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# 1

## The Making of an Ambassador

Lord D'Abernon was born Edgar Vincent in Slinford, Surrey on 19 August 1857, the seventh and youngest son of the Reverend Sir Frederick Vincent, eleventh baronet, rector of Slinford and prebendary of Chichester Cathedral.<sup>1</sup> His childhood home was The Manor House, in the village of Stoke D'Abernon, Surrey. A house had stood in this location by the River Mole since the land had been given to one Roger D'Abernon in 1086 for services rendered to William the Conqueror.<sup>2</sup> Ownership passed to the Vincent family in 1620, but the house that D'Abernon knew as a boy dated primarily from the eighteenth century. It contained a large Robert Adam drawing room and a fine mahogany staircase and was widely regarded as one of the finest houses dating from this period in the county.<sup>3</sup>

In the surviving record of his life, D'Abernon's parents and siblings are entirely absent. They are never mentioned and no correspondence with them has survived. This unconventional situation in an era renowned for letter writing provides an explanation for D'Abernon's unusual personal and intellectual self-containment. Nevertheless, his childhood seems to have followed the pattern typical of a nineteenth-century aristocrat and there is no indication that it was anything less than happy. He was educated at home until the age of seven and was then dispatched to a prep school on Manfolkin Terrace in Brighton. Here he must have showed some academic ability as he was taught with boys older than himself. D'Abernon later reflected that he 'did the work well enough and without effort'.<sup>4</sup> During these years, he excelled at sport, particularly football and cricket – aptitudes which, he was later to claim, demonstrated that he was one of life's 'team players'. At the age of twelve, D'Abernon went up to Eton, where he enjoyed an unexceptional career, being described by his house master, the Reverend C.C. James,

as 'lazy and impertinent'.<sup>5</sup> In 1882, in his only attempt to write an autobiography, D'Abernon explained away his boyhood indolence as 'boredom due to lack of crisis', claiming that his mind was only spurred into action when faced with a major intellectual challenge. He clearly found recounting the events of his life too tedious because he abandoned the endeavour after this account of his school days, instructing his readers to 'ask other people' about his life thereafter.<sup>6</sup> This is no easy task because he seldom merits more than a passing mention in the memoirs of his contemporaries.

At the age of twenty, D'Abernon was commissioned into the Coldstream Guards, but his disposition was unsuited to the discipline of military life and he spent the following three years developing his skills as a linguist. Throughout his career in public life D'Abernon was to demonstrate a talent for languages. His first published work was a *Handbook to Modern Greek*, produced in collaboration with T.G. Dickinson in 1879, which became a standard primer, widely and favourably reviewed in the national press.<sup>7</sup> D'Abernon spoke French fluently, could converse in Spanish and Italian and had some knowledge of Mandarin, Arabic and Russian. Despite such proficiency, when he was appointed ambassador to Berlin, he confessed that his knowledge of German was confined to an ability to read the language rather than to speak it. When this fact was pointed out to Lloyd George, D'Abernon claimed that the Prime Minister did not think an inability to speak German would undermine his effectiveness in Berlin.<sup>8</sup> This curious statement provides a further indication of the eccentric approach of both men towards D'Abernon's appointment and towards Britain's relations with Germany.

A career in the Diplomatic Service would have provided an obvious and natural outlet for his talents, but D'Abernon lacked a clear idea about where his future lay. It is likely that in his youth he would have found the prospect of conforming to diplomatic etiquette even more disagreeable than he was to find it forty years later in Berlin. In 1880, he chose instead to accept the post of private secretary to Lord Edmond Petty-Fitzmaurice, the Commissioner for Eastern Roumelia. D'Abernon demonstrated that he was an able administrator. In September 1880, he wrote a critique of a memorandum by Sir Francis Bertie, then acting senior clerk at the Foreign Office, on the importation of arms and ammunition into Bulgaria, that was highly regarded.<sup>9</sup> The following year, he became British commissioner for the evacuation of Turkish territory ceded to Greece under the terms of the Treaty of Berlin. In this post, he impressed George Goschen, the British ambassador to Constantinople, with his concise and dispassionate reports about troop movements in

the region and about the size and development of the Bulgarian army.<sup>10</sup> Goschen frequently asked D'Abernon for advice about the conduct of diplomacy and it was to be D'Abernon's views on finance that were to make the greatest impression on him when he became Chancellor of the Exchequer four years later.<sup>11</sup> In recognition of his talents, D'Abernon was appointed British, Belgian and Dutch representative on the council of the Ottoman public debt in Constantinople.

At the same time, D'Abernon's insights into the crisis in Sudan, which stemmed partly from his travels in the region in his late teens, led to a two-year appointment as Financial Adviser to the Khedive of Egypt. It was while in this post that the first indications of D'Abernon's attitude to the British government's treatment of him become apparent. He relished the freedom associated with administrative authority but believed that his masters in London did not respect this in their dealings with him. It was in a fit of pique over this issue that he declined the award of Companion of the Order of the Bath on his departure from office. In explaining his reasons for doing so, he wrote:

The position which I held in Egypt was one of great difficulty. I have been refused all legal powers, I have no regular administrative authority, and under the circumstances I am held responsible for the finances of a country, which the best financial opinion considers insolvent. Everything therefore depends on personal authority and influence and personal authority and influence depends in a great measure upon the manner in which I am treated by H.M.G. It is perfectly obvious that if I am made a Member of the Council of Ministers and then treated as an inferior to the Ministers, my advice will not carry much weight with my colleagues.<sup>12</sup>

The impact of personal influence on the conduct of commercial relations was to be a theme to which he returned in accounts of his activities in the 1880s and 1890s. It is ironic that a point conveyed with such force and cynicism at the end of his period in Egypt was to be made in a very different way between June 1920 and October 1926 during his period in Berlin.

