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**King George VI**

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Ladies and gentlemen, this is the fifth of six lectures on the monarchy and this is on George VI, whose coronation occurred 80 years ago on the 12th of May 1937, and that date was originally intended to be the date of the coronation of Edward VIII, but as I explained in my last lecture, Edward VIII abdicated in December 1936, and the second son of George V came to the throne as George VI.

At the Accession Council in December 1936, George VI said: “I meet you today in circumstances which are without parallel in the history of our country.” The circumstances were indeed unprecedented. One king was following another, not as the result of the death of his predecessor, but because of his voluntary abdication. George VI was the third of three kings in 1936.

He was the unexpected king and also a very reluctant one. Indeed, until three and a half weeks before the Abdication, he had no reason to believe that he would in fact be king, and when he realised that he was going to be, he burst into tears, but he said to the King’s Assistant Private Secretary, “If the worst happens and I have to take over, you can be assured that I will do my best to clear up the inevitable mess, if the whole fabric does not crumble under the shock and strain of it all.”

George VI was born in December 1895, the second son of the Duke and Duchess of York, later to become George V and Queen Mary. He was a shy boy, overshadowed by his more glamorous elder brother, and, as is well-known, he had a stammer, but he was to overcome it by qualities of grit and determination, which he was also to display as King. But even so, he never found public speaking easy, and his Christmas broadcasts, which he delivered conscientiously, were somewhat of a torture for him.

Not being heir to the throne, he was able to mix more widely with his future subjects than would otherwise have been possible: first, in the Royal Navy, and then in activities relating to industrial welfare. Like his father, he joined the Navy and was at the naval colleges of Osborne and Dartmouth, and his captain at Osborne made a comment which perhaps symbolised his whole life. He said: “He shows the grit and “never say I am beaten” spirit which is strong in him.”

In May 1916, he fought as a sub lieutenant at the Battle of Jutland, and was indeed the only British sovereign to have seen action in battle since William IV in the early 19th Century. He was also the first member of the royal family to enter the RAF and to qualify as a pilot – he received instruction and his pilot’s licence.

In his spare time, he played tennis, and in 1920, he won the RAF tennis doubles but lost in the semi-final of the singles. In 1926, in the jubilee year of the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Championships, he entered the doubles but was defeated in straight sets in the first round. Nevertheless, I think he is the only member of the royal family to have competed at Wimbledon.

But his prime interest during the inter-War years was in industrial welfare. In 1919, he became President of the Boys’ Welfare Association, later re-named Industrial Welfare Society, and he held this position for 16 years. His visits to factories gave him first-hand knowledge of industrial conditions, and in his speeches, he emphasised the human factor in industrial relations. Indeed, he spoke about these matters so frequently that he came to be nicknamed “the foreman” by other members of the royal family.

In 1921, he instituted boys’ camps, the Duke of York’s camps, whereby boys from different social backgrounds could enjoy a week’s holiday as his guest, and these camps continued until the outbreak of the Second War in 1939. Their aim was to break down what he thought of as artificial social barriers, and each year, 100 industrial firms were invited to send two boys each, and another 200 came from 100 public schools. Now, although this conception may appear somewhat naïve to modern eyes, the camps did do something to bring boys together in the grim depression years.

In 1923, he was given permission by George V to marry outside the royal family, and he married Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, daughter of the Early of Strathmore, who later became Queen Elizabeth. His Queen seemed to charm everyone, even the notoriously difficult to please George V. Once, she appeared late for a meal at Buckingham Palace, but George V, who was normally a martinet for punctuality, simply said, “We must have sat down a little early today.”

