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Great Statesman or Unscrupulous Opportunist? Anglo-Saxon Interpretations of Lluís Companys.

Contemporary Anglo-Saxon views of Lluís Companys ranged across a spectrum from admiration of his statesmanship as leader of Catalonia to indignation at what was seen as his subordination to anarchists. As might be expected, the admiration was usually found in the writings of observers, whether British or American, who had some knowledge of, and feeling for, Catalonia. The most acerbic criticisms tended to derive from conservative diplomats, particularly the representatives of Great Britain. Given that there were important British business concerns in Catalonia and about 1500 British citizens resident in Barcelona, it was hardly surprising that the principal British consulate in Spain should be located there. In consequence, there exists an abundance of reports to the government in London about political developments in the region with many references to Companys.¹

The British Ambassador from 1928 to the end of 1935, Sir George Grahame was a relatively liberal individual inclined to view the new Republican authorities with benevolence. He admired both Manuel Azaña and Colonel Macià and was sympathetic to the movement towards a Catalan autonomy statute.² Unfortunately, his tolerant attitudes were not shared by the Consul General in Barcelona, Norman King, a conservative born in 1880. Sharing many of the patronising, if not downright racist, attitudes of British conservatives towards Spaniards in general, King soon revealed himself to be a hostile critic of the new Republic in general and specifically of developments in Catalonia. Although he claimed on several occasions to enjoy the most cordial personal relations with Companys, King's comments tended to be highly critical.

Inevitably, British diplomats felt considerable trepidation with regard to the Catalan situation after the anarchist insurrection in December 1932 and it was in this

¹ Enrique Moradiellos, *Neutralidad benévola: el gobierno británico y la insurrección militar española de 1936* (Oviedo: Pentalfa, 1990) p.104.

² Grahame to Simon, 30 May 1932, W6393/12/41; 21 October 1932, W12066/12/41, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, (henceforth *B DFA*) Part II, Series F, vol.26, pp.46-7, 59-61.

context that their attitudes towards Companys would develop. Sir George Grahame ended his report on those events with the comment ‘The lesson of this latest outbreak is that there still exists a danger to the State from the Extreme Left, and that a strong Government is indispensable if order is to be maintained and the security of existing institutions assured.’³ The doubts about the capacity of the Catalan authorities to control the subversive forces of the CNT were somewhat calmed by the relative ease with which the insurrectionary movement of December 1933 was quelled in the region.⁴ However, the death on 25 December 1933 of the President of the Generalitat, Francesc Macià, provoked considerable doubts within the British diplomatic community. Sir George Grahame regarded Colonel Macià as a safe pair of hands and thought that his disappearance opened up a period of uncertainty, not least because of the lack of someone with the necessary skill, maturity and experience to be an obvious successor: ‘His death is likely to complicate further the political situation in Catalonia, for there is no one particularly indicated to succeed him, and certainly no one possessing in the eyes of the Catalan people the nimbus which, in spite of the friction inevitably engendered by the exercise of power, encompassed until the end the venerable head of the first President of the Generalidad.’⁵ The assumption of power by Lluís Companys was merely reported by Sir George Grahame without comment.⁶

The dispute over the Llei de Contractes de Conreu, initially between the Esquerra and the Lliga, and subsequently between the Esquerra and the central government, saw the British government’s observers inclining to the side of Francesc Cambò. From Madrid, Sir George Grahame tended to report events in a relatively neutral tone but Norman King in Barcelona was already beginning to reveal a more partisan approach to local politics. On 8 June, the Tribunal of Constitutional Guarantees ruled that the Corts Catalanes did not have the power to legislate in the issue of Ley de Contratos. Norman King explained clearly to the Ambassador why the decision of the Tribunal was perceived in Catalonia as an attempt to reduce the region’s autonomy. However, he made

³ Grahame to Simon, 10 January 1933, Public Record Office, London, FO371/17426, W472/116/41.

⁴ Grahame to Simon, 12 December 1933, W14410/116/41, *BDF*A, Part II, Series F, vol.26, pp.126-9.

⁵ Grahame to Simon, 28 December 1933, W322/31/41, *BDF*A, Part II, Series F, vol.26, pp.133-4.

⁶ Grahame to Simon, 15 January 1934, W862/862/41, *BDF*A, Part II, Series F, vol.26, p.139.

no secret of the fact that regarded as rash the decision of Companys to present the law unchanged to the Parlament de Catalunya. Moreover, he considered Companys's remarks to the effect that Catalonia would defend the Republic against monarchist reaction as 'inflammatory'. He went on to assert that the attitude of the Esquerra 'might be compared to that of athletes who refuse to take part in any contest unless they are certain to win and who abandon the ring at the first unfavourable decision.'⁷