## Egypt and Constantinople

In 1889, D'Abernon began to write a book – *Egypt in 1887* – in which he attempted to give fuller voice to his complaints about the way he had been treated by the British government, but after three years' work and

the completion of five of the projected six chapters, D'Abernon abandoned the manuscript.<sup>13</sup> He was to demonstrate considerably more tenacity in producing his memoirs of his period as ambassador to Berlin. While in Egypt, D'Abernon was not without his critics. Evelyn Baring, later Lord Cromer, and future President of the Unionist Free Trade Club, was sceptical whether D'Abernon's proposals to make the Egyptian economy solvent would work. He thought them too complicated, inconsistent and lacking in clarity.<sup>14</sup> D'Abernon worked closely with Baring examining ways in which Egyptian government expenditure could be reduced. He believed that the administrative costs were too high and that the government should produce a breakdown of departmental expenditure that would be used to calculate the annual budget. He did not rule out taking draconian measures to ensure the stability of the Egyptian economy. If necessary, government departments should be disbanded if they failed to meet their revised, lower targets for expenditure. Baring favoured the abolition of the Sinking Fund; D'Abernon favoured its retention.<sup>15</sup> In January 1884, D'Abernon persuaded Sir Evelyn Wood, first British *sidar* in the Egyptian army and charged with improving lines of communication with Khartoum, to make substantial reductions in the army budget.<sup>16</sup>

It was while he was in Egypt that D'Abernon developed a scepticism about the French, believing them to be 'too judgemental and difficult'.<sup>17</sup> His eccentric approach to diplomacy at this time is evident in a diary entry written when he was in Egypt. In discussing ways of persuading the government of the Khedive to cooperate with him, he noted: 'The more I see of foreigners the more convinced I am that the way to get on with them is to pay great attention to trivial details of formality: calling on them, leaving cards, dancing with their wives and sending them in to dinner in the proper order.'<sup>18</sup> He was to adopt similar tactics in his dealings with the German government but, as was also the case in Egypt, demonstrations of respect and tolerance were appreciated more than strict adherence to the niceties of diplomatic etiquette. His views towards foreign nationals of any race – be they Africans or Europeans – were typical of the paternalism and condescension of many of his generation. But D'Abernon was quick to condemn such an attitude in others. He accused the British government of 'bigotry' for failing to bring stable government to Egypt.<sup>19</sup> By August 1884, when he felt that his patience had been tried to the limit, his views on the conduct of diplomacy had undergone something of a change. He noted that it was now 'hopeless to get an Englishman, who has not been brought up to it... to conceal his contempt for the little formalities to which they attach so much importance'.<sup>20</sup>

D'Abernon was appointed Governor of the Imperial Ottoman Bank in 1889 and remained in this post until 1897, when he was forced to resign because of his association with a financial scandal, in which many of the bank's customers lost their life savings. The debacle, which today might have left him open to charges of insider dealing, inevitably did serious damage to his reputation. Matters were made worse by his unceremonious exit from Constantinople – through a rear window of the bank – because he believed that facing the consequences of his actions would be 'too onerous'.<sup>21</sup> For the rest of his career in public life, the French government, which underwrote the Imperial Ottoman Bank, took every possible opportunity to expose the duplicity of '*Le Voleur* Sir Edgar Vincent'.<sup>22</sup> Such statements did little to improve relations between the British and French governments during the diplomatically sensitive years immediately after the First World War or to enhance D'Abernon's reputation in Berlin.

Yet before the scandal, D'Abernon used his period as Governor to develop his views on international finance and it was to be these ideas that were to have a direct bearing on his attitude towards Anglo-German relations during his embassy in Berlin. He told Goschen that all measures possible had to be taken to ensure that London remained the financial centre of Europe.

Dealing with the London market from the outside, I see how important it is, in view of the rivalry of Paris and Berlin, to reduce the charge of both financial and commercial transactions in London to a minimum. Direct telegraphic communications gives London an immense advantage for finance, sea communication with all parts of the world gives England an advantage for commerce. But everything should be done to increase these national facilities so that London may become more and more the centre of the trade of the world. Commissions and brokerage are so much lower in Paris and Berlin that they (and Berlin especially) are serious competitors.<sup>23</sup>

This was particularly important, he believed, given the rapid industrial expansion of Germany. D'Abernon was thus one of an increasing number who believed that Germany posed a threat to British economic hegemony in Europe but not to European peace. Even in the years immediately before the First World War, D'Abernon continued to regard Anglo-German rivalry as nothing more than the natural expression of free market economics.

On his return to Britain from Constantinople, D'Abernon decided to abandon his career in international finance. He embarked on what was to be a brief parliamentary career, being elected Conservative MP for Exeter in 1899, before surrendering his seat in 1906 to join the Liberal party because he disagreed with Unionist policy on tariff reform.<sup>24</sup> He stood for Parliament again, unsuccessfully, as the Liberal candidate for Colchester in the first of the two general elections held in 1910. As a report in *The Times* put it, D'Abernon's parliamentary career was 'distinguished by the ability and firmness with which he opposed Mr [Joseph] Chamberlain's policy'.<sup>25</sup> D'Abernon became a close associate of the Liberal leader, Herbert Asquith, and began a lifelong friendship with Asquith's children, particularly Raymond and Violet (later Bonham Carter) and Asquith's second wife, Margot Tennant.<sup>26</sup> Although not always the shrewdest judge of character, the latter told D'Abernon in 1909 that her husband valued his views on tariff reform more than those of anyone else.<sup>27</sup>

