

CHAPTER VI

THE NEW MAN

"I am dead against any 'inspiration' being sent to the Press. It is done in no country - probably not even in America. The King's Speech is drawn up by his Ministers but if the Press gets hold of it before it is made from the Throne it becomes a perfect farce. Sandars evidently belongs to a new regime - one has heard of the New Woman but he is evidently the New Man": King Edward VII to Lord Knollys
14th February 1903.

When King Edward VII ascended the throne in 1901, he made every effort to assume the most active part in directing the affairs of state. Queen Victoria had, on many issues in her later years, merely concurred with the wishes of the Prime Minister and Parliament, due to her aloofness, and, in the last years of her reign, diminishing energy. When Edward VII became King he made no secret of the fact that he intended to be personally in charge of affairs. He even refused to allow another member of the royal family to hold Council for him when he was abroad, even though he was away very often at Biarritz or Baden.

During the second year of his reign, Lord Salisbury resigned as Prime Minister, as he had said he would at the end of the Boer War, and was succeeded by his nephew Arthur Balfour. This further increased the likelihood of a serious constitutional clash between the King and the Prime Minister. Under the old era, it had become the habit to "leak" to the Press the important contents of the King's Speech at the opening of Parliament, before the Speech was actually made. Queen Victoria had made no objection

to this practice, but far from allowing it, Edward VII wanted the speech submitted to him for personal correction and alteration.

Mr. Balfour's Private Secretary, since his days as First Lord of the Treasury, had been John Satterfield Sandars: he continued in this capacity throughout Balfour's Premiership. Sandars controlled not only the flow of information from 10 Downing Street to the Press, but also to a degree unknown in the case of any other Prime Minister's Private Secretary, the very decisions and steps of his chief. So it is not surprising to find Edward VII writing these words so scathingly about the habit of allowing the Press advance information on the contents of the King's Speech before it was even made by him.

Jack Sandars was the only son of Charles Sandars of Mackworth, Derbyshire. He was born in January 1853, was educated at Repton and from there went up to Oxford. He gained admission as a commoner to Magdalen on the strength, according to his obituary in The Times, of his extensive and most unusual knowledge of Cicero's 'Pro Cluentio'. This may well have been true - and the story emanates from Sandars himself - in view of the fact that he took a Third class in Law in 1874. In 1877 he was called, and for the next seven years he was variously occupied at the Bar, until he published, in 1884 his textbook on the law of land drainage. The year after "Sandars on Sewers" was published, he took the unusual step of bettering his Third Class in Law with a D.C.L. which he was awarded for his thesis on the Roman Doctrine of Culpa. (later published). It is easy to see from the list of Sandars's publications the stages in which his interest moved from Sewer Law to Coal Mines (his father was a colliery agent) to Electoral Law in 1890, and political events and personalities later.

Sandars's real career was not in law, however, but politics. His first appointment was as private secretary to the Home Secretary in 1885, Lord Llandaff. This appointment continued until 1892 when Sandars decided to contest a constituency and enter the political arena in his own right. However this ambition was not realised, and his opponent was elected for mid-Derbyshire. In retrospect it can confidently be said that had Jack Sandars entered and remained in Parliament himself, he would never have wielded the influence over events which later became his lot as a private secretary. In the same year as his unsuccessful attempt to enter the House of Commons he married Harriet, daughter of Sir William Don, Bt - as The Times has it: "he made a most happy alliance with a lady of singular attraction and artistic accomplishment". Her description as artistic is borne out perhaps by the fact that she was closely related to Sir J. E. Millais, a President of the Royal Academy, and her will, when she died in 1947, refers to various paintings by members of her family, as well as two Rubens.

While at Magdalen, one of Jack Sandars's immediate contemporaries had been Cecil Balfour. Twenty years later he became a private secretary for the second time - this time to Cecil Balfour's brother, Arthur, who was already well known to him from the latter's days under Lord Llandaff. In 1895 Arthur Balfour was First Lord of the Treasury and in 1902 became Prime Minister on his uncle's resignation. Sandars worked for Balfour throughout this period until Balfour's defeat as P.M. in 1905 then continuing until 1915 when Balfour became First Lord of the Admiralty much against Sandars's wishes and advice.

