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**The Queen at 90**

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This lecture is intended as a celebration of the Queen’s birthday, or perhaps one might say “one of her birthdays”. She is unique in being able to celebrate two birthdays. Her real birthday is on 21st April, this Thursday, and her official birthday falls on 11th June this year, and I want to take that opportunity to look at the function which the monarchy plays in Britain today.

But it may be that the Queen approaches the age of 90 with mixed feelings. At the recent Heads of Commonwealth Government meeting in Malta, the toast to the Queen was given by Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, in which he honoured her over 60 years on the throne, which had seen 12 Canadian Prime Ministers, and the Queen replied, “Thank you, Mr Prime Minister of Canada, for making me feel so old!”

The Queen has two roles in Britain, which could in theory conflict: she is both Head of State but also Head of the Nation, or perhaps one ought to put the point differently and say she is head of a multinational state, which Britain has become since devolution, because devolution recognised the different claims of the component parts of the United Kingdom – Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and England. The role of Head of State is of great interest to those people who are interested in the constitution, but that is probably only a very small minority of the population, and explains why sales of my books are not as high as they might be. But the Queen is not just an item of constitutional machinery, and the reason why the Queen is held in such high regard, and one may say affection, is due not to so much to her constitutional role but to her role as Head of the Nation, as representative of the United Kingdom. That is the way I think most of us see the Queen. They are less interested in her constitutional powers, and those powers have, in any case, come to be greatly limited during her reign.

When she came to the throne in 1952, she did have some discretion over the appointment of a Prime Minister - for example, in 1957, when Sir Anthony Eden resigned, and in 1963, when Harold Macmillan resigned – but that discretion no longer exists because, in 1956, the Conservative Party established a system of election by which they should choose their future leaders, so the Queen has lost that discretion, and when David Cameron comes to resign, which we are told will be in this Parliament, it will be the Conservatives, not the Queen, who will choose their next leader and Prime Minister.

Then, in 2011, the Fixed Term Parliament Act removed the Queen’s discretion in deciding whether to agree or refuse a prime ministerial request for dissolution. There are now strict rules governing when dissolution can occur, and the Queen is bound by them.

All that is part of a much larger process that has occurred during the Queen’s reign, during which a constitution based on discretion has given way to a constitution based upon rules, and in my opinion, the monarchy has benefited from these restrictions on the Queen’s powers because any exercise of discretion is bound to be controversial. For example, when, in 1963, the Queen chose Lord Home as Prime Minister rather than the other contenders, some people agreed with that choice and some did not. Now, the Queen had acted perfectly properly, constitutionally, because she had accepted a recommendation from the outgoing Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, but if the Queen is to represent the whole nation, she cannot take the risk of being involved in controversy.

Now, what does it mean to say that the Queen is Head of the Nation? The Queen’s task is, as it were, to represent the nation to itself, and that requires a rare combination of talents. Most of us see the Queen only on ceremonial occasions, when she has to display qualities of dignity and to fulfil her constitutional duties, but that, while expected, is not enough. Indeed, it can lead to the danger of the monarch appearing remote. “Duty”, after all, is a rather cold word. So, in addition, the Queen needs to display a human touch, something not always easy to reconcile with dignity. She needs to show not only good sense and judgement in avoiding mistakes in her constitutional role but also the human quality of sympathy, of feeling with her people. The monarchy is one of the few institutions that can do this, perhaps the only one, and this is most evidently seen at the annual Remembrance Day ceremonies at the Cenotaph every November. It was also to be seen at the 70th anniversary commemoration of Victory in Europe Day in 2015.

I think this role is particularly important as Britain has become, as I mentioned a few moments ago, a multinational country. The General Election of 2015 was the first in our history in which a different political party won in each of the component parts. The Conservatives were the leading party in England, but in Wales, Labour was the leading party, while in Scotland, the Scottish Nationalists swept the board, and in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party won the election. Now, this political fragmentation has within it some danger of constitutional fragmentation, and perhaps the monarchy has a role in helping to hold the country together. The Queen, after all, may be the only person in Britain who is neither English, Scottish, Welsh, nor Northern Irish, but all and none of them. She can therefore represent all parts of the country on an equal basis. A republican head of state, by contrast, a president, would probably belong to one of the four components of the United Kingdom, would probably come from England, which is by far the largest component, and so might find it difficult to represent Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland on an equal basis and be accepted equally by people living in those areas. In Belgium, which is deeply divided by the French-speaking Walloon population and the Flemish speakers, it is sometimes said the King of Belgium is the only Belgian, that everyone else is either a Fleming or a Walloon. So, the Queen is well-placed to hold the United Kingdom together and to counter trends of fragmentation between the component parts of the country. She is also well-placed, in my view, to counter trends towards ethnic fragmentation.