At Asquith's instigation, D'Abernon was appointed a member of the Royal Commission on Imperial Trade established in April 1912 in response to Resolution 20 of the Imperial Conference held the previous year. The Commission was chaired by Lord Inchcape and included Sir Charles Owens and Sir Rider Haggard, as well as representatives from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.<sup>28</sup> D'Abernon was appointed because of his passionate belief in free trade. In November of that year, he took over the chairmanship of the commission and embarked on a tour of Australia and Polynesia in the spring of 1913.<sup>29</sup> This led to a subsequent tour of South Africa and later of Canada to assess the impact of free trade policies on the Empire.<sup>30</sup> The Commission's report, published in the autumn of 1914, concluded that the principal countries in the Empire were suffering from a severe shortage of educated and skilled workers to make their economies sufficiently competitive in the world market. Consequently, it was suggested that special efforts should be made to induce women to emigrate to help expand the population and to encourage soldiers returning from the war to start a new life in the colonies.<sup>31</sup>

### **Central Liquor Traffic Control Board**

In May 1915, Asquith appointed D'Abernon Chairman of the Central Liquor Traffic Control Board to assess the effect that workers' consumption of alcohol during working hours was having on the production of munitions.<sup>32</sup> Other members of the Board included Neville Chamberlain,

Waldorf Astor and Philip Snowden. The effects of the Board's rulings on shortened licensing hours and on the dilution of spirits sold in public houses influenced Lloyd George's decision as Chancellor of the Exchequer to double the duty on spirits, quadruple it on wine and sextuple it on sparkling wine.<sup>33</sup> These proposed measures were, however, abandoned because of strong Conservative opposition, notably from Bonar Law and Austen Chamberlain, who argued that only the areas where the munitions factories were located should be subject to such measures.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, the measures imposed by the Central Liquor Traffic Control Board were applied to all munitions factories, ports and shipbuilding in Britain and to the whole of London after September 1915.<sup>35</sup>

D'Abernon was surprised at the speed at which this legislation improved the war effort. Almost immediately after the measures had been put in place, statistics revealed that in Liverpool, for example, the number of prosecutions for drunkenness at work fell from 240 per week, before the establishment of the Board, to 164. In Cardiff, the improvement was even greater, with prosecutions falling from thirteen per week to five. At a conference of chief constables of the areas under the jurisdiction of the Board, D'Abernon stated: 'I confess that these results exceed my most sanguine expectations. If they can be maintained, a notable triumph would have been won, but the habits of a lifetime are not modified in a month and you must be prepared for a counter-attack.'<sup>36</sup> It is doubtful, however, whether D'Abernon anticipated the form that the 'counter-attack' would take. In November 1915, he received a number of deputations from dockers' unions asking for improvements in canteen facilities to help diminish the lure of the public house. During the winter of 1915, D'Abernon was invited to open dockers' canteens in Liverpool, Newcastle and Edinburgh.<sup>37</sup> By the summer of the following year, the Board had embarked on a review of the state of public houses, taking steps to close dilapidated establishments and to open larger, more attractive premises. These measures, it was hoped, somewhat optimistically, would encourage the consumption of more non-alcoholic drinks. The first of its kind was the so-called 'model pub', the Gretna Tavern, at whose opening D'Abernon was present, in July 1916.<sup>38</sup> D'Abernon advocated a drastic reduction in the number of public houses because he believed that in its present form the brewery business was not cost effective. In an interview with an American journalist in April 1916, D'Abernon set out his case. In an industry worth £186 million per annum, he argued, £64 million was absorbed by taxation, with the cost of materials being approximately £40 million,

leaving a balance of £82 million for retail expenditure and profit. Therefore, he claimed, between 30 and 40 per cent of public houses should be closed.<sup>39</sup>

By May 1917, the work of the Central Liquor Traffic Control Board had broadened, with the establishment of a subcommittee, chaired by D'Abernon, that examined the effect of drunkenness on workers' health.<sup>40</sup> He also used his position to praise the role of women in the war effort. In December of that year, he presented a paper entitled *Public Health and Alcoholism among Women* in which he argued that the war had demonstrated the value of women as an economic asset to the country.<sup>41</sup> He recommended that measures restricting the consumption of alcohol in the work place should remain in operation after the war to ensure the efficient running of the economy.<sup>42</sup> At a meeting with the Central Liquor Traffic Control Board at Caxton Hall in October 1918, D'Abernon went further, putting forward an eight-point plan that included the avoidance of long opening hours for public houses, the dilution of spirits, the brewing of beers with a lower alcohol content and a national programme for the establishment of workers' canteens.<sup>43</sup> His proposals came under severe criticism in an open letter from the trade union leader, Ben Tillett. Discussing D'Abernon's uncompromising approach to his role as chairman of the Central Liquor Traffic Control Board, Tillett wrote:

Summing up the value of your committee, I very much regret to say that you have made profiteers of both distillers and brewers, together with public-house owners, and the consumer of the ordinary healthy beverages has been mulcted in exorbitant costs. If you think that a reward for your services you are welcome to do so, but so far as the nation is concerned, the Army and the workers in particular, they have suffered materially by your mischievous administration, and while there may be some results of usefulness in your committee, on the whole I think it has been an egregious failure, and a very unwarrantable cost to the community. We regard it as the most Hun-like Department that ever the war has produced.<sup>44</sup>

Despite such criticism, by the end of the war, D'Abernon had established a reputation as an authority on industrial relations, giving a paper on *Rival Theories of the Causes of Drunkenness* to the Society of Arts on 27 November 1918.<sup>45</sup> It was his ability to combine economic ideas and sociological analysis that led him to become interested in defusing the tension between the government and the trade unions over the

operation of the railways and the coal industry in the spring of 1919. In a letter to *The Times* in April 1919, D'Abernon predicted a long and continuous cycle of strikes and unrest. The solution to the problem, he concluded, lay in a redefinition of the relationship between the government and the trade unions. He wrote:

