"A Nation much given to changes":
The French Understanding of
English Politics in 1715

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England in the spring and summer of 1715 was a nation in turmoil. A new dynasty was barely settled on the throne, a new ministry was busy impeaching its predecessor, rioters were attacking Nonconformist chapels all over the country, and shocking slanders against the royal family were being sold on every street corner in London. More ominously, the English Jacobites were plotting to overthrow King George I and restore the exiled Catholic line of the Stuarts. Exciting times, to be sure. All of this was regularly reported back to France by the French ambassador to London, Charles François de la Bonde, marquis d'Iberville. There the king occasionally read the reports himself and more often listened to them being read by his old and trusted minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert de Croissy, marquis de Torcy. Between the three of them they set the direction of French policy with respect to the Hanoverian dynasty and its early troubles.

But how well did they understand what was transpiring over the Channel? For all its sound and fury the English troubles of the spring and summer 1715 ultimately came to nothing, and some historians have argued as a consequence that French ambassadors' reports are of little value as sources with which to gauge opinion and mood in eighteenth-century London. By contrast, this paper will
argue that the marquis d'Iberville and his masters at home understood the English and their politics very well and made perceptive and rational judgments that went to the heart of matters there. Precisely because they perceived the likely course of events in England, Louis XIV and his ministers were able to play a fine diplomatic game that was bound to come out in France's favor no matter who emerged triumphant from England's political turmoil.

Effective statecraft is as much about short-term opportunism as it is about deep laid policy. In the volatile world of international relations the ability to recognize and seize on opportunities arising from the troubles of one's enemies or one's allies is often the difference between winners and losers in the great game of power. Of all the opportunities to aggrandize oneself at the expense of the neighbors few are more pregnant with possibility than a looming civil war. In any event France was bound to be concerned about the outcome of the increasingly bitter power struggle taking place in Britain between 1714 and 1716. The crucial question from the French point of view was whether or not it could be turned to advantage. What follows below is an analysis of a moment in French statecraft at an unpropitious time for both England and France. Louis XIV was visibly ailing, his ministers were old men who knew their day was almost past, and France could not back up its diplomacy with military force because it could not risk the renewal of the Grand Alliance that had defeated the Bourbon powers in the War of Spanish Succession. So how well did the old king deal with the English crisis as the shadows lengthened around him?

It was clear in the first instance that the situation required very careful management. England in the spring and summer of 1715 was a nation in turmoil. The Hanoverian, Welf dynasty had come to the throne less than
a year previously in distinctly inauspicious circumstances and had completely failed to win the hearts and minds of the population.\footnote{1 Edward Gregg, *Queen Anne* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 150, and Ragnhild M. Hatton, *George I, Elector and King* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 173.} The new dynasty also lay at the center of the escalating party strife between Whigs and Tories.\footnote{2 Geoffrey Holmes, *The Making of a Great Power: Late Stuart and Early Georgian Britain 1660-1722* (New York: Longman, 1993), 334-66.} The Tories were the fundamentalist party of the Church of England, and George I was at best an unenthusiastic Anglican. The Tories saw their party enemies, the Whigs, as bitter enemies of the Anglican hegemony and thus opponents of all that was good and right about the British polity.\footnote{3 Hatton, *George I*, 289; Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (1967; repr., London: Hambledon, 1987), 17, 97; and J. P. Kenyon, *Revolution Principles. The Politics of Party 1689-1720*, rev. ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 83-101.} Thus Tories viewed George I's appointment of an overwhelmingly Whig administration soon after he came to the throne and his acquiescence in purging all Tories from positions of authority down to the gardener at Dublin castle as tantamount to a betrayal of a sacred trust.\footnote{4 W. A. Speck, *Stability and Strife: England, 1714-1760* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 172-76.} If the new monarch would not defend the Church of England and install its partisans in positions of power, what use was he? Perhaps, the more extreme Tories whispered, it was time to bring in a new king, one who would have no choice but to cleave to the Tories. The political crisis further deepened after the general election of 1715. When the Whigs won, thanks in large part to the king's forthright support, they took the first opportunity to revenge themselves on their
enemies by impeaching the Tories' leaders.\textsuperscript{5} Lives and fortunes were now at stake.