In contrast, the doyen of British Hispanists, Professor Edgar Allison Peers of the University of Liverpool, despite his own conservative views, regarded Companys with some admiration. He described him as 'an undistinguished-looking little man, who as a practising lawyer had had a good deal to do with the worker's Unions and of whom the Anarco-Syndicalists had a way of speaking as if they owned him. But he was an acute parliamentarian and an excellent organiser; and the first six months of the year 1934 passed quite placidly.'⁸ As a frequent visitor to Catalonia, he took a different view. Peers realised, as did Companys, that not only the Llei de Contractes de Conreu, but also any realistic concept of Catalan autonomy, was under threat from the Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas. Essentially, Peers agreed with Companys who had declared in the Parlament de Catalunya on 12 June, 'l'ocorregut amb aquesta Llei és solament un episodi en les relacions que el Govern ve sostenint des de fa temps ambs els últims Governes de la República. L'ofensiva a les nostres llibertats s'ha anat produint cada dia des de tots els Ministeris amb milers d'incidències ocorregudes, i responen a una tàctica i una persistència de l'Estat, o més aviat de les influències monàrquiques que s'han apoderat de l'Estat.'⁹

Peers wrote in consequence: 'As nearly as I could assess the opinion of the Catalanian in the street at that period, as distinct from that of the party politician and the revolutionary, it was distinctly on the side of Sr.Companys, not so much on the intrinsic

⁷ Grahame to Simon, 5 June 1934, and enclosure, King to Grahame, 31 May 1934, W5648/31/41; Grahame to Simon, 13 June 1934, W5851/31/41; Grahame to Simon, 28 June 1934, and enclosure, King to Grahame, 19 June 1934, W5648/31/41, *B DFA*, Part II, Series F, vol.26, pp.150-2, 154-6.

⁸ Edgar Allison Peers, *Catalonia Infelix* (London: Methuen, 1937) pp.222-3.

⁹ Text of Companys speech in Frederic Escofet, *Al servei de Catalunya i de la República* 2 vols (Paris: Edicions Catalanes, 1973) I, pp.199-205.

merits of the *rabassaires*' case, but because it was felt that the Tribunal had acted in a high-handed way, and that, for the honour of Catalonia, Sr.Companys had made the only possible reply.'¹⁰ Although the government of Alejandro Lerroux was inclined to negotiate a compromise solution over the Llei de Contractes de Conreu, Catalan autonomy would be under threat if the CEDA joined the government. The links between José María Gil Robles, the leader of the CEDA, and the Catalan right were reinforced when he spoke on 8 September at an assembly that the Catalan landowners' federation, the Instituto Agrícola Catalán de San Isidro, organised in Madrid.

However, even Professor Peers was alarmed by the way in which Companys referred to the action of the central government as 'l'agressió, dintre de la República, dels lacais de la Monarquia i de les hosts feixistes monàrquiques, que ja han fet penetrar llur avantguarda i que son ja a la mateixa porta', talked of the eventual triumph of 'la nacionalitat catalana'.¹¹ Norman King's much more critical attitude towards Companys soon moved towards outright hostility. This was a consequence of the President's reaction to the entry of the CEDA into the central government and his declaration on 6 October 1934 of the Catalan State within the Federal Republic of Spain. King's views were clearly coloured by the right-wing company that he kept. He reported to the Foreign Office with regard to Azaña that 'I had heard a report that he was conspiring with the Catalan Government to set up a new republic of which Catalonia should be the head, in case the Lerroux Government should attempt to establish martial law in this country.' King believed that Companys was not a separatist but that he had somehow fallen under the influence of Josep Dencàs. His sympathies were revealed in his comment 'Fortunately, for the cause of law and order, the troops remained loyal, and there was no sign of the Catalan contingents from Tarrasa, Sabadell and other disaffected centres.'¹²

Even Peers believed that 'the people of Catalonia had been betrayed by their own leaders'. Neither he nor King perceived the extent to which Companys, already under immense pressure from the extreme nationalists of Estat Català, was also the victim of

¹⁰ Peers, *Catalonia Infelix*, p.227.

¹¹ Peers, *Catalonia Infelix*, p.228.

¹² King to Simon, 7 October 1934, W9023/27/41, *BDF*, Part II, Series F, vol.26, pp.166-7.

provocation from Gil Robles. The new cabinet contained three Cedistas, José Oriol y Anguera de Sojo (Labour), Rafael Aizpún (Justice) and Manuel Giménez Fernández (Agriculture). Anguera de Sojo was a deliberately provocative choice. As an extreme ultraist member of the Instituto Agrícola Catalán de San Isidro, he was a bitter enemy of the Esquerra. As a hard-line Civil Governor of Barcelona in 1931, his uncompromising strike-breaking policies had pushed the CNT towards insurrectionism. The choice was consciously offensive, since Companys had sent a deputation to see Alcalá Zamora and plead for his exclusion. Gil Robles had refused point-blank the suggestions of the President.¹³ Nevertheless, it is clear that, in the circumstances, the action of Companys was, to say the least, unrealistic if not downright irresponsible.