The result must be that a fresh alteration to a fresh basis will have to be sought. If we continue on the old lines, a cycle of strikes and lock-outs is inevitable before agreement is once more reached, an agreement no more stable than the present one. It is possible that in this country the innate reasonableness and love of compromise in the English character will result in these disputes being again settled without any revolutionary upheaval; but if the view is correct that the disputes are avoidable and are due to a remediable cause, it is surely unwise to expose our national life to so severe a strain and to so grave a danger.<sup>46</sup>

These views led him to recommend to the Sankey Commission – established to investigate the possible nationalisation of the coal industry – that miners' wages should be fixed at a level that did not leave them subject to fluctuations in the price of coal.<sup>47</sup> It is only possible to view such an idea, which clearly had little grounding in sound economics, as an attempt to appeal to the commissioners' hearts rather than to their heads. Such words also suggest that D'Abernon was not always a reliable source of sensible advice on economic policy.

While Lloyd George and Balfour were at the Paris Peace Conference, D'Abernon visited the French capital to address what the *Ligue Nationale contre l'Alcolisme* termed 'a peace conference on alcohol'. In a paper entitled *The Effects of War-Time Control of the Liquor Traffic in England*, D'Abernon gave a detailed economic analysis of the impact of convictions for drunkenness, deaths from alcoholism, cases of delirium tremens and suicides prompted by drunkenness.<sup>48</sup> D'Abernon socialised extensively with members of the British delegation to the peace conference, especially Balfour, and became known as something of an authority on some of the most politically sensitive and controversial issues of the time. He was also readily accepted into the company of senior government ministers. His ignominious departure from Constantinople had long been forgotten by all except the French. He may not have been an obvious choice as ambassador to Berlin, but his ability to cope with difficult briefs combined with his insight into the operation of contemporary economics may have brought him to the notice of Lloyd George

and of Curzon, when the latter assumed Balfour's mantle as Foreign Secretary in October 1919.

At the end of the First World War, therefore, D'Abernon enjoyed a relatively high profile among senior politicians. He had the respect of both Asquith and Lloyd George – a feat that not many were able to accomplish – and had established his credentials as an expert on the connection between economic policy and the successful prosecution of the war. He was thus more qualified than most to make an examination of the connection between economic policy and the successful prosecution of the peace. But as the post-war world in which he was required to operate turned so many old certainties on their heads, D'Abernon can be seen as a sound choice for the post of ambassador in so far as anyone with some knowledge of international finance would have been appropriate. Other factors also need to be taken into consideration, most notably the operation and opinions of the Diplomatic Service, of which D'Abernon was not a member. The decision to appoint D'Abernon as ambassador to Berlin indicated an obsession within British government circles with the 'new' *expert* diplomacy and showed that Britain's relations with Germany were viewed primarily in terms of economics – the payment of reparations and the cost of the army of occupation, rather than political considerations.

### **Resumption of diplomatic relations with Germany**

After the Armistice, a long debate took place between the Allies about when and how to resume diplomatic relations with Germany. The First World War had two important consequences for Britain that had a direct bearing on these issues. The first was the effect on the diplomatic priorities of Britain and France. The 'German Question' was the central issue of Anglo-French diplomacy during the first years of peace. The Cabinet believed that the timing of the reinstatement of diplomatic relations with Germany must be linked, like so many other matters, to maintaining a *modus vivendi* with France. In many respects, the timetable for sending diplomatic representation to Berlin formed a logical focus for the debate between the British and French governments about how Germany should be treated.<sup>49</sup> In addition, domestic remnants of wartime Germanophobia were mixed with uncertainties about the political and economic climate in the immediate aftermath of the Paris Peace Conference. As a result, Allied attempts to establish a joint policy regarding the resumption of diplomatic relations with Germany were made more difficult.<sup>50</sup> All major powers that had fought the war

had a clear need to seek some form of permanent security. But most British politicians were sceptical about becoming too involved in preserving and guaranteeing European peace and stability.<sup>51</sup> There was another point of view to which Curzon subscribed, namely that it was in Britain's interest to conclude a peace settlement as soon as possible, to expedite German recovery and so obtain reparation payments that could be used to repay British war loans to the United States.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, the British government was inclined to distance itself from the uncompromising policy of France towards Germany over the implementation of the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>53</sup> Brokering a relationship between France and France's principal former enemy formed the foundation of British involvement in western European diplomacy throughout the 1920s.<sup>54</sup>

In the early years of peace, British policy towards Germany consisted primarily of short-term responses to the current political, military and economic situation, and Curzon and Lloyd George contributed equally to the formulation of such policy.<sup>55</sup> The uncertainty that made the devising of a long-term policy difficult was partly due to the volatility of domestic affairs in Germany, but also stemmed from differences within the British government about the way in which foreign policy should be conducted. 'Old' diplomatic practices were linked to the pre-war era and widely regarded as an important cause of the war. Such practices were also widely viewed as élitist in that they tended to be practised by those upper echelons of society traditionally employed by the Foreign Office partly as a means of maintaining social predominance. 'New' diplomacy was intended to dispel the secrecy and suspicion that had surrounded pre-war diplomatic practices and help promote international security through the open discussion of problems. But it is dangerous to view these different approaches to the conduct of relations between states as incompatible opposites, creating unbridgeable divisions within the Foreign Office and between Curzon and Lloyd George.<sup>56</sup> When the events surrounding the decision to appoint an ambassador are analysed, it becomes clear that Curzon and Lloyd George played equal parts in guiding Allied policy on the matter.

