Ladies and gentlemen, this is the first of a series of six lectures on British sovereigns since Queen Victoria, and it will conclude next summer with a lecture on the Queen. My aim in these lectures is to try to answer two questions: the first is how our system of constitutional monarchy has evolved since the 19th Century; and the second is what is the role of constitutional monarchy in a modern democratic state.

This first lecture is on Queen Victoria, but first, I have a confession to make because I fear I cannot possibly compete with the television series, which seems to have transfixed the nation, and soon we will know every detail of the Queen’s private life in the early years of her reign, but I cannot help feeling that the television series is not really about Victoria, Queen of England and Empress of India, but about an entirely different character – Victoria, the telly star – and indeed, I sometimes felt as if I had intruded upon an episode of Downton Abbey by mistake! I suspect that Queen Victoria would have responded to the series by using words often attributed to her, but which she never in fact used, the words being “We are not amused.” But whether that is right or not, I fear there will be nothing in this lecture on the Queen’s love life, about which I know nothing. Instead, I will concentrate on a theme which I am sure you will all find much more exciting, namely, the constitution!

In June 1837, a young girl of 18 was woken at Kensington Palace and told by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lord Chamberlain that her uncle, William IV, was dead and that she was to be Queen of Britain, or England as the Victorians used to call it, ignoring the susceptibilities of the Scots, Welsh and Irish. By the end of the 19th Century, Victoria would be ruling over nearly one-quarter of the world’s population.

She was born in 1819 and named Alexandrina Victoria, and at her proclamation, she was called “Alexandrina Victoria, Queen of the United Kingdom”, but at her first Privy Council meeting, she signed herself as “Victoria” and the name “Alexandrina” was withdrawn at her wish. She was the only child of the fourth son of George III, so at her birth, it seemed unlikely she would succeed to the throne, but there were no other surviving sons of George III’s sons, there were no surviving grandsons, and the three older brothers of her father had no surviving daughters, or rather I should say they had no surviving daughters born in wedlock. William IV, in fact, had no fewer than 10 children, the result of his liaison with an actress, Mrs Jordan, who was his mistress for 20 years, but his Queen, Adelaide, had no children.

At the age of 10, Victoria was told she might succeed to the throne, and she responded, characteristically perhaps, “I will be good.” Had she been under 18 when she came to the throne, there would have been a regency - she was just over 18. She later told the official biographer of the Prince Consort, “The Queen was not overwhelmed on her accession, rather full of courage, she may say”, and then she uttered a remark that is perhaps characteristic of her reign, she said, “She took things as they came, as she knew they must be”. She was, incidentally, the first sovereign to live in Buckingham Palace, and from the first, she showed a certainty of touch which sometimes degenerated into wilfulness. Being so young, some thought she could easily be influenced, and after her father’s early death, her mother had fallen under the influence of her secretary, Sir John Conroy, but the new Queen banished Conroy from the court, and when her uncle King Leopold of Belgium wrote to her offering policy suggestions, the Queen was scrupulous in showing all letters to her Prime Minister and refusing to reply on policy matters, except on the advice of her Prime Minister. This shows that, by the time Victoria came to the throne, the principle of ministerial responsibility for advice, which is fundamental to the constitutional monarchy, was already well-established.

It has been partially established after the Civil War in the 17th Century. Now, of Charles II, who was King after the Restoration, from 1660 to 1685, a wit had said that he “never said a foolish thing and never did a wise one”, but Charles responded, “That is very true, for my words are my own, but my actions are those of my ministers!” But by the 19th Century, it was generally accepted that a sovereign’s actions, and her words, were those of her ministers.

Victoria’s firmness sometimes had less happy results. Queen Victoria, like her father, was a sympathiser to the Whigs, the predecessor of the Liberals, and rather suspicious of the Conservatives when she came to power, and in 1839, the Conservative Leader, Sir Robert Peel, became Prime Minister and asked her if she would replace some of the ladies of her bedchamber, who were all Whigs and some of whom were related to Whig ministers, and Peel sought an expression of confidence. Queen Victoria refused and said she never talked politics with her ladies and would not move them, but Peel insisted, and Peel refused to take office, and the Whig Leader, Lord Melbourne, remained in power for two more years. The Queen told Lord Melbourne, “They wish to treat me like a girl, but I will show them that I am Queen of England.” Critics said that Melbourne had returned to power, and I quote, “behind the petticoats of the ladies-in-waiting” and the Queen became very unpopular in Conservative circles, where the royal toast was received in silence.

