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 **King George V**

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Ladies and gentlemen, this is the third in a series of six lectures on British monarchs from Queen Victoria to the present day, and this lecture is on George V, who reigned from 1910 to 1936.

He was born in 1865, the second son of the Prince of Wales, who was later to become Edward VII. Rather oddly, like his son, George VI, and his granddaughter, the present Queen, none of those three were actually born to be sovereign, and indeed, of the six I am discussing, only two, Edward VII and Edward VIII, were born to be Kings, and it is a paradox that the four monarchs not born to be sovereigns have done so much for the institution – Queen Victoria, George V, George VI, and the present Queen.

George V was destined for a naval career and spent fifteen years at sea, which he greatly liked. He enjoyed the ordered life of the Navy and its virtues of stability, structure and duty. These virtues were fundamental for him throughout his life.

In 1892, his elder brother, Albert Victor, died, and he became heir to the throne, and he began to study Bagehot, much to the displeasure of Queen Victoria, who was annoyed that he was reading “such a radical writer”. For thirty-three years before he came to the throne, he lived at Sandringham, not in the large house but in a small house on the estate called York Cottage. His oldest son, who was later to be Edward VIII and then the Duke of Windsor, told George V’s official biographer, “Until you have seen York Cottage, you will never understand my father.” His official biographer says of York Cottage: “It was and remains a glum little villa. The rooms inside are indistinguishable from those of any Surbiton or upper-Norwood home. It is almost incredible that the heir to so vast a heritage lived in this horrible little house. The King and Queen’s baths had lids that shut down, so that when not in use, they could be used as tables. His study was a monstrous little cold room with a north window, shrouded by shrubberies, and the walls are covered in red cloth, which he had been given while on a visit to Paris. It is cloth from which the trousers of the French private soldiers used to be made.” The house was dull. So also was its main occupant, later George V. Unlike his father, George V was neither gregarious nor cosmopolitan. He liked an orderly and stately domestic routine, unvarying from year to year, and stuck to it like clockwork. First thing in the morning and last thing at night, he consulted the barometer, and between these two fixed points, his daily progress was as predictable as the course of a planet. He was up at 7 o’clock and read the Times, and then did his boxes. At 9 o’clock, he had breakfast. In the morning, he would see secretaries and others. He walked a little round the garden before lunch. Lunch was at 1.30. Then he slept for exactly fifteen minutes, waking up as if there was an alarm clock in his head. In the afternoon, there were either official engagements or he played tennis or looked at his stamp collection. He did his boxes in the early evening. He dined quietly with his family, wearing his white tie and garter-star. His watch was set at 10 minutes past 11, when he went to bed. His official biographer said: “He preferred the usual to the unusual, the familiar to the unaccustomed, the old to the new.”

His eldest son, Edward VIII, after abdication, wrote an autobiography, the only British monarch, certainly in modern times, to have written an autobiography, called “A King’s Story”, and said a lot about his father in that book, not all complimentary. He said: “No other man that I ever knew was more content with his own mode of life than was my father.”

But he did combine traditionalism with some subtle innovations. He allowed his second son, George VI, to marry outside the conventional royal families. He was the first to appoint a royal press secretary, in 1918, and the most important of his innovations, which has lasted, he inaugurated the first Christmas radio broadcast in 1932, and that began a tradition which of course continues. We can now listen to this first broadcast, the words of which were written for the King by Rudyard Kipling.

*“Through one of the marvels of modern science, I am enabled this Christmas Day to speak to all my peoples throughout the Empire. I take it as a good omen that wireless should have reached its present perfection at a time when the Empire has been linked in closer union, for it offers us immense possibilities to make that union closer still.*

*It may be that our future will lay upon us more than one stern test. Our past will have taught us how to meet it, unshaken. For the present, the work to which we are all equally bound is to arrive at a reasoned tranquillity within our borders, to regain prosperity without self-seeking, and to carry with us those whom the burden of past years has disheartened or overborne.*

*My life’s aim has been to serve as I might towards those ends. Your loyalty, your confidence in me has been my abundant reward.*

*I speak now from my home and from my heart to you all, to men and women so cut off by the snows, the desert or the sea that only voices out of the air can reach them, to those cut off from fuller life by blindness, sickness or infirmity, and to those who are celebrating this day with their children and their grandchildren, to all, to each, I wish a happy Christmas. God bless you.”*

But these innovations were hardly typical of the man or of his reign. Unlike his father, Edward VII, George disliked travel, particularly foreign travel. “Abroad” he said “…is bloody – I know, I have been there.” When told that his father, Edward VII, had travelled abroad often in the interests in peace, he replied “What has been the result? The Great War.” When asked to pay a state visit to Holland, he spoke of “Amsterdam, Rotterdam and all the other Dams – damned if I’ll do it!” After 1918, for the rest of his reign, he spent just eight weeks abroad, five of which were on an enforced Mediterranean cruise recovering from bronchitis.