Jack Sandars had as great influence in the political events of these twenty years

as a Cabinet Minister, even apart from the period when his chief was Prime Minister. During Balfour's time as First Lord of the Treasury he was responsible for ecclesiastical patronage, also advising on the distribution of honours and the selection of candidates for the Conservative Party. He sounded out opinion at the Carlton Club for his chief (who never cared for that side of politics and seldom went there), smoothed over differences between him and Joseph Chamberlain and looked after his private life and affairs in a way which made his services indispensable to Mr. Balfour. So when Lord Salisbury resigned on July 10 1902 and Mr. Balfour became Prime Minister, Sandars's career reached its zenith. Even before this appointment Balfour was heavily dependent on his private secretary, but now the burden of his responsibilities made him even more so. Sandars himself, writing many years later of the special character of the job, says, "nothing is more difficult to trace than this invisible influence (of the private secretary) where it is permitted to have play."

Arthur Balfour has been described as the laziest British Prime Minister of the twentieth century. He suffered from poor health and was easily frustrated by his colleagues if they did not understand and fit in with his superior attitude. He quickly became bored of the routine matters which his office required of him: Sandars realised this and knew that only by making his letters to his chief lively and readable could he hold his attention. Balfour was frequently in ill health, and even more frequently in Scotland. His prolonged absences from Downing Street allowed his private secretary to exercise more control over the everyday events of government than did the Prime Minister himself. On one occasion for instance he convened Parliament a week earlier than usual without consulting

either the Prime Minister or the King. He was held in awe by Balfour's Cabinet colleagues: we find Walter Long, who was Chief Secretary for Ireland at this time, and who was not a man to fawn on his colleagues, let alone on their deputies, writing, shortly after his appointment, in a rather subservient manner to Sandars: ".... I shall be at the office at eleven and should be glad if I can have half an hour with you to discuss one or two points." Letters of this kind among the Balfour Papers bear out the historians of the Edwardian political scene: in many respects the Secretary was more important than the Principal. And this position was in no way altered by the Tory party's disappearance into opposition in 1905. Sandars continued to communicate the views of the Opposition to the King - on 12th February 1910 Edward VII is writing to his own private secretary, Lord Knollys: "I should be glad if you would ask Sandars to come and see you on Monday at 1 o'clock and then I shall ask him to come up to my room for a few minutes afterwards."

The letters which passed between the Prime Minister and his man of action behind the scenes throw much light on their personal relations. Balfour writing, in an illegible hand, from varying Halls and Castles in Scotland and the North, "Dear Sandars", and the other replies in a neat succinct style from 10 Downing Street, "My dear Chief" Some of the later letters are typewritten - it is amusing to notice in such cases that where mention is made of the King, the word is left blank by the typist and carefully penned in when the letter is signed so as not to debase His Majesty with modernity.

Where the public were concerned, his attitude was autocratic. In advising Mr. Balfour in September 1903 about the correct formalities to be observed on appointing new

cabinet ministers, his letter of advice ends off, characteristically, after carefully setting out the correct constitutional steps with his advice man to man to his chief: "the public are very ignorant on the niceties of practice and we ought to keep them in that condition." Apart from expressions of opinion of this kind, Sandars as a lawyer, was well qualified to smooth out the difficulties of constitutional rights and wrongs - in February 1903 he writes to Balfour, "The King is wrong in his views of the order of precedence of the Bishops" and goes on to cite a Henry VIII Statute.

What Sandars himself described as the 'invisible influence' of the Private Secretary was however by no means invisible to Balfour's Cabinet colleagues, as the following memorandum from Walter Long to Mr. Balfour in 1909 shows: "Will you allow me to lay before you briefly, I hope clearly and without undue presumption, my views as to the control of business inside the House of Commons. In this respect there has been a radical and, as I at all events think, deplorable departure from the practice which obtained when you led us in opposition from '92 to '95. Then you decided everything, taking counsel whenever you thought fit (which happily for us was very frequently, often two or three times a week) with your chief colleagues.