Liberal and Labour politicians believed that the war was potentially a vehicle for fundamental political, economic and social change. The era of mass politics and the enfranchisement of women in the years after 1918 have been well chronicled, but within the government, this process of change had started during the early years of the war. The Foreign Office had begun to contemplate reform in its recruitment patterns as early as 1914. In that year, the MacDonnell Commission had

concluded that Britain possessed the most expensive and 'snobbish' Foreign Service in the world and that it had also failed to develop the commercial aspect of its role.<sup>57</sup> In future, diplomats were to be moved about as often as possible to gain broader experience, and the commission recommended that an integral part of the process of peacemaking should be the need to involve economic and financial experts in the conduct of diplomacy. Thus the origins of the expert diplomacy that was to become so synonymous with Lloyd George in the early 1920s were not as radical as many contemporaries and historians have thought. Its foundation in interdepartmental politics also explains why Curzon was never entirely repelled by it and was even willing to use it to enhance his position as Foreign Secretary rather than denouncing it in its entirety. D'Abernon's appointment as ambassador to Berlin represented one such opportunity.

The recommendations of the MacDonnell Commission influenced British policy towards Germany in the period leading up to the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries in January 1920. As early as July 1919, the governments of Britain, France, Italy, Japan and the United States sent a note requesting that the German government resume diplomatic relations with them after the shortest possible delay.<sup>58</sup> This request came as members of the Allied delegations at the Paris Peace Conference considered the establishment of committees to coordinate the operation of the Treaty of Versailles. The records of the conversations kept by Eustace Percy, Secretary to the then Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, reveal that the Allies intended to appoint *chargés d'affaires* in Berlin as soon as the treaty was ratified.<sup>59</sup> The matter was discussed again in October when Sir Eyre Crowe, acting as replacement for Lloyd George as head of the British delegation during the closing weeks of the peace conference, suggested that the Allies should agree the conditions under which diplomatic relations with Germany would be resumed. The head of the Italian delegation, Tittoni, believed that before such discussions could take place, a decision should be taken about whether the Allied governments would be represented by ambassadors or *chargés d'affaires*.<sup>60</sup> This preceded the production of a letter by the British delegation, for submission to the Allied Supreme Council, which stated that the five Great Powers had 'agreed on a uniform course of action as regards the resumption of diplomatic relations with Germany' and proposed to be represented in Berlin by *chargés d'affaires* until a suitable date for the dispatch of an ambassador could be agreed.<sup>61</sup> The British government then asked how the names would be chosen and when the appointees would proceed to their posts.<sup>62</sup>

In response, the Allied Supreme Council set up a Special Committee to investigate the matter. Its report, which was published in November 1919, concluded that 'there would be no objection to immediately sending to Berlin agents whose mission would be of an economic character, such as commercial attachés'.<sup>63</sup> The presence of military and naval attachés was deemed provocative and therefore undesirable. Its final conclusion, that the proliferation of commissions of control were such as to 'diminish the importance of the task of these offices', was to provide useful Foreign Office ammunition against the War Office in the coming months as both departments sought to direct British policy towards Germany.

The discussions about the resumption of diplomatic relations with Germany that took place in the following months illustrate the different attitudes of the British and French governments towards Germany that were to be such a feature of European diplomacy throughout the 1920s. Curzon wanted the Allied powers to act together on the matter. In January 1920, Lord Kilmarnock, a career diplomat who had held a number of junior consular posts in Germany before the war, was appointed British chargé d'affaires in Berlin.<sup>64</sup> Curzon was anxious to appoint an ambassador within three months of Kilmarnock's arrival. But progress was hampered when it became apparent that the French government wished to see how far the German government was prepared to comply with the reparation and disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles before committing itself to the appointment of an ambassador. What was more, the French insisted on special consideration because France had borne the brunt of the physical devastation during the war and was the most vulnerable to any future German invasion. Lloyd George argued that it was precisely because there could be problems with German compliance with the terms of the Treaty of Versailles that the Allied powers should be represented by ambassadors in Berlin.<sup>65</sup> Nor was he surprised at the French reaction since he had anticipated that there would be 'difficulties for the next fifteen years'. Anyone who thought that all the controversies surrounding the treaty could be resolved within six months 'could not have read it'.<sup>66</sup> The French position nevertheless remained intractable. Curzon argued that the attitude of the French government was dangerous because if France did not agree to appoint an ambassador at the same time as Britain and Italy, it would demonstrate an embarrassing lack of unity among the Allies.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, the minutes of this meeting suggest that the French representatives accepted Curzon's argument as they reveal that the British, French and Italian governments intended to dispatch

ambassadors to Berlin within three months of the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles, that is from 10 April 1920.<sup>68</sup>

At the inter-Allied conference at Lympe in June 1920, Lloyd George and Millerand, the French Prime Minister, announced that the British and French governments intended to replace their *chargés d'affaires* in Berlin with ambassadors.<sup>69</sup> Central to the decision was the Allied need to discuss the reparation clauses of the Treaty of Versailles with the German government in detail, in particular the establishment of a final total and the means of payment. At a meeting of the Allied Supreme Council the following day in Boulogne, Millerand, Curzon and the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Count Sforza, proposed 1 July as the date when the ambassadors' appointments would take effect.<sup>70</sup> As economic affairs lay at the heart of the decision to dispatch Allied ambassadors to Berlin, it was logical to appoint candidates who had a detailed knowledge of such issues, especially given the complexity of the reparation clauses of the peace treaty.

