

Her Majesty, Elizabeth II: Defender of the Faith

Piety, duty, and dogs – Jeremy Black surveys the life of Britain’s longest-reigning and possibly most popular monarch

From the perspective of today, it can be surprising to realise how unusual monarchy was becoming in the background to the accession of Elizabeth II in 1952. Indeed, the twentieth century had seen that means of identity and system of government, lay and spiritual, in desperate collapse across Eurasia as a whole. The 1910s had seen monarchy end in the world’s most populous country, China, bringing to an end the oldest monarchy in the world, with Russia, and Austria and Germany, three other long-established imperial monarchies, and one new one, following. So also with the Ottoman Empire in 1922. The 1940s had seen monarchy ended in Bulgaria, Romania and Italy, while the end of British imperial rule in South Asia had not been followed by the establishment of new monarchies. Japan’s imperial monarchy had been established, but shorn of status.

1952 witnessed not only the accession of Elizabeth but soon after, on 23 July 1952, the toppling of King Farouk in the Egyptian Revolution. Monarchies of different forms ended elsewhere, for example in Vietnam in 1955, Tunisia in 1957, Iraq in 1958 and Iran in 1979. Britain was unusual and increasingly so. There was nothing inevitable about this, and a country that had had a republic imposed on it by circumstances and force in 1649 could well have gone in a similar direction anew. France had had this experience in 1792, 1848 and 1870.

There were strengths in and of continuity in the British system, more particularly the interaction of monarchy and the Church of England and the joint grounding of both as legitimate and limited (not *but* limited) as consequence of the Revolution Settlement following the Glorious Revolution of 1688-9.

Yet, this required working at, and continually so. Here each monarch represents the challenge of mishap, as did, very differently, George IV and Edward VIII, or the possibility of strengthening the institution, and, with it, the Crown and the kingdom, as did, in particular, George III, Victoria, George V, George VI and Elizabeth II. Each brought different strengths and contributions, with a probity and conduct based on duty and faith especially to the fore.



Each thereby helped the country confront serious challenges, domestic and international, and related crises of identity. In my biography of George III, I emphasised his faith and how that set the tone for his conduct. It will surely be the case that the same is said of the Queen, an individual who surmounted her status in order to bring to the fore the full range of her spirit.

After the coronation, Elizabeth, who had been on an imperial tour when her father died in 1952, embarked on a lengthy world tour that captured the wide-ranging nature of the British world and enormous interest in the monarch. Vast crowds, for example, turned out to greet the Queen in Australian cities. Cinema news-reels and television provided publicity for such episodes. The royal family indeed adapted to television. The Queen’s first televised Christmas broadcast followed in 1957, and the wedding of Princess Margaret in 1960 was also televised.

At this stage, the Queen was very much head of what appeared to be a settled and stable society, one with relatively few challenges to her position or image. Her duties included opening Parliament and holding meetings of the Privy Council, awarding honours and decorations, and receiving visiting heads of state. Her private interests included a strong commitment to horse-racing, and she was also very fond of dogs.

There was much in common between the Queen and George III, notably a fundamental piety and, as a related factor, a strong sense of duty. Both liked country pursuits. Less happily, each had serious problems with their children and also oversaw the loss of an empire.

There was a consolidation of a type, however, from 1979, with referenda in Scotland and Wales leading to the maintenance of constitutional arrangements. Moreover, the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979, and her re-elections in 1983 and 1987, did not appear to be a change for radicalism. She was interested in reforming British governance, but did not extend this to changing the nature of monarchy. Thatcher's innate conservatism was on display in this attitude, and the Queen rather than Thatcher was somewhat irritated by the nature of their working relationship.

