

https://doi.org/10.18485/fpn_pz.2022.23.1

UDK 342.3:316.3(93/94)

Legacy of Queen Elizabeth II: The symbolism of the British Monarchy and the challenges it faces

Abstract



The British Monarchy is one of the most remarkable remaining monarchies in the world and a prototype of constitutional monarchies. During the 20th century, it became a potent symbol of British national unity, consensus and stability, and in the second half of the century, a reminder of Britain's former imperial grandeur. The funeral of Queen Elizabeth II displayed once again the power of the symbolic meaning of the monarchy for many Britons. However, the British monarchy, which has become highly mediated, has to act within a deeply divided society, face its colonial legacy in an international framework, and endeavour to overcome social, political and age-based differences in terms of its popularity.

Keywords



British monarchy, Queen Elizabeth II, divided societies

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Monarchy was a form of government that faced serious challenges during the 20th century. Prior to the Age of Revolution (1765–1830/1848), the monarchy was almost a universal form of government for states. In this period, however, the United States, France and many countries of Latin America became republics. Still, on the eve of the Great War, France, Portugal and Switzerland were the only republics in Europe. But the end of World War One ushered in a new era of republics.

In 2022, there were still 12 monarchies (four of which are mini-states) in Europe out of more than 45 European countries. Globally, there were 43 monarchies, with only slightly above 5 per cent of the global population living in them.

The British monarchy is one of the most remarkable remaining monarchies. As V. Bogdanor put it, the monarchy in Britain: “dating back to the time of King Egbert in the ninth century, is by far the oldest continuous dynasty, except, perhaps, for that of Denmark, and constitutes a prototype for other constitutional monarchies.” (Bogdanor, 1997:298) Historians, however, detected a process called “the invention of tradition.” In terms of the British monarchy, this happened in the last decades of the 19th century. As David Cannadine demonstrated, the British monarchy did not enjoy a good reputation in Britain in the early 19th century, and royal ceremonies were neither elaborate nor popular. (Cannadine, 2000[1983]:117–119) It was only between the 1870s and 1914 that rituals of the British monarchy “hitherto inept, private and of limited appeal, became splendid, public and popular”. (Cannadine, 2000[1983]:120) In the first half of the 20th century, the British monarchy, particularly through its symbolism during celebrations, appeared “as the embodiment of consensus, stability and community.” (Cannadine, 2000[1983]:140)

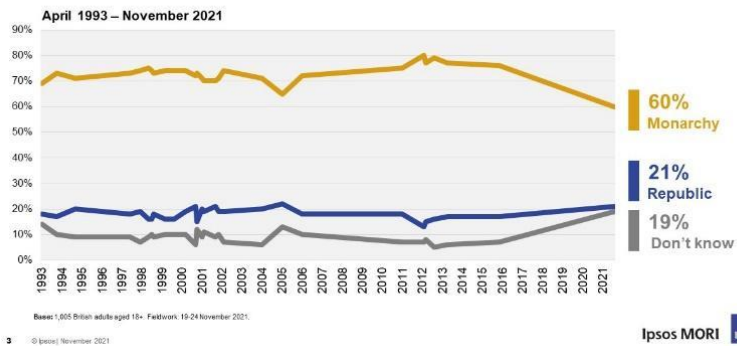
The same symbolism was kept during the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. What is remarkable about the British monarchy is its success in being transformed into the mediated monarchy heralded in the radio broad-

cast of the coronation of King George VI in 1937 and fully developed in the televised coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Subsequent media narratives on the British royal family focused on “how they represent British values and ways of life, and how they are the envy of other less fortunate nations.” (Chaney, 2005: 212) Through media narratives, the monarchy became a potent symbol of national unity, a reminder of historical grandeur and a source of British national pride.

The celebration of the Platinum Jubilee of Elizabeth II in February 2022 and the Queen’s death in September 2022 created situational bursts of support for the monarchy in Britain, but pollsters will be able to analyse the real effects of these public displays of enthusiasm for the monarchy only after some time has passed. Although republican clubs have had a voice in the United Kingdom since the 1870s, in 2021, only around one-fifth of the electorate declared themselves in favour of the republic, while the percentage of monarchists was still three times higher. Despite the relatively strong endorsement for the monarchy, the support for this institution declined in the period 2012–2021. Opinion polls conducted by Ipsos demonstrated a significant decrease in the support for the monarchy in 2016–2021. In 2016, three out of four Brits supported the British monarchy, and in 2021, the ratio was three out of five. (Ipsos, Nov. 2021) It is for this reason that the first year of the reign of King Charles III may be a very important indicator of future trends.

Should Britain become a republic or remain a monarchy?

Would you favour Britain becoming a republic or remaining a monarchy?



Source: “Ipsos Mori Attitudes to the Royal Family” (Nov. 2021), power point presentation.