In later life, the Queen admitted she had been mistaken, and she told her Private Secretary in 1897, “Yes, I was
very hot about it, and so were my ladies, as I had been brought up under Lord Melbourne, but I was very young, only 20, and never should have acted so again. Yes, it was a mistake.” The mistake came about because Lord Melbourne, the Whig Leader and Prime Minister, was also serving as Queen Victoria’s Private Secretary, thus allowing a clear conflict of roles. This conflict ended when Victoria married Prince Albert in 1840 and Albert replaced Melbourne as her Private Secretary. After Albert’s death in 1861, Victoria appointed Private Secretaries who were not involved with politics and were expected to serve the interests of the sovereign, which need not necessarily coincide with those of her Prime Minister, and that was an important step in the development of modern constitutional monarchy.

Victoria came to the throne after a period in which the role of the monarchy had been radically altered, though it had not yet reached its modern form. The old theory of monarchy held that the sovereign was responsible for Government legislation and that the Government therefore needed the confidence of the sovereign to survive. Defeat of the Government in the House of Commons was therefore a defeat for the sovereign. The response of the sovereign would then be to dissolve Parliament and the party in power would appeal to the country on the basis it had the sovereign’s support, and partly for that reason perhaps, no Government between the years 1715 and 1835 was defeated in a general election. But all that had been changing, or at least views of it had been changing during the 19th Century.

Dr Johnson had said that the first Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, had been chosen by George I for the people, but the Younger Pitt had been a Prime Minister chosen by the people for George III, but in fact, Pitt was also chosen by George III, though one factor in his favour was that he was popular with the people.

In 1841, the Whig Government, favoured by the Queen, led by Lord Melbourne, was defeated at the polls after losing a vote in the Commons. The voters then chose the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, against the wishes of the sovereign. Melbourne did not understand that, in future, the Government would be decided by the people, not by the sovereign. He told the Queen that the return of a majority in favour of the opposition would be an affront to the Crown, but in 1841, for the first time in British history, it happened: the opposition won a general election. The Queen said she had made a mistake in dissolving. She said the result has been a majority returned against her, of nearly 100 votes, and she was forced to accept Sir Robert Peel, whom she did not actually care for, though later she came to revise her judgement and she supported the policy by which he is most remembered, that of free trade. Later in her reign, she was also forced to accept Gladstone, whom she also disliked, but with Gladstone, by contrast with Peel, the Queen did not revise her judgement, and her dislike, if anything, increased in intensity during Gladstone’s four administrations.

In 1846, Peel resigned following the controversy over the Corn Laws, and after that, politics entered a kind of twilight period between decline of royal power and the development of the modern party system. Instead of a two-party system, the House of Commons dissolved into different party groups, none of which was particularly cohesive and none of which could command a real majority. This enabled Victoria to exercise a genuine influence on Government, and in this, she was aided by Prince Albert, who became, in 1857, the Prince Consort. One Government Minister said, rightly I think, “Princes are strong when ministers are weak.”

I have mentioned that Prince Albert became, in effect, her Private Secretary, but in fact, his role was much greater than that: he became, in effect, a co-sovereign with Victoria after the birth of her first child in late-1840. He was given full access to Cabinet and other state papers, and from 1841, he attended audiences which the Queen held with her ministers. He became, in effect, a joint sovereign. But in my view, there is no constitutional provision for such a concept because it is only the sovereign and not her consort who is required to act under advice and therefore protected by the principle of ministerial responsibility to Parliament. The consort is not under parliamentary control and therefore cannot act as sovereign.