The Tories responded with violence in the streets of towns and cities across England. A torrent of popular demonstrations against the Whig regime cascaded into violent attacks on the property and, increasingly, the persons of well-known Whigs in localities scattered from Cornwall to the Scottish border.\textsuperscript{6} Behind the scenes, the most extreme Tories, the Jacobites, were plotting an armed uprising to drive out the Hanoverians and recall James, the Old Pretender, son of James II and VII, the Stuart king driven out in 1688 who was living in exile in Lorraine.\textsuperscript{7} In the event it came to civil war, the Tories openly acknowledged that they were bound to look to Louis, the patron and friend of the Stuarts, for aid and military support.\textsuperscript{8} Conversely, the Whigs were already convinced Louis' hand lay behind the nation's troubles, and many clamored for renewed war on the continent that would

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 176-79.
\textsuperscript{7} I will be dealing at length with the conspiracy and the uprising in my forthcoming book: 1715. The Great Jacobite Rebellion.
finally settle matters with the old enemy.\textsuperscript{9}

The situation was correspondingly difficult and dangerous for the French king and his ministers. The crucial moderator was that Louis could not contemplate full-scale war again. The War of the Spanish Succession had exacted a fearful toll from France in terms of blood and treasure, and there is no reason to doubt the old king's sincerity when, on his deathbed, he warned his great grandson, the future Louis XV, against developing a propensity for war.\textsuperscript{10} France's strategic situation also told against another war. The Habsburgs were highly unhappy with the Peace of Utrecht and were virtually certain to join in any renewed assault on the Bourbon powers. The Dutch Republic was an exhausted power and correspondingly less keen on another war, but the British more than made up for them. As one French diplomat succinctly put it: "The party spirit that reigns in England . . . is entirely in favor of war."\textsuperscript{11} Diplomacy and intrigue, not military force in any form, were the only tools Louis could use given his circumstances.

To complicate matters, if Britain's Jacobites did rebel, the Irish diaspora in France and particularly the elite Irish brigade, which at this time was still devoted to the Stuart cause, was bound to become involved whether the king liked it or not.\textsuperscript{12} If that happened the Whig regime in Britain was sure to blame the French government and could

\textsuperscript{9} AECP 265, 47r-48v, 49r-50v: d'Iberville to Torcy, London, 2 and 12 Oct. 1714 ns.
\textsuperscript{11} AECP 264, 207r: memo by de Lorme, London, 17 Oct. 1714 ns. See also AECP 265, 47r-48v, 49r-50v: d'Iberville to Torcy, London, 2 and 12 Oct. 1714 ns.
\textsuperscript{12} Éamonn Ó Ciardha, Ireland and the Jacobite Cause, 1685-1766: A Fatal Attachment (Dublin: Four Courts, 2002), 114-34, 149-50.
well use it as a pretext for war. Yet weighing against the potential problems for France that the Stuarts and their adherents might create in 1714-15 was their potential usefulness at some future point. Edward Gregg has recently demonstrated that Torcy and other ministers were contemptuous of the exiled Stuarts and cynically manipulated them to serve France's interests.\textsuperscript{13} Louis and the princes of the blood, according to Edward Corp, took a very different and much warmer view of their Stuart cousins.\textsuperscript{14} Both in their different ways, however, wanted to retain the Stuart card, that is, the potential to throw a Stuart prince into the British Isles in time of need. As long as there was a reasonable probability that such an act would precipitate civil strife in the British Isles, the Stuarts were simply too useful to abandon. Louis' difficulty here was that in the summer and autumn of 1714 James Stuart, the Old Pretender, was facing a crisis of confidence among his followers. "The Scots have told me clearly," he informed Torcy, "that if I don't come in person to their aid as soon as possible, they will be obliged to submit to the government, which has already begun to mistreat them, that they will be permanent slaves, incapable either of serving me or of shaking off the yoke that threatens them." Consequently, James felt, "without abandoning both my duty and my honor and even my own interest, I could not avoid taking this resolution."\textsuperscript{15}

Even so, Louis might still have chosen to squash the Jacobites' hopes and plans (after all, where else did they

\textsuperscript{13} Edward Gregg, "France, Rome and the Exiled Stuarts, 1689-1713," in A Court in Exile: The Stuarts in France, 1689-1718, by Edward Corp with contributions by Edward Gregg, et.al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11-76.