One of the major changes in Britain during the Queen’s reign has been the shift from a homogenous society, composed primarily of white people, with Anglicanism being the dominant religion, to a much more heterogonous society, a multiracial or multicultural society in which a number of different religions jostle with the Church of England, indeed with Christianity, for recognition, and such a society can be threatened by intolerance and prejudice.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, there were clear signs of such intolerance and prejudice, and the racist British National Party seemed to be attracting a significant degree of support. In her Christmas Message of 2004, the Queen addressed this issue, and I want to quote from this broadcast in detail because it seems to me a very good example of how the Queen can encourage the expression of certain views without in any way departing from a position of political neutrality. The Queen spoke of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which she referred to as, and I quote, “a timeless story of a victim of a mugging who was ignored by his own countrymen but helped by a foreigner, and a despised foreigner at that. The implication,” she said, “is clear: everyone is our neighbour, no matter what race, creed or colour. The need to look after a fellow human being is far more important than any cultural or religious differences. Most of us have learned to acknowledge and respect the ways of other cultures and religions, but what matters even more is the way in which those from different backgrounds behave towards each other in everyday life.” She then went on to say: “There is certainly much more to be done and many challenges to be overcome. Discrimination still exists. Some people feel that their own beliefs are being threatened. Some are unhappy about unfamiliar cultures. They all need to be reassured. There is so much to be gained by reaching out to others, that diversity is indeed a strength and not a threat.” She then gave a story to illustrate her theme and she said: “It was for this reason that I particularly enjoyed a story I heard the other day about an overseas visitor to Britain who said the best part of his visit had been travelling from Heathrow into Central London on the tube. His British friends, as you can imagine, were somewhat surprised, particularly as the visitor had been to some of the great attractions of the country. “What do you mean?” they asked. “Because,” he replied, “I boarded the train just as the schools were coming out. At each stop, children were getting on and off. They were of every ethnic and religious background, some with scarves or turbans, some talking quietly, others playing, and occasionally misbehaving together, completely at ease and trusting one another. How lucky you are,” said the visitor, “to live in a country where your children can grow up in this way.”

I have quoted from this speech in detail because it does seem to me an excellent example of the way in which the monarchy can make an impact upon society and on its values, without, as I say, compromising its political neutrality, and I think it is not a coincidence that the Queen’s first visit during 2012, the year of the Diamond Jubilee, was to Leicester, a city that has become a symbol of the success of the integration of different ethnic groups. The Queen also made sure to visit a number of Hindu temples and Muslim mosques during that year. The plea for ethnic and religious tolerance gains, it seems to me, considerable force from the fact that it was delivered by someone who is not a politician and therefore cannot be accused of having any ulterior motive, such as the need to win votes.

The Queen can also represent the nation to itself when abroad. Remember the 2011 visit to Ireland when the Queen wore green and began her remarks at the state dinner to the President of Ireland and friends in Irish. During her speech, she spoke of the heartache, turbulence and loss that had been experienced by what she called “our islands” and she said, “With the benefit of hindsight, we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all.” In making these remarks about the history of the troubled British/Irish relationship, she was expressing the view of the nation, with an authority that would be quite impossible for an elected politician.

The Queen’s achievement is often described by saying that she has “never put a step wrong during her reign”, but I do not think it should be put in such negative terms. The Queen has, on almost all occasions, understood what might be called “the soul of the British people”. When Queen Victoria died in 1901, her last Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, said: “When I knew what the Queen thought, I knew pretty certainly what view her subjects would take.” It is of course very difficult for a monarch to know what view her subjects would take since her life is so very different from that of her people.