The British Monarchy in a divided society

The Monarchy and the sovereign symbolically represent the unity of Britain. However, this institution has had to act in a deeply divided society. The post-Brexit United Kingdom is one such deeply divided society, but the divisions amplified during the process of Brexit had existed for many

decades. Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland and around half of the citizens of Scotland would prefer to separate their regions from the United Kingdom. Divisions that the Brexit campaign laid bare are far from being resolved. Deep-seated social, age-based and regional differences also sharply divide Britain.

In such a divided society, the death of Queen Elizabeth II on September 8, 2022, united the peoples and citizens in Britain in their grief and sorrow with an unprecedented and unanticipated fervour. Any observer who witnessed the atmosphere in Britain in the days following the death of the Queen or who merely watched the relevant video clips may have been somewhat surprised by this sudden display of national unity. Britons from all walks of life, from different ethnic backgrounds, social groups and faiths patiently waited, at one point for as long as 20 hours, to pay their final respects to their beloved Queen. Even those in Britain who were not royalists themselves could not have failed to notice the power of the monarchy's symbolism in Britain.

After seventy years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, many came to believe that almost everything could change, but the Queen would remain. Although Queen Elizabeth II was 96 when she died, her mother, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, was aged 101 when she passed in 2002. Many Britons hoped that their monarch would surpass her mother in longevity. Therefore, despite her advanced age, the Queen's death came as a huge shock and deeply affected the citizens of the United Kingdom.

The Queen was the last universally acknowledged symbol of unity, perseverance and grandeur in the period of unusual political turmoil when Britain changed four prime ministers in six years (2016- September 2022). The Queen was a guarantor of British identity and the highest symbol of the unique institution of the British monarchy. With its symbolism, this institution could simultaneously encompass two nexuses: the seemingly unbreakable bond between England and Britain and the unity of the four parts of the United Kingdom. At the same time, the monarchy has remained the only institution connecting contemporary Britain with its lost global prestige and influence. At the end of her reign, the Queen was the head of the remaining 15 countries of Commonwealth realm, and the head of the Commonwealth of Nations, a political association of 56 member states.

After Queen Elizabeth's death, every one of these relations could become more complicated, and the already detectable fractures may become ever wider. The first relation, England-Britain, is undermined by growing English nationalism, which will be discussed in more detail below. The voting results of the Brexit referendum demonstrated substantial regional differences, with 53.4% in favour of Brexit in England but only 38% in favour in Scotland. The very fact that Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU while Wales and England voted in

favour of Brexit illustrated the regional context of division. It also highlighted the problems that British governments are likely to face.

When, in 1910, King George V, the grandfather of Queen Elizabeth, became the British monarch, the last stage of the period known as *Pax Britannica* was taking place. This era of "British peace" emerged at some point after the Congress of Vienna (1815) and was clearly materialised by the mid-19th century. This period of British domination lasted till the outbreak of World War One, and the world experienced a century of relative stability. (O'Brien, 2002:9-13) Britain of that time was a dominant global naval power, and that power was the main pillar of *Pax Britannica*. In 1910, Lady Flora Lugard proudly mentioned in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* that the British Empire, with its territory of some 12,000,000 sq. miles, occupied nearly one-quarter of the Earth's surface. At the same time, the Empire's population of some 400,000,000 inhabitants included more than one-fourth of the global population. (Lugard, 1910:605-615) When, in 1936, King George VI acceded to the British throne, the British Empire was even slightly bigger than at the time of his father's accession. It was during his reign (1936-1952) that Britain experienced her "finest hour", but the King also witnessed the beginning of the end of his Empire when India became independent (1947) and then a republic (1950). It was during the reign of King George VI that Britain ceased to be the most powerful global power, and the United States replaced her as the global hegemon no later than 1941.

His daughter, Queen Elizabeth II, succeeded him in 1952 as the ruler of a reduced monarchy. Still, she became the sovereign not only of the United Kingdom but also of the countries of Commonwealth (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Pakistan and Ceylon). During the seven decades of her reign, Queen Elizabeth II was, in addition to the United Kingdom, the head of government in 31 other independent countries. At the end of her reign, the United Kingdom and 14 other countries of Commonwealth realm had 150 million inhabitants or less than 2 per cent of global population.

At the very end of World War Two, the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom were the three greatest global powers. Britain gradually left this club. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, Britain lost its status as a global power. Although no longer the most influential global power, just after the end of World War Two, Britain nevertheless seemed like the most powerful European country (excluding the USSR), but this position was also lost over the following three decades. (Robbins, 2005: 242-245)

The United Kingdom not only became the younger brother in transatlantic relations but also had to change her policy to the European Economic Community. Britain could not escape accepting the new reality that had already emerged in Europe, the reality of the Franco-German axis that represented the main pillar of the European Economic Community. The United Kingdom became a part of this reality in 1973 by joining

the Community but immediately had to face problems with parts of the public opinion that were embedded in an insular mentality and could not accept transfer of power to a transnational organisation.

