

## Thirty.

On the constitutional front - and with particular reference to the recent proposal with regard to the declaration of a republic - events continued to move quickly. King George VI was to be tried for treason and associated crimes and - but only if found guilty - dealt with according to law and precedent. That same night, therefore, all available members of the Protectorate Parliament were summoned from their residential compound to Westminster Hall, where they convened under heavy Militia guard. In a matter of hours, their business was completed.

A High Court of Justice would try the traitor. The Attorney General would prosecute. The king would, of course, be allowed counsel for his defence. The court would consist of 135 representatives of the people although - on account of the weather, which was continuing inclement - just 20 could form a quorum. These 135 Commissioners would consist of nominated members of the Protectorate Parliament, some bishops from the Established Church or - at the discretion of the Lord Chancellor - nominees of the State Council on Religious Affairs, and a number of specially-selected Mayors, Recorders and Lords Provost from throughout the realm. Indeed, those Mayors, Recorders and Lords Provost from distant parts of the realm had already been brought to the city.

A Bill to render illegal the proclamation of any successor to the king passed all stages of the parliamentary procedure in twenty three minutes, without any need for debate, and therefore assumed the full glory and authority of law. The Sergeant at Arms, meanwhile, was authorised to read the announcement of royal trial

the following morning at points throughout the city. That concluded the night's business of the Protectorate Parliament.

That same day, a leading international jurist flew from Moscow to Warsaw. He continued to a military airport outside Berlin, where his aircraft was refuelled. Then, with a very heavy escort of night-fighters, he flew to London and was at once driven into the city centre, where the entire Savoy Hotel had been cleared and prepared for his occupancy. The name of this jurist was Andrei Vyshinsky. Before midnight, Vyshinsky was ensconced in his suite of rooms at the Savoy with the Lord Chancellor, the Attorney General, the Dean of Canterbury Hewlett Johnson, and the distinguished English lawyer D.N. Pritt, who was to act as counsel for the defence on a pro bono publico basis. Vyshinsky quoted the English constitutional theorist Burke, knocked the Lord Chancellor down to the floor, and kicked him smartly, and repeatedly, in the face.

At this point the Lord Chancellor's wife and children were taken into the meeting. All were in their night-clothes and in a rather distressed condition. Vyshinsky suggested that the children might benefit if they were to continue their expensive education on the Baltic coast. Then he punched the Lord Chancellor's wife in the stomach, until she too fell to the floor. Not long afterwards, the Lord Chancellor was able to give assurances that a number of senior judges would be available for the great proceedings. There was some discussion about the best place for trial and - should the judgement merit the sentence - execution. But all recognised that time was now very short. If the weather remained difficult, the king could be tried in London.

Pritt said, 'What about Scotland? He is king there too'.

‘He could be finished-off outside their cathedral in Edinburgh’, the Dean of Canterbury added.

But the Lord Chancellor and the Attorney General favoured London for reasons of proximity, convenience and constitutional precedence. After a short discussion, this was agreed. The only matter that then still awaited resolution was the location of the final ceremony: would it be at Tower Hill, or at Tyburn, or once more in front of the old Banqueting Hall in Whitehall?

The meeting broke-up in the early hours of the morning, and the Lord Chancellor was allowed to return home. There at breakfast time he shot his children and wife to death, and then turned the Purvey on himself. Unfortunately, he failed in this attempt at criminal suicide, and a servant called an ambulance. The servant was then arrested and the Lord Chancellor taken to hospital, where it was expected that he would shortly be questioned by police. By ten that morning the Protectorate authorities had appointed his successor: for a smooth succession in such matters is always a sure sign of a mature polity.

At about the same hour of ten o’clock, the foreign press corps in London, including radio reporters and news film units, was advised that a major story would break shortly, and that they should apply at once, by the usual channels, for appropriate accreditation to the event. As yet, however, there was no detail of just what that event would be.

At ten o’clock, the Sergeant at Arms read the Proclamation of Trial in Westminster Hall. He was attended by drummers, six trumpeters, and two troops of Militia horsemen in Household Cavalry uniforms. The party then made its way to both Cheapside and the Old Exchange, where the Proclamation of Trial was again read, loud

and clear against the morning sky. It was the morning of January 30th, 1948. The king did not have long to find out what was coming next.