Perhaps one can understand this better by looking at the one occasion when the Queen was criticised for being out of touch with the movement of opinion, and that was in 1997 following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, when she did not appear in London for some days. She was staying in Balmoral at the time, and remained there with her grandsons, the present Duke of Cambridge and Prince Harry, rather than meeting a public demand that she return to London. She felt, no doubt, that she ought to comfort her two grandsons grieving from the loss of their mother, an understandable human reaction. In addition, we have to remember the Queen grew up during the War. She is a member of the Wartime generation, accustomed to displaying fortitude during times of emotional stress rather than displaying one’s emotions in public. Still, it seemed that she had not noted the deep emotional reaction of the public to the death of Diana, whom it saw as the People’s Princess, and it took some days for her to arrive in London to join the mourners.

The need to represent the nation to itself is an unchanging one, but the way in which it is done is bound to change over time. Britain in 1952, when the Queen came to the throne, was a very different country from what it is today - in L.P. Hartley’s famous words, “The past is a different country – they do things differently there.” The monarchy cannot be exempt from change, and perhaps the central change has been a shift in attitude towards it from the mystical monarchy to the public service monarchy.

In 1952, religion was a much more powerful force in society than it is today. A poll taken soon after the Queen came to the throne showed that one-third of respondents believed that she had been chosen by God. On Coronation Day in 1953, the Archbishop of Canterbury declared the country and the Commonwealth had been “not far from the Kingdom of Heaven”, language which I think would not be used today. The Queen seemed to many a magical figure, rather remote from the public as a whole. Queen Mary, the Consort of George V, once said, “No member of our family should smile in public.” When the Queen came to the throne in 1952, there was a marked degree of deference and respect for those in authority. That has now disappeared, and the challenge for the monarchy is to adapt to an age in which these social attitudes have passed away. It is no longer enough for an institution to justify itself by declaring that it has been in existence for a long time. Instead, people ask what is the use of it, what good does it do, and institutions which have not been able to justify themselves in this way face either reform or abolition. So, while, in the past, it was sufficient for monarchy just to be seen, the feeling today is for it to justify itself in practical terms, so the monarchy, which had been on something of a pedestal, had to become less remote and to involve itself more in society. Its contribution to national wellbeing today is not so much through constitutional niceties or royal spectacle but through philanthropic and charitable activities.

A good example of such an activity is the Queen’s Silver Jubilee Trust, which, in 2013, became the Queen’s Trust. This was launched in 1977 by the Prince of Wales and it funds charities which help young people. It has, for example, distributed grants to help young carers, those recovering from cancer, the long-term unemployed, and those at risk from under-achievement at school, and young people from vulnerable backgrounds or troubled families. Recently, the Queen visited one of the beneficiaries of the Trust, the Lister Community School in Newham in East London, one of the most ethnically-diverse areas in the country. She asked the headmaster how many different languages were spoken by the children and was told that 60 different languages were spoken.

The monarchy has adapted to the changes in society by becoming a public service monarchy. It has been associated with public service since the 18th Century, but it is only in the latter part of the 20th Century that this aspect has come to assume fundamental importance, and it is, in my opinion, the most important development in the modern history of the monarchy, and in this area, I believe, the practical employment of its symbolic influence…it is in this area that the monarchy will find its future. From this point of view, it is of great advantage for the deployment of its symbolic role that the monarchy is above party because a politician’s motives will always be suspect, while the monarch, the sovereign, by contrast, can speak to a wider constituency, the constituency of the whole nation.

So far, I have been talking as if the Queen was Queen of Britain alone, but she is also Queen of 15 other Commonwealth countries, sometimes called her realms. Now, by the provisions of the Royal Titles Act of 1953, the Queen is also Queen of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Barbados, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea, and eight other countries. Her role as Queen of Canada and the other realms is entirely separate from her role as Queen of the United Kingdom, although almost all her constitutional functions in Canada and the other realms are carried out by a Governor-General, appointed by the Queen on the advice of her Canadian Ministers. The existence of these multiple realms gives the Queen an international role, deriving from Britain’s colonial past, and serves to distinguish the monarchy in Britain from the monarchies of the Continent – we have an international monarchy.