The emergence of the Commonwealth of Nations softened the psychological transition that accompanied the process of decolonisation of the British Empire that began in 1947. This organisation was “another way in which British politicians and people came to terms with the loss of an Imperial status, and increasingly, the erosion of their international role as an international patron and dispenser of aid.” (Brown, 2001: 707) Or, as Timothy Garton Ash put it, the Queen “smoothed the transition from empire to Commonwealth and, for the UK, from imperial great power to middle-sized Euro-Atlantic power.” (Garton Ash, 15.09.2022)

Global Britain or Small England

The Monarchy and British society are faced with contradictory processes in the United Kingdom. While the Crown theoretically symbolises the unity of the nation, there are also ongoing efforts to separate certain parts of the United Kingdom. In Scotland, voices asking for separate statehood were so insistent that the British government and Parliament had to accept a referendum on Scottish independence. It was held in September 2014, and 55.3% of voters rejected Scottish independence.

It is quite clear that new challenges are just about to appear in Northern Ireland. The census of 2021 revealed, for the first time in the 101-year-long history of Northern Ireland, the existence of a relative Catholic majority in this region. Citizens who either identify as Catholics or were brought up Catholic make up 45.7%, outnumbering the Protestants (43.48%). (Census, BBC News, 22.09.2022)

This already complex situation has an additional problem that internally undermines British unity. The European Football Championship in 2004 signalled to the researchers of nationalism a new feature in Britain. Although Britain has separate football teams competing in international competitions (for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), football fans of England normally waved British Union Jack flags during football championships in the 1990s. Therefore, the use of the Cross of St. George (the flag of England) by the supporters of England's team in 2004 indicated a new reality, “the increasing weight which is being attached exclusively to England”. (King, 2006: 253-254) The same feature became apparent during the Brexit campaign when English flags were widely displayed on houses throughout England, either with the Union Jack or alone. This was a symbolic expression of many voters in England suggesting that, for them, support for Brexit meant not only the possibility of regaining British sovereignty but also a chance to maintain and preserve their English identity.

The death of Queen Elizabeth led to new self-reflections, although foreign observers were quicker to express them. *The Guardian* quoted Antonello Guerrera, the British correspondent of *La Repubblica*, who captured the fears of many British monarchists in a single sentence: "The risk is always that the UK ends up not as Global Britain but Little England. This, too, would have been a nightmare for the Queen."¹ (*The Guardian*, 16.09.2022)

The fact that Queen Elizabeth was the monarch of the United Kingdom for 70 years and that the Kingdom remained united during her entire reign, in spite of many challenges, is something that will certainly be the subject of various analyses. The symbolism of the Crown and its appeal to national unity was, no doubt, helpful in this endeavour.

Ghosts of colonialism in a postmodern monarchy

When in 1908, Leonard Woolf, the British writer and Fabian, became a colonial administrator of a small district in Ceylon (subsequently Sri Lanka), he was quick to realise "the absurdity of a people of one civilization and mode of life trying to impose its rule upon an entirely different civilization and mode of life." (Ferguson, 2004:320) Unsurprisingly, he resigned from his post several years later. However, what he faced in the early 20th century became, by the end of the same century, the problem of the moral consciousness of British society.

How can an increasingly multicultural state face the ghosts of colonialism? This question was posed both by intellectual and political elites of former colonies, and by the academia, artists and political and social activists in the Isles. The question has been increasingly put forward to the British monarchy because the territories that had been taken by the British Empire had been annexed on behalf of the rulers of Britain.

In 1997, on the 50th anniversary of the independence of India (1947), Queen Elizabeth II visited this country for the third time. On that occasion, she visited Amritsar, the site of a horrible massacre that took place on April 13, 1919, when General Reginald Dyer ordered the execution of 379 Indians who had taken part in a non-violent protest. The Queen had to take a stance about this shameful event during her visit to India. She said on that occasion: "It is no secret that there have been some difficult episodes in our past. Jallianwala Bagh is a distressing example." She also added: "history cannot be rewritten, however much we might sometimes wish otherwise. It has its moments of sadness, as well as gladness. We must learn from the sadness and build on the gladness." (Masih, 19.09.2022) This was the closest statement to an actual apology, which the Crown never offered during her reign. Since 1997, relevant parts of public opinion in India expect a full apology. British Prime Minister David

[1] "‘When mourning ends, reality will hit hard’: European journalists on Britain’s mood", *The Guardian*, Sep. 16, 2022.