As Duke of York, the future King carried out his public duties quietly and efficiently until the Abdication, living the life of a country gentleman with sporting interests, much as his father had done. He was, I think, the first sovereign without any political history at all, whose political views were completely unknown when he came to the throne, and this no doubt helped him to be an impartial constitutional monarch, and he always insisted that his Private Secretaries were impartial too. There was to be no repetition of the problem that had affected his father, George V, and his grandfather, Edward VII, that one of his Private Secretaries, Lord Stamfordham, had been a known Conservative, and the other, Lord Knowles, a known Liberal. But the reason why George VI’s political views were unknown was because he was not particularly interested in politics or government before coming to the throne. He showed little more interest in politics than an ordinary country gentleman, which he had hoped to remain. Upon learning that he was to be King, he said to his friend, Lord Mountbatten: “Dickie, this is absolutely terrible! I never wanted this to happen. I am quite unprepared for it. I have never even seen a state paper. I am only a naval officer – it is the only thing I know about!”

He was unfamiliar with public affairs. Edward VII and George V had, for years, been in touch with leading political figures and had formed views about government. George VI, on the other hand, felt unprepared and untrained, and he felt he could not do the job as well as Edward VIII because he lacked the charisma. He found, in looking at the papers in the archives in Buckingham Palace, that there was a great deal of guidance on ceremonial matters – the opening of Parliament, Trooping of the Colour, and so on – but no real manual or guidance on constitutional or political matters, except perhaps for Walter Bagehot, and Bagehot was becoming out of date. No doubt for this reason, he was to make sure that his elder daughter, the Queen, did not have the same problem. He gave her a rigorous training in public affairs and in the duties of a constitutional monarch. He also gave her the benefit of a happy family life. George VI had greatly admired his father, but it has to be said that George V had not established unequivocally happy relationships with all his children. George VI did. Indeed, he was probably happiest living quietly with his family, and he certainly proved a role model for the Queen, and it is often said the Queen’s main concern is that she should be worthy of her father’s example.

But during the period of the Abdication, some felt the Duke of York could not really do the job. The monarchy was in uncharted waters. One constitutional authority, the first Parliamentary Counsel, Sir Maurice Gwyer, wrote to the PM’s Advisor to suggest that Queen Mary, widow of George V, be appointed Queen Regent - she would rule, and George V’s fourth and youngest son, George, Duke of Kent, would become King at a later date. Sir Maurice said: “The difficulty about the immediate succession of the Duke of York is that a substantial part of the country might still favour the present King and see his brother as a sort of interloper.” Queen Mary as Regent would re-establish the reputation of the monarchy, and the Duke of Kent was considered the most suitable successor as King because he was the only one of George V’s sons who himself had a son, who could become Prince of Wales, and that, so it was argued, would avoid putting too heavy a burden on the shoulders of the proposed Regent, Queen Mary. But in the end, these attempts to alter the succession came to nought and the Duke of Yok assumed the throne.

The new King always felt he would be compared with his more charismatic and glamorous brother. He was later to say to one of his Ministers: “All my ancestors succeeded to the throne after their predecessors had died. Mine is not only alive but very much so!” The ex-King tended to pester George VI: at first, he continually rang him up, giving him unwanted advice about how to perform the duties of the sovereign, then he wanted to have his wife presented at court, and he continually tried to secure a major diplomatic post for himself. All this added to George VI’s troubles.

Edward VIII had always been known to his family as David, and at the end of the War, there was a thanksgiving service at Windsor Castle, at which the Chaplain unwisely chose as a psalm “Lord, remember David and all his troubles”. The King’s Private Secretary felt this was not the most tactful of choices.

Now, the Abdication did arouse fears for the future of the monarchy. The official biographer of George VI wrote in his biography of the King: “It is idle to believe that because the Abdication crisis was of short duration and because it was skilfully handed that there are no grounds for the assumption that it was not of the utmost gravity and that, in slightly different circumstance, the stability of the monarchy might have been imperilled.” George VI himself felt the monarchy could, in his own words, “crumble under the shock and strain”. But these fears proved unfounded. In Parliament, a republican motion, put forward by a radical Labour MP, attracted just five votes, and popular support for the monarchy remained as strong as it had ever been, and was rapidly transferred from Edward VIII to the new King.