At the time of the Royal Titles Act of 1953, it was said that the Queen belonged equally to all of her realms. Indeed, one former Commonwealth Secretary suggested the Queen should spend an equal amount of time in each of her realms, that she should be, as it were, peripatetic, and this would mean that Britain, like the other Commonwealth realms, would have her own Governor-General, since the Queen would only spend a few weeks in Britain before travelling to Canada and elsewhere. Now, that of course was absurd and unrealistic. The Queen’s role as Queen of Britain is bound to be her primary role because it is only in Britain that she performs her constitutional ceremonial and symbolic duties in person, so the legal reality of a Head of State who is equally sovereign over all of her realms could never become a practical reality.

Indeed, the Queen’s multiple roles open up obvious possibilities of conflict. For example, in 1994, the Queen opened the Parliament of Belize as Queen of Belize, and in her Queen’s Speech, she declared that prison was not the real answer to crime, but in Britain at the time, the Home Secretary, Michael Howard, was insisting that prison was the answer to crime. Now, the Queen’s Speech was delivered in Belize on the advice of her Ministers in Belize, not her Ministers in Britain, but there was an obvious possibility of conflict.

In 1984, the Queen delivered a speech in Jordan on Middle East policy, a speech delivered on the advice of the British Government, but the Australian Government protested that the speech proclaimed British policy on the Middle East, which was not the same as Australian policy on the Middle East. The Queen has spoken as Queen of Britain, as she normally does when she speaks in any foreign country, that is a country outside her realms, since her role as Queen of Britain is her primary role, so she was not speaking as Queen of Australia or any of the other realms, but that of course did cause worry.

The other realms do face problems associated with a non-resident Head of State, and some Governor-Generals feel they don’t have sufficient status, that their significance is not understood and that it is not, in particular, understood that they represent the Head of State. So there must be a real question mark as to how long the other realms will be prepared to accept a non-resident Head of State.

Now, the basis of the Royal Titles Act in 1953 was that Canadians, Australians and inhabitants of the other realms regarded themselves as British. For example, Robert Menzies, the Prime Minister of Australia between 1949 and 1966, used to refer to himself as British to his bootstraps and said, “The boundaries of Britain do not lie on the Kentish coast. They are to be found at Cape York in Australia and Invercargill in New Zealand.” When, in 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary, a New Zealander, was the first, with Sherpa Tenzing, to reach the summit of Everest, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Sidney Holland, declared how proud he was that an Englishman had been the first to climb the world’s highest mountain.

Today, of course, the pressures of nationhood in these other realms are putting the traditional situation under strain. In 1999, there was a referendum on the monarchy in Australia, in which republicanism was defeated by 55% to 45%. After that referendum, the Queen issued a statement declaring her belief that Australians wanted constitutional change but they were not yet clear that direction should take. She also declared she would only wish to remain Queen of Australia if that was the wish of the Australian people. Now, one of the leaders of the republican campaign at that time was the current Prime Minister of Australia, Malcolm Turnbull. He declares the Royal Titles Act had created a Queen of Australia but not an Australian Queen. He now says that turning Australia into a republic is not a matter of immediate concern and there are no plans at present for a second referendum, but of course the issue could arise again in any of the realms where there is pressure to have a resident Head of State, and there is at present active discussion in Barbados and Jamaica of the republican issue.

In addition to her role as Head of State in 15 other realms, the Queen has a second international role as Head of the Commonwealth, a Commonwealth in which 31 of the 53 members are republics. Now, the Commonwealth is also a product of Britain’s colonial past, and before 1949, all Commonwealth members had been monarchies and were required to accept the monarch as their Head of State, but when India became independent, she indicated that she wished to become a republic but to remain in the Commonwealth. The Indian leaders said that, unlike the previous Commonwealth members, such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, which were colonies peopled mainly by British white settlers, India was not a colony of settlement and was not peopled by emigrants from Britain. The Commonwealth had to decide on its attitude to the Indian request. If the request had been refused, the Commonwealth would have become a purely white organisation since the other African and Asian territories would also probably have become republics upon attaining independence. So, the decision was taken, rightly in my view, that the Commonwealth should accept republics and become a multiracial organisation, and since then, most of the other African and Asian members of the Commonwealth have followed India’s lead and have become republics.