He was uninterested in science and the arts. His favourite opera was Tosca because it was the shortest. At the end of the opera, he was overheard saying “Well, now that she’s dead, can we all go home?” and he once said he would rather abdicate than sit through Hamlet a second time. Unlike his father, who was fluent in French and German, he spoke hardly any foreign languages. His knowledge of literature was also shaky. Early in his reign, his Prime Minister, Asquith, asked him, through his Private Secretary, if it might not be a good idea to send a telegram to “old Hardy”. He meant, of course, the novelist, Thomas Hardy, whose 70th birthday was approaching, but the King sent a telegram to Mr Hardy of Northumberland who made the King’s fishing rods, and was surprised to receive royal congratulations on reaching 70, an age that he had not attained, on a day that was not his birthday.

Remarkably, in 1922, the modernist Irish writer James Joyce sent the King a copy of his short stories entitled “Dubliners”, together with rejection slips from various publishers, asking the King if he could find a publisher for him. It is difficult to imagine a less likely enthusiast for the writings of James Joyce than the King, who liked a good story. He did, it is true, read a great deal. His diaries showed he read a book a week and he kept a record. He read mainly adventure stories – John Buchan, C.S. Forester, and knew novels by established authors as they came out. He even read, though with great disapproval, an unexpiated version of “Lady Chatterley’s Lover”. He also read a large number of books on social conditions. But, in general, his tastes were old-fashioned: he liked a book with a good story, a tune that he could hum, and a picture which told a story. The Impressionists were too modern for him and he could not see the point of them.

He had two main hobbies: firstly, shooting, at which he was an expert – indeed, he was said to be one of the best shots in England. One day, he killed 4,000 partridges, but said at the end of the day to one of his sons, “Perhaps we carried things too far today.” His second hobby was collecting stamps, on which, until he came to the throne, he spent three afternoons a week. He had a wonderful collection of stamps from Britain and the Empire, and by the time of his death, he had collected 250,000 stamps in 325 volumes. A courtier once said, incautiously, to him, “Did your Royal Highness hear that some damned fool has just paid £1,450 for a single stamp?” The King replied “I was the damned fool.”

His official biographer lamented in his biography that the King, before he came to the throne, for seventeen years, did nothing at all but kill animals and stick in stamps. But he later wrote, in the same book, more tactfully: “These years succeeded each other with placid similitude. Apart from occasional public functions and a few official journeys, he lived the life of a private country gentleman, unostentatious, comparatively retired, almost obscure.”

His other main interest was his family, and he did not seem to need many other friends. Unlike his father, Edward VII, he was strongly uxorious, but his home life was very dull, and Christmases were particularly dreary for his young sons and his daughter. The main guest at Christmas was the elderly, unmarried Sister Agnes Keyser, of the King Edward VII Hospital for Officers. The King used to put on the gramophone at Christmas. There were excerpts from “La Traviata” and then the “Song of the Volga Boatmen”, and then a tune they thought vaguely familiar – the National Anthem, when everyone sprang to their feet, and the King was in fits of laughter at the joke. The four Princes and the King’s daughter had their own joke, singing music-hall songs in a low voice, and the King, at the far end of the room, did not hear very well and said, “Listen, these children of mine are rather delightful with their Christmas carols.” Not much of a joke nor very cheerful for his young sons, particularly the Prince of Wales, the future Edward VIII, who says in his memoirs, “Nothing was lacking but gaiety.” The King said of his court, “Dull perhaps, but certainly respectable”, and a great contrast with Edward VII.

One of the politicians with whom the King got on remarkably well was the trade union leader, J.H. Thomas, Jimmy Thomas, a Minister in the first two Labour Governments and then in the Conservative-dominated National Government, and Thomas could break through the formality which surrounded the King and, partly for this reason, he was invited to stay with him every year. Thomas told the King’s official biographer, in his own words: “Well, it is a bloody dull house of course, and I told the King so. He was regretting the young Princes did not like the place, so I said, “I do not wonder at that – it’s a bloody dull house! You ought to get out more.” The King replied, rather sadly, “Yes, but you see, I like my wife.””

Most people would consider the King a dull man, but his reign was anything but dull. It was full of political and constitutional turmoil, more than has been faced by many other monarchs since the death of Queen Victoria, and, to the surprise of some, he dealt with almost all of them with a sure touch which strengthened the monarchy. Indeed, he was, in many ways, an ideal constitutional monarch.

He came to the throne in 1910, and he made a good start when he said he would not open Parliament unless the anti-Catholic clauses of the Declaration of Accession were removed, which they were in 1911.

His great asset was a sturdy common-sense and an instinctive understanding of what ordinary people would think or feel. His first Prime Minister, Asquith, said of him, rather patronisingly, in March 1915, “I do not know a better reflection than his talk of what one imagines to be for the moment the average opinion of the man in the Tube.” The King, in later life, said, “I am not a clever man, but if I had not picked up something from all the brains I have met, I would be an idiot.”

He was faced with a very serious constitutional crisis from the moment he came to the throne in 1910, and this crisis continued until 1914, when it was superseded by the Great War. By a constitutional crisis, I do not mean merely a difference of opinion by the parties on the constitution, because that is to be expected in a democracy; what I mean is that the two major parties held different interpretations of the constitution, so that each side believed the other had broken the constitution.