"Since 1906 all this has changed, and the business of the House of Commons, including, very often, the selection of topics for debate, when the duty falls to us, and even of speakers from Front and Back benches, has been entirely in the hands of Alick Hood and Jack Sandars. I could give a number of instances of this, some of which greatly strained the allegiance of some of the most loyal and devoted of your colleagues, but I do not think it right to

take up your time by doing so. You are entitled to expect, and I think you have received, as loyal support from your colleagues as has even been accorded to any leader, but is it quite fair to ask men who have held high office under you and who have served in several cabinets, to subordinate their judgment, not to yours, but to those of men who have never been in Cabinets, and who have no claim of any kind to the position in which they have found themselves by some strange accident? I am not blaming either Hood or Sandars: I fully believe that in very difficult circumstances they did their best honestly and well according to their own lights".

His control over the Prime Minister's actions was firm and definite, when handlong his personal affairs and his political decisions: early in 1904 the Prime Minister was the subject of criticism in the Times; Balfour sent a suggested rejoinder to his secretary in London to read before forwarding it to the Editor. It never reached the Times offices - fortunately for its impulsive writer. On the frequent occasions when Mr. Balfour was in Scotland - either for reasons of recuperation or sport - Sandars was in the habit of calling cabinet meetings on his own initiative, presiding over them and then reporting the proceedings to Scotland - as usual with his own strong recommendations as to what steps should be taken.

On matters of much broader policy and political diplomacy he was equally adept, as this extract from a contemporary account shows: "These differences (of opinion as to whether the royal prerogative extended to ceding territories or whether Parliamentary consent was necessary) were not allowed to affect the personal relations between the King and Sandars - they were both too much men-of-the-world for that - and Sandars,

after an audience with the Sovereign, wrote to Balfour who was (once again) in Scotland "The King was extremely gracious, and proposed that I should go down to Newmarket with him and see his horses after racing".

Balfour's Administration by 1905 was running into difficulties which could not be tackled by the unfit and unwilling Prime Minister. Problems over the Irish Land Act, the reorganization of the Army and in particular tariff reform were not only overcoming the Prime Minister's strength but were splitting the Cabinet itself. Joseph Chamberlain's proposals on free trade and Balfour's could never meet and only the most skilful diplomacy prevented the breach from becoming openly seen by the public. Finally, on July 20 1905, Balfour's government was defeated in the Commons. But Balfour would not resign, despite all advice and normal practice, mainly because he would not trust the Liberals to carry out the recommendations of his Committee on Imperial Defence. The Tories and the Prime Minister in particular never trusted their opposition in matters of Army or Defence, and the events of ten years later proved far too clearly the justification for their fears. At this stage Balfour had three alternative courses of action - either to resign, dissolve Parliament, or carry on until the next compulsory election date - 1907. Jack Sandars, typically far-seeing, favoured dissolving Parliament: then, if defeated, a period of opposition would close the ranks within the Tory Party. Later that year however the government did resign and the Liberals were in. Balfour remained as Leader of the Opposition until 1911 and the influence of his private secretary continued to increase. He played a considerable part in trying to influence Balfour to prevent Bonar law succeeding him as leader of the party.

One of the most inexplicable facets of this very able man's character was his attitude to Winston Churchill. Mr. Churchill, at the time, had ended his army career and was at this time engaged in writing a biography of his father Lord Randolph Churchill. Jack Sandars, not realising the latent power and personality of his young opponent, was convinced that Churchill's motive for writing this biography was to show how his father had been, infamously treated by Balfour and by Lord Salisbury. In 1906 Churchill was returned as Member for Oldham and Sandars's dislike of him increased accordingly.