\textsuperscript{14} Corp, 159-79.

\textsuperscript{15} AECP 263, 440v-441r [early 1715].
have to go?) but for the interesting possibilities that began to unfold in early 1715. The marquis d'Iberville, French ambassador to Britain, first detected the potential seriousness of the crisis in January 1715 at the height of the election campaign. "It is impossible," he reported to Torcy, "that such animosity, which grows daily and bursts out in declarations from both sides, not produce real trouble."\(^{16}\)

Moreover, instead of receding once the election was over, the animus felt by the Tories towards the new dynasty only increased. "Every day there is some new sign of the fermentation of opinion against the king," wrote d'Iberville in early February.\(^{17}\) "The most enlightened foresee that sooner or later it will produce a civil war," he reported in March.\(^{18}\) By April, there was "quite public talk about a revolution."\(^{19}\)

All this, of course, could have simply been sound and fury signifying nothing. Neither d'Iberville nor Torcy had much respect for the English. "A nation much given to changes," remarked Torcy contemptuously in March 1715.\(^{20}\) "The English nation, so proud, so audacious, not to say so insolent on occasion, is not always the same and is not fundamentally as difficult to control as one might think. One might say that at different moments it is susceptible to quite opposite strategies," agreed d'Iberville.\(^{21}\) But in February the English Tories did something

\(^{16}\) AECP 266, 90v: d'Iberville to Torcy, London, 27 Jan. 1715 ns.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 145v: d'Iberville to Torcy, London, 7 Feb. 1715 ns.

\(^{18}\) AECP 267, 39r-v: d'Iberville to Louis XIV, London, 8-10 March 1715 ns.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 312v: d'Iberville to Torcy, London, 25 April 1715 ns.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 75v: Torcy to d'Iberville, Versailles, 11 March 1715 ns.

uncharacteristically daring and dangerous to themselves: a delegation of four leading Tories approached Karl, Count Gyllenborg, the Swedish ambassador to London, on behalf of a syndicate of forty or so of their brethren and offered Charles XII of Sweden a "loan" of £200,000 sterling on the understanding that as soon as Charles had settled accounts with his multiplicity of enemies in the Baltic, he would invade the British Isles. Gyllenborg, whose master was in dire financial and military straits, was enthusiastic about the scheme, which was ultimately to end in his arrest and the ransacking of the Swedish embassy in London by military search parties in 1717. In 1715, however, Gyllenborg immediately reported this approach to his French counterpart. The long-standing alliance between Sweden and France had been renewed in the course of the Great Northern War, and Louis was committed to doing everything he could, short of open war, to shore up the beleaguered Swedish empire. In that context, such an offer was bound to be of interest to France. Just as importantly, it persuaded Torcy and his master to begin taking the 'Tories' fulminations more seriously.

This is not to say that either Louis or Torcy lost sight of their key objective: maintaining the peace. Rather, they became interested in the possibility of a dual-track approach to the British Isles. Publicly, France remained committed to the peace of Utrecht, including the clauses

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23 Paul S. Fritz, The English Ministers and Jacobitism Between the Rebellions of 1715 and 1745 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 8-27.
25 AECP 268, 89v: Torcy to d'Iberville, Marly, 22 May 1715 ns.
binding Louis to uphold the Protestant Succession and cut his ties with James Stuart.  

Privately, Louis and his ministers now became increasingly involved in Jacobite plotting to overthrow the Hanoverian dynasty. It should be emphasized that this was not the instinctive response of either the king or Torcy. The Jacobites were certainly potentially useful in case of war, but France was not at war in 1715, and for all Louis's personal fondness for James, he had always shown a steely determination to subordinate him to French interests. The French government also maintained a careful public distance between itself and the Jacobites. As Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, explained to the leaders of the conspiracy back in England, Louis would offer "no troops, no money, no officers, no appearance which may not be disavowed on the part of France." Louis and Torcy were clearly very familiar with the concept of plausible deniability.