The first aspect of this crisis was over the powers of the House of Lords. When that was resolved, there was a further crisis on the issue of Irish Home Rule, and in particular over the position of Ulster in Ireland, and that crisis, as I said, remained unresolved when war broke out in 1914.

The first difficulty was the problem of the House of Lords, left in abeyance by the death of Edward VII. The Liberal Government of the day was proposing a Parliament Bill restricting the powers of the House of Lords, but the Lords, with its large Conservative majority, would not accept it, and since, unlike the Commons, it could not be dissolved, the only way of overcoming its opposition would be by the threat of a large-scale creation of Liberal peers to help pass the measure. That had been threatened in 1832 to persuade the peers to pass the Great Reform Bill. Now, Edward VII had said that two General Elections would be needed for so fundamental a change. There had already been one in January 1910, which had led to a Hung Parliament, and the Liberals had lost their overall majority and they relied on the Irish and the Labour Party to remain in office. It was in that confused situation that Edward VII died, and although he would have had a very good relationship with his son, he had not discussed the crisis with him and the new King had little knowledge of it.

The Liberals were very distrustful of the King because he had made extremely incautious remarks before coming to the throne. He had said at a dinner party that Asquith, his Prime Minister, was “not quite a gentleman”, and that comment, the King later said, “I ought not to have said it and it was a damned stupid thing to say, but Winston Churchill repeated it to Asquith, which was a monstrous thing to do and made great mischief.” Then, at a dinner, he said to the Permanent Secretary of the Treasury, “I cannot think, Sir George, how you can go on serving that damned fellow Lloyd George.” When the King died in 1936, Lloyd George said: “Before he came to the throne, he had the reputation of being very Tory in his views. In those days, he was frank to the point of indiscretion in his talk, and his sayings were repeated in wide circles. There is no use concealing the fact they gave offence to Liberals, and his succession to the throne, for that reason, was viewed with some misgivings.” But as King, he was to act in an entirely impartial manner, without showing favouritism to any particular party, but the trouble was the Liberals did not trust him to be impartial. They did not believe he would act on the advice of the Government and create peers to overcome the Lords.

Edward VII had said he would create peers after a second General Election, but Asquith now asked for more, not merely that the King would create peers after a second Election, but that he would give what were called “contingent guarantees”, that is that he would promise before the General Election that, if the Liberals won, he would agree to create peers after the Election. Asquith sought those guarantees because the Liberals did not trust the King.

This raises a very difficult question: can a request that the King act in a certain way, in a purely hypothetical situation be made constitutionally? The King, after all, would be committing himself as to how he would use his prerogative in advance. The King said he would not do that because this would yield a partisan advantage to the Government. He said it would give the Liberals “a blank and post-dated cheque”, which would in effect make him a party to the Liberal Party’s election programme. The Liberals replied, “We will keep the promise secret – it will not be publicly-announced,” but of course it was likely to be assumed. The King replied, “My normal constitutional role is to act on advice. Why cannot you trust me to act on advice?” As we have seen, the Liberals did not trust him.

The King was in the rather odd position of having two Private Secretaries, who gave him contradictory advice, so he had no clear guidance. Today, of course, the Queen has just one Private Secretary, and no one knows what his political views are, but in those days, people did know the views of the two Private Secretaries and they were conflicting – one was a Conservative and one was a Liberal. The Conservative, Sir Arthur Bigge, who shortly afterwards became Lord Stamfordham, said the King should refuse what the Government was asking. He said, “The King cannot give contingent guarantees, for by doing so he becomes a partisan.” He told him to reject the Liberal request and say the King will do what is right when the time comes. The King, therefore, telegraphed to the Prime Minister’s Private Secretary, “His Majesty regrets that it would be impossible to give contingent guarantees.” Asquith then came back to the King and gave him, in effect, an ultimatum, saying the Government could not continue in office unless the King did give the guarantees.

The King’s second Private Secretary, Lord Knowles, who had also served Edward VII, was a Liberal, and he said the King should give the guarantees. Shortly before Edward VII died, Lord Knowles had met the Leader of the Conservative Opposition, Arthur Balfour, who had said that if the King refused the Prime Minister’s request for contingent guarantees, he, Balfour, would be willing to form a Government. But Knowles did not pass on this remark to the King. It is fair to say that Balfour later thought rather better of what he said, and it is also fair to say that if a Conservative Government were formed, it would have to go to the country because it had no majority in the House of Commons, and the issue in the election might well be the conduct of the King, who would appear a Conservative partisan. So, it may be the Liberals had no constitutional right to ask the King for contingent guarantees, but once they had asked him, the King, in my view, had no alternative but to accept.

George V wanted personally to consult the Leaders of the Opposition, but Asquith said “You cannot do that – your role is not to be arbiter but to act on the advice of Ministers”, and in the end, the King reluctantly accepted. He said, in his diary, “I agreed most reluctantly to give the Cabinet a secret undertaking, that in the event of the Government being returned with a majority at the General Election, I should use my prerogative to make peers if asked for. This was the only alternative to the Cabinet resigning, which at this moment would be disastrous.” But the King was annoyed and felt he had been bullied and coerced. He later said his Ministers “behaved disgracefully to me” and felt he had not been treated fairly.