But it was support for a monarchy along traditional lines, and the new King appreciated this. Although his first name was Albert and his friends and family called him Bertie, he chose as his title George VI, both as a sign of continuity and also as homage to his father, with whom he had always got on well. Indeed, when he had married Elizabeth, George V wrote to him the following significant letter: “You have always been so sensible and easy to work with, and you have always been ready to listen to my advice and to agree with my opinions about people and things, that I feel that we have always got on very well together (very different to dear David).”

In a Commons’ tribute to the new King, the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, made the following pointed remark: “What will endear him to his people is that, more than any of his brothers, he resembles in character and mind his father.”

George VI, the unexpected monarch, proved, to the surprise of some, a highly successful one, a model indeed of what a constitutional monarch should be. At his coronation, Winston Churchill, previously a supporter of Edward VIII, told his wife: “You were right – I see now that the other one would not have done.”

At the end of the first year of his reign, the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote to the new King, saying: “You have grown into your high office, thus the courage with which, a year ago, you accepted the burden of a great responsibility, suddenly thrust upon you, has been amply vindicated.”

Perhaps because of the Abdication, George VI was very concerned about the future line of succession. The next in line to the throne, Princess Elizabeth, was just 10 years old, and clearly, if anything happened to the King, she was not yet in a position to assume the role of sovereign. The King therefore proposed that specific statutory provision be given to a situation in which, either because the sovereign was a minor or because the sovereign had become incapacitated and incapable of performing his duties, a regency would be instituted. There had been a regency during the madness of George III at the beginning of the 19th Century, but that had been only on a temporary and ad hoc basis. George VI proposed permanent statutory provision and Regency Acts were duly passed in 1937 and 1943.

Although George VI wanted to return to a more traditional style of monarchy, he was determined not to prove a cypher in the hands of his Ministers, and he soon showed that he would insist upon his constitutional rights.

In February 1938, just over a year after he had come to the throne, he was disconcerted to be told that his Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, was in serious dispute with the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, on the issue of Government policy towards Mussolini’s Italy, and that Eden was thinking of resigning, as indeed he did. The King asked why he had not been told of this dispute. He thought he might have been able to prevent Eden’s resignation had he been informed in time. He demanded that, in future, he be properly informed, and it was agreed that he would, in future, see the drafts of Cabinet Minutes that the Prime Minister received before they had been officially circulated, and that he would be promptly informed of any impending crises. This episode, I think, is constitutionally important because, according to Bagehot, the King has three constitutional rights: the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, and the right to warn, but he can only exercise these rights if he is kept properly informed. The King remained, throughout his reign, determined to use his constitutional rights.

In 1945, he asked his new Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, leader of Britain’s first majority Labour Government, who would be his Foreign Secretary, and in the words of the King’s diary, the Prime Minister suggested Dr Hugh Dalton. The King disagreed, saying that foreign affairs would be the most important subject for the new Government, and that Ernest Bevin should be appointed. The King disliked Dalton. Indeed, Dalton was the only member of the Cabinet whom he did dislike, and it is fair to say the King was not unique in disliking Dalton – most people did. But the King’s view was not based mainly or even entirely on that. He thought Bevin was a bigger man. In the end, Attlee did make Bevin Foreign Secretary and Dalton Chancellor. In his memoirs, Attlee insisted the decision was his own. That might have been to protect the King, we will never know, but the King certainly believed that he himself was responsible for the substitution of Bevin for Dalton as Foreign Secretary.

In 1950, the King’s Private Secretary, using the pseudonym Senex, old man, wrote to the Times to insist the King retain the constitutional right to refuse a dissolution, and in 1951, the King successfully objected to Anthony Eden being given the title of Deputy Prime Minister in Winston Churchill’s peacetime Government, on the ground that it would limit his prerogative of appointing a Prime Minister when a vacancy occurred.

Like most modern monarchs, George VI tended to sympathise with the policies of his current Prime Minister, whoever it was, and he believed the role of a constitutional monarch was to be loyal to his Prime Minister. This accounted for two misjudgements during the early part of his reign.