This new relationship was expressed in the Declaration of London of 1949, three years before the Queen’s accession. In future, the Commonwealth would be bound together not by common allegiance to the Queen as Head of State but by recognition of the Queen as the symbol of the free association of its independent member states and as such the Head of the Commonwealth. So, in place of recognising the Queen as Head of State, the Queen is recognised as Head of the Commonwealth, and that role is quite different from the role of Head of State in two crucial respects.

Firstly, it is an entirely symbolic position, with no constitutional functions at all. India and the other Asian and African members of the Commonwealth would not have accepted a constitutional Head of State, so the Queen plays no part in the Indian constitution or the constitution of the other republics. The Indians and the other republics wanted a constitutional Head of State of their own, normally a president. So, there is no question of the Queen accepting advice with regard to her role as Head of the Commonwealth, and, for example, the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, the leading official of the Commonwealth in London, has no authority to advice the Queen – that is sometimes I think misunderstood. The Commonwealth has no government of its own. It is an association of states voluntarily joining together and so no situation requiring advice can arise.

Secondly, the role of Head of the Commonwealth, by contrast with the role of Head of State, is not a hereditary position. The Head is decided by the common agreement of Commonwealth members. Now, there are no rules. There can be no law of succession because the Commonwealth cannot have any legislative body capable of drawing up such rules of succession. The only occasion on which the question of the Head of the Commonwealth has arisen was in 1952 when the Queen came to the throne, and the Prime Minister of India, which was then the only republic; the Prime Minister of India then simply sent a message announcing that India welcomed the Queen as Head of the Commonwealth.

Although there are no rules, it is, I think, fairly certain that the Prince of Wales will become Head of the Commonwealth when he becomes King of Britain, and part of the reason for that is the high regard which Commonwealth members have for the way in which the Queen has performed her role, but it is also the case that any alternative Head of the Commonwealth would probably seek to exercise powers, and that would be unacceptable to most of the members. Sometimes, it has been suggested the post pass by rotation between Commonwealth Heads of Government, but that would mean, if it rotated every six months, it would take over 26 years for a country’s Head of Government to be Head of the Commonwealth, and some Commonwealth leaders, a minority, are dictatorships, and it would be unacceptable I think to most Commonwealth countries to have a dictator as their Head.

The Commonwealth, which contained just eight members when the Queen came to the throne in 1952, now contains 53 members, around one-quarter of the members of the United Nations, and all but three of the members – Cameroon, Mozambique and Rwanda – were formally parts of the Empire. The Commonwealth is a voluntary organisation and no ex-colony is required to join. In fact, however, only two former colonies have declined to remain in the Commonwealth – Burma and Ireland, which left the Commonwealth in 1949. South Africa left the Commonwealth when its request to become a republic in the Commonwealth was refused in 1961 because of its policies of apartheid, but South Africa re-joined following the end of apartheid in 1994. Other countries, such as Zimbabwe, have been suspended from time to time because they’ve failed to meet the minimum constitutional standards of membership.

In the past, the Commonwealth was seen as a club, but in recent years, it has become a community of values, symbolised by the Commonwealth Charter, signed by the Queen in 2013. This Charter emphasised democracy and human rights and commits members of the Commonwealth to opposing, and I quote, “all forms of discrimination, whether rooted in gender, race, colour, creed, political belief, or other grounds”, and a country can be suspended from the Commonwealth for anti-democratic practices.

The Commonwealth, perhaps, is a more influential organisation than many of us appreciate. It not only seeks to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law but is also involved in a wide range of diverse activities, particularly in developing countries. In recent years, for example, it has been involved in strengthening the Sierra Leone public health system, the magistrates’ courts system of Namibia, the investigation of economic and financial crimes in Nigeria, safeguarding historical data and records in Tonga, and developing youth job creation schemes in the Pacific.

The Queen is clearly deeply committed to the Commonwealth. In 1947, on her 21st birthday, the Queen made a promise that her whole life, whether it be long or short, “shall be devoted to your service”, a clear indication that she will never abdicate, and after the words just quoted, she added, “and to the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong”. In her Silver Jubilee speech in 1977, the Queen declared that she had seen, “…from a unique position of advantage, the last great phase of the transformation of the Empire into Commonwealth, and the transformation of the Crown from an emblem of dominion into a symbol of free and voluntary association. In history, this has no precedent.”