In 1913, he finally learnt that Lord Knowles had consulted with the Leader of the Opposition during his fathers’ reign and had not told him, and he said that the “…forcing of His Majesty’s hand against his better judgement was the dirtiest thing ever done”.

The King’s promise did not remain secret and the newspapers speculated, for obvious reasons, that he had in fact given the guarantees, and Lloyd George went so far as to say, in an election speech, “Does any man in his senses think we could provoke another election unless we are certain that if we can get a majority it will be a final one?” – in other words, that they could overcome the Lords.

The Election in December 1910 led to a very similar result to January, another Hung Parliament. The Liberals remained in office, and the King was then presented with the promise he had given to create peers. But he did insist on no immediate creation. He said, very wisely, “The House of Lords must be given time to change its mind”, and in the end, the House of Lords did change its mind and allowed through the Parliament Bill, much to the King’s relief, so he did not have to create peers.

It is not clear that, in this crisis, the agreement to contingent guarantees offers a precedent. I suspect it is unlikely the sovereign will ever again be asked to give a hypothetical promise, and perhaps even more unlikely that a sovereign will be prepared to do it. It caused the King much anguish.

Churchill, in his book “Great Contemporaries”, said he asked the King which was the worst time he went through, was it the War, and he said: “No. For me, the most difficult was the constitutional crisis. In war, we were all united – we should sink or swim together. But then, in my first year, half the nation was one way and half the other.”

The resolution of this crisis gave rise to an even more serious crisis, in my view, and the most serious crisis, I would suggest, that Britain has seen since the Civil War, and many thought it would lead to another Civil War because, with the removal of the absolute veto of the House of Lords, the way was now open to Irish Home Rule because the Lords could not stop it. They could only delay it for two sessions. In the third session, it would become law, whatever the Lords thought. A Home Rule Bill was therefore introduced in 1912 and it would become law in 1914.

There was particular resistance on this from the Protestant counties of Ulster, broadly the areas that now form Northern Ireland. In those areas, the Protestants were a majority and said they would refuse to send representatives to a Catholic-dominated Parliament in Dublin, they would back-up their refusal with a threat of force to resist the Home Rule Bill, and they would declare independence from the rest of Ireland if Home Rule was passed. There was a real question of whether the Army could be relied on to put down a revolt from Ulster because many of the leading officers came from Ulster. And Ulster’s resistance was supported by the Conservative Party, which took the view that the Loyalists, as they called the Ulster Protestants, should not be forced under the jurisdiction of a Parliament in Dublin which they repudiated. This created a terrible dilemma for the King. He said, in his diary: “Whatever I do, I shall offend half the population. One alternative would certainly result in alienating the Ulster Protestants from me, and whatever happens, the result must be detrimental to me personally and to the Crown in general. No sovereign has ever been in such a position.”

The new Leader of the Conservative Opposition in 1911 was Bonar Law, who was an enthusiastic supporter of the claims of Ulster, and very direct in speech, and at a dinner party, he used the following words to the King, spoke to him rather roughly, you may think: “Our desire has been to keep the Crown out of our struggles, but the Government have brought it in. Your only chance,” he said to the King, “is that they resign within two years. If they do not, you must either accept the Home Rule Bill or dismiss your Ministers and choose others who will support you in vetoing it, and in either case, half your subjects will think that you have acted against them.” Bonar Law said the King turned red. He said, “Have you ever considered that, Sir?” “No,” said the King, “it is the first time it has been suggested to me.” Bonar Law told a colleague he thought he had given the King the worst five minutes he had had for a long time.

The Conservatives argued the Parliament Act had created a gap in the constitution and that the House of Lords had now lost its absolute veto, but that power had now devolved upon the King, who had become the guardian of the constitution. Otherwise, so the Conservatives said, a temporary majority in the Commons could overcome the Lords and create a dictatorship, and therefore the King, they said, should insist on a General Election or, alternatively, refuse royal assent to a Home Rule Bill which did not make special provision or Ulster.

The King, at first, seemed to accept this, and he challenged his Prime Minister, Asquith. He said, “Is there any country in the world which would carry out such a fundamental change in the constitution upon the authority of the single chamber? Is there any precedent in our own country for such a change to be made without submitting it to the electorate?” The King said he alone stood between the Government and the voters, and that Home Rule should be put to the voters, and many constitutional lawyers supported him.

The King said that the only way to prevent civil war in Ireland was to get a settlement by consent, and that must involve the exclusion of Ulster from Home Rule. He told his Prime Minister, rightly in my view, “Ulster will never agree to send representatives to an Irish Parliament, no matter what safeguards or guarantees you may provide.” The King warned the Prime Minister that Army officers might resign their commission rather than fight in a civil war. He said he could not allow bloodshed amongst his loyal subjects without exerting every means in his power to avert it.