The first was in 1938, after the Munich Agreement with Hitler, when he appeared with the Queen on the balcony of Buckingham Palace with his Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. This was, I believe, the first time in British history that the sovereign had invited a commoner onto the balcony of Buckingham Palace, but it was a mistake since the Munich Agreement was the subject of a division in Parliament and was opposed by the Labour Party. The King also issued a public statement praising Chamberlain’s, quote, “magnificent efforts”, and that too was a mistake.

In the King’s defence, it may be said his misjudgement was shared, in an atmosphere of near-hysteria, by the vast majority of the public, who were relieved that the country did not have to go to war again, just 20 years after the end of the First World War, which had produced casualties in almost every family in the land. Indeed, the Labour Party’s criticism of Chamberlain was not that we should have gone to war but that a firmer stand on the part of the British Government would have deterred Hitler or made him climb down so that war would have been avoided. That, in my view, is a dubious judgement.

When War did actually come, in 1939, the King remembered in his diary that, in August 1914, at the time of the outbreak of the First World War, he had been a midshipman in the Royal Navy, and he said this: “In the grand fleet, everyone was pleased that it had come at last. We had been trained in the belief that war between Germany and this country had to come one day and when it did come, we thought we were prepared for it. We were not prepared for what we found a modern war really was, and those of us who had been through the Great War never wanted another.” That last sentiment was very widely shared at the time of the Munich Agreement. Sometimes, reading memoirs of the period or watching interviews with people who lived through it, one can get the impression the whole population was against the Munich Agreement, but at the time, it was widely welcomed and the King’s feelings probably were shared by many in the country.

The King’s second misjudgement was to prefer Lord Halifax to Winston Churchill in 1940 as the new Prime Minister when Neville Chamberlain resigned. When Chamberlain told the King that he intended to resign and that his successor would have to be found, the King, in his own words, said: “I of course suggested Halifax, but he told me that Halifax was not enthusiastic. I was disappointed over this statement as I thought Halifax was the obvious man.” But, again, it is fair to say that this misjudgement was shared by many Conservative MPs, and whatever they were to say in later years, by many in the Labour Party, who distrusted Churchill, as the enemy, in their view, of the labour movement, and the opponent of Indian self-government. In addition, Churchill had shown bad judgement during the Abdication crisis, in supporting Edward VIII against the Government, and this too, no doubt, prejudiced the new King against him. After appointing Churchill, the King wrote in his diary: “I cannot really think of Winston as PM. I met Halifax in the garden and told him I was sorry not to have him as PM.”

But, nevertheless, after initial difficulties, the King did establish an excellent relationship with his new Prime Minister, which Churchill described in his war memoirs as “…without precedent since the days of Queen Anne and Marlborough during his years in power”. From September 1940, the King instituted informal lunches at which he and the Prime Minister could discuss the war in detail. The menu was in accordance with strict wartime food rationing, and the King and the Prime Minister had to serve themselves because, discussing secret matters, it was thought inappropriate that anyone else be present. They were, therefore, somewhat spartan lunches, but lunches eaten on royal crockery – as one historian has put it, “Spam on a gold plate”.

The relationship between the King and Churchill became increasingly informal, so much so that, at a dinner party at Buckingham Palace in October 1942, Churchill kept excusing himself so that he could use the telephone to discover the outcome of the Battle of El Alamein, the first British land victory against Germany in the War. The assembled company knew that the battle had gone well when Churchill returned to the dinner singing “Roll Out the Barrel”, with great gusto but little evidence of musical talent.

But the King was not overawed by Churchill, frequently questioning him about the War, and, on at least one occasion, altering his mind when he persuaded his Prime Minister not to go with the troops to France on D-Day, so as to avoid putting himself in danger. In strict constitutional theory, the Prime Minister needs the King’s permission to go abroad, but the King did not rely on this. He simply said to Churchill: “I was not raising any constitutional point. I asked him, as a friend, not to endanger his life and so put me and everybody else in a difficult position.”

