded in imposing his strategy.

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1. See Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, *Baldwin: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); Philip Ziegler, *King Edward VIII* (London: Collins, 1990); Frances Donaldson, *Edward VIII* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974); a revisionist approach is Susan Williams, *The People's King: the True Story of the Abdication* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).
2. For some indiscretions see Cambridge University Library: Templewood Papers RF3, p. 16; Ziegler, *King Edward VIII*, p. 209; Barnes and Middlemas, *Baldwin*, p. 979.
3. Churchill College Cambridge: Duff Cooper Papers 2/26, Abdication Diary, 16 November 1936.
4. House of Lords Record Office: Samuel Papers A/101, Lord Salisbury to Herbert Samuel, 16 November 1936; Samuel to Salisbury, 16 September 1943.
5. Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), 132–33.
6. *Daily Worker*, 4 December 1936; *Los Angeles Times*, 18 November 1936.
7. *Daily Mail*, 4, 5, 7 December 1937; *Daily Express*, 4, 7 December 1936.
8. *Times*, 5 December 1936; Barnes and Middlemas, *Baldwin*, p. 1011; Lymington to the King (draft), 7 December 1936, Hampshire CRO, Lymington

- Papers F250; Philip Murphy, *Alan Lennox-Boyd: A Biography* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), p. 48.
9. Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill Vol. V 1922–1939* (London: Heinemann, 1976), pp. 812–16.
  10. PRO CAB127/157/18–19, 'King Edward VIII Notes by Sir Horace Wilson'.
  11. PRO PREM 1/457, Cabinet meeting Notes, 4 and 5 December 1936.
  12. PRO PREM 1/457, Cabinet meeting Notes, 4 December 1936.
  13. *Daily Express*, 4 December 1936.
  14. *Times*, 5 December 1936.
  15. *Times*, 5 December 1936; *Daily Express*, 5 December 1936.
  16. PRO CAB127/157.
  17. Gerrard De Groot, *Liberal Crusader: The Life of Sir Archibald Sinclair* (London: Hurst and Company, 1993), pp. 11–22.
  18. Gilbert, *Winston Churchill*, pp. 820–21; Michael Bloch, *The Reign and Abdication of Edward VIII* (London: Cape, 1990), p. 181.
  19. Bernard Wasserstein, *Herbert Samuel: A Political Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 80, 185, 397–98.
  20. Bloch, *The Reign and Abdication of Edward VIII*, p. 109.
  21. Lloyd George to Megan Lloyd George, 9 December 1936, in K. O. Morgan ed., *Lloyd George: Family Letters, 1885–1936* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), p. 213.
  22. *News Chronicle*, 3 December 1936.
  23. *News Chronicle*, 5 December 1936.
  24. *News Chronicle*, 7 December 1936.
  25. *News Chronicle*, editorial 7 December 1936.
  26. *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, 318, 10 December 1936, c.2188–89.
  27. De Groot, *Liberal Crusader*, 124.
  28. Notably in December 1938 at the Duchess of Atholl's by-election in West Perth and Kinross.

in February 2003 he was interviewed in the House of Lords by Dr Russell Deacon.

*How did you come to fight Cardigan?*

I had been a Cardiganshire Liberal for a long time before I went into national politics. I'd won a council seat in 1952 and got really active with the Welsh Liberals in the mid-1960s. In 1966 Roderic Bowen lost the seat and so I stood in the selection contest to become the next Liberal candidate. I only received four votes; the executive who voted for Huw Lloyd Williams was also full of his friends and relatives. Later on I also went for the Meirionnydd seat, which was then a Labour–Liberal marginal. Once again I lost. This was a real pity as I felt that I could have won that seat back for the Liberals. Instead they chose I. E. Thomas who put us into third position behind the Nationalists. I ended up fighting Brecon & Radnor. The seat was almost derelict in terms of Liberal supporters: they hadn't had a candidate there for twenty years. It was there that I helped build up the constituency and won almost 20 per cent of the vote. This planted the seeds for Richard Livsey's victory fifteen years later.

Huw Lloyd Williams lost Cardigan for the Liberals in 1970, and in 1972 I stood again for selection and was not opposed. I made sure that time that my friends were on the executive to support me. I was determined to rebuilt Cardigan as a Liberal seat. In 1973 I persuaded a large number of Independents to stand as Liberals. They took nine seats. Although the Independents still had the largest majority the Liberals were by far the largest political group in the county. They were the largest Liberal group in Wales at the time. We remained the largest political group on the council until I was defeated in 1992 – perhaps also the largest Liberal group in Wales for that period.

**I was a Welsh nationalist and a Liberal as well. There was no need to join Plaid Cymru with those credentials.**

# INTERVIEW

## Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd

Interview by **Russell Deacon**

**G**eraint Howells (1925–2004) was Liberal and Liberal Democrat MP for Cardiganshire (1974–83) and

Ceredigion & Pembrokeshire North (1983–92) from February 1974 to 1992. Ennobled as Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd in 1992,