By March 1914, the Liberals had come to the view that some special provision would be made for Ulster, and they introduced into Parliament an amending bill allowing for the exclusion of Ulster for a period of six years, but they said they were prepared to amend that further should Ulster want it, which of course it did.

That Bill itself, under the provisions of the Parliament Act, would take two years to pass, so it would not pass until 1916, but the King said the two Bills, Home Rule and the Amending Bill, were interconnected and that Home Rule should not be presented for royal assent without the Amending Bill, and he said advantage should not be taken of the Parliament Act to require him to give assent to a Home Rule Bill which the Government themselves had tried to alter.

Asquith said he hoped the King was not thinking of refusing assent. Such a thing, he said, had not been done since the reign of Queen Anne, and it would undoubtedly prove disastrous to the monarchy because the danger would be that, in future, every Act of Parliament would be seen as the King’s act – he would either sign it, in which case it would be said he agreed with it, or he would refuse to sign it, in which case people would know that he disagreed with it, so the Crown would become part of party politics. Asquith said to the King, “If you act on the advice of Ministers, you cannot be blamed for any consequences which may follow.” But the King said, “If I assent, half the people of this country will, rightly or wrongly, consider that I have not been faithful to my trust, while the people of Ulster will declare that I have deserted them. On the other hand, if I withhold my assent, my Government would resign, the other half of the people would condemn my action, and the whole of Ireland, except Ulster, would be indignant against me.” He told one Minister, if he signed the bill, he would be “hissed on the streets in Belfast”. The Minister replied, if he did not sign, he would “hissed on the streets in London”. The King said that was a damned impertinent comment.

The issue had not been resolved by the time war broke out, and the Home Rule Bill was presented for royal assent in September 1914, one month after the outbreak of war, before the Amending Bill was passed, but the Government did promise, although of course it was not a binding promise, there would be no attempt to coerce Ulster, and since Home Rule could not come into effect until after the War, and after negotiations with Ulster had been concluded, the Bill merely postponed the issue, so the royal assent was merely formal. There would be an Amending Bill and no doubt a General Election before the Bill came into effect.

The King told a friend, “I do not conceal from you my regret at having to give my assent to the Home Rule Bill.” He left a memorandum saying he had considered refusing assent, but that he feels strongly that “…this extreme course should not be adopted in this case, unless there is convincing evidence that it would avert a national disaster, or at least have a tranquilising effect on the distracting conditions of the time. There is no such evidence.”

This is, I think, very significant because the King believed he had the right to veto legislation, and the fact the right had not been used since the reign of Queen Anne in the early-18th Century seemed not relevant because, after all, this prerogative was one that ought to be exercised only in very exceptional cases, so the fact it had not been used for so long did not make it obsolete. If it was a power that ought to be very rarely used, the fact it was so rarely used did not mean it did not exist. It was a right to be used, the King believed, in emergency or pathological situations, a back-stop perhaps. Suppose a Bill was passed by Parliament seeking to abolish civil liberties. Could the Queen veto that? It remains, in my view, an open question.

It is fair to say that, after the King had signed the Bill, his Prime Minister, Asquith, with whom he’d had so many disagreements, said he hopes he may be allowed to express “…the respectful sympathy with and admiration of the patience and the strict observance of constitutional practice, together with the tact and judgement, which, in a time of exceptional difficulty and anxiety, Your Majesty has never for a moment failed to exercise.”

The War, of course, imposed new demands on the King, and his Minister imposed even more. Lloyd George said it would create a very valuable precedent for the country if the King and the Royal Family agreed to abstain from alcohol during the War, which the King did, but this principle was not followed by others, and Queen Mary said to Asquith after the War, “We have been carted”, she thought they had been made to look foolish.

Another Minister told the King that if Buckingham Palace were to be bombed by German aircraft, it would have a stimulating effect on the people. The King replied, “Yes, but rather a depressing effect on me!”

He responded in a charming way to numerous letters from his subjects, including with a young Lionel Sackville-West, later Lord Sackville, who died recently at the age of 90. Lionel Sackville-West wrote to him, “When will the War be over? I miss my Daddy and having sugar on my porridge.” The King replied, “I hope the War will be over soon and that your Daddy will come back. I too miss having sugar on my porridge.”

There was one important consequence of the monarchy during the War, that the surname of the monarchy was derived from Germany – it was the House of Saxe-Coburg Gotha. There was some talk because of that, that the monarchy was pro-German, and the King, with his great sense of fairness, had argued unsuccessfully against a Government proposal to strip the family of his German cousin, the Kaiser, of British honours. The novelist H.G. Wells said the King headed “an alien and uninspiring court”. The King replied, “I may be uninspiring but I’ll be damned if I’m an alien!” The Royal Family then changed their name to Saxe-Coburg, from Saxe-Coburg Gotha, to Windsor, and that led to the only recorded joke of the Kaiser, who said he was looking forward to seeing Shakespeare’s play, the Merry Wives of Saxe-Coburg Gotha.