As indicated earlier, Foreign Office enthusiasm for the establishment of permanent diplomatic representation in Berlin was also fuelled by the activities of the War Office. Officials attached to the British army of occupation had a greater grasp of the social, economic and political mood in Germany than most members of the government in London. Through the War Office, they sent suggestions about the future conduct of Anglo-German relations to London. This was viewed as a threat to the right of the Foreign Office to be the principal architect of British policy towards Germany. Curzon responded by stepping up the search to find a suitable candidate for the post of ambassador to Berlin. It is difficult to overstate the impact that strained relations with the War Office had on Foreign Office morale on this matter. Sir Charles Hardinge, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, summed up the feeling of resentment, commenting: 'It is really very difficult to work with the War Office who seem to barge in on every occasion on matters abroad whether military or political.'<sup>71</sup> However, others saw the appointment of an ambassador to Berlin as an opportunity to enhance the prestige of the Foreign Office. On the day that D'Abernon's selection was announced, Sydney Waterlow of the Central European Department, wrote:

Our Berlin Embassy is very much in the limelight and is likely to be more so in the early future. If it does not shew up well – if the Prime Minister continues to feel that it cannot be depended upon for intelligent information, he is likely to turn more and more to the soldiers.

The position and prestige of the Foreign Office itself are closely involved in the success of the British Embassy.<sup>72</sup>

Containing the influence of the War Office, which was headed by one of his sternest critics, Winston Churchill, was as important to Lloyd George as it was to the Foreign Office. In March 1920, Lloyd George told Cambon, the French ambassador to London, that it was important for an ambassador to be appointed. He believed that 'great danger lay in the military members of the various missions each expressing their own views, whilst the *chargés d'affaires* did not possess sufficient authority to keep them in order'. As a result each of the Allied powers should be represented by an ambassador who 'represented the political conscience of the people'.<sup>73</sup> It is doubtful whether D'Abernon ever did that, but he did provide an effective tool in the power struggle between the War Office and the Foreign Office. Lloyd George came under considerable pressure from Churchill to send a 'great man to Berlin'.<sup>74</sup> The Prime Minister stood accused by Churchill of pursuing a tentative policy towards Germany while disregarding the possibility of communist infiltration. When D'Abernon's appointment was announced, he was almost as well known for his hostility to Bolshevism as he was for his financial expertise. Commenting on these events years later, Sir Robert Vansittart, a man not known for his pro-German views, described D'Abernon as 'handsome, brilliantly intelligent, financier, scholar, as good a judge of a horse as of a picture, white-bearded as an acute Father Christmas with something more than an eye for a pretty girl, excellent company, one of those Britons who contrive to be cosmopolitan in culture and insular in outlook; he was in fact almost everything but great'.<sup>75</sup>

### **D'Abernon's selection as ambassador**

Nevertheless, Curzon's decision to appoint D'Abernon as ambassador to Berlin on 30 June 1920 indicates a sound grasp of the realities of contemporary diplomacy and the fact that it was not always desirable to adhere to traditional means of selection based on experience and seniority.<sup>76</sup> Nor was D'Abernon's appointment unique in this respect. Curzon had adopted a similar rationale when appointing Sir Auckland Geddes, a businessman, as ambassador to Washington in April 1920, a post where once again financial affairs dominated the role of the diplomat. On his appointment, Curzon described Geddes as a 'new type of ambassador'.<sup>77</sup> It was conventional for all senior diplomatic appointments

to be discussed with the Permanent Under-Secretary, but in the case of D'Abernon, Curzon did not do so because he knew that Hardinge was likely to be hostile.<sup>78</sup> Curzon also realised that D'Abernon's experience of international diplomacy was limited, in the distant past and was not based on a knowledge of European affairs. As this was also an almost perfect description of his own credentials as Foreign Secretary – a post that he felt that he had been born to fill – he saw little reason why D'Abernon's relative lack of experience of European diplomacy should act as a bar to his appointment to Berlin.<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, Curzon was reluctant to admit openly to his hand in D'Abernon's appointment. The only indication of Curzon's role lies in the diary of the British ambassador to Paris, the Earl of Derby, in March 1920, and it was widely believed inside Foreign Office circles and in the press that it was Lloyd George who had forced the appointment on Curzon.<sup>80</sup> This was not a myth that Curzon was anxious to debunk. After all, if it was believed that Lloyd George had been responsible for D'Abernon's appointment, should his embassy prove to be a failure, the blame would not be laid at Curzon's door.<sup>81</sup> As it was, in D'Abernon, Curzon and the Foreign Office had access to an individual who was more able than they were to interpret and explain the complexities of the economic clauses of the Treaty of Versailles and the subsequent plans to establish a reparations total.<sup>82</sup>

Lloyd George himself approved of the appointment of a financial expert as ambassador to Berlin, but had reservations about D'Abernon's suitability given his association with the share scandal at the Imperial Ottoman Bank in 1897.<sup>83</sup> Curzon persuaded him that there were no other candidates with D'Abernon's knowledge of financial affairs.<sup>84</sup> The ease with which Curzon convinced the Prime Minister suggests that any reservations that Lloyd George had about D'Abernon's suitability were not great. He seemed little concerned that, even if the Germans welcomed the appointment of someone who could advise them on meeting their financial obligations under the peace treaty, the French were likely to be much less impressed. Both he and Curzon must have realised that the appointment of a man who had almost brought about the collapse of the bank would be unpopular in Paris and cause friction between the British and French governments.<sup>85</sup>

When the official announcement of D'Abernon's appointment was made, his experience in international finance was cited as the principal reason for his selection.<sup>86</sup> Opposition came from two quarters: *The Times*, and through the less public channels of the Foreign Office. Both believed that D'Abernon's appointment represented further evidence of