In 1852, the Queen’s influence was decisive in my view when she assisted in the creation of a coalition government, led by Lord Aberdeen, and this was the last in our history to be brought about by royal influence, except for the national government of 1931, but the Aberdeen Government could not be sustained by royal favour when it came to be accused of incompetence during the Crimean War.

In fact, royal power was coming to be limited even in the mid-Victorian period of multi-party politics because, following the fall of the Aberdeen coalition in 1855, the Queen tried to avoid calling on Palmerston, whose foreign policy she disapproved of, but she could not do so, and in 1859, she again tried to avoid both Palmerston and the new Whig Leader, Lord John Russell, whom she called “two dreadful old men”, but she was again forced to turn to Palmerston. Now, her basic objection to Palmerston was as much constitutional as political. Her views on foreign policy were very different from us, but she gave his policies backing when they were supported by a united Cabinet. What she objected to, and with some reason, was his failure to keep her informed of policies which she was required to sanction. She also resented the fact that, after she had given her approval to politics, he then arbitrarily altered or modified them without informing her. But what was unconstitutional in her conduct, even then, was the method by which she and Albert intrigued with the Cabinet against Palmerston behind his back.

The Queen did in fact also disagree with Palmerston’s policies, which involved, she thought, interference with the affairs of other countries to help secure liberal regimes in other countries, and the Queen’s influence on foreign affairs was generally exercised in the interests of reconciliation. In 1861, during the American Civil War, Albert,
on her behalf, toned down a Government draft to the Northern States which could have involved Britain in war with the Northern States. In 1863, she pressed ministers not to intervene in the rebellion in Poland, and in 1864, not to intervene in the war between Prussia and Denmark. The German Minister in London said, “The victory of the peace party is the victory of the Queen”.

During the middle part of her reign, she was also a force for conciliation in domestic affairs. In 1869, on the Irish Church Disestablishment Bill, and in 1884, on the Reform Bill - now, she was broadly opposed to both, but on the Irish Church, she wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury begging him not to reject it out of hand and not to allow the House of Lords to reject it, and she did the same in 1884 on parliamentary reform.

In 1861, Albert died, and Disraeli paid him the rather ambiguous compliment that “if he had outlived some of our old stagers, he would have given us, while retaining all constitutional guarantees, the blessings of absolute government.” What he meant by that was that Albert believed that only the sovereign could move beyond the partial interests of politicians and comprehend the true interests of the people, so acquiring a dispassionate view of the public good. The truth is, to my mind, that Albert did not really understand the British constitution because it is not for the sovereign, in a constitutional monarchy, to form a view of the public good independently of ministers who have been chosen by the people. The sovereign cannot be, as Albert thought, an independent power in the state.

The death of Albert was a shattering blow to the Queen, from which she never fully recovered. She mourned him for the rest of her life and used writing paper from then onwards with black borders. Her health deteriorated and she refused to appear in public. In the last 39 years of her reign, she opened Parliament just seven times, and for over two years, she made no public appearance in London at all. She came to be known as the “Widow of Windsor”. This led to a brief but significant growth of republican sentiment.

On the third anniversary of Albert’s death, the Times commented: “The living have their claims, as well as the dead. It is impossible for a recluse to occupy the British throne, without a gradual weakening of that authority which the sovereign has been accustomed to expect.”

In September 1865, the satirical magazine, Punch, printed a cartoon of the Queen as Hermione in “The Winter’s Tale” and Paulina was depicted as Britannia, and at the bottom of the cartoon was Paulina’s comment from the last act of the play, “Tis time, descend, be stone no more”.

But the criticism of the Queen was not in essence republican. The public demand was in essence for more monarchy, not for its abolition. “The mass of the people”, one peer told the Queen’s Secretary, “expect a King or Queen to look and play the part. They want to see a crown and sceptre and all that sort of thing. They want the gilding for their money.” That, no doubt, remains true today.

Now, in 1867, the second Reform Act extended the franchise to urban householders, and this helped to restore a two-party system and limited the possibilities of royal influence.

