

The Abdication Crisis 1936

King Edward VIII caused serious problems for the government in 1936 with his choice of his future wife. Edward had always had a love for older women especially Mrs Wallis Simpson whom he met in 1930. Wallis was a divorced American who was married to her second husband. When Edward became King in early 1936 pressure was placed on him to marry and it became apparent that his most likely choice for wife would be Mrs Simpson. The government became even more concerned when she applied for a divorce from her current husband. As King, Edward was the head of the Church and the attitude of the church was against divorce. It therefore seemed impossible for the King to marry a twice divorced American. At a time when the public had a strong feeling and belief in the monarch especially as many had fought and died in WW1 for their King and Country, it seemed impossible for Edward to remain King and marry the woman he loved.

Edward VIII made it very clear that he had every intention of marrying Wallis Simpson and the government also made it very clear that they would not support this marriage. The Royal family strongly opposed the marriage between the two and firmly believed that Edward should put his country before this woman. The choice was clear for Edward; marry Wallis and abdicate as King of England, or remain King but give up the woman he loved. The government and Royal family were strongly in favour of option 2 and made it clear to Edward that they would not support his marriage.

Source C – Churchill issued a public statement on the royal crisis, 5 December 1936

I plead for time and patience. The nation must realise the character of the constitutional issue. There is no question of any conflict between the King and parliament, parliament has not been consulted in any way, nor allowed to express any opinion. The question is whether the King is to abdicate upon the advice of the ministers of the day. No such advice has ever before been tendered to a Sovereign in parliamentary times.

If an abdication were to be hastily extorted the outrage so committed would cast its shadow forward across many chapters of the History of the British Empire.

The matter is pregnant with calamity and all the evil aspects will be aggravated beyond measure if the utmost chivalry is not shown by ministers and the British nation to a gifted and beloved King.

R. Rhodes James, *Churchill: A study in Failure*, 1973

Source D – A modern historian describes one of Churchill's bleakest moments.

When the House of Commons met on Monday 7 December it was apparent that its members had taken the pulse of their constituents, and found that the King had little support. Churchill had not done this. After Baldwin made a statement, Churchill rose and asked for an assurance that no irrevocable step would be taken before the House had had a chance to discuss the matter. To his astonishment he found, as he said later 'that it was physically impossible to make myself heard'. He was shaken by the hostility of the House and on his way out said that his political career was finished.

Pelling *Winston Churchill*, Macmillan 1974