



Supporters of King Edward demonstrate in London on December 10, 1936
Opposite: The last changing of the guard for Edward VIII

'A theatre watched by the whole world'

80 years ago this week, the eyes of the world were on the House of Commons as prime minister Stanley Baldwin rose to announce the abdication of Edward VIII. Conservative historian **Lord Lexden** looks back at a day which left MPs 'broken in body and soul'

The speaker enters, and we proceed to pray for 'Our sovereign lord King Edward'. The House is crowded and rather nervous and noisy. As questions proceed, the galleries fill up in a double row and people begin to sit on the gangways."

So begins a vivid account of the dramatic events in the House of Commons on 10 December 80 years ago, recorded in the marvellous diary of Harold Nicolson, one of the leading writers of his generation, a debonair

homosexual and a National Labour MP.

His tiny party supported the government of Stanley Baldwin whose third term as prime minister was in its last phase. Exhausted after 13 tumultuous years as Tory leader, Baldwin had already decided to retire after the coronation of the new monarch in May the following year. He was about to set in train an unprecedented constitutional change which would mean that the person who was crowned would not be Edward VIII, for whom prayers had just been offered, but his younger brother, the

Duke of York, who would be proclaimed king as George VI two days later.

Nicolson noted Baldwin's arrival with a keen, well-trained eye. "The prime minister comes in, pushing past the encumbered knees of his colleagues and finds his place. He has a box with him, and on sitting down, at once discovers that he has lost the key. He probes and rummages for a bit and then finds the key. He unlocks the box, extracts some sheets of paper with the royal monogram in red, and with them some flimsy notes of his own, more squalid

than a young Labour candidate would dare to produce at a Wapping by-election."

The first lord of the admiralty, who was answering questions, knocked the prime minister's papers on to the floor. "The old man collects them hurriedly and the next minute seizes his red-monogrammed sheets, walks firmly to the bar, turns round, bows, and advances to the chair. 'A message from the King', he shouts, 'signed by His Majesty's own hand'. He then hands the papers to the speaker. The latter rises and reads out the message of abdication in a quavering voice."

“ The Speaker's voice broke and there were stifled sobs in the house... poignant reminders of the king's immense popularity ”

The King's formal instrument of abdication stated his "irrevocable determination to renounce the throne". When the speaker came to these words, his voice broke and there were stifled sobs in the House, poignant reminders of Edward VIII's immense popularity both in Britain and his empire in which he had travelled as Prince of Wales much more extensively than any of his predecessors, winning the soubriquet Prince Charming.

Many MPs were utterly astonished. It was only seven days earlier that news had broken publicly in the British media of his intention at the age of 42 to take as his wife a twice-married American (who was in the process of divorcing her second husband) against the advice of his ministers, provoking the sudden and unexpected constitutional crisis by which the nation was now convulsed.

The person at the centre of it was the most famous man in the world, widely regarded as perfectly suited to the task of modernising a monarchy that had remained stuffily Victorian in its attitudes. It was only after his departure that serious and well-founded criticism of the royal hero became widespread.

After the speaker had read out the words sent by the King, Baldwin rose and moved formally "that His Majesty's most gracious message be now considered". The speech which followed was regarded on all sides of the House as masterly. "No more grave message has ever been received

by parliament", he began, "and no more difficult – I may almost say repugnant – task has ever been imposed upon a prime minister". He continued by pointing out that the intensity of the crisis had left him "little time in which to compose a speech for delivery today, so I must tell what I have to tell truthfully, sincerely and plainly, with no attempt to dress up or adorn".

On the face of it his tale was a simple account of what had passed between him and the King since 20th October when he had first brought up the latter's relationship with Mrs Simpson, which had begun two years earlier.

In reality, the speech, though unprepared in advance, was most carefully contrived by the country's most accomplished politician. Baldwin provided an extremely adroit and subtle presentation of the facts, full of tributes to the King for his behaviour throughout the crisis (of which Baldwin in private was highly critical), and designed to protect and preserve the reputation of the crown so that its constitutional position was not weakened.

He produced to great effect a pencilled note in the King's hand. It read: "Duke of York. He and the King have always been on the best of terms as brothers, and the King is confident that the duke deserves and will receive the support of the whole



empire". A second pencilled note in praise of Mrs Simpson was not used.

Baldwin's deeply moving speech concluded: "This House today is a theatre which is being watched by the whole world. Let us conduct ourselves with that dignity which His Majesty is showing in this hour of trial. Whatever our regret at the contents of the message let us fulfil his wish, do what he asks, and do it with speed... and let us hope that, whatever the country may have suffered by what we are passing through, it may soon be repaired and that we may take steps to make this country a better country for all the people in it."

Baldwin, the man who invented the phrase "one nation", had struck exactly the right note of national unity. Harold Nicolson summed up the reaction to the speech as MPs left the chamber: "We file out broken in body and soul, conscious that we have heard the best speech we shall ever hear in our lives."

On the following day, 11th December, which was a Friday, the House met at its customary hour of 11am and passed the second reading of His Majesty's declaration of abdication 1936 bill by 403 to 5 (Labour MPs who favoured a republic) after a short debate. All remaining stages were agreed without a division. Just before 1.30pm the bill was sent to the Lords where it passed through all its stages in a quarter of an hour. Royal assent was then given by a commission of three peers with the speaker, Baldwin and other MPs at the bar.

A Cabinet minister, Lord Zetland, recorded the scene: "I do not suppose that many of us who were present will live through a more dramatic moment than we did when Sir H Badeley (clerk of the parliaments) turned from the three noble lords seated in front of the throne to the speaker and members of the House of Commons standing at the bar and uttered the words: 'Le Roy le veult' [*The King wills it*]. Thus at eight minutes before two o'clock did Edward VIII cease to be King". He had reigned for just 325 days. 🇬🇧



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