But it was during the last part of her reign that the Queen became most blatantly partisan. She became, as is well-known, a devoted admirer of the Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, and a critic of his Liberal opponent, William Gladstone. This arose in part for personal reasons, which can best be explained by an anecdote. There was a lady who had the good fortune to dine on successive evenings with Gladstone and Disraeli, and she said Mr Gladstone spoke so brilliantly that he made her feel that he was the cleverest person in the land, but she said, the next evening, Mr Disraeli spoke even more brilliantly and made her feel that she was the cleverest person in the land.

In 1868, the Dean of Windsor told Gladstone that “Everything depends upon your manner of approaching the Queen. Her nervous susceptibility has much increased since you had to do with her before, and you cannot show too much regard, gentleness, I might even say tenderness towards her.” But Gladstone never succeeded in following this advice. “Gladstone”, so Disraeli said, “treats the Queen like a public department; I treat her like a woman.” Disraeli was able to penetrate the stiff formality of court life, and the Queen found his letters to her witty and amusing, which indeed they were, and he flattered her quite outrageously.

His first letter to the Queen after being appointed Prime Minister in 1868 set the tone, and I think is worth quoting extensively:

He can only offer devotion. It will be his delight and duty to render the transaction of affairs as easy to Your Majesty as possible, and in smaller matters, he hoped he may succeed in this, but he ventures to trust that, in the great affairs of state, Your Majesty will deign not to withhold from him the benefit of Your Majesty’s guidance. Your Majesty’s life has been passed in constant communion with great men, and the knowledge and management of important transactions. Even if Your Majesty were not gifted with those great abilities which all must now acknowledge, this rare and choice experience must give Your Majesty an advantage in judgement which few living persons, and probably no living prince, can rival. He whom Your Majesty has so highly preferred presumed to trust Your Majesty’s condescension in this behalf.

The Queen returned Disraeli’s affection. When the Conservatives unexpectedly won a by-election in Southwark in February 1880, she sent him a Valentine, saying “I’m greatly rejoiced at the great victory at Southwark – it
shows what the feeling of the country is.” Disraeli replied, characteristically, that his, and I quote, “life of anxiety and toil has its romance” when he remembers that he “labours for the most gracious of beings”.

It seemed that Disraeli gave the Queen a false view of her powers, telling her in 1878 that she had the clear constitutional right to dismiss her ministers, and when the Conservatives were in opposition in 1881, the Queen asked him, quite unconstitutionally, whether it was true, as the Liberals had said, that the Queen’s Speech was not hers but her ministers, and he replied that such a principle, and I quote, was “not known to the British constitution – it is only a piece of parliamentary gossip”.

On one occasion, the Queen told Disraeli that if the Cabinet did not fulfil its promises to her, she would, and I quote, “lay down the thorny crown”, i.e. abdicate.

Victoria was devastated when Disraeli’s Conservatives were defeated in the general election of 1880. She told her Private Secretary: she cannot deny she, liberal as she has ever been, but never radical or democratic, thinks that a great calamity for the country and the peace of Europe. She was faced with the necessity of summoning Gladstone, but told her Private Secretary, she will “sooner abdicate than send for or have any communication with that half-mad firebrand who would soon ruin everything and be a dictator”. Others but herself, she went on, may submit to his democratic rule, but not the Queen! However, she found she had no alternative and she had to summon Gladstone, but she comforted herself by writing to Disraeli, “Mr Gladstone looks very ill, very old and haggard, and his voice feeble”. He said twice he looked to his not being long in office as it was too much for him. She would not have been amused had she known that Gladstone would remain Leader of the Liberals for another 14 years and would take office twice more, on the last occasion in 1892 at the age of 82.