It is well-known that the King was sceptical of offering asylum of his cousin, the Czar, and this was an example of royal interference with the Government, though the Cabinet was also frightened that it could lead to republicanism in Britain. But the King did help to rescue Prince Andrew, the brother of the King of Greece and father of the Duke of Edinburgh – he helped him escape from Greece when that country became a republic.

The post-War era led to the end of monarchy in countries which had been defeated and that left the British monarchy more isolated and seemingly less stable. George V believed the monarchy must be made more accessible – that is why he created a Press Secretary, more open to the public, that a closer relationship with the people was needed, and he paid a large number of visits to industrial cities after the War, and he resumed royal lunches and dinners but suggested they be thrown open for a wider public. That was not done at the time. It was adopted by the present Queen, around fifty years ago.

But the King also faced a number of constitutional problems after the War. In 1923, when Bonar Law was stricken by a fatal cancer of the throat, he faced the problem of whether to appoint Baldwin or the much more experienced Lord Curzan to the premiership, and he chose Baldwin largely on the grounds that the Prime Minister must be in the House of Commons because Labour, which was by then the main opposition party, had no representation in the Lords, and there was no provision then for the renunciation of peerages.

He faced a more difficult political problem after the General Election of 1923, which led to a Hung Parliament and the likelihood of a Labour Government. The Labour Party was fearful that royal circles would attempt to wangle the constitution so that they would not be given fair play, and one Labour Leader, George Lansbury, said, in a speech at Shoreditch Town Hall, “Some centuries ago, a King stood against the common people and he lost his head.”

In January 1924, the Conservatives, who were the largest party in the Hung Parliament, were defeated on the address, but the King, without hesitation, summoned Ramsay MacDonald, as the Leader of the second largest party, to form the first Labour Government. MacDonald was greeted at the Palace by the comment from the King, “Well, what are you socialists going to do about me?” and MacDonald, laughing, said, “Nothing but try to serve Your Majesty and the country’s best interest.” In his diary, the King said: “I had an hour’s talk with MacDonald. He impressed me very much. He wishes to do the right thing. Today, twenty-three years ago, dear Grandma died.” That was Queen Victoria. He said, “I wonder what she would have thought of a Labour Government?” I think it is fairly clear what Queen Victoria would have thought…

But, to his mother, George V wrote, revealingly, “They have different ideas to ours, as they are all socialists, but they ought to be given a chance and ought to be treated fairly,” which he did.

The King’s Private Secretary said, “I expect the King will be interpreting the general feeling of the people in this country, that true to British ideas, the Government, whoever they should be, should have a fair chance.”

He won plaudits in the Labour Party by treating the Labour Government in exactly the same as the Conservatives, and when asked how he was getting on, he replied: “Very well! My grandmother would have hated it, my father would have tolerated it, but I move with the times.”

The Labour constitutional theorist Harold Laski said, “It is not without significance that the official daily newspaper of the TUC devotes more space of news and pictures to the Royal Family than does any of its rivals.”

The King faced another dilemma in 1926 with the General Strike because, after all, the miners and the others on strike were his subjects just as much as those who opposed them. The King was in broad sympathy with the miners. In April 1926, a month before the Strike, he told Lord Durham that he felt very sorry for the coalminers. Lord Durham, who was a coal-owner, said they were “a damned lot of revolutionaries”. The King said, “Try living on their wages before you judge them”, and he pressed the Government not to bring in special legislation against strikes and not to have an embargo on money sent to the British trade unions from the Soviet Union. But, at the same time, he wanted order preserved and asked Government for strong measures to curb disorder and to restrict peaceful picketing.

In 1931, he faced yet another constitutional crisis, when the second Labour Minority Government, without a majority in the House of Commons, could not agree on cuts in public expenditure, including unemployment benefit. The majority in the Cabinet favoured the cuts, but a strong minority, which included the Foreign Secretary, who was the second person in the Government, opposed them, and it was clear the Government could not go on and there was a fear of financial panic and of a collapse of the banks. The Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, went to the Palace to resign, but the King said, “You mustn’t resign. The country needs a national government, and only you can lead the country through this crisis, and the Conservative and Liberal Parties will support you.” At a conference of Party Leaders, held at Buckingham Palace, the King more or less ordered them to form a National Government. He said that before they left the Palace, “some communique must be issued which would no longer keep the country and the world in suspense”. The Prime Minister said he had the resignation of his Cabinet in his pocket, but the King replied that he trusted there was no question of the Prime Minister’s resignation, that leaders of the three parties must get together and come to some arrangement, and that led to the formation of a National Government, which was seen as a purely temporary affair, but in practice lasted throughout the 1930s.

This raises I think two important questions: first, did the King exceed his constitutional powers; and secondly, was his political judgement correct?

There is no doubt in my mind he did not exceed his constitutional powers. Bagehot had famously said that a king had three constitutional rights: to be consulted, to encourage, and to warn. The King warned MacDonald of the consequences of his own resignation, which he thought would be a financial panic, and he encouraged him to lead a National Government. He did no more than that. MacDonald was perfectly free to reject the King’s warnings and encouragement had he wished to do so.