What manner of support did they envisage for the Jacobites? Torcy and Louis insisted that the Jacobites develop a concrete proposal for them to consider. When James and his supporters did so, they responded selectively and judiciously. One thing France had in abundance, having just emerged from a major war, was military grade


28 Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Calendar of the Stuart Papers Belonging to His Majesty the King Preserved at Windsor Castle*, 8. vols.(London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1902-20) [hereafter HMC *Stuart*], 1:529; memo by Bolingbroke for the English Jacobites, 13 Aug. 1715 ns. See also AECP 269, 300v: Torcy to d'Iberville, Versailles, 22 Aug. 1715 ns.

29 HMC *Stuart*, 1:360-61; James to Berwick, Bar, 24 Apr. 1715 ns; AECP 263, 440v-441r [early 1715].
arms and ammunition, something the Jacobites were desperately short of. Torcy was correspondingly able to offer the Jacobites 20,000 stand of arms, a commensurate supply of ammunition, and ships to get this materiel to the British Isles.\(^{30}\) French diplomatic channels were also opened as a conduit for secret Jacobite correspondence between the exiled Stuart court at Bar-le-duc and its adherents in the British Isles.\(^{31}\) In addition, the French government blandly refused to take action against Jacobites living in and moving through France and so obstructed the attempts of the British ambassador, John Dalrymple, Earl of Stair, to spy on the Jacobites that his agents were arrested and interrogated so vigorously that at least one of them died in the Bastille.\(^{32}\) Beyond France Louis and Torcy sought to secure the two further things the Jacobites most needed, men and money, from France's allies. Louis personally wrote to his grandson, Philip V of Spain, asking him to provide financing for the Jacobite uprising, and Philip in due course agreed to give them the sum of 400,000 pesos (approximately £100,000).\(^{33}\) Torcy also

\(^{30}\) HMC Stuart, 1:381-82; Berwick to James, Fitzjames, 2 Aug. 1715 ns; 1:529: memo by Bolingbroke for the English Jacobites, 13 Aug. 1715 ns.

\(^{31}\) AECP 267, 174v, 325r: Torcy to d'Iberville, Versailles, 3 April and 1 May 1715 ns; 234v: d'Iberville to Torcy, London, 9-10 April 1715.


applied to Sweden for troops to bolster the Jacobites once they were in arms. There the French government was less successful. Much as he despised George I for his jackal-like conduct towards Sweden since 1709 and was angered by the deliberately provocative anti-Swedish conduct of the Royal Navy squadron sent to the Baltic in spring 1715 ostensibly to escort British merchantmen safely through the war zone, Charles XII was reluctant to add yet another country to his already long list of enemies. Nonetheless, in sum, the French government did a great deal to make the 1715 Jacobite rebellion happen, all the while publicly maintaining a neutral disposition towards events in the British Isles.

In the nature of things the Jacobites, of course, wanted more than Louis was prepared to give. James, his bastard half-brother, James Fitzjames, Duke of Berwick, and Bolingbroke all lobbied Torcy tirelessly in an effort to get the French government to provide troops for an invasion force in support of the uprising. If France would only do so, they urged, a Jacobite victory was "morally certain." In particular, they wanted France to release Berwick, who was a naturalized French subject, and the Irish brigade for this purpose. James and Berwick were encouraged in this dogged campaign to sway the new French policy further in their favor by the fact that Louis had secretly ordered two ships and a cadre of Irish officers prepared to get the two