At the time of his death, in 1952, the King was seriously considering to ask Churchill, who had become Prime Minister for the second time at the age of 76, to consider resigning on grounds of age. He was perhaps the only person who could have persuaded Churchill to take this step. Whether he would have succeeded is a moot point. Churchill did not in fact retire until he was 80, in 1955, saying, in his own inimitable fashion, that he intended to “stay in the pub till closing time”.

The King’s reign was marked by war and by the shadow of war - preparations for war after 1936, recovery from war after 1945. His father, George V, had been King during the First World War, but war was not so central to his reign as it was to be for his son, and it was during the War that the King really came into his own, and, as the Archbishop had said, grew into his role.

In the summer of 1939, shortly before the outbreak of War, he visited the United States, the first visit by a reigning monarch to the United States. This produced great good feeling and Roosevelt predicted, wrongly, that, and I quote: “If London was bombed, America would come in.” Nevertheless, the visit did help to cement Anglo-American friendship and perhaps also helped to dispel isolationist feeling in the United States.

After the fall of France in 1940, the King did not despair but said, perhaps expressing the feeling of the country: “I feel happier now that we have no allies to be polite to and to pamper.”

In that same year, the monarchs of Holland and Norway came to Britain after their countries were conquered by Hitler. Also, the heads of government of Czechoslovakia and Poland and other exiled European governments came to London and established their headquarters there. The King became a symbol of the resistance of free peoples to Hitler.

During the Blitz, he returned to Buckingham Palace every day from Windsor to share the rigors with Londoners. He, in effect, came back to London every day to be bombed. Buckingham Palace was in fact bombed more than once. On 9th September 1940, a delayed action bomb fell just below the King’s study. On 12th September, six bombs dropped on Buckingham Palace. Two landed just 30 yards from where the King and Queen were standing, and a third destroyed the chapel. The King wrote in his diary: “We all wondered why we were not dead.” The King’s close escape was not widely known. Not even Churchill was told until much later how close the bombs had come to killing the King.

In 1945, Churchill was unexpectedly beaten in the General Election. His first instinct was to remain as Prime Minister until Parliament met, as he was constitutionally entitled to do, for the purpose of continuing to represent Britain at the Potsdam Conference, but the King, together with Eden, persuaded Churchill to resign immediately, on the grounds that a lame duck Prime Minister at Potsdam could exert little influence, and they convinced Churchill of that. The King offered Churchill the Order of the Garter at the end of the War, but Churchill declined, saying it would be inappropriate to accept the Order of the Garter when the voters had just given him the order of the boot!

The King found his new Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, very difficult to communicate with. The King himself was a shy and diffident man, Attlee even more so, and when Attlee came to the Palace to be appointed Prime Minister, there was a long silence, eventually broken by Attlee, who said: “I won the election.” The King replied: “I know, I heard it on the radio.” After the meeting, the King said his new Prime Minister ought to be called not Clem Attlee but Clam Attlee. But the King formed a good relationship with Attlee and with the Labour Cabinet, with the exception, as I said earlier, of Dalton, whom he thoroughly disliked.

He formed a good relationship with the leader of the left in the Cabinet, Aneurin Bevan, the Minister of Health, who, like the King, had conquered and stammer, and said how much he admired the King for having done the same. But the King disagreed with Bevan’s resignation in 1951 over charges for false teeth and spectacles, or perhaps it is fairer to say the King did not really understand the ideological reasons behind it. Just before the budget which led to Bevan’s resignation, the King had the Chancellor, Bevan’s great enemy, Hugh Gaitskell, and his wife, to stay overnight at Windsor Castle, and Gaitskell kept a diary of the event. When the King told Gaitskell, “There was only one of your people I can’t abide”, Gaitskell assumed he meant Bevan rather than Dalton, but the King said of Bevan’s Cabinet resignation: “He must be mad to resign over a thing like that! I really don’t see why people should have free false teeth any more than free shoes,” waving his foot at Gaitskell. The King then spoke of the forthcoming budget to Gaitskell’s wife: “I wonder what he has got in his box for us – I hope it will not be too terrible.” His wife said: “I don’t suppose it will be as bad as all that – after all, he is rather right-wing.” This the King thought a tremendous joke, and as Gaitskell said, “…laughed a great deal at the idea of my being thought right-wing”. But the truth was that the King, unlike most professional politicians, did not think in ideological terms of who was right-wing and who was left-wing. There were people he liked and people he didn’t like. As for government, that was something that had to be done effectively by the group of people elected to do it. George VI took the view, as I think his father did and I think the Queen does, like most modern monarchs, what you might call a managerial or administrative view of government: the job of the Prime Minister was to govern the country; the King’s job was to help them as best he could in terms of the famous slogan “The King’s Government must be carried on.”