In the wake of the abortive federalist rebellion of 6 October, the critical attitude of Norman King was seconded by Sir George Grahame who made extremely unfavourable comparisons between the political stature of Companys and that of Francesc Macià. On 10 October 1934, he wrote: ‘The rebellion of the Catalan Government, while synchronising with the general strike and the uprising of violent labour elements, and doubtless largely conditioned by these events, was purely political and probably due in the main to the personal character and attitude of Sr. Companys, President of the Generality. I had, as reported at the time, an interview with Sr. Companys in May last, when I was in Barcelona. He struck me as a supple and unscrupulous politician of a kind often found in Latin countries and quite the opposite of his predecessor, Sr. Macià, who was a straightforward and venerable Catalan full of ideals. Sr. Companys spoke to me almost contemptuously of Sr. Azaña, saying that, though he was a competent President when he had in his hands the government of the country, he was not much good in Opposition, lacking initiative and being too philosophical, aloof and disdainful of antagonists. Sr. Companys appeared to pride himself on understanding how mass movements were to be managed and directed nowadays, and it struck me that he had been influenced by spectacular methods such as are prevalent in Italy and Germany. He

¹³ Peers, *Catalonia Infelix*, p.231. Gabriel Mario de Coca, *Anti-Caballero. Crítica marxista de la bolchevización del Partido Socialista (1930-1936)* (Madrid: Ediciones Engel, 1936) p.107, makes the remarkable claim that Anguera's mother was a canonised saint. Cf. Juan-Simeón Vidarte, *El bienio negro y la insurrección de Asturias* (Barcelona: Grijalbo, 1978) p.233.

appeared to have a strong element of audacity and ambition in his composition. Recent occurrences show what was lacking in him, namely, the power of computing the material force at his disposal and that which might be brought against him.¹⁴

How different were the comments of the English Catholic correspondent of the *Daily Chronicle*, Henry Buckley. He wrote ‘After two centuries and a quarter of oppression since Philip V abolished the regional autonomy at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Catalonia had been free once again for only three short years since the Republic was proclaimed in 1931 and now Feudal Spain was again out to smash her independence. The Catalans led in the October revolt, just as they did when the Republic was proclaimed in April 1931. But this time it was a short affair. Curiously enough almost the entire resistance was made by the middle class, that is to say by the Esquerra Catalana, the Liberal Party led by Luis Companys, and the Estat Català, the separatist movement which was working in cooperation with the former group. [...] Companys and the Esquerra stood for all that was Liberal and Left-Wing in Catalan and national politics and here they were co-operating with a group that was Fascist in tendency.’¹⁵

The consequence of Companys’s rash action was that the Catalan Parliament was closed, the Estatut suspended, the Llei de Contractes de Conreu annulled, Catalan-language newspapers prohibited and control of law and order and labour affairs reverted to the Madrid government. Over 3000 Catalans were still in prison at the beginning of 1935. In the course of his trial by the Tribunal de Garantías Constitucionales, which began on 27 May and continued until 7 June 1935, in his final intervention, Companys declared: ‘En nombre propio, insisto en destacar mi mayor responsabilidad por los motivos que ya ha expuesto mi defensor siguiendo mis instrucciones. Mis compañeros, por el afecto que me tienen, por la serendidad de su ánimo y por estímulos de elegancia espiritual, sienten satisfacción y tienen a honor el compartir e igualar su responsabilidad con la mía. Pero a mí me produce una impresión que me hace exclamar: esto señores del Tribunal, no sería justo. Si hay un responsable, soy yo; o, cuando menos, tengo que

¹⁴ Grahame to Simon, 10 October 1934, PRO FO371/18596, W9132/27/41.

¹⁵ Henry Buckley, *Life and Death of the Spanish Republic* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1940) p.145.

absorber la mayor parte de la responsabilidad. Dicho esto, ahora, en nombre de todos, debo añadir lo siguiente: Afirmo por nuestro honor, porque es la verdad, ante el Tribunal, ante el país y ante la Historia, que el móvil de nuestras determinaciones no fué otro que la defensa de la República democrata y parlamentaria y de las libertades que la Constitución del Estado tiene reconocidas a Cataluña.’¹⁶ Professor Peers regarded this speech as dignified and chivalrous, not least because he was convinced that Companys had been forced by Josep Dencàs and the Chief of Police, Miquel Badia, into what he called ‘a mad adventure’, his declaration of Catalan independence. Peers was inclined to believe that Companys had made the declaration ‘against his will’, possibly even at pistol-point.¹⁷

The assault on Catalan liberties by the Radical-CEDA coalition inadvertently favoured both left-wing and nationalist groups in the parliamentary elections of 16 February 1936. In October 1935, Sir George Grahame was replaced by the considerably more right-wing Sir Henry Chilton. Norman King revealed his own prejudices as well as confirming those of the new Ambassador, when he wrote: ‘The announcement of the result of the elections was followed by a tranquillity which was almost uncanny. At such times, when the possibility of trouble is anticipated, the well-to-do classes seem to retire temporarily from the scene. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that in Spain when the Left lose an election, they refuse to “play the game” and threaten a revolution, whereas if the Left wins, the Rights run away.’” On the other hand, in the same report, he acknowledged that the punishment inflicted on Companys and the other Consellers of the Generalitat had significantly influenced the election results. He wrote ‘The extraordinary popularity of Sr.Companys is due to his *cordialidad popular* – a term difficult to translate. He made his reputation as the legal adviser of the Syndicalists, and in politics naturally became the champion of the rights of the workers. He is astute and unscrupulous, and the best that I have ever heard said of him is that there are worse lawyers and politicians who are even more unscrupulous than he is. His appearance does not belie his reputation, but he has a great gift of swaying the mob with his oratory. He polled 260,990 votes, and the fact that so many votes should be given for him when he is

¹⁶ Alardo Prats, *El Gobierno de la Generalidad en el banquillo* (Madrid: Imprenta Salvador Quemades, 1935) pp.382-3.