Ultimately this curious aversion to Mr. Churchill led to his parting from his chief once and for all, on quite unaccountably bad terms. The occasion was the reshaping of the War Cabinet in 1915. Balfour succeeded Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty, and he asked his friend to come with him as his private secretary. Sandars agreed. The two men lunched together at Balfour's house in Carlton Gardens and were walking across to Downing Street, where Balfour had an appointment with Asquith, when Sandars said, at the top of the Duke of York's steps, that he presumed Mr. Balfour would live in Admiralty House. The new First Lord said he did not propose to do so - he had told his predecessor, Winston Churchill, who had a growing family while he himself was a bachelor, that he could stay on there if he liked. Sandars at once said he entirely disagreed with the decision as it was calculated to give the impression that Churchill was still in control of naval policy. Balfour denied this, but Sandars continued to argue the point and when the two men reached No. 10 he asked his chief if that was his final decision. Balfour replied that it was. Sandars declared that in that case he could not work for him,

turned his back on him and refused ever to communicate with him again. So sudden and decisive a break was this that later, when Balfour's biographer asked him if he would supply some information, he would have no part of it. This accounts for the fact that none of the Balfour biographers mention him more than cursorarily despite his very close connection with the events of the twenty most important years of Balfour's life.

The break was as sudden as it was inexplicable. For the 'Chief' and his aide to have remained in such successful partnership for twenty years, they must have been in complete agreement. This is borne out by the informative and even cordial nature of Sandars's letters to Mr. Balfour. He knew what his Chief wanted to know and he knew better than the aloof and intellectual Mr. Balfour how to preserve him from the critical scrutiny of the press and the public. Sandars's letters to the Prime Minister, written almost daily, and although maintaining the outward appearance of strict formality and protocol, occasionally show the closeness of the relationship between the two men. On 20th December 1903 he is reporting the results of a local by-election to Mr. Balfour, laid up at Knowsley with his recurrent illness and across the letter-heading of 10 Downing Street he has scrawled a friendly, personal note that there is fog in London, but that the roses and geraniums are still out in the garden.

Having achieved so much, it is clear that here was a man who was determined, able and persuasive. From time to time he put his views and thoughts on paper, and fortunately these anonymous writings have been preserved in published form ("Studies of Yesterday by a Privy Counsellor"), in which can be read his views on the Cabinet, the Lords, The War and the Monarchy. In one of

these he dissects the members of the Cabinet - in such harsh terms that it appears he would only have retained about four of its members. He does not mince his words: but even though he had a low opinion of many of the politicians of the day and despite his disagreement with Edward VII mentioned earlier, he was a great admirer of the sovereign and upheld his right to participate actively in politics:

"In the department of foreign affairs the King's interest was keen and active, and with great advantage Ministers learnt to take account of his views. It is true that domestic politics did not particularly attract him. At the outset of his reign he displayed a lively sympathy with measures for the advancement of social reform and he desired through the means of the King's Speech to advertise his participation in their promotion and presentation but his Ministers remonstrated. In 1909 when the Lords rejected the Budget, his Majesty was so persuaded that a tactical error had been committed that he let the nation know that he had addressed himself to the leaders of both parties in order to avert a catastrophe. It had been well for the nation had he prevailed. His foresight was superior to that of his servants, his acumen to that of the Party Press":

Sandars's incisive style can again be seen in the following passage about political honours: "When the dates came round for gratifying with honours the appetites of his supporters, he professed surprise that they had to be fed regularly with this special nourishment." So much the greater was his disappointment, therefore, when the ex Prime Minister accepted a knighthood and later a peerage: "Until a few weeks ago he was Mr. Balfour," writes Sandars, "with the august unadornment of Mr. Pitt, Mr. Canning

and Mr. Gladstone. The new prefix of Sir Arthur lamentably suggested the promotion desired by a mayor or demanded by a lobby suitor."

In 1905, when Balfour's Conservative government had been forced to resign, the services of the outgoing Prime Minister's aide had been recognised. He was made a Privy Councillor and awarded the C.V.O. Now, ten years later, he finally turned his back on politics and, at the age of 62, addressed himself to his own interests in retirement. His keenest interest throughout his life was racing and, curiously, as an antidote perhaps, classical literature. During the period after the Great War, he devoted much of his energy to his old University. This period of his life, showing as it does Jack Sandars as a man rather than an influence on great events would better be described by one who knew him personally:-

"Sandars was nothing if he was not conservative and constitutionalist, intelligent and informed, it is true, but old-fashioned and Tory to a fault, even something of a "die-hard". He preferred always to stand and rely on the trusted precedents of the past.