It was a clear day at last, with blue skies and a light northerly breeze. The centre of London was closed to all civilians, and mobile anti-aircraft artillery had taken up positions throughout Westminster and immediately surrounding districts. Shortly after ten o'clock thousands of Militia personnel and units of Paramilitaries and Specials began to flood into the centre of the city, and make their way towards the Parliament buildings. Less than an hour later, the members of the High Court of Justice were brought to the city centre too, in a procession of armoured cars. From these however, the judges and clerks were required to dismount in the vicinity of Trafalgar Square and walk the length of Whitehall. Quite easily, they were able fully to inspect the gigantic platform of execution which had been erected there overnight.

In Westminster Hall, everything was almost ready to begin. Once the Commissioners had been shown to their places, they were addressed informally by the Attorney General. During these remarks, however, a northern bishop stood to object to the proposed proceedings in their entirety.

'What arm', he asked, 'be stretched out to give the stroke against the Lord's Anointed, and shall not wither like that of Jeroboam when his arm he lifted against a prophet anointed?'

This vicious and provincial upstart was at once dragged from his place and bayoneted to silence by two of the Attorney General's troop of Militia bodyguards. The Attorney General then asked - still in an informal tone, for the proceedings had not yet formally commenced - whether there was any further objection to the

proposed proceedings. This question met with a deathly silence, which went on for a very considerable period of time. The Attorney General then announced in a kindly tone that it was perfectly clear that the members of the Commission knew where their duty to the nation lay, and that the historic proceedings would now commence. It was just after one o'clock in the afternoon.

The Hall had been damaged during its occupation by partisan forces associated with the Convention, but not so badly that it could not serve as a court of the people: or, at least, their representatives. And as a location it enjoyed, of course, the unimpeachable benefit of precedence in the vexed matter of regicide.

There was no heating or lighting, for these services had not been restored since the savage fighting between partisans and Militia stormtroops in the last hours of the Convention. But diesel generators had been brought to service for banks of industrial arc-lights, and roadmen's braziers had been positioned around the hall. These brought some warmth to the members of the Commission, the senior legal officers, the guard forces, and the distinguished public spectators crammed aloft in the gallery and mullioned windows.

A special section of the hall had been reserved for representatives of the world's press, cinema and radio news services; and they now were allowed into the hall, that they might record the proceedings of the afternoon for posterity. A number of official court artists was also accredited to attend and they quickly took up position with their easels and crayons, for the most part in the close vicinity of the braziers or under the hot glow of the industrial arcs.

At one thirty - for the nearby clock tower audibly signalled the time - the court itself entered, at which the Militia men stationed in the gallery, and on the floor of the hall, lowered their firearms and a court official screamed that everyone should be upstanding. Then all the officers and servants of the High Court of Justice - all the great judges of the land led by the new Lord Chancellor - entered in their solemn way, accompanied by twenty halberdiers and officers of the court carrying the sword and mace.

The proceedings were almost ready to start. There was a short delay for some minutes, as a final credentials check was conducted throughout the hall. Finally, however, the new Lord Chancellor screamed 'Bring in the Traitor!'; the clock tower signalled two o'clock; and the court, precisely on schedule, got down to business in earnest.

The Archbishop of Canterbury offered prayers for the court, and preached a short homily, taking as his text that verse from Numbers which states incontestably: 'the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein but by the blood of him that shed it'.

In the packed hall, the king - protected by a sturdy screen from the people, lest their wrath be uncontrollable - at first seemed scarcely to know where he was, and seemed blinded by the arc lights that had been placed hard up against the dock. He was dressed in his full coronation regalia - the fur cape, the George and Garter, the Coronation Crown. The Lord Chancellor asked the prisoner how he pleaded: the king's counsel said that the king refused to plead. A second judge, resplendent in robes and silken wig, sneered that perhaps the traitor had been rendered deaf by the march of history: and a Militia officer smacked the traitor hard in the

face, twice. A third judge pointed out that under the treason laws a refusal to plead was deemed to be a confession of guilt.

Counsel for the defence, Pritt, craved the indulgence of the court, and said that the king refused to plead because he did not recognise the court and did not recognise its right to try him under any circumstances, for it was an illegal assembly. Pritt also pointed out that a refusal to recognise the court would deny the prisoner any right to speak in his defence, or crave - should he wish to - the mercy of the court.