¹⁷ Peers, *Catalonia Infelix*, pp.234-5.

still in prison for having brought on a civil war is significant of the attitude of the masses. The fact that Sr.Companys by his defiance of Madrid, caused the Catalans to lose their autonomy temporarily is overlooked. For them he is the successor of their hero Macià, and the champion of Catalan independence. It is curious to reflect in this connexion that Companys was not himself a separatist, and in his cooler moments probably would have disapproved of the rash action in October 1934, into which he was hurried by Dencàs, Badia and other headstrongs.’¹⁸

The new British ambassador, Sir Henry Chilton, was a man of extremely conservative views. Like the majority of officials in the Foreign Office, he regarded the Popular Front as a Trojan Horse in the service of the Comintern. In response to the May Day celebrations in Madrid, he would comment on his ‘feeling that the weak and vacillating Spanish government had abandoned the power to the proletariat’.¹⁹ Chilton’s suspicious reaction to the return of Companys as President of the Generalitat was coloured by the hostile appreciation provided by Norman King who reported, in the most school-masterly tone: ‘There has been no disturbance of public order in connexion with the arrival of Sr.Companys, and it remains to be seen whether he and his fellow-ex-prisoners have learned their lesson and will deal with the new situation in a spirit chastened by fifteen months’ imprisonment. Their attitude and that of their adherents are not reassuring. So far from showing any regret for the events of the 6th October, which proved so disastrous to Catalonia and the rest of Spain, they obviously regard the date as a red-letter one in Catalan history.’²⁰

Despite his antipathy towards Companys, King’s reports contributed to the idea that Catalonia constituted an oasis of tranquillity in the spring of 1936. As late as early June, still pleased with the idea of Companys having been taught a lesson by imprisonment, King wrote to the British chargé d’affaires in Madrid, George Ogilvie-Forbes: ‘Sr. Companys seems to be aware of the importance of the problems with which

¹⁸ King to Chilton, 21 February 1936, enclosure, W1678/62/41, *BDF*, Part II, Series F, vol.26, pp.270-1.

¹⁹ Chilton to Eden, 2 May 1936, PRO FO371/20521, W3947/62/41; Enrique Moradiellos, ‘El gobierno británico y Cataluña durante la República y la guerra civil’, *El Basilisco* (Oviedo), No.27, enero-junio 2000, p.24.

²⁰ King to Chilton, 4 March 1936, enclosure, W2117/62/41, *BDF*, Part II, Series F, vol.26, pp.279-80.

he has to deal. Although as the former legal champion of the syndicalists he has always been looked upon with great suspicion by the Conservatives and property owners, he appears to have broadened his views. He has declared that he will uphold the law, maintain the right to work and prevent coercion and he is reported to have said recently “Better a dictator than communism”. I am assured by an acquaintance of the President that it is not unlikely that Sr.Companys and the property-owning classes will make common cause against their enemies the anarchists and Communists.’²¹

The outbreak of war found Sir Henry Chilton on holiday in his splendid French residence in St Jean de Luz, where he remained until his retirement in late 1937. Deeply hostile to the Republicans, to whom he normally referred as ‘the Reds’, Chilton maintained cordial relations with the military rebels on the other side of the border. British knowledge of Catalan politics was therefore left to Norman King, who communicated directly with the Foreign Office. He made little effort to conceal the fact that he thoroughly approved of the military coup. Having been recalled from his summer leave, shortly after arriving in Barcelona on the destroyer HMS London, he wrote: ‘The Government of Sr.Companys appears to be losing control. They have sown the wind and are now reaping the whirlwind. Sr.Companys himself is nothing more than a figure-head and he gives the impression, physically as well as figuratively, of being a rat caught in a trap.’ He went on to say that ‘My impression is, therefore, that the disasters of the last week are really only the first act of the tragedy. Barcelona appears doomed to be the scene of further struggles and horrors whatever is the outcome of the general situation. If the Government are successful in suppressing the military rebellion, Spain will be plunged into the chaos of some form of bolshevism and acts of savage brutality can be expected.’²²

Initially, however, King made an effort to achieve some understanding of what exactly Companys was trying to do in dealing with the fact that the military coup had left political power in the streets which were it dominated by the CNT. He wrote on 6

²¹ King to Ogilvie-Forbes, 5 June 1936, PRO FO425/413, W5256/6241.

²² King to Eden, 29 July 1936, W7485/62/41, *BDF* Part II, Series F, vol.27, pp.5-7.