The Queen normally attends the regular Head of Government meetings of the Commonwealth. She does not actually participate in the meetings, but she does ensure that she meets the Heads of Government of each of the 53 members, which is obviously quite a formidable task.

The Queen makes two speeches every year in her role not as Queen of Britain, nor as Queen of her other realms, but as Head of the Commonwealth, and these are the Commonwealth Day Broadcast and the Christmas Day Broadcast. I suspect that most of us think the Christmas Day Broadcast is delivered to us in the Queen’s role as Queen of Britain, but it is not. It is delivered in her role as Head of the Commonwealth, a Commonwealth in which of course the majority are not Christian and do not observe Christmas, and in consequence, these speeches are not delivered on the advice of Ministers. They are the only two occasions on which the Queen speaks in public without advice. Normally, of course, the speech will be shown to the Prime Minister of Britain out of courtesy, and the Prime Minister may make suggestions, which the Queen may or may not accept, but she is not under any obligation to accept the Prime Minister’s suggestions.

For this role as Head of the Commonwealth to be of value, it must not be seen as a mere extension of the role of Queen of Britain, and it is believed that the Queen was disturbed by the position of the British Government in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher, when Britain, alone amongst Commonwealth members, opposed sanctions against Apartheid South Africa, and this raised a fundamental issue for a multiracial Commonwealth because while other Commonwealth members no doubt discriminated against people on grounds of race, Apartheid South Africa actually proclaimed it as an aim. The then President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda said, ironically, that Apartheid Africa was one of the few countries which actually practised what it preached.

Clearly, such a public proclamation of fundamental differences between races was unacceptable to the African and Asian members. There was a real risk that the Commonwealth could disintegrate on this issue. Some have argued it was only because of the Queen that the Commonwealth survived. We will not know whether this is true or not until the archives are opened, and perhaps not even then. But there is an obvious link between the Queen’s role as head of a multiracial Commonwealth and her call for tolerance and respect between ethnic groups in Britain in her 2004 Christmas Broadcast. The Commonwealth is valued as an institution because it links together developed and developing economies and because it cuts across religious and ethnic divisions. From that point of view, issues of ethnic and religious integration in Britain mirror those of the Commonwealth as a whole.

In 1983, a French-speaking newspaper in Quebec said of the title “Head of the Commonwealth” that it was “In the good British tradition, it is both efficient and devoid of logic”, and perhaps we might take that as a compliment.

I now want to make some remarks, in conclusion, on the value of the monarchy. Since 1689, when Parliament determined the line of succession, the monarchy has been a constitutional monarchy. Parliament can, at any time, alter the line of succession, as it did at the time of the Abdication in 1936, so that we, the people, have the right, if we so wish, through Parliament, to alter the line of succession or, if we wish, to abolish the monarchy entirely.

In 1969, the Duke of Edinburgh said, in Canada, “It is a complete misconception to imagine that the monarchy exists in the interests of the monarch. It doesn’t. It exists in the interests of the people. If at any time any nation thinks it is unacceptable, then it is up to them to change it.” He then added, in typically trenchant style, “We don’t come here for our health, so to speak. We can think of other ways of enjoying ourselves. The important thing is that if, at any stage, people feel that it has no further part to play, then for goodness sake let us end the thing on amicable terms, without having a row about it.” In 1994, in an interview in the Daily Telegraph, he said a republic was a perfectly reasonable alternative, and that the monarchy could survive only as long as the people wanted it to. After the untimely death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997, the Queen herself said, “The monarchy exists only with the support and consent of the people.”

We can now measure attitudes towards the monarchy through opinion surveys, and the remarkable feature of public support is how consistent it has remained over many decades, at between 70% and 75%. It falls a little below that during times of difficulty for the monarchy, as in the 1990s, but it rises above it at certain celebratory occasions such as today. A further indication of support for the monarchy is that no leading politician has called openly for a republic, though some may privately hold republican views. The monarchy has become a fixed point of continuity in a rapidly changing age.