But perhaps constitutional purists have taken all this a little too seriously. Indeed, they did so even at the time. Lord Derby, Disraeli’s Foreign Secretary, asked him in 1874, “Is there not just a risk of encouraging her in too large ideas of her personal power and too great indifference to what the public expects? I only ask. It is for you to judge.” The truth is that both the Queen and Disraeli were elderly, lonely and bereaved. Prince Albert had died in 1861; Disraeli’s wife in 1872. They sought solace in each other’s company and enjoyed a rather romantic conception of the relationship between the Queen and Prime Minister. What they said to each other about their constitutional powers must be taken with a large pinch of salt. Much of it was harmless play-acting and both of them knew it. Disraeli had no more intention of being dismissed by the Queen than she had of abdicating. And perhaps the personal element in the Queen’s attitudes to Disraeli and Gladstone has been over-estimated. Perhaps more important was the Queen’s dislike of Gladstone’s policies and in particular Irish Home Rule, which she feared would break up the kingdom. The Queen was just as much opposed to Gladstone’s Liberal successor, Lord Rosebery, even though she personally had chosen him and even though he was almost as chivalrous, gallant and flattering in his method of approach to the Queen as Disraeli had been. She was just as sympathetic to Disraeli’s Conservative successor, Lord Salisbury, as she had been to Disraeli. Indeed, she declared at the end of her life that, contrary to what is often supposed, she regarded not Disraeli but Lord Salisbury as the best Prime Minister of her reign. Her attitude to the radical Joseph Chamberlain changed completely when Chamberlain rejected Home Rule and became no longer a left-wing radical but a unionist and an imperialist.

The Queen was more of an irritant to the Liberals than a real hindrance. She could achieve little against a strong united Liberal Government under an agreed leader. She could do nothing against a Government with a secure majority in the Commons. She could not force a dissolution against the wish of her Prime Minister and could not veto policies to which she was unsympathetic. She could only initiate policies when the Prime Minister agreed with her. Her influence could be exerted only when the Liberals were divided and politics was in a state of flux, as in 1885/86 over Home Rule, or when, as between 1892 and 1895, a weak minority Liberal Government found itself dependent on support of the Irish Nationalists.

After Gladstone’s conversion to Home Rule in 1885, the Queen sought to bring together a coalition of Conservatives and so-called moderate Liberals, who were unionists, and she communicated with the Conservative opposition as to how this might best be achieved. In 1886, she pressed the unionist leader, Lord Hartington, to support Lord Salisbury’s Conservative Government. She was accused in 1894 of using her prerogative of appointing a Prime Minister by choosing as Gladstone’s successor a Liberal of the right, the Liberal imperialist, Lord Rosebery, rather than Sir William Harcourt, who would probably have been the choice of Liberal MPs, or Lord Spencer, who would have been Gladstone’s choice, and she did not ask Gladstone for his own view before appointing Rosebery.

But, in the Queen’s defence, it could be argued she was under no obligation to consult Gladstone, who was resigning because he had been repudiated by his Cabinet on the question of naval expenditure and who had perhaps therefore lost the authority which gave him the right to be consulted. Lord Spencer, in any case, later declared he would not have accepted appointment as Prime Minister, and the Cabinet was opposed to Sir William Harcourt, whom they regarded as an impossible colleague, and the biographer of Harcourt admits that Lord Rosebery was already emerging as the choice of the Cabinet – “Had ministers wished to serve under someone other than Rosebery, they could refuse to serve under him, so compelling the Queen to choose someone else.” So the Queen was working with the grain of politics, exercising a casting vote, as it were, rather than a purely personal preference.

Lord Rosebery was less willing to pursue Home Rule than Gladstone, and Home Rule had been defeated heavily.
in the House of Lords in 1893, but partly for that reason, he favoured constitutional reform to widen the composition of the House of Lords by diluting the hereditary element. To this too, the Queen was vehemently opposed, seeing it as tantamount to abolition of the Lords.

Lord Salisbury, in opposition, provided her with a novel doctrine that: “On a matter of this vital importance, the Prime Minister has no constitutional right to announce a totally new policy without first ascertaining Your Majesty’s pleasure on the subject, and if he is unable to convince Your Majesty, it is his duty to tender his resignation.” The Queen then told Rosebery that Lords’ reform was not a mere question of policy but, as he himself said, a question of enormous importance, a question of the revision of the entire constitution, and as such, she maintains her sanction that her sanction for its public declaration should have been obtained. The implication of this doctrine was that on what you might call constitutional matters, however defined, the Prime Minister needed the confidence of the Crown as well as that of the House of Commons, but as Rosebery told the Queen, this would tend to make the sovereign “a party in all controversies of the hour and would hazard the neutrality of the sovereign”.

