

worked well. The Admiralty had commissioned oil-powered warships before he became First Lord. By February 1914 the navy had built, or was in the process of building, a grand total of 252 vessels that were either fitted for burning oil fuel only or fitted to burn oil and coal in combination, so the decision clearly predated Churchill, but he is credited with this radical change.¹⁰ It all added up to a navy that was permanently prepared for war, which was exactly what the Secret Elite expected from a First Lord of the Admiralty.

Even with pliant and trusted men in the Cabinet, the Secret Elite had to keep their plan for war under tight wraps. Had the public known of their intention to manipulate a war with Germany, the government would have been swept from office. The regular meetings between military strategists from France and Britain that had been taking place in secret since 1905, sanctioned by Asquith, Grey and Haldane, were still only known to a privileged few, but secrecy was not easily maintained. Those in the know were bound to grow in number as the work of the Committee of Imperial Defence expanded. Foreign ministers and diplomats heard unconfirmed whispers or were included in confidential briefings. Newspaper editors and owners had sight of information that was kept from the public domain, but it could not last. By November 1911, sources from different parts of Europe made confident claims that secret deals had been done: deals that bound Britain to France and Russia through military and naval agreements that were repeatedly and officially denied in Parliament and in public.

There was a furious row in Asquith's Cabinet on 15