But was the King’s political judgement sound? There, I have some doubts. Some years ago, in a book on the monarchy, I defended the King’s political judgement. I am now not so sure. The King believed MacDonald was the only person who could save the country, and that was a political judgement which of course others did not share. Labour did not support MacDonald, apart from a very small number of MPs, who were expelled from the Labour Party, so MacDonald was no longer the leader of a party but of a small rump. The defence of the King was that he was acting in a national emergency and there was a fear of collapse of the currency. The King told the Archbishop of Canterbury, “If I had failed, there would have been a disaster in a few hours as a General Election was out of the question.” But the National Government, although it impressed the markets, was not really national in that the Labour Party did not support it, and the implication of the National Government was that any opposition to it was somehow anti-national. Was a repudiation of the National Government also a repudiation of the King?

The King asked his Cabinet Secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey, whether he had voted for the National Government, and Hankey said, “Since the War, I’ve rather made a point of not voting. I have my views of course, but I like to keep a very detached point of view.” “But this time it is different,” the King said. “I want the National Government to get every vote possible.” “Is that a command, Sir?” I asked. “Yes, you really ought to vote!” “Very well,” Sir Hankey told the King, he’d canvassed one vote for his National Government, but Hankey wisely told his son, “This is not a story to repeat, as the Labour Party would not like the King to canvas for the National Party and would be capable of using the story if they got hold of it.”

In my view, the King’s actions in 1931 were not a precedent capable of repetition, and it is interesting to note that in the Hung Parliament of 1974, the Queen made no intervention, and in the Hung Parliament of 2010, which led to a Coalition, the Queen spent the five days of uncertainty at Windsor Castle, so that she could not be accused of endorsing one situation or the other. The modern constitutional doctrine seems to be that the politicians decide and the Palace will then endorse the decision they have made.

Well, whatever you think of the King’s actions in 1931, they did not affect his popularity, and he remained as popular with Labour as the other parties, and that was shown in the Silver Jubilee celebrations in 1935. “Why are they cheering me?” he said. “I am just an ordinary fellow. I had no idea they felt like that about me.” He said the service, on leaving St Paul’s, was “absolutely wonderful”. He said there was just one thing wrong with it – “Too many damn parsons getting in the way!” He said, “I didn’t know there were so many damned parsons in England!”

MacDonald resigned shortly afterwards, to the King’s deep regret. He was the King’s favourite Prime Minister. At the end of the first Labour Government in 1924, the King said to him, rather plaintively I think, “You have found me an ordinary man, haven’t you?” In 1935, he said: “I hoped you might have seen me through, but I now know it is impossible. I wonder how you have stood it, especially the loss of your friends and their beastly behaviour. You have been the Prime Minister I have liked best. You have so many qualities. You have kept up the dignity of the office, without using it to give you dignity.”

In many ways, whatever one thinks of the events of 1931, George V was an ideal constitutional monarch. He was conciliatory and fair, with a concern for all his subjects, often more conciliatory than his Ministers. He pressed for decency, even towards those who were unpopular. I have cited his attitude during the General Strike. In the five-week strike of coalminers in 1912 for a minimum wage, he sent a thousand guineas for relief of distress among strikers’ families. In 1921, he warned the Cabinet that you could not expect people to subsist upon the unemployment benefit of fifteen shillings a week for men and twelve shillings for women.

He objected to the maltreatment of Suffragettes, the forcible feeding. He wrote to the Home Secretary, “There is something shocking, if not almost cruel, in the operation to which these insensate women are subjected through their refusal to take necessary nourishment.” The King asked whether it would not be possible to abolish forcible feeding.

He disliked the campaign against aliens and conscientious objectors in World War I. He said he would “…like to think that when this War is over, it would be truly said we had shown the example in generous and magnanimous consideration of our prisoners of war”. He objected to conscientious objectors being interned at Dartmoor. He said he feels that “their new condition of life will not be very different from that of imprisonment”.

He condemned reprisals in Ireland and said the Black & Tans should be disbanded because he said, “In punishing the guilty, we are inflicting punishment no less severe upon the innocent.” He called for toleration and conciliation in Ireland. His influence was important, I think, in 1921, in seeing a conciliatory approach to the Irish Nationalist Leader, de Valera.

But above all this, the King’s willingness to act as an impartial constitutional monarch strengthened popular attachment to the monarchy in the age of universal suffrage. He was the genuine head of the nation as well as head of the state.

On his death, in January 1936, the Leader of the Labour Opposition, Attlee, said in the House of Commons: “It has I think been given to no previous King to have won such universal affection. No King has ever been able to associate himself so closely with the hopes and fears, with the joys and sorrows, of his people.”

Edward VII’s short reign had appeared like a continuation of the Victorian era, but George V’s reign appeared a radical transition, and the First World War had increased the pace of change. When the King came to the throne in 1910, the franchise was limited on a property basis to adult males; by 1936, there was universal franchise for all men and women over 21. When the King came to the throne, the powers of the House of Lords were unlimited; by 1936, they were severely restricted. When the King came to the throne, the Labour Party was little more than a minor pressure group in the House of Commons; by 1936, it had become a party of government – there had been two Labour Governments, and Labour was now the official opposition. When the King came to the throne in 1910, the state took little responsibility for the welfare of its citizens; by 1936, the state was responsible for health and unemployment insurance, and many other social welfare measures.