The Rosebery Government, being as weak as it was, could it seemed be forced to go to the country at any time as a result of the defeat in Parliament, and the Queen then asked the opposition leader, Lord Salisbury, what would be the most suitable time for a dissolution from his point of view, and Salisbury said she would be within her rights to insist upon such a dissolution.

The Queen then asked, through her Private Secretary, a shadow law officer whether she was constitutionally entitled to order a dissolution, and failing consent of Rosebery, to dismiss the Government. The reply was tactful, saying that while the Queen undoubtedly had such a right in constitutional theory, it would be inexpedient to exercise that right, at least at the present time, since if Rosebery dissolved, he would say he was dissolving at the Queen’s insistence. If, on the other hand, as was more likely, he refused to dissolve, the Queen would have to dismiss him. The shadow law officer later wrote, “I could scarcely express myself as strongly as I felt, for my view was it would be a most dangerous act of folly if any premature interference of the Crown took place”.

The reign of Queen Victoria transformed the monarchy, rather against her wishes in fact. She was the first sovereign to arouse popular enthusiasm and affection. She had altered the image of the monarchy from that of her dissolute predecessors, George IV and William IV, whom she called her wicked uncles. We think, by contrast, of the respectability of the Victorian age.

On the Queen’s death in 1901, her Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, said that her reign “...bridged over that great interval which separates old England from new England. Other nations may have had to pass through similar trials, but have seldom passed through them so peaceably, so easily, and with so much prosperity and success as we have, and I think that future historians will look to the Queen’s reign as the boundary which separates the two states of England.”

To a writer on the Victorian age in 1936, the changes which the Victorian period saw appeared greater than anything that had been witnessed before or since. “I am speaking of changes in men’s minds, and I cannot, in my own time, observe anything of greater consequence than the dethronement of ancient faith by natural science and historical criticism and the transition from oligarchic to democratic representation.”

The paradox is the Queen was quite out of sympathy with these changes. She deprecated anything which appeared to cast doubt on revered religion and insisted she could never be Queen of a democratic state. She cannot, she wrote to a Liberal minister in 1880, and will not, be the Queen of a democratic monarchy.

In 1892, after the Conservatives had been defeated in the general election, she wrote to her daughter, the Empress Frederick of Prussia: “It seems to me a defect in our famed constitution to have to part with an admirable Government like Lord Salisbury’s for no question of any importance or any particular reason, merely on account of the number of votes.”

But Lord Salisbury said she had an extraordinary knowledge of what her people would think, extraordinary because it could not have come from any personal intercourse. “I have said for years I always thought that when I knew what the Queen thought, I knew pretty certainly what view her subjects would take, and especially the middle classes of her subjects.” The Queen had become the symbol of British pride and prosperity and her personality had come to be associated with the magnificent changes of the era, even though she was opposed to them.

She was also, by contrast with her predecessors, an exemplar of the domestic virtues, with a close and affectionate family life, and by the end of her reign, to a degree unapproached by any of her predecessors, she had become a national talisman.

The role of the monarchy was also transformed by the development of the self-governing colonies in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, who were, in the words of the Leader of the House of Commons, Arthur Balfour, “constitutionally linked to us through the person of the sovereign, the living symbol of imperial unity”, and with development of responsible government in the colonies, parliamentary government, Balfour believed the importance of the Crown in our constitution is not a diminishing but an increasing factor, and that was shown in the two Jubilees, the Golden Jubilee of 1887 and the Diamond Jubilee of 1897, at which the self-
governing colonies were represented by their Prime Ministers.

And all this was to be recognised by an amendment to the Royal Titles Act, passed in 1909, after Queen Victoria’s death, so that following the words “Queen or King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland”, there was inserted “and of the British dominions beyond the seas”. In 1909, Balfour told a royal confidante that “During the latter half of Queen Victoria’s reign, and more than ever now, Great Britain means the British Empire. Our people overseas do not care a rush for Asquith or me – they hardly know our names. For them, the symbol of Empire is the King.”