A series of witnesses was then examined, though none was to be seen, for each gave his evidence from behind another sturdy screen, close to the Lord Chancellor. From time to time, one or other of the eminent judges would interrupt the proceedings, on a point of law or fact, or sometimes in the cause of clarification of some other matter. Nineteen of these witnesses, described as former members of the government and the royal household, and all said to be of impeccable character, gave testimony of the king's complicity with American intelligence agencies, in a treasonable attempt to subvert the second Protectorate and its laws.

By four o'clock, the process was drawing to a close. The case for the prosecution had finished. For the defence, Pritt said that the matter in hand was as clear a case of treason as he could imagine. Pritt asked of the court permission to recall a similar trial in that same Westminster Hall, 299 years earlier to the very day and hour. With regard to the present trial, he could only agree with the sentiments of the prosecution. He had no intention of calling any witness to what was a clear case of espionage, wrecking, war criminality and treason. In any case, there were no witnesses. He understood that there was only one mete punishment for this

catalogue of infamy: but asked the court as a humanitarian gesture to ensure that it was, at least, a speedy one.

The Commissioners were asked for their findings. Twenty of its members found the defendant guilty. None found him not guilty. One hundred and fifteen abstained. In stern tones, the Lord Chancellor let it be known that abstention in such matters of state was a right unknown to the procedures of English law. On a second show of hands, therefore, the Commissioners gave the great legal authority the unanimity he sought. The Lord Chancellor then asked the prisoner if he had anything final to say: but anything the king might have said was drowned by jeering from the gallery and the ranks of the great judges and Commissioners.

An usher brought with tremendous reverence the Black Cap. At sight of it, all the great Chief Justices of England began to weep hysterically. The Lord Chancellor then assumed the dreaded cap and - in a voice breaking with emotion - cried that death was too good for the dog, and that he should at once be dragged to his place of execution. From the public gallery a torrential cry erupted - 'Kill Him, Kill Him, Shoot the Mad Dog Now!' After a little time, the robed and mitred bishops leaped to their slippered feet and joined the cry too: and then the great judges, overcome with sentiment, were also on their feet and screaming for blood. This improper clamour went on for some considerable time, until silence was finally restored in the court.

It was almost dark when the king was dragged into Whitehall and onto the platform, which was draped in customary black. Beside the block - a standard butcher's affair, well-scrubbed and hollow-centred from use - were heavy staples, lest the prisoner struggle and need to be tied in place. Muffled drums were beating

on every hand as a pair of Paramilitaries bound the king's hands behind his back and removed his crown and fur-trimmed cape.

Waiting on the platform were his counsel Pritt, the Dean of Canterbury Hewlett Johnson, and Andrei Vyshinsky, there by right of his status as a foreign observer of the customs and traditions of the English legal system. The Archbishop of Canterbury was also there, weeping frightfully. Suddenly, the king began to struggle and scream incoherently. But a rag was bound around his mouth, and that stopped the dog and its sedition.

In a silence which contrived to be both hideous and yet ineffably dignified, and which seemed at that moment to stretch the length of Whitehall, George VI was dragged to the block, and a hooded executioner stepped forward. The silence seemed to go on and on, and was broken only by the sound of the London traffic grinding over the nearby Stalingrad bridge. A guard ripped from the king's person the George and Garter, and handed it to the weeping Archbishop of Canterbury. It was exactly ten seconds before four minutes after two o'clock on January 30, 1948. The king was thrust on his knees at the block and pressed forward.

In these very last moments, the archbishop stopped weeping and cried, 'Stay for the sign!'

'And I will stay!', cried the hooded executioner.

Geoffrey Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury, leaned low for a moment over the prostrate body of George VI and - in the full hearing of the world's news media - savagely cried, 'This is for Becket, you bastard!'

Then Canterbury extended a gracious archepiscopal glove, the executioner swung his gigantic axe three glorious times, snatched aloft the bloody head, and cried, 'Behold, a traitor's fate!'

The press pack, radio reporters and film news crews surged below, and a Militia band in the uniforms of the Life Guards played a fanfare on trumpets. In the deepening cold, the crowds began to melt away. The body and head were taken at once to Westminster Hall, and their coffin placed under strict guard below Richard II's great Gothic south window.