August: 'In this confused imbroglio the Government of Sr. Companys are endeavouring to maintain a semblance of authority by working with the committees of the extremists. Commissioners of public food and public amusement [sic]. &c., have been nominated, presumably in imitation of the Russian system. Sr. Companys told me personally that he hoped to find the solution of his difficulties by appointing a new Government and he has now delegated his authority as President of the Government to Sr. Casanovas, a popular Catalan figure, and he has included in the Cabinet several leaders of the extreme Left in the hope of reaching a working compromise and preventing the friction between the armed anarchists and the Government from coming to an open struggle. The Government, of course, rely chiefly on the disciplined Civil Guards, of whom there are about 1,200 in Barcelona and 800 in the rest of Cataluña but these men, even with the Government's shock police and the anti-Fascist militia, do not dare to try to disarm the anarchists and the armed proletariat in the capital and the provinces. A premature attempt might be fatal. It has always been the nightmare of respectable Catalans that the "underworld" of the proletariat should break loose and obtain control and this they are now within an ace of doing. Sr. Companys, therefore, must play for time by endeavouring to induce their leaders to work with him and making whatever concessions are necessary.'²³ The enormous difficulties facing Companys in maintaining a working relationship with the CNT while also trying to restore law and order would enjoy King's comprehension only for a short interlude.

King would soon be found insinuating that Companys was somehow to blame for the break-down of political authority, for the imminent establishment of a Soviet regime and for the atrocities perpetrated by uncontrolled elements and by the FAI, even claiming mendaciously that Companys had armed the workers before the military coup. 'Sr. Companys may not order or even approve the atrocities now taking place, but when one considers that he rose to power through the National Union of Workers [CNT], now allied to the anarchists, as the lawyer of which he made his reputation, and that his Government armed the anarchists prior to the outbreak of the present revolt, he cannot divest himself of his responsibility.' Despite the efforts of Companys and the Generalitat

²³ King to Eden, 2 August, PRO FO371/20527, W7809/62/41.

to control the disorders, King reported that ‘the control is slipping more and more out of the hands of Sr.Companys and the government of Sr.Casanovas into those of the anarcho-sindicalists’. He saw the situation as one of ‘bolshevistic anarchy’ and the government forces as a ‘collection of raw levies, young anarchists, escaped gaolbirds and other armed rabble, including a company of women’. He also submitted the draft of a letter which he proposed to send to the Catalan government. In it, he protested against ‘the state of anarchy which still prevails in the country under your governance’ and of ‘the atrocities committed by Spanish citizens on their fellow countrymen, some of which if true, and I have good reason to believe them, would disgrace the most backward race of savages known to humanity’. The Foreign Office refused authorisation for his letter to be sent.²⁴

The deterioration of King’s attitude towards Companys was fundamentally the result of his understandable outrage at the collectivisation of numerous British businesses, the violent requisition of the property, especially motor cars, of British citizens and the goods of British companies warehoused in the port of Barcelona.²⁵ These acts inflamed his intense antipathy to the anarchists. His readiness to assume that this meant that bolshevism was taking over Catalonia may be read in many of his despatches. **In mid-August, King reported to London on a meeting with Joan Casanovas at which he protested about the requisitioning of cars and the opening of consular mail. In the course of their encounter, during which King’s tone to the Catalan prime minister was extremely patronising and over-bearing, Casanovas said that ‘he was struggling to restore order amidst the confusion for which the late uprising was responsible.’ To this King replied brusquely that ‘to judge from the declarations of Sr. Companys, the order which the Catalan government was attempting to restore amounted to Bolshevism.’²⁶ Most graphically, he wrote on 28 August 1936 of the flying of the senyera catalana over Montjuich: ‘the Catalans (today**

²⁴ King to Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs; draft of letter from King to Casanovas, 16 August 1936, PRO FO371/20532, W9003/62/41.

²⁵ Moradiellos, ‘El gobierno británico y Cataluña’, p.28.

²⁶ King to Eden, 15 August 1936, FO371/20569, W10003/62/41.

this word means the dregs of the population) consider that the hoisting of this flag is another step forward to Catalan independence'.²⁷

What King seemed to have missed was that, far from being the mere puppet of the anarchists, Companys had realised that the Anti-Fascist Militia Committee was actually a great face-saving device for them given their lack of preparation for running a revolution, let alone a war, a perception which opened the way to the eventual recovery of governmental authority. In fact, although it seemed as if the workers were in control, sufficiently to alarm King and other diplomatic representatives, the CNT had actually acquiesced in the Central Anti-fascist Militia Committee being simply a sub-committee of the Generalitat. Companys had effectively ensured a continuity of state power even if it was temporarily in the background. The presence in the Committee of both the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya and the Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya was a guarantee of this. At the time, understandably, neither King nor his American colleagues, the U.S. Consuls General, Lynn W. Franklin and his successor Mahlon Fay Perkins, could see this.²⁸ The PSUC was as committed as Companys and the Esquerra to taming the revolution. Companys had manoeuvred the CNT into accepting responsibility without long-term institutionalized power. It took some time before it occurred to the diplomatic observers that the anarchists' effective authority in the streets could be short-lived. Even when, at the end of September, the CNT agreed to the dissolution of the Anti-Fascist Militia Committee and its own direct participation in the Generalitat, Perkins, continued to see only 'a general state of disorganization' and a powerless Companys.²⁹

King's views on Companys coincided with those of the British journalist, Cedric Salter who found himself in Spain as the correspondent of the *Daily Mail*. Salter regarded Companys as 'a slick little lawyer, with a die-away chin, shifty eyes, and the most movingly beautiful speaking voice' who 'was uneasily riding the trade-unionist whirlwind'. According to Salter, Companys, 'with no qualities beyond opportunism,

²⁷ King to Eden, 28 August 1936, W10136/62/41, *BDF*, Part II, Series F, vol.27, pp.24-5.