"His hero and model in literature, as in politics, was Disraeli, whose style he often amusingly echoes. For he himself was a devotee of the turf, and would have said like Bismarck, that while the love of it prevailed England need never fear a revolution. Of racing annals, the pedigree and performance of men and horses, and the fortunes of owners, his knowledge was exact and exhaustive. He was also a scholar and man of letters, who could quote aptly not only his Terence and Ovid, his Horace and Juvenal, but his Petronius and Lucian, with occasional recourse too to the Vulgate and

the masterpieces of English and French literature. He loved nothing so much as to describe a classic race in classic style. While engaged in public affairs he lived in London, but enjoyed too, an agreeable "Tusculum" at Torquay. Latterly he realised Andrew Lang's desire for "a house full of books and a garden of flowers" at Eastley End, Chertsey, where his well-stocked and various library and sunny walks enabled him to "verify" as he carefully did "his references," and to meditate his abundant memories.

"Here "Jack" Sandars, as they called him, kept up with not a few congenial friends. He was constant in his loyalty to Oxford, and one of his keenest interests in later life was to be found in promoting the election of Chancellors and Burgesses who, in his view, would represent adequately the historic tradition, duty, and value, as he viewed it, of his old University in Church and State. A famous French writer expressed his surprise some years ago at the anonymity, today less prevailing, of English journalism. He could not understand, he said, how his British confreres could forego the delicious satisfaction of acknowledged authorship. Sandars, unlike the Frenchman, cherished and jealously guarded the secret of his anonymity. He wished and believed it to be known only to one or two of the very highest personages and a very few favoured and "safe" friends. It was well kept in his tribute to "The Squires of Blankney." Internal evidence revealed it to a wider circle in the volume entitled "Studies of Yesterday", published in 1928."

Jack Sandars's wish to remain anonymous so closely resembles the sentiments of Tom Sandars, who never wrote in the Saturday Review under his own name, that one could almost hear him using his cousin's words: "Why should I give the public my name, to be

kicked around like a football?" He lived at Eastley End until his death in March 1934 and was succeeded by his widow who also died there in 1947: since there were no children this brought to an end not only this line of the Sandars family but also the Don baronetcy, as Harriet Sandars's father, Sir William Don, although twice married, had only one daughter by each marriage.

The puzzle of this otherwise forthright and ambitious man's character, and one which other commentators can give no satisfactory answer to, is why he left his Chief in such curious circumstances in 1915. Sir Charles Petrie has confirmed that the details of the incident at the Duke of York's steps were told him by Blanche Dugdale, Balfour's sister and main biographer. It is therefore admittedly hearsay. After twenty years of the closest association it is impossible to believe it was mere impulsive whim, or that it was really connected with the danger, as he saw it, of Mr. Churchill. The break was both sudden and final. On the day after the 1918 Armistice Balfour, foreseeing a change of administration, wrote and asked him to come and at least have lunch with him, saying regretfully that he knew he was living in London. Perhaps his own words give the best clue. Although he spent much of his life working in the rather secretive atmosphere of back-stage politics, he was highly critical of the Cabinet and of the conduct of politics in general; writing in 1917 about the political conduct of the Great War, he said: "The real title to popular favour of the present government at the outset of its career was that it would bend its energies and strain all its resources to the prosecution of the war. Not so, however. Playing the game of their disaffected and distracted opponents, the Government have been persuaded to engage in

the familiar party struggle. They resemble the Paris entomologist who collected butterflies during the Reign of Terror. Ministers complain of overwork, but their fatigue is largely due to the claims of the wire-puller and the clamour of the election agent. The necessities of the fighting forces, the insistent needs of a population in sight of hunger, are postponed to the detailed demands of the party organisation."

Disillusionment, whether with politics itself, or with war, is undoubtedly the key to the man. But it is nevertheless a remarkable conclusion, when summing up a man whose active life had been devoted to politics, and who had had such a profound effect on their conduct.