Cameron also paid respects to the victims during his visit to the memorial in 2013 but did not apologise for the event. (Wagner, 19.02.2019)

In spite of the fact that some people in India were less than pleased with the Queen's statements, she possessed a well-known charm and was able to make a very good impression on many people in India during her visits. It is, however, very questionable if the same practice can be continued without producing negative emotions in India. Therefore, an apology remains something that the new British king will have to face.

King Charles III is likely to face not only this question but many other issues from the legacy of the British Empire, including the fact that many objects that the nation-states in Africa and Asia consider as their own are now in Britain. A list of jewels, artefacts, paintings and possibly some forms of reparations are likely to emerge every now and then. In a nutshell, the world of the early 21st century is a world of identity politics, and it has become such a potent paradigm that politicians of a very wide ideological spectre need to accommodate it. One should bear in mind that relevant parts of the British academic community and progressive circles have been pointing out for decades how difficult and complex the burden of the imperial and colonial legacy is. These issues are particularly important since King Charles is the head of the Commonwealth of Nations and has taken this position very seriously.

The British Monarchy between tradition and postmodernism

The British Monarchy became a classic example of a parliamentary monarchy during the course of the 19th century. Although the influence of the sovereign was weakened in the 18th century, it was further limited since the mid-19th century, and, during the course of the 20th century, transformed into the purely symbolic impact that British rulers have now.

The British Monarchy underwent several phases since the beginning of the 20th century. The first monarch in this century, Edward VII (1901-1910), had very different views regarding royal ceremonies from his mother, Queen Victoria. Unlike her, he genuinely liked the pageantry and enjoyed it. His successor, George V (1910-1936), witnessed a new phase in the development of the monarchy after 1918. That was the era of ceremonial nationalism. (Cannadine, 2000 [1983]; Chaney, 2005) The televised coronation of Elizabeth II on June 2, 1953, ushered in the latest phase of the British monarchy, which became "the mediated monarchy". The sovereign's subjects changed their role in this type of monarchy, gradually becoming "an audience rather than the awestruck onlookers of a traditional crowd." (Chaney, 2005: 2010)

The monarchy in Britain, in the words of Queen Elizabeth, had to experience its own *annus horribilis*. For the British royals, that shocking year of 1992 included the divorce of the Queen's daughter, Anne, the Princess Royal; the acrimonious separation of Prince Charles and Diana,

Princess of Wales; and extensive media coverage of various love affairs of the members of the royal house. In addition to being mediated, the monarchy in Britain also became a favourite topic in the tabloids. The introduction of social media brought the additional burden of daily interaction of the members of the British royal family with the public. Every single member of the royal family has been under the constant strain of regular opinion polls. British public opinion has become accustomed to regular reports on the popularity of their royal family, and the monarch and members of the royal family have become used to this form of pressure, too.

Queen Elizabeth II ended her reign as a very popular monarch. Following the Platinum Jubilee, her popularity reached 75%, well above the general popularity of the British Monarchy (62%). With 22% of respondents who opted for an elected head of state, the British monarchy was still a very popular institution at the end of her reign. British divisions about the monarchy are, however, clear when one analyses the monarchy in the context of political sympathies and age. While 84% of Conservative voters support the monarchy, only 48% of Labour voters share the same opinion. An even more dramatic difference in opinion emerged between generation Z (18–24) and the 65+ age group. While in the latter group, the support for the monarchy was 77%, with only 13% in favour of an elected head of state, respondents from Generation Z were almost totally divided, with 33% in favour of the monarchy and 31% who said they would prefer Great Britain to be a republic. Another issue that should worry monarchists in Britain is that, for the first time, a YouGov poll showed that a relative majority of Britons (41%) did not believe that the monarchy would survive the next 100 years, and only 39% believed it would still exist in a century. (Kirk, 01.06.2022)

The new king, Charles III, has already confirmed his reputation as a dedicated proponent of ecological values and an advocate of the global movement to tackle the issues and consequences of climate change. That opens up a huge opportunity for King Charles to approach Millennials and Generation Z. It is precisely this point that takes us back to the crucial problem of contemporary Britain: it is a highly divided and polarised society, and that fact brings the British monarchy to uncharted waters and very complex dilemmas. If the new sovereign decides to embrace some key values of the Millennials and Generation Z, he will potentially antagonise the group in which he enjoys the highest level of support (65+). The significance and impact of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II stemmed very much from her ability to be widely accepted across the hugely divided society as someone who was above political divisions.

The previous experience of the British monarchy has demonstrated its unusual ability to adapt itself and accommodate the demands of contemporary tendencies. The monarchy essentially followed the general evolutionary path of the development of the British political system. King Charles III, who succeeded his mother in September 2022, faces a huge

challenge to continue along the lines of accommodation of the monarchy to contemporary British society. If he opts for an inclusive approach, he could overcome some of the controversies that the tradition of the British monarchy includes, but would have to be careful how to make this more inclusive approach acceptable to the core group of the (largely aging) supporters of the monarchy in Britain.

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