34 Hatton, Charles XII, 416-17.
36 HMC Stuart, 1:528: memo by Bolingbroke for the English Jacobites, 13 Aug. 1715.
men to the British Isles before the death of Queen Anne.\textsuperscript{37} This was on condition, however, that James would travel discreetly and fast to the French Channel ports and depart from Louis' territory as quickly as possible. Instead, when the queen died James went to Paris to request an army and a fleet, and Louis angrily responded by publicly refusing to receive him and then sending him back to Lorraine forthwith.\textsuperscript{38} By 1715, though Louis was prepared again surreptitiously to help the Jacobites organize their uprising, he was no longer willing to have any clear token of his support manifest in the Jacobites' ranks. Thus, not only were the Irish officers officially forbidden to participate, an order a good number of them ultimately ignored, but Berwick was specifically told he was not to accompany his half-brother.\textsuperscript{39} Should they disobey the king, Torcy could explain away a few Irish officers; the Marshal-Duke of Berwick was another matter. The French response was correspondingly adamant, and when the rebellion finally went forward, it did so without Berwick and for a long time without any help from the Irish brigade.

The Jacobites in England also insisted that they had to have regular troops supporting their uprising if it was to stand a chance of success, and it is clear from their conduct and the pressure they put on d'Iberville to persuade Louis to support them that they expected those troops to be

\textsuperscript{37}HMC Stuart, 1:282-83, 284-85, 305-306: Berwick to James, 21 Nov. and 12 Dec. 1713 and 4 March 1714 ns; AECP 250, 86-87: Torcy to James, 21 Nov. 1713 ns; HMC Stuart, 1:376-77: James to Berwick, Bar, 23 [endorsed, 27] July 1715 ns.


\textsuperscript{39}HMC Stuart, 2:283: Mr Gaydon to John Erskine, Earl of Mar, Caen, 16 July 1716 ns; Sir Charles Petrie, The Marshal Duke of Berwick: The Picture of an Age (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1953), 304-6.
French. They were, moreover, quite prepared to foment what trouble they could between Britain and France to secure what they wanted. As d'Iberville explained to Torcy in autumn 1714: "You may well guess, Monsieur, which of the Whigs desire a rupture, but you would not imagine that the most adamant Jacobites desire it also because they don't see that the Chevalier [the Chevalier de St George: James Stuart's official incognito] has any resources except the aid from the king, which he will not get as long as peace lasts."

Louis's refusal to offer anything that even looked like direct military support consequently depressed and angered them, and they took it out on d'Iberville who, they reasoned, could not have been giving Louis an accurate picture of events in England, because otherwise he would be eager for renewed war with Britain.

The desperation with which the English Tories sought direct military intervention from any possible source is a striking feature of their negotiations with France throughout 1715. Yet it is not self-evident why they were so insistent on having such support. Obviously a Jacobite rising would have been greatly helped by foreign military intervention. Until the end of July 1715, however, when George I told Parliament that the nation was in imminent danger of domestic insurrection and foreign invasion and was voted extra funding to expand the army, the army in


42 AECP 268, 330v: d'Iberville to [Torcy], London, 19 June 1715 ns.
mainland Britain was only 8,000 strong.\textsuperscript{43} It was a high quality force, almost entirely composed of veterans of the War of Spanish Succession, yet it could not be everywhere at once, and as the Scottish Jacobites were to show in the autumn of 1715, that left would-be rebels plenty of opportunity to seize control of a great many localities—in the case of Scotland, near two-thirds of the country—before the small number of regular troops could intervene.\textsuperscript{44} In addition, the English Tories' zeal to secure French military support was not matched by their willingness to prepare themselves for a civil war. When it came, the Jacobite rebellion was overwhelmingly a Scottish affair, but there was also a small rising in northern England. Scots Jacobites who fought alongside these English rebels were profoundly unimpressed. "Not above 8 or 10 of a troop of the English were better armed than with a whip and small sword, many of their horses were but indifferent, and their men raw and unactive," complained one of the Scots, and his disgust was echoed by virtually all observers.\textsuperscript{45} Only the northern English Catholics, who in all likelihood had secret arms stockpiles of their own dating back to the 1690s, made any kind of decent appearance in arms.\textsuperscript{46} All of these conditions strongly indicate that what the English Tories wanted was

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{43} Corelli Barnett, \textit{Britain and Her Army, 1509-1970} (New York: W. Morrow, 1970), 165. \\
\textsuperscript{44} PRO SP 54/8/89: John Campbell, Duke of Argyll, to Charles Townshend, Viscount Townshend, camp at Stirling, 24 Sept. 1715. \\
\textsuperscript{46} Monod, 309-16.}
to be rescued, not to have to fight themselves. They were even prepared to pay to be rescued, but they were very averse to risking anything more than their money.