Perhaps even more important, the King’s reign was one in which traditional, liberal conventions and assumptions were undermined, undermined by militant trade unionists, suffragettes, militant Unionists in Ireland, militant Irish Nationalists, and these elements constituted a threat to the political system. There was a real question as to whether the system could accommodate these new elements – the suffragettes, the Irish, the trade unionists. The system clearly could not accommodate the Irish Nationalists, which remains the single great failure in the British polity and constitution in the 20th Century, because most of Ireland left the United Kingdom in 1921. But the system did accommodate the other disruptive forces.

All these changes, from a liberal society to a quite different post-liberal yet peaceful society, occurred peacefully within a framework of stability, offering a stark contrast to conditions on the Continent of Europe, riven by dictatorship and strive, and George V helped in that process by acting as a focus of stability in an era of great change.

During his reign, five Emperors, eight Kings, and 18 other dynasties collapsed. A major reason for this was that empires and political systems collapsed following defeat in war, and of course the British system was judged successful because of victory in war. But it faced other domestic threats, but the system itself was never seriously threatened because George V, a man of deeply conservative temperament, accepted change and did not resist it. In particular, he accepted the Labour Party as a party of government and treated its Ministers fairly. In 1923, a republican motion at the Labour Party Conference was rejected by over 3.5 million votes to just 400,000, and as the Labour Party grew in importance, support for republicanism declined.

Attlee, the Leader of the Labour Opposition at the time of the King’s death, went so far as to say that George V had “shared in the work of reconstruction”, and went even further and said, “He was a real social reformer who had recognised the claims of social justice”. Perhaps that is stretching things a bit, but at least George V did not resist social reform.

Extremists got nowhere in the Britain of the 1930s. The Fascists were too weak to contest a parliamentary election and never won a council seat. Contrast that not only with the Continent but in Britain more recently with the BNP, which, in 2010, won nearly 2% of the vote and has won some local council seats. The Communists got under 1% of the vote in every General Election in the 1930s and elected just one MP. Fascist membership, at its peak, was 50,000, and Communists around 20,000. If one compared Britain in the 1930s with the dictatorships across most of Continental Europe and threats to democracy in other countries, it appeared a veritable paradise.

In a book written at the time called “England Speaks” by Philip Gibbs, he quotes a road-sweeper during the 1935 Jubilee, who said: “The Royal Family is a very respectable lot, human, if you know what I mean. They feel kindly towards us, and we feel kindly towards them. The King is alright, a nice fellow, not like that there Hitler in Germany who puts folks into concentration camps because they don’t see eye-to-eye with him. He does his duty like the rest of us, like I do mine, and I do not envy him his job. That is why I am loyal. That is why we are all loyal.”

I think moderation played a definite and significant role in helping to create a climate of stability in inter-War Britain.

But, sadly, the King’s last years were clouded by worries, both political and personal. He was deeply concerned at developments on the Continent, and in particular at the rise of the dictators. He felt that German rearmament would lead to another war. He told the German Ambassador in 1934 that, at the present moment, Germany was “the peril of the world” and if she went on at the present rate, there was “bound to be a war within 10 years”. The King asked what Germany was arming for. No one wanted to attack her but she was forcing all the other countries to be prepared for an attack on her part. The Ambassador tried to excuse Germany by saying that French fortifications were impregnable and that Germany had no fortification on her side. The King ridiculed the idea and said, in the last War, fortifications were useless and would be even more useless in the next. In 1935, the King told the British Ambassador in Berlin, “We must not be blinded by the apparent sweet reasonableness of the Germans but be wary and not taken unawares.”

During the Abyssinia Crisis of 1935, he could not sleep. He told Lloyd George: “I will not have another war! I will not! I will go to Trafalgar Square and wave a red flag myself sooner than allow this country to be brought in.” He said, “I am an old man. I have been through one World War. How can I go through another?” His position was ambivalent. He hated dictators, but dreaded another war, and that ambivalence probably reflected that of his subjects.

But his other worry was personal: the friendship of his oldest son, the Prince of Wales, who was to become Edward VIII, his friendship with Mrs Simpson and the feeling that he was not prepared for the throne. The King said, presciently, “After I am dead, the boy will ruin himself in 12 months.”

The King died in 1936, with these problems unresolved. The conventional view is that his last words were “How is the Empire?” but there is another story, which may or may not be true, but I like to believe it, that his doctors told him he would soon recover and would be convalescing at Bognor, where he’d convalesced before, and his reply, as perhaps people well know, is “Bugger Bognor!”

People felt, on his death, it was the end of an era, that it was the end of an era of stability, and in the funeral procession to Westminster Hall, as the cortege swung into New Palace Yard, the jewelled Maltese cross that surmounts the crown had been loosened by the jolting wheels and fell to the ground, which observers thought was a most terrible omen for the future reign.

Thank you.

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