



The king's choice

A century ago, it fell to King George V to choose a new prime minister. **Lord Lexden** revisits the machinations that lay behind the eventual decision



King George V

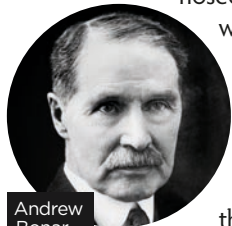
One hundred years ago this month, King George V had to find a new prime minister very quickly.

The incumbent, the Conservative Andrew Bonar Law, who had only had the job for seven months, was diagnosed at the age of 64

with throat cancer, which was already in its later stages.

Bonar Law, who was to die six months later, was not told the full truth about his condition, but it was obvious he could not carry on any longer.

A letter of resignation was delivered to the king on 20 May 1923 during the Whitsun bank holiday weekend. Bonar Law said he was too ill to give the



Andrew Bonar Law

monarch the customary advice to assist the choice of his successor.

The king had to manage as best he could. No one came forward with the helpful suggestion that the Conservatives should swiftly select a new leader, who could then take over as prime minister. Another 40 years would pass before that idea took hold.

One man stood out as the obvious successor on grounds of ability and experience. Lord Curzon had first made his mark years earlier as one of the finest Indian viceroys. In 1923, after four years as foreign secretary, he was regarded throughout Europe as a masterly diplomat, who produced solutions to acute international problems. Somehow he also found the time to be leader of the Lords and Bonar Law's deputy.

Curzon was brilliant, but unloved. He was nicknamed the All Highest by his cabinet colleagues because of his grand lifestyle and insufferable arrogance in domestic politics.

No one looked forward to him becoming prime minister, but his appointment was widely seen for a time as inevitable. Bonar Law would not recommend him to the king, and yet felt that "he would on the whole be disinclined to pass over Curzon".

As for Curzon himself, "it never occurred to him that any alternative could exist", as his former cabinet colleague, Lord Crawford, noted in his diary.

It was inconceivable to Curzon that

"It was inconceivable to Lord Curzon that Stanley Baldwin could be a serious rival"

Stanley Baldwin, the only other candidate, could be a serious rival. To the All Highest he was "a man of the utmost insignificance". After 15 years as an MP, Baldwin, then aged 55, had no achievements to match Curzon's. Appointed chancellor of the Exchequer a few months earlier, he had agreed to settle Britain's war debts with the United States on terms which horrified Bonar Law and almost the entire cabinet.

But Baldwin did not irritate people in the way that Curzon did. He benefited above all from being in the Commons. This proved decisive. Almost everyone consulted by the king told him that peers were not acceptable as prime ministers in modern Britain, with its mass electorate created in 1918. The Labour Party, now the official opposition, had no members in the Lords.

The point was underlined in an anonymous paper which the Palace was led to believe had Bonar Law's approval. "The subordination of the House of Commons," the paper argued, "would be most strongly resented, not only by the Conservative Party as a whole but by every shade of democratic opinion in the country."

Years later, the author of the paper was unmasked as John Davidson, Baldwin's right-hand man. Bonar Law was unaware of it. Baldwin himself may well have been ignorant of this blatant attempt to influence the king for his benefit.

The devious Davidson, grandfather of Baroness (Anne) Jenkin, need not have worried. The king had already concluded that it was "imperative that he should appoint a prime minister from the House of Commons". He also shared the general dislike of Curzon.

Just two days after receiving Bonar Law's resignation unaccompanied by any advice as to his successor, the king made Stanley Baldwin his new prime minister on 22 May 1923. 🇬🇧



Lord Curzon



Stanley Baldwin

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and historian