Helped by the Queen's circumspect character, the royal family were able to maintain a public focus on its non-political roles, notably its importance to a host of good causes, especially voluntary organisations, at community and national level. This contributed to a strong sense that the royal family had an important purpose, and helped maintain social harmony. The emphasis on service was linked not only to charitable roles, but also to the military, and much royal time was accordingly spent on ceremonial functions.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the royal family, like other national institutions, was affected by the increased public criticism linked to a decline in deference. The need to consider how best to respond, both to the criticism and to the pressures of, and for, change, was further posed and accentuated by the position of the Queen's four children, which raised questions about the nature of their upbringing. The role and matrimonial difficulties of the heir, Prince Charles, proved a particularly sensitive issue. His marriage in 1981 to Lady Diana Spencer in St Paul's Cathedral had been watched on television by much of the population, and their subsequent very public rift excited a lot of attention and discussion. It culminated in

divorce in 1996, Diana dramatically complaining, in a 1995 interview in *Panorama*, about Charles's continued favour for his former girlfriend, Camilla, whom he was subsequently to marry.

Although republicanism had always been at the margins in Britain from the 1790s, the 1990s saw an upsurge in anti-monarchical sentiment and a more critical press. The tragic death of Diana in August 1997 in a car accident in Paris, unleashed a wave of national grief which the royal family seemed totally unable to comprehend nor to respond to. The royal practice of 'never explain, never complain,' of discretion and never expressing a personal opinion, left the Queen in a particularly difficult position in this case; although, in truth, any comments would have been risky. Moreover, she appears to have been instinctively conciliatory and keen to avoid disagreements.

Neither the Blair nor the Brown governments saw any more significant developments, but the different stance of monarchy was readily apparent in 2010 when an election led to no majority. The Crown was kept informed of the coalition negotiations between Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats, but did not play a role in a process controlled by the politicians. The monarchy validated the outcome, rather than determining, or even influencing it.





So also with successive decisions to hold referenda. Indeed, David Cameron, Conservative Prime Minister from 2010 to 2016, was criticised for revealing the Queen's pleasure when the 2014 Scottish referendum saw a clear majority of Scots who voted to reject independence. This represented her support for the maintenance of the United Kingdom, and her essential conservatism. Earlier, she had urged voters to think with care which was a way to urge them not to vote for independence. The attitude of the Crown to the Brexit referendum, and to the subsequent bitter constitutional impasse and political division that lasted until a general election in December 2019 delivered a verdict, was more successfully kept private. This was also the case with her view on Boris Johnson as Prime Minister. The Queen continued to hold a weekly meeting with the Prime Minister and to read daily red boxes of Cabinet papers.

Meanwhile, the issue of the succession was increasingly coming to the fore, a situation highlighted by her refusal to abdicate (unlike the example of the Dutch monarchy) and to allow the grounding of a new reign before it aged. Moreover, the length of the reign ensured that the Queen was still on the throne when

rows over son Andrew and grandson Harry came to the fore. Whereas Pope Benedict XVI provided the example of a papal resignation in 2013, the first to do so on his own initiative since Celestine V in 1294 (Gregory XII did so in 1415 to end a schism), there was no abdication for Elizabeth. Nor was there need for a regency, although the 1947 Regency Act established a system of Counsellors of State to act when the monarch was abroad or ill.

Great affection and admiration for the Queen could not end discussion about the future, a situation encouraged in 2021 when the death of Prince Philip highlighted public sympathy, but also awareness of her age and frailty. In 2022, there was an increasing withdrawal from public duties, although the Queen opened the new Elizabeth underground line in London. Parliament was opened by the 73-year-old Prince Charles sitting on the consort's throne, and, facing 'episodic mobility problems' which had become increasingly serious, the Queen did not attend the garden parties celebrating the Platinum Jubilee, which, instead, were hosted

by other members of the royal family. Nor did she take the royal Salute at the Trooping the Colour in 2022, marking the start of national celebrations for her Platinum Jubilee, although as an instructive underlining of her preferences she was given a tour of the Chelsea Flower Show in a buggy that belongs to the royal household. The Queen took a lively interest, speaking to designers and plant experts, showing her knowledge of clematis. Yet, her withdrawal from public duties appeared increasingly apparent prior to her death on September 8, 2022, two days after a clearly frail monarch had appointed Liz Truss as Prime Minister.

She died with the love of her subjects and with the respect and admiration of the whole world. **ND**

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