The King proved a particular help to the Labour Government in helping it avoid a clash with the House of Lords because the Labour Government proposed to reduce the delaying power of the Lords from three sessions, in the 1911 Parliament Act, enacted by the pre-War Liberals, to just two sessions, and the Conservatives, who had a large majority in the Lords, were opposed to this. The King begged them to be conciliatory and not to oppose, and Conservatives were perhaps less likely to oppose it if they knew that the King himself was happy with it. At any rate, the 1949 Parliament Act was passed, without any repetition of the problems with plagued George V and Edward VII during the years 1909 to 1911.

The King also sustained his Labour Government on Commonwealth matters because the Commonwealth was changing profoundly during the late 1940s. In 1947, the King made an official trip to South Africa which had a political purpose: to assist the Prime Minister, General Smuts, against his Nationalist opponents, who were Republicans and who would introduce Apartheid. On the visit, one Nationalist Republican told the Queen that he had visited England and liked the country. He said it was only the people he couldn’t stand. The Queen replied, tactfully: “I quite see what you mean. I am Scottish, and married to an Englishman, but you soon get used to them.” The Government of Smuts, though opposed to Apartheid, was itself racialist and insisted the King must not personally pin medals on non-whites, nor shake hands or engage in conversation with non-white recipients of medals, but must instead hand the medal over to an official if the native department, so that the King did not come into personal contact with people whose skin was not white. The King was revolted by this, but was told that, as he was in South Africa as King of South Africa, he had to accept the advice of his South African Government. But when the King visited the British Protectorates, the Basutoland, Bechuanaland, and Swaziland, he gave both non-whites and whites medals personally, shaking hands and speaking with all recipients. Sadly, the purpose behind the tour of South Africa was not achieved. In the 1948 Election, the Nationalists defeated Smuts and proceeded to introduce Apartheid, which, in 1961, was to prove incompatible with Commonwealth membership, so that South Africa, on becoming a republic, left the Commonwealth. The King disliked his visit to South Africa, and his Queen never went there again, though she lived for another 55 years. His daughter, who became Queen in 1952, refused to visit South Africa during the period of Apartheid and did not go again until Nelson Mandela had become President.

In 1949, there was a major alteration in the Commonwealth, by which India, upon becoming independent, George VI ceased to be Emperor of India. Now, in 1877, Queen Victoria had been proclaimed Empress of India, as the result of an initiative by Disraeli, and from that time, she signed her letters “VRI”, Victoria Regina et Imperatrix. George VI, however, would no longer be able to sign his letters “GRI”, but only “GR”, George Rex, not George Rex et Imperator. But India posed a problem for the Commonwealth because previous self-governing countries, such as Canada and Australia, had remained monarchies and recognised the King as King of Canada or King of Australia. They had been colonies of settlement, composed largely of people of British stock. But India was not a colony of settlement, but composed of indigenous peoples, and unlike previous self-governing members, the Indian Government wanted her to be a republic and not a monarchy, and as an independent country, clearly had the right to choose her own form of government. But her decision meant the head of state would not be the King but a president elected by the Indian people. Now, could India remain a member of the Commonwealth as a republic?