Louis and Torcy, it appears, perceived this early on. They were impressed by the approach to Gyllenborg, yet Torcy remained cautious, noting, "I see that every day gives rise to some false rumor that people spread if they believe that it will contribute to the success of their particular views." Even at the height of the rioting against the government that swept England in the early summer of 1715, Torcy felt that "the apparent signs of a revolution could be quite misleading if one did not have information apart from the public agitation that one sees." Iberville, too, detected a distinct slackening of Tory enthusiasm once it became apparent that Louis was not about to come up with an invasion force and that if they wanted to overthrow the Hanoverian dynasty they were going to have to do it themselves. This, in turn, provoked Torcy to observe:

It appears that agitation in England is beginning to die down and that the accusations against the principal ministers of the late queen of Great Britain, although without foundation, hold the Tories back and prevent them from acting as quickly as they were inclined before these accusations were made public. It now seems that the parliamentary session will end without any unrest other than from individuals implicated in the

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48 AECP 266, 274: Torcy to d'Iberville, Versailles, 5 March 1715 ns.
49 AECP 268, 89v: Torcy to d'Iberville, Marly, 22 May 1715 ns.
accusations and that the nation as a whole is not sufficiently interested to make the king of England fear a revolution, which just recently appeared to threaten him.\footnote{AECP 268, 380r: Torcy to d'Iberville, Marly, 4 July 1715 ns.}

In diplomacy experience is an enormous asset. Torcy and his master had been dealing with England and the English for nearly fifty years, and they clearly understood the principals and their limitations.

The upshot of this knowledge was that even in the twilight of his life the old king and his minister's management of France's relations with Britain was shrewd and effective. The image of the tired old man waiting to die that inevitably creeps in as his biographers prepare their readers for their subject's death is misleading in terms of the king's actual performance, because Louis and Torcy in fact played both sides of the British dynastic crisis with consummate skill.\footnote{Wolf, 616-17; François Bluche, \textit{Louis XIV}, trans. Mark Greengrass (New York: F. Watts, 1990), 600-601; and Pierre Goubert, \textit{Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen}, trans. Anne Carter (New York: Vintage, 1972), 271-72.} Despite giving aid and comfort to the Jacobites, Louis maintained coolly civil diplomatic relations with the British government. Thus, if the Hanoverians survived, France would be no worse off than before. At the same time Louis gave more than adequate support to the Jacobites--provided they were prepared to do the hard work themselves. Hence, if the Jacobites succeeded, France would certainly be the winner, and all at the cost of a few thousand army surplus muskets and a letter or two to the kings of Spain and Sweden. Perhaps the greatest compliment to Louis' and Torcy's handling of the crisis in Britain is that their approach survived Louis' death. When Philippe de Bourbon, Duc d'Orléans, became Regent...
in September 1715, he initially distanced himself from the old man's policies and ministers. Torcy was sidelined and Orléans was initially unctuous in his conduct towards the British government. But within a month the new ruler and the new ministers had quietly resumed the dual track policy developed by Louis and Torcy. When the British government finally crushed the Scottish Jacobite rebellion in 1716, Orléans took the same route as Louis would almost certainly have followed had he still been alive: he matter-of-factly dropped the Jacobites and courted the British so assiduously that he secured a crushingly strong political and military alliance. We know that Louis was contemplating a radical diplomatic realignment in 1714-15 the better to secure the peace of Europe and, incidentally, France's superpower status; Orléans actually achieved such a realignment in 1716. Is it too far-fetched to find the seeds of that Anglo-French hegemony that was to dominate the affairs of Europe for the next twenty years in the old fox's cunning management of affairs in his last few months on earth?