²⁸ Franklin to Hull, 12, 17, 19 August, 1 September; Perkins to Hull, 22 September 1936, reprinted in James W. Cortada, editor, *A City in War: American Views on Barcelona and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1985) pp.17-18, 22-3, 26-7.

²⁹ Perkins to Hull, 2 October 1936, Cortada, *A City in War*, pp.29-30.

unscrupulousness, and a capacity for appealing to the Catalan mob in its own tongue, found himself quite unable to arrest the rising tide of anarchy, and concentrated all his considerable power of adroitness and low cunning in avoiding a clash with the trade-unionists.’ Salter’s conclusion about Companys’s relations with the CNT were somewhat cynical: ‘Although shrewd enough to know that the decrees that he was forced to sign must inevitably plunge Cataluña into speedy bankruptcy and utter chaos, he continued to sign on the dotted line, and so performed the valuable task of hurrying on the crisis when Cataluña must be taken over, lock, stock and barrel, by the Madrid Government, and so brought into the national war effort.’³⁰

On the other hand, Salter was far less critical of Companys than Norman King. Salter had run into some difficulty in trying to arrange the escape from Barcelona on board a British cruiser of two nuns who had begged his assistance. Salter’s problems were exacerbated by the openness with which King had expressed his contempt for Companys. As he recalled: ‘I had no confidence in the consul general, who had repeatedly shown himself so openly hostile to the existing regime that his usefulness in such matters was restricted owing to the closeness with which his every movement was now watched.’³¹ King’s hostility to Companys had even gone as far as insinuations to the Foreign Office that the Generalitat should not be recognised as the legitimate government. When, in early August, Companys had formed “Yet another government, composed entirely of members from the proletariat”, King had made an unusual request to the Foreign Office for authorisation to meet with its representatives. Since his job was to liaise with the Generalitat, his request provoked consternation in London where one official commented: ‘Why he should ask for authority to interview their members...it would seem perfectly normal that he should be in touch with them.’³²

Norman King’s contemptuous attitude towards Companys soon saw him in trouble because of a letter published on 1 September 1936 in the *News Chronicle* by the

³⁰ Cedric Salter, *Try-out in Spain* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1943) pp.87-9.

³¹ Salter, *Try-Out in Spain*, pp.66-8.

³² King to FO and minutes, 6 August 1936, FO371/20527, quoted by Maria Thomas, Beneath ‘the thin veneer of civilisation’: Norman King, British Consular Officials and the Spanish Civil War. The Front-line of Albion’s Perfidy?, MA thesis, LSE, 2006, p.31.

British poet Stephen Spender. The letter described a trip that he had made to Spain in March. While in Barcelona, he had been invited to dinner by King. Without naming him, Spender wrote ‘In a very short time, without inquiring about my political feelings, he told me in a spirit of camaraderie and with great assurance that he wished Companys, the constitutional president of the Catalan Republic (with whom he had a political relationship of international importance, second only to that of an ambassador) had been shot after the rising of 1934.’ King hastened to assure the Foreign Office that he was on the friendliest terms possible with Companys and with the family of Colonel Macià. Nonetheless as the lengthy subsequent correspondence showed, he believed that Spender’s letter had put his life in danger.³³ Because of his concern, King informed Companys of the letter, although he did not explain to London on exactly what terms he had done so. Companys, aware of the need to maintain a good relationship with Britain, wrote King a letter reassuring that no harm had been done to their cordial relations and thus closed the affair.³⁴

It is worth noting that, in the course of the flurry of correspondence with his superiors, King did not actually deny making the offending remark and it was entirely in keeping with his oft-expressed views on the October 1934 events and their aftermath. Indeed, he was to make the same judgement in a slightly more circumspect form in late November 1936. His comments came in a report on the overall wartime situation made to Frank Roberts of the Western Department. In a series of comments which revealed his sympathies with the military uprising, he commented that, after the Asturian and Catalan risings of October 1934, ‘the Rights treated the rebels so lightly that they were laying up fresh trouble in store for themselves. Instead of dealing promptly with the prisoners, punishing the leaders severely and letting the rest go, they executed a very few insignificant rebels and imprisoned the leaders with thousands of their followers’. The clear implication was that Companys, along with other Asturian and Catalan leaders, should have

³³ King to Seymour, 2 September, Seymour to King, 5 September, PRO FO371/20537, W10719/62/41; King to Western Department, 10 September, PRO FO371/20538, W11209/62/41; King to Roberts, 11 September 1936, PRO FO371/20539, W11527/62/41.