In 1947, Burma had become independent and a republic, and had left the Commonwealth, the first country to leave what had been the Empire since America in the 18th Century. She was followed by Ireland, which, in 1949, also became a republic and seceded from the Commonwealth. The King was very upset by this and asked the Irish Minister in London, “Why leave the family?” He had been pleased to see relations with Ireland improving and had hoped to visit Dublin. He asked the Irish Minister whether he was in any way to blame. The Minister said even the Angel Gabriel could not have prevented it, and the Queen replied, “Well, whatever we are, we are not two Angel Gabriels.” When the Irish Government published their new law on citizenship and immigration, George VI said he wished Ireland well, but he said, sadly, to the Irish Foreign Minister: “What does this new legislation of yours make me in Ireland – an undesirable alien?”

Because, hitherto, the King had been the link between the countries of the Empire and Commonwealth. The members, all monarchies, were held together by having the same head of state. Now, a new title had to be found, and there was some agonising about it. The Indian High Commissioner said to Attlee, the Prime Minister, “The King should be called the First Citizen of the Commonwealth.” Attlee said, “Oh no, that sounds like Robespierre!” So, they eventually fixed on the title the Head of the Commonwealth, and this formed a new relationship with India, which was expressed in the Declaration of London in 1949. The Declaration of London said this. It began by saying that India wished to become a republic, but then went on to say: “The Government of India have however declared and affirmed India’s desire to continue her full membership of the Commonwealth of Nations and the acceptance of the King as the symbol of the free association of its independent member nations, and as such, the Head of the Commonwealth.”

The Head of the Commonwealth is a purely symbolic position, by contrast with the position of the monarch. The Head of the Commonwealth is not advised by any Ministers responsible to Parliament, as the Queen is in her role as Queen of Britain, Canada, Australia, and so on, because the role of Head of the Commonwealth has no constitutional duties whatever and discharges no constitutional functions in that role, so there is no question of advice, because the Indians would not have accepted a figure with constitutional duties – she wanted to be a sovereign and independent republic, and she was frightened that membership of the Commonwealth would, in a sense, subordinate her to a super-state of some sort. The Indian Prime Minister, Mr Nehru, insisted that her Commonwealth membership should not limit her independence or freedom of action, she would be subject to no external authority, and her subjects would owe no allegiance to the King. The agreement was one by free will and could be terminated at any time by free will. The only obligation of a member of the Commonwealth was voluntary cooperation, and India accepted, on that basis, that far from derogating from her independence, it would enhance it, she thought – it would be independence plus, not independence minus.

The Declaration of London in 1949 is the founding document of the modern Commonwealth, and the Commonwealth, in a sense, may in part be defined by what it is not – there are no constitutional duties, no allegiance. The Commonwealth cannot have a government of its own. It is an association of states, voluntarily cooperating, and not a union. So, the position of Head of the Commonwealth is not, as it were, an office, but an expression of a symbolic character of the wish of the Commonwealth members to remain in association as free and equal members. But in order to work, the position must not be seen as a mere extension of the British monarchy.

The Queen, in her role as Head of the Commonwealth, delivers two messages each year: a Commonwealth Day message on the second Monday in March; and the Christmas message, which, contrary perhaps to what most of us think, is not delivered to Britain alone, but to the Commonwealth, the majority of whose citizens are not Christians and do not celebrate Christmas. These messages are the only occasions on which the Queen speaks in public without advice.

In 1949, the King expressed the wish there would not be too many republican stars in his crown. India was seen as an exception. But of course, what had been given to India could not, in logic, be denied to other newly-independent countries, and Asian and African countries, upon achieving independence, have followed the Indian example. It may be that some of the older dominions, such as Australia, come to do the same. It was fundamental, the 1949 Declaration, because it ensured the Commonwealth would not remain a white man’s club. That would be inconsistent with the principles on which the Empire and Commonwealth had been constructed. As early as 1897, Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary, reminded representatives at the Colonial Conference to bear in mind the tradition of Empire, which makes no distinction in favour of or against race or colour. In the late 1940s, the Cabinet Secretary reiterated this point: “To regard the Commonwealth as essentially European in race and British in culture and outlook would indeed be wholly inconsistent with our colonial policy, which contemplated, as an aim of political development, the ultimate attainment by the dependent territories of responsible self-government within the British Commonwealth.” So, the Government’s motive was not only to accommodate India but to create a multiracial body which could help avoid a collision of races, and in the modern Commonwealth, non-whites outnumber whites by around six to one. This completed, I think, a remarkable transformation of Empire, hitherto based on a relationship of domination, to one of equal and voluntary membership.