Lloyd George's desire to dominate the conduct of foreign policy and to marginalise members of the Diplomatic Service with greater experience. *The Times*, under the editorship of Wickham Steed, had been critical of Lloyd George's conduct of foreign affairs since the Paris Peace Conference.<sup>87</sup> It seized on the news of D'Abernon's appointment as an opportunity to launch another attack upon the Prime Minister, accusing him of breaking a number of diplomatic conventions relating to the way in which ambassadors were selected and of trying to undermine the role of the Foreign Office.<sup>88</sup> A series of barbed articles appeared implying that D'Abernon was unsuitable for the post and expressing outrage at the government's decision to resume full diplomatic relations so soon after the war. The strongest indictment came in the leader column on 30 June 1920, which expressed dismay at the decision to send an ambassador to Germany at all, let alone such an eccentric choice. It concluded that,

we should have preferred the choice of the Prime Minister to have fallen upon a public man whose career had been free from any connection with international finance; and we hold that the Prime Minister would have been well-advised had he paid heed to the representations upon the appointment of D'Abernon which we believe to have been made to him by Curzon, and other responsible members.<sup>89</sup>

The debate rumbled on for several days. On 2 July 1920, in the House of Commons, the Lord Privy Seal, Andrew Bonar Law, was asked to explain what 'qualifications' D'Abernon possessed that were 'superior' to those of experienced diplomats. Bonar Law replied somewhat lamely that D'Abernon was deemed to be the most suitable candidate.<sup>90</sup> Recognising Foreign Office fears about his selection, *The Times* then focused attention on German reactions to the news of D'Abernon's appointment. Quoting an extract from the *Berliner Tageblatt* that linked D'Abernon's reputation as a financial expert with Allied desires to 'complete the diplomatic activities of the Reparation Commission', *The Times* accused the British government of unnecessarily abandoning pre-war diplomatic procedures.<sup>91</sup> This comment played on German fears that, because the Reparation Commission was based in Paris, it was little more than an extension of the French government.

Curzon's role in D'Abernon's appointment also offers a valuable insight into his relationship with the Foreign Office, and illustrates the difficulties that it experienced in reconciling pre-war diplomatic practices with the realities of post-war diplomacy. Curzon must have

anticipated Foreign Office hostility to D'Abernon's appointment. Hardinge was the most strenuous critic – his main objection being that D'Abernon lacked diplomatic experience and that more suitable candidates had been passed over.<sup>92</sup> In April 1920, he had warned that 'it would be hardly fair to appoint an outsider' when there were members of the Diplomatic Service with greater and more relevant experience.<sup>93</sup> He made specific reference to Sir Horace Rumbold, who had held the rank of counsellor at the British Embassy in Berlin before the war and was currently Minister to Poland.<sup>94</sup> While Curzon saw fit to ignore this advice, Hardinge automatically assumed that it had been Lloyd George who had forced D'Abernon's appointment on the Foreign Secretary. By mid-July 1920, Hardinge's opposition had intensified. In a letter of commiseration to Rumbold, he wrote: 'I am afraid you, like many other people, were disgusted at the appointment to the Embassy in Berlin. There is nothing to be done as far as I can see, for the prospects for the Service are very poor.'<sup>95</sup> In reply, Rumbold complained that D'Abernon's selection represented 'clear proof that the regular diplomats cannot aspire to become ambassadors'. Rumbold was in no doubt that Lloyd George was 'at the bottom of it all'. He feared for the future of the Diplomatic Service, noting that the 'present system [was] bound to take the heart out of the Service'. His contempt for Lloyd George was such that he felt sure that the abandonment of the traditional way of selecting diplomats that D'Abernon's appointment represented was a 'matter of indifference to the higher power'.<sup>96</sup>

### **Inter-Allied mission to Poland**

Foreign Office resentment came to a head at the beginning of July 1920 when Lloyd George decided to dispatch D'Abernon as head of an inter-Allied mission to offer advice to the Polish government during the Russo-Polish war.<sup>97</sup> It is not clear why D'Abernon was chosen for this task. One consideration would undoubtedly have been his hatred of Bolshevism, but it could also have been a means of mollifying French opposition to his selection as ambassador to Berlin by dispatching him to offer advice to the government of France's foremost ally in eastern Europe.<sup>98</sup> Lloyd George made the appointment without consulting Curzon. The strength of the latter's response indicates his confident attitude both towards his position as Foreign Secretary and towards his relationship with Lloyd George. Curzon wrote:

While it is true that we are living in days of sudden decision, the precedent is rather a dangerous one if the Foreign Secretary may

wake up any day to find that one of his principal subordinates is about to be sent off elsewhere. Hence my gentle protest, which I am sure you will not think unreasonable.<sup>99</sup>

D'Abernon's dispatch to Poland further inflamed Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service hostility towards Lloyd George. When the ambassador arrived in Warsaw, Rumbold commented that he knew 'quite well' that neither Hardinge nor anyone else at the Foreign Office had been responsible for D'Abernon's appointment either as ambassador to Berlin or as head of the mission to Poland.<sup>100</sup> Rumbold expressed relief when D'Abernon left the Polish capital to survey the Polish military situation, but noted that, 'If D'Abernon comes back again the situation will become impossible. If I am practically superseded, the result must inevitably be to discourage me and to impair my authority with the Poles.'<sup>101</sup>

Hardinge asked Curzon to curtail D'Abernon's visit to Poland, arguing that if D'Abernon returned to Warsaw, Rumbold's position would be 'rather a false one', but Curzon refused, insisting that it was Lloyd George who was responsible for the mission. Curzon's letter of protest was therefore more concerned with the potential threat to his own position than with disagreement with the decision to dispatch D'Abernon to Poland. Hardinge attempted to reassure Rumbold that he had the full support of Lloyd George – which, under the circumstances, can have been of little consolation. He described Lloyd George's enthusiasm for D'Abernon as a temporary aberration – that the Prime Minister was 'going through a phase of a sort of blind admiration and hero worship of D'Abernon and thinks that nobody can do anything except D'Abernon: all this will pass and you needn't be a bit afraid as to your future prospects'.<sup>102</sup>