³⁴ King to Western Department, 3 October 1936, and enclosure, Companys to King, 30 September PRO FO371/20542, W13083/62/41.

been shot. In some respects, King's report was prophetic, anticipating with some accuracy that if Franco were victorious 'Barcelona may expect to be the scene of a carnage more appalling than that witnessed by Madrid'.³⁵

In September 1936, a visit was made to the Foreign Office in London by John Langdon-Davies. A long-standing student of Catalan culture, Langdon-Davies had visited Barcelona as a correspondent of the *News Chronicle*. His visit to the Foreign Office was an attempt to counter-act the apocalyptic view of Companys and of the Catalan situation that was emanating from right-wing sources. A month later, he set down his own opinions on both as he wrote his book *Behind the Spanish Barricades*. He had come to regard Companys as 'the greatest man in Catalunya today' despite an initially very unfavourable impression: 'I had never liked the look of him. He is too much like those caricatures of the German Crown Prince that helped us to win the war to save democracy. A weak man, I thought, and a sentimentalist. I was completely wrong. I went to see him at his private reception room at the Generalitat. [...] Companys leaned back in his chair and smiled. A foreigner who could speak to him in Catalan! He relaxed. The conversation that followed seems to me contain a statement of certain political truths of the first importance to any student of politics in this changing world.'

In the course of their lengthy conversation, Companys spoke of his relationship with the anarcho-syndicalists. Langdon-Davies commented: 'Ever since the rebellion Companys has insisted in having the CNT take part in the responsibilities of government. Of course, short-sighted people have thought that this meant that the Generalitat was become a mere shadow in the hands of the CNT. But the wisdom of Companys has borne fruit. He has tied down the anti-political philosophers to the job of having to organise and to govern. If he had not vigorously supported a policy of making the anarcho-syndicalists responsible for what happened, they would have blamed the bourgeoisie for anything that went wrong; as it is they are themselves forced to justify their existence by learning how to keep public order; they have to control their own extremists.' Langdon-Davies was equally impressed by the fact that Companys

³⁵ King to Roberts, 25 November 1936, PRO FO371/20551, W107016/62/41.

seemed to have mobilised the petit bourgeoisie for the anti-fascist struggle. He concluded: 'For every thousand that has heard of Hitler and Mussolini probably only one has heard of Companys; but that does not alter the fact that he is one of the key-men in Europe today.'³⁶

Langdon-Davies was not alone in holding a sympathetic view of Companys. Geoffrey Brereton, the correspondent of the *New Statesman and Nation*. He described with admiration a scene in which Company arrived for a meeting of the Catalan parliament in the middle of an air-raid. He wrote appreciatively: 'Companys is certainly a brave man, and probably a strong one, but he is the direct opposite of the dictator type. On the contrary, he is the perfect democrat. He charms you by his modesty and friendliness. After talking to him, you are not sure which of you has enjoyed the conversation more. He is a small man in the middle forties, clean shaven, with lively, intelligent eyes. Whether you meet him in the middle or at the end of hard day's work, he is always unruffled, refreshing in his humour, natural in his manner. It is hard to think of him as the central figure in one of the stormiest decades of Catalan history. Yet this unpretentious civilian has been called once to lead, twice to suppress, armed revolt.'³⁷

The views of Langdon-Davies and Brereton were at the other end of the spectrum from those of conservatives like Professor Peers, who took church burnings and the persecution of rightists as evidence that the Generalitat was a powerless puppet in the hands of extremists. He regarded Companys as complicit with those who carried out atrocities in the name of the anti-fascist struggle. He saw the conflict of interest between the Catalan nationalist petit bourgeoisie and the revolutionary working class as a mini-civil war held in check only by the bigger struggle against Franco.³⁸

The efforts made by Companys and the Generalitat to claw back its powers from the revolutionary unions created considerable tension within Catalonia, although Anglo-

³⁶ John Langdon-Davies, *Behind the Spanish Barricades* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1936) pp.174-9.

³⁷ Geoffrey Brereton, *Inside Spain* (London: Quality Press, 1938) pp.14-15.

³⁸ Peers, *Catalonia Infelix*, pp.248-52, 264-6.

Saxon diplomatic observers were less than sympathetic to the difficulties that this occasioned. Massive economic and social distress was being caused by wartime circumstances. The population of Barcelona had been swelled by 10% by the arrival of 350,000 refugees. Shortages and inflation were kept under control in the short term by the CNT's supply committees which requisitioned food in the countryside and distributed it to the urban poor. Inevitably, the actions of the CNT in imposing low prices led to peasants hoarding food. The consequent shortages and food price inflation led to bread riots in Barcelona. Companys had brought the CNT into the Generalitat at the end of September and re-established conventional police forces in October. The significance of this was missed by the diplomats. For King, the entry of the CNT into government was 'an entirely novel idea' but not something that he saw as part of Companys's strategy for bringing the anarchists under control. The American Consul General, Mahlon Perkins, more perceptively, saw the new cabinet as 'an attempt by the Government to centralize and strengthen its position' although he too saw 'little promise of success'.³⁹

King, as always more categorical in his condemnation, was soon to be telling London that Companys's new government had 'handed themselves over, body and soul, to the Russian Bolsheviks'. Companys's elimination of the POUM from the Generalitat on 16 December did not convince King that order was being restored. Indeed, he gave vent to some of his most prejudiced remarks: 'The system which these people are setting up is based on robbery, arson and murder'. He referred to 'the lowest, most uneducated and savage part of the proletariat, a section of whom now dominate by terrorism not only Barcelona, but the whole of Catalonia.' In consequence, he went on to recommend that 'a Great Power like England would act more in accordance with her dignity if she broke off official relations with a Governmnet which has fallen into the hands of communist and anarchist gunmen.'⁴⁰

The American Ambassador, Claude Bowers, was much more sympathetic to both the Spanish Republic and the Generalitat than his British diplomatic colleagues, although

³⁹ King to Eden, 30 September 1936, PRO FO425/413, W12877/62/41; Perkins to Hull, 29 September 1936, Cortada, *A City in War*, p.28-9.