The monarch’s role in India had also been transformed when, in 1876, Disraeli added “Empress of India” to the Queen’s title, which she had long wanted. Indeed, she wanted to be called “Empress of Great Britain, Ireland and India”, but Disraeli said that would be unwise. What Disraeli understood was that India was an empire of its own and therefore needed a head of state of its own, and in his view, if the Queen were to become Empress of India, the Indian people would see her not as a sovereign of a distant country but as their own sovereign, Empress of their own country. Liberal opposition to this innovation annoyed the Queen and perhaps strengthened her Conservative sympathies. The Prince of Wales was also displeased because he hadn’t been consulted, and whereas Queen Victoria would sign her dispatches “VRI”, “Victoria, Regina et Imperatrix”, “Victoria, Queen and Emperor”, Edward VII simply signed his dispatches “ER” as a protest.

But the most fundamental changes in the monarchy were at home. Queen Victoria was in fact the first sovereign of a new type. Arthur Balfour told the House of Commons, in moving an address on the accession of Edward VII, that she had been “the first of all constitutional monarchs whom the world has yet seen”, and constitutional monarchy was in fact a British invention.

In 1867, Walter Bagehot wrote his classic work, “The English Constitution”, and he said, “If we look at history, we shall find that it is only during the period of the present reign that, in England, the duties of a constitutional sovereign have ever been well-performed.” Britain, during her reign, had changed from being a country ruled by the Crown with the assistance of ministers, whose task was to secure a parliamentary majority for the Crown and its polices, to a country ruled by one of the two party leaders. The Queen ceased to be a political force in her own right.

This growing impartiality of the Crown was due of course less to the wishes to the Queen than to the growth of party. But as her power declined, largely because of that, the symbolic role of the monarchy in Britain and the Empire greatly increased. As Bagehot had foreseen, the magic of monarchy, what he called its “dignified element”, depended upon the withering away of what he called the “efficient element”, because a Queen with power was bound to offend that part of the nation which did not agree with her. With her power withering away, she could become head of the whole nation as well as head of state.

Many believed the growth of parliamentary government would reduce the Queen to a cipher, that she would become, in the words of one advisor to Prince Albert, “nothing but a mandarin figure which has to nod its head in assent or shake it in denial, as his minister pleases”, but Victoria showed this need not be so, that she would not become a mere piece of constitutional machinery because power was replaced by influence.

Bagehot famously laid down the three constitutional rights which a sovereign enjoyed: the right to be consulted; the right to encourage; and the right to warn. But he said there was no easy road to monarchical influence: “The details of political affairs,” Bagehot said, “were vast, disagreeable, complicated and miscellaneous. A King, to be the equal of his ministers in discussion, must work as they work. He must be a man of business, as they are men of business.” Victoria was the first sovereign prepared to master the endless boxes of state papers sent to her with monotonous regularity by her Private Secretary. It has been her great aim, she said, to follow the Prince Consort’s plan, which was to sign nothing until he had read it and made notes upon what he signed.

Arthur Balfour referred to her “life of continuous labour”. Noticing, during her final illness, an accumulating mass of untouched documents which awaited her attentions, he, I quote, “marvelled at the unostentatious patience which, for 63 years, through sorrow, through suffering, in moments of weariness, in moments of despondency, had enabled her to carry on, without break or pause, her share in the government of this great Empire. For her, there was no holiday. For her, there was no intermission of toil. Domestic sorrow, domestic sickness, made no difference in her labours, and they were continued from the hour at which she became our sovereign to within a few days - I almost said a few hours of her death.”