At midnight Vyshinsky came to the hall. He brought with him the Lord Chancellor, Pritt and Hewlett Johnson. They looked splendid in their lawyers' gowns and wigs and ecclesiastical robes. Soviet marines in the uniforms of the Grenadier Guards were standing to attention in every corner. They looked splendid too, in their polished breastplates and plumes. Vyshinsky, Hewlett Johnson and Pritt bowed deeply and peered into the coffin, as if suspicious that the royal remains might have gone. They looked closely at the body for what seemed an immensity of time.

Vyshinsky said, 'How did you persuade that snivelling archbishop?'

'We showed him the instruments'.

'How?'

'On his wife'.

'Hot poker?'

'Good Lord no', Pritt said, quite shocked. 'The boot and the thumbkins'.

'Hot?'

'Red hot', Pritt said, and Lord Chancellor and Dean of Canterbury laughed together at the witticism: a warm chuckle of the deepest sincerity which rolled emptily around the freezing hall.

'What will you do with him now?'

‘We can’t let him live now’, Pritt said, ‘I think he ought to die in his cathedral. There’s sound precedent, you know, very sound’.

‘See to it at once’, Vyshinsky said.

Both men were still peering deeply into the coffin. Vyshinsky sniffed, as if he were scenting the aroma of freshly-ground coffee somewhere near.

‘Where is the jewel?’, Vyshinsky asked.

‘In your luggage’, Pritt said, ‘as you asked’.

‘And when will the Pollitt gang confess?’, Vyshinsky asked next, very quietly indeed.

Pritt said, ‘Any day now’.

‘I am pleased to hear that’, Vyshinsky said, as if a great matter of state had in that moment been settled. Both men stood up at precisely the same moment. After a long pause, Vyshinsky spoke some more.

‘Apart from the king, how many are there in the family?’

‘A queen and two daughters’, Pritt said.

‘And where are they?’

‘We have them in Scotland’, Pritt said.

‘Get them’, Vyshinsky said.

The Lord Chancellor leaned into the company in amazement. Did Vyshinsky want more trials and executions in Whitehall? So soon after this one?

‘Kill them all, you fool’, Vyshinsky said. ‘Wipe them out. And leave no trace of them anywhere’.

Denis Nowell Pritt, Wykeamist M.P. and so lately Counsel for the King, said sagely, ‘That’s a jolly good idea, comrade Vyshinsky. We should shoot the mad dogs at once. Every one of them’.

Under Herland's mighty hammerbeams, Westminster Hall was marvellously silent. The carved White Hart badges still looked down from the string course on the conspirators. But the 26 great wooden angels had gone, of course, destroyed as idols by radical Daniels during the tumultuous days of the Convention. All was utterly silent.

Again, Pritt, Johnson, Vyshinsky and the Lord Chancellor peered into the coffin. It was easy to see that the head was not attached to the body. There had been a lot of bleeding too. It might have been an old pauper's body, dredged from the river. There was no crown, no cape, no rings, no jewels or insignia of the Garter now.

'He was supposed to be George VI, was he?', Vyshinsky said in a contemplative tone. 'Didn't you used to burn the bodies of traitors?'

'Quarter them', Pritt cried, 'quarter them! They can always be dug up for trial afterwards'.

'Then they can be spiked or burned', Johnson said suavely, 'once they have been properly tried'.

'Is there precedent for that too?', Vyshinsky asked in tones of very considerable awe.

The great English lawyer and the great English churchman assured their visitor that there was ample and proper precedent for the procedures.

'John Hooke for one', Pritt said.

'And we hanged and beheaded Cromwell at Tyburn', Hewlett Johnson said, 'once we had dug him up. Then we spiked his head on the top of this hall'.

'And we dug-up Wycliffe and burned him', the Lord Chancellor said, 'forty years after his death'.

'Isn't that going a bit far?', Vyshinsky said.

'We can't', said the Lord Chancellor in stern tones, 'let any nonsense about human-rights stand in the way of national security'.

In the Great Hall of Westminster it was already very cold. Ice could be seen to be forming on the inner surfaces of the windows. Outside, it was snowing heavily again. And England was entered on the second republic in her history.