Perhaps one reason why Britain remains a monarchical nation is that we have always been rather sceptical of giving too much deference to elected politicians, as Winston Churchill discovered when he was defeated in 1945, having led the nation to victory in war. The monarchy puts the role of Head of State beyond the reach of politicians, and that seems to me a good thing because any republican Head of State would have a political history. The Queen and the Prince of Wales have none. It is sometimes said that a republican Head of State could be a non-partisan figure, respected by all, but in practice, the Head of State would be chosen by the political parties, and no one who was not supported by a major party would have much chance of election. That is the case, for example, in Germany and Italy, when the President is generally a retired politician. I wonder how many in the audience could name the President of Germany or Italy… I know that I could not. Many people in Britain believe that politicians have too much influence and not too little. The former Prime Minister John Major once said, “If the answer is “more politicians”, you are asking the wrong question”, and much as we may admire Kenneth Clarke or Jack Straw, would we really want either of them as President?

Now, the monarchy is sometimes criticised as a conservative force and a relic of the past, and that case was put many years ago by the socialist Beatrice Webb, in a rather sour comment at the time of the Silver Jubilee of George V in 1935. She said, “The universal popularity of the royal family is the biggest asset of the status quo within Britain and the Empire – what a political paradox! Powerless puppet saving the face of the British constitution! The King and Queen, the royal Dukes and their Duchesses, above all the Prince of Wales, are good souls and do their duty with exemplary piety. How long will they save the situation for Western civilisation, i.e. capitalist dictatorship plus political democracy plus a veneer of the Christian faith?” That comment, of course, was written just four years before the War, in which George VI and his Queen did help, to quote Beatrice Webb, “to save the situation for Western civilisation”. The Queen also played her part, as Princess Elizabeth, joining the Auxiliary Transport Service in February 1945 and being registered as number 230873 Second Subaltern Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor. She took a driving and vehicle maintenance course at Aldershot and qualified in April 1945 as a driver, being promoted in July to Junior Commander. She was in fact the first female member of the royal family to join the Armed Forces as a full-time active member.

The argument put forward by Beatrice Webb is the existence of monarchy is a constraint upon radical policies, but if you look at some of the Continental monarchies, in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, they exist in far more egalitarian societies than Britain, countries where the modern left has been in power more often than conservative parties, and Japan also is a successful and modern industrial state, with a highly traditional monarchy. Is Finland, which is a republic, more modern than Sweden? Is Portugal, which is a republic, more modern than Spain? It seems to me difficult from these examples to argue that the monarchy inhibits radical change. Indeed, by acting as a force for stability, it can make radicalism more palatable. So, if radicals are disappointed in the conservatism of British society and of the British electorate, I do not think the monarchy can be held to blame.

What the monarchy yields is not conservatism, in my view, but legitimacy and continuity, because it puts the question of who is to be Head of State beyond doubt, and that continuity and stability is of great advantage, particularly during periods of radical change. These virtues are appreciated perhaps particularly strongly by those whose families have come here to escape from foreign tyrannies. The grandmother of the well-known Times journalist Daniel Finkelstein came to Britain after being imprisoned by Stalin in the Gulag. She used to say that, as long as the Queen was safe in Buckingham Palace, she knew she would be safe in Hendon Central.

But it cannot be denied that monarchy is a paradoxical institution. It is after all a paradox that, as the monarchy has lost power, its influence has increased, its public importance has increased, and that I think is because it is seen as symbolising and expressing important public values, and in particular perhaps the value of tolerance across different religious and ethnic groups. And it is a second paradox that an institution which began as absolutist and a threat to popular government now helps to sustain it, both in Britain and in a number of countries on the Continent which are monarchies – Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Sweden. The conjunction of monarchy and democracy may seem paradoxical, but perhaps it is worth bearing in mind an aphorism by Sigmund Freud, who said “It is only in logic that contractions cannot exist.”

I have tried to give arguments for the survival of the monarchy, but of course a large part of the appeal of the monarchy is to emotions and to emotional needs, perhaps sometimes emotional needs which are subconscious, and the appeal of monarch is in part, surely, an appeal to the imagination. The great 19th Century constitutional writer Walter Bagehot said: “So long as the human heart is strong and the human reason weak, royalty will be strong because it appeals to diffused feeling, and republics are weak because they appeal to understanding.”

So, perhaps we can all wish the Queen a happy birthday on Thursday and also wish her many more to come – thank you.

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