When Bagehot described the rights of the monarchy in the 1860s, he wrote as if he were describing accepted constitutional conventions, but in fact, as we have seen, the idea of a constitutional monarch was comparatively new and there was no authoritative guidance as to what the Queen could or could not do. She was often blamed for not acting more like George V, when the only precedents she knew were those of her uncles, George IV and William IV. There was no real precedent for a constitutional monarchy of the modern type, and Bagehot’s account of the monarchy was more prescriptive than descriptive. It is known that George V read Bagehot. It is not clear whether Queen Victoria read “The English Constitution”, but she deplored Bagehot, whom she thought of as a dangerous radical, and she was much displeased when she found her grandson reading his economic essays. When Victoria’s letters were published after her death, it became clear that Bagehot had seriously underestimated the extent of the Queen’s influence.
Disraeli had been more perceptive. In 1872, he said: “I know it will be said that, however beautiful the theory, the personal influence of the sovereign is now merged in the responsibility of the minister. I think you will find there is a great fallacy in this view. The principles of the English constitution do not contemplate the absence of personal influence on the part of the sovereign, and if they did, the principles of human nature would prevent the fulfilment of such a theory. The sovereign is entitled, and indeed has a duty, to express her views on Government policy, as long as this is done in private. In the last resort of course, a constitutional sovereign must give way to responsible ministers, but it does not follow from this that a sovereign has no influence.”

As we have seen, Queen Victoria exerted her influence in a blatantly partisan way during the last 25 years of her reign, in favour of the Conservatives, against the Liberals. She wrote incessantly to Gladstone and Rosebery to complain about their policies, and she regularly complained of the speeches of Liberal ministers, which she believed were too extreme. It is said that Gladstone used to begin Cabinet meetings by saying that he had just received a critical letter from the Queen, which he then proceeded to read out. After reading the letter, he said, “And now let us proceed to business.”

In 1885, the Queen acted unconstitutionally by sending Gladstone a public telegram deploring his failure to rescue General Gordon, who had been killed in Khartoum by a Sudanese nationalist leader who called himself the Mardi, which means the Messiah. The Queen’s view, no doubt, corresponded with that of the man in the street, but it should not have been made public, and the Queen’s Private Secretary wondered if Gladstone could remain in office after being publicly condemned by the Queen.

A left-wing commentator in 1926 summed up the Queen’s influence in the following way. He said that her interpretation of the right to be consulted, to encourage and to warn was a wide one: as exercised by her, it involved the right to harass, to delay, to reprimand, and indeed, as one who suffered much from her remarks, the right to bully her ministers. In the last resort, both in home and foreign affairs, a Prime Minister could of course get his own way, but often only at the expense of a lengthy and delicate combat. If, as some have said, it is the duty of the English monarch to be passive and impartial, the Queen was certainly the least constitutional of sovereigns. That she retained the reputation of a model monarch was due to the fact that, though she strained the constitution almost to breaking point, her prejudices and her conventions were so exactly those dominant in her age that she seemed to embody its very nature within herself. Her influence, moreover, was almost always in the direction on which middle-class sentiment would have approved.

But the monarch, as I have said, is not only head of state, she is also head of the nation, and that role increased in importance during her reign, just as her powers went into decline. Indeed, the monarchy reached a new peak of prestige in the Victorian age. This could not have been predicted when Victoria came to the throne. The three previous sovereigns had been, in the words of Sir Sidney Lee, the official biographer for Edward VII, the three previous sovereigns had been “an imbecile”, George III, “a profligate”, George IV, and “a buffoon”, William IV. In 1830, Peel had thought the monarchy so unpopular that only a miracle could save it, and when George IV died in 1830, the Times said “There never was an individual less regretted by his fellow creatures than this deceased King.” During the agitation over the 1932 Reform Bill, William IV said he’d felt the crown tottering on his head, and insofar as monarchy was accepted, it was merely as a useful institution, part of the machinery of government. The monarchy enjoyed no emotional rapport with the people, of the sort that it has enjoyed almost continuously since the reign of Queen Victoria. The element of magic sometimes associated with a monarchy, the idea of the magical monarchy, began with her.

But I end by repeating the paradox that, although the Queen was sceptical, if not downright hostile, to the main political developments of the Victorian age, and in particular to the idea of popular government, the opening up of government to the people, nevertheless, the prestige of the monarchy at the end of her reign owed much to its association with the idea of parliamentary and responsible government in which the sovereign was required to be non-partisan and politically neutral. It is, to my mind, a striking and remarkable paradox that constitutional monarchy arose as a result of political forces of which Victoria, the first modern constitutional monarch, largely disapproved.
Thank you.