The news of D'Abernon's dispatch to Poland also prompted attacks against Lloyd George in *The Times*. Aubrey Kennedy, who had been sent to report on the activities of the inter-Allied mission, thought that Lloyd George had been unwise to send D'Abernon to Poland to take precedence over the existing diplomatic staff.<sup>103</sup> This gave Lloyd George a bad press at a time when he was anxious to maintain the reputation of an international statesman that he had enjoyed at the Paris Peace Conference and when Curzon was trying to secure the role of the Foreign Office in the conduct of foreign policy and enhance his position in the Cabinet.<sup>104</sup>

## **Relations with the British government**

More junior officials at the Foreign Office hoped that D'Abernon would only occupy the embassy in Berlin for a short period and that eventually

he would be replaced by a career diplomat. Opposition to his appointment had led to the creation of a small group of Foreign Office officials who took every opportunity to criticise D'Abernon's activities and to complain about Lloyd George's role in the conduct of foreign affairs. This group, led by Sir Miles Lampson and Ralph Wigram in the Central European Department, sought ways of finding alternative uses for D'Abernon's knowledge of financial affairs. Lampson and Wigram wished to reinstate traditional procedures for the selection of diplomats but, by the time that the Lloyd George administration fell in October 1922, they were forced to concede that D'Abernon had proved a useful interpreter of financial issues.<sup>105</sup> In November 1922, it seemed as though a compromise might be possible when it was rumoured that Sir John Bradbury, the head of the British delegation to the Reparation Commission, was retiring.<sup>106</sup> Lampson was in the vanguard of those who recommended that D'Abernon be appointed in his stead. Curzon, however, refused to agree because by then D'Abernon's strong pro-German sympathies were well known and were likely to arouse hostility at the meetings of a commission that was based in France.<sup>107</sup> This decision serves as a reminder of the sensitivity of Britain's relationship with France at this time – an era when the friction between Curzon and Poincaré, the French Prime Minister, brought relations between the two countries to their lowest ebb since the war.<sup>108</sup>

Throughout his embassy, D'Abernon was convinced that Lloyd George had been responsible for his appointment.<sup>109</sup> Even when he was contemplating retirement in 1926, almost four years after the fall of the Lloyd George government, he wrote that he had 'always recognised' that it had been through the former Prime Minister that he had become 'connected' with the Berlin embassy.<sup>110</sup> More significantly, D'Abernon believed that the early years of his embassy had been under Lloyd George's 'auspices and guidance', while feeling that Curzon was 'out of touch with the modern world'.<sup>111</sup> Sir Maurice Hankey, Secretary to the Cabinet, was later to tell Lloyd George that D'Abernon attached 'more importance to your *personal* confidence than to anything else'.<sup>112</sup> D'Abernon clearly thought that he was a favourite of Lloyd George and that this gave his position as ambassador to Berlin a particularly high status. It was from this perceived position that D'Abernon criticised Curzon and the operation of the Foreign Office. He believed that the Foreign Office's conduct of diplomacy was antiquated and excessively bureaucratic. He also thought that the Diplomatic Service possessed 'insufficient acquaintance with commerce [and] finance', and lived in an insular world in which 'contact with men of affairs [was] too rare'.<sup>113</sup>

He recommended that, at the very least, a scheme should be introduced that would strictly limit the duration of diplomatic appointments. Junior diplomatic staff should be interchanged on a regular basis, with experience of commercial affairs being made compulsory. While these comments were confined to his diary, they were not confidential or private. D'Abernon, like Lord Derby and other diplomats of his generation, was in the habit of sending copies of substantial parts of his diary to Lloyd George, Curzon and Hankey as 'supplements' to his official dispatches.<sup>114</sup> It was not merely D'Abernon's views on what kinds of individuals should be employed as diplomats that was a source of friction, but the similarity of his views with those of the Prime Minister concerning the conduct of diplomacy. In particular, D'Abernon and Lloyd George had similar views about Britain's role in European affairs.<sup>115</sup> They both believed that the Treaty of Versailles would be most effectively enforced by treating Germany on the same terms as the Allied powers.<sup>116</sup>

The relationship between Curzon and D'Abernon was never close. 'More than once Curzon let [D'Abernon] down', wrote a reviewer of the first volume of *An Ambassador of Peace*, 'but, fortunately, such desertions were never serious enough to destroy his credit in Berlin.'<sup>117</sup> The first part of the statement is true; the second much less so. Apart from coming from a similar social background, the two men had little in common. Their views on the nature of diplomacy and on Germany were different.<sup>118</sup> Curzon had little interest in German affairs and viewed the French as the most dangerous rivals to Britain in international affairs.<sup>119</sup> D'Abernon, by contrast, was, with the exception of Sir Neville Henderson in the 1930s, the most pro-German British diplomat of the interwar period.

Curzon's attitude towards D'Abernon's appointment and the way in which he encouraged Foreign Office opposition to Lloyd George's approach to diplomacy suggests a man confident of his own position as Foreign Secretary. The reinstatement of diplomatic relations with Germany after the First World War represented one of the most important steps in British foreign policy during the interwar period. It was the culmination of a process of negotiation that demonstrated the fragility of the relationship between Britain and France. It also proved to be controversial as the process of selecting an ambassador became part of the debate between traditional and newer methods of conducting diplomacy. It was particularly significant that Curzon, as head of the Foreign Office, was willing to break with convention and appoint a man to a key diplomatic post whose views about the conduct of diplomacy were

closer to those of Lloyd George than to his own. The impact of such internal rivalries within the Cabinet on D'Abernon's activities in Berlin were to be considerable. His first and principal task was to offer financial advice to the German government. On this subject, he received incomplete information from London, which immediately placed him at a disadvantage in his dealings with the German experts.

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