⁴⁰ King to Howard, 21 December 1936, FO371/20567/19038/62/41.

his personal opinion of Companys was relatively negative. On 12 April 1937, he wrote to Washington from St Jean de Luz about the efforts being made to restore authority: ‘The reports I have received from our Consul General in Barcelona indicate that progress is being made even there in bringing order out of chaos in Catalonia. There are now some reasons to believe that a Catalan army actually may enter the field to fight wherever needed. The strength of the extreme syndicalists and the anarchists in Barcelona has made the position of the Companys Government most precarious for months. One thing convinces me that there must be a radical change in that quarter. I know Companys – know him to be a timid, trimming politician without much courage of any kind; and when he suddenly takes the bull by the horns and comes out openly with demands for the unification of all forces under the authority of the Government, I know there must have been a change in public opinion. He is not a man who would venture much.’⁴¹

When the major fight-back against the anarchists and POUM came at the beginning of May 1937, Norman King was initially appalled by the street-fighting and commented, as he often did, on the fact that guns seemed to be available in Barcelona when they were lacking at the front. The extension of the authority of the Valencia government caused King to comment ‘It must be irritating to the Catalan autonomists and independents who aimed at the creation of a national Catalan army. The control of public order has also been taken over by the Valencia Government, which constitutes a humiliating admission of incapacity to govern by the Generality.’⁴² Professor Peers, not surprisingly, also applauded the action of the Generalitat during the May Days of 1937 and approved of the exclusion of the CNT from the government in June.⁴³ After the May Days, with the internal politics within Catalonia of decreasing interest to foreign diplomats, comments on Companys appear rarely.

In contrast with the highly opinionated reports of Norman King, it is noteworthy that the dispatches from the U.S. Consuls General in Barcelona and various other

⁴¹ Bowers to Secretary of State, 12 April 1937, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1937* Vol.I (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1954) p.279.

⁴² King to Eden, 10 May 1937, W9745/1/41, *BDF*, Part II, Series F, vol.27, pp.111-15.

⁴³ Peers, *Catalonia Infelix*, pp.283-7.

consular agents throughout Catalonia tended more to be straight factual reports without strongly expressed opinions.⁴⁴ The U.S. Consul General at Barcelona, Mahlon Perkins, despite his clearly conservative views, for instance, was as appalled by what he called the ‘tyranny’ of the Francoist zone as by what he called the ‘chaos’ of the Republican zone.⁴⁵ The attitudes of King and Chilton were typical of a certain sector of the British upper classes who regarded foreigners with a patronising distaste. In contrast, British and American observers who had devoted a long time to the study of Spanish and Catalan politics, even conservatives like Professor Peers, tended to be much more sympathetic. However, as might have been expected, sympathy or antipathy to Companys did not depend on the nationality of the observer in question but rather was usually the consequence of their prior leftist or rightist views.

This was revealed in the attitudes to Companys’s tragic end. Few foreign correspondents understood Catalan aspirations more fully than Lawrence Fernsworth, a close friend of Henry Buckley. He wrote of the capture and execution of Companys: ‘A crime which particularly shocked Europe and the liberal world was the execution at Barcelona's notorious Montjuich prison of Luis Companys, the former President of the Catalan regional government. Early in World War II he had been seized in France by the Nazis and handed over to Franco. And there at Montjuich on an October day in 1940 he met his death before a firing squad. The last words on his lips were "*Visca Catalunya!*"- "*Long Live Catalonia!*" uttered in his native Catalan. I had known President Companys during a number of years. He was one of the pioneers in the Spanish Republican movement. While still at the university he had been the students' Republican leader. He was an outstanding liberal, a friend of the underdog and he loved his Catalonia deeply. As head of the regional government during the Civil War he had done a magnificent job of keeping the government intact in the face of anarchy and chaos. He had denounced the militarists and their cohorts unsparingly and had incurred their unforgiving hatred. There was probably no man of all who had opposed Spanish fascism whom Franco could be

⁴⁴ See the collection of U.S. consular reports from Barcelona edited by Cortada, *A City in War, passim*.

⁴⁵ Perkins to Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, 20 April 1937, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1937* Vol.I (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1954) pp.286-7.

more pleased to have at his mercy.⁴⁶ The fiercely pro-Francoist, Sir Robert Hodgson, the British Government's diplomatic agent in Burgos, criticised the trial and execution of Companys, not as intrinsically wrong but as 'lacking in wisdom' on the part of Franco for failing to perceive the political advantage of showing magnanimity.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Lawrence Fernsworth, *Spain's Struggle for Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957) p.243.

⁴⁷ Sir Robert Hodgson, *Spain Resurgent* (London: Hutchinson, 1953) p.139.