The King accepted this and that he was no longer to be the Emperor of India but, in the words of the Declaration of London, “the symbol of the free association of its independent member states and, as such, the Head of the Commonwealth”. The King asked the Indian High Commissioner, “What am I now, simply an as-such?” But the High Commissioner said he did far more than is known or need be said to help, and Attlee said, after the King’s death, that during his reign, there were “…developments in the Commonwealth, some of which entailed the abandonment of outward forms, which a lesser man might have found it difficult to surrender, but he was essentially broad-minded and was ready to accept changes that seemed necessary.”

Around the time of the Declaration of London in 1949, the King began to suffer from serious illnesses – Buerger’s Disease and arteriosclerosis, a product perhaps of heavy smoking, and perhaps the result of stress during the War and post-War years. These illnesses caused severe pain in his legs and it was feared at one time that amputation might be necessary. Then, in 1951, he was found to have cancer of the lung, and a lung was removed in what I suppose, for those days, was quite a complex and dangerous operation. The King appeared to be recovering, but died suddenly in his sleep on February 6th 1952, not from cancer but from a coronary thrombosis.

In a moving tribute in the House of Commons to the King, Churchill said that he had “…walked with death, as if death were a companion, an acquaintance whom he recognised and did not fear.”

The King’s poor health was known to his Ministers, but the public had assumed that he had recovered, and his death came as a shock. There was an outpouring of public grief at the news. The King was 56 when he died. The last monarch to have died at a younger age had been Queen Anne, at 49 in 1714. Had the King lived to the age of the Duke of Windsor, who died in 1972, his daughter would not have become Queen until she was in her late-forties. As it was, she succeeded to the throne at the age of just 25.

The reign of George VI was not marked by constitutional crises as the reign of his father, George V, had been. The main change in the Commonwealth relationship was achieved by negotiation and agreement, with little controversy. But the reign of George VI was marked by an atmosphere of perpetual tension and anxiety. Churchill said his was the hardest reign of modern times. There was, first, the worry of the pre-War years, then there was the War itself, and after that, the difficult post-War years of economic austerity and privation and the Cold War. Sadly, the King did not live to see the reduction of international tensions after the death of Stalin in 1953, nor the so-called Affluent Society of the 1950s, the foundations of which were perhaps laid in the late 1940s. The key to Britain’s survival during these difficult years lay in the very high degree of cohesion of British society. Britain proved a much less divided society than the countries of the Continent, which were either ruled by Nazi or Fascist governments or conquered by them, and it was this social cohesion that helped Britain resist Hitler’s onslaught and weather the strains of the post-War years, while retaining a stable and moderate political system which, at that time at least, many people envied.

The King played his part in helping to cement that social cohesion, especially during the War years. In 1941, Churchill told the King, “The War has drawn the throne and the people more closely together than was ever before recorded.” The monarchy, during these difficult years, proved a factor both for stability and for continuity.

But perhaps the best tribute to the King, with which I shall conclude, came in a dispatch from the French Ambassador to his Government, a dispatch not intended to be seen by the public and therefore one can assume that it expresses something very sincere. The Ambassador said: “If the greatness of a King can be measured by the extent to which his qualities correspond to the needs of a nation at a given moment in its history, then George VI was a great King, and perhaps a very great King.” Courage, work and austerity have been the watchwords of the country over the last 15 years, and one could say that the King provided an example of them. He had to learn everything at the age of 41 on ascending the throne, and he learned quickly and well. By his simplicity, his goodwill, his courage and his sense of duty, his respect for constitutional principles and the example of his private life, King George VI has amassed around the throne a capital sympathy and loyalty upon which he could call in case of crisis. Brought to the throne in a climate of dynastic and constitutional crisis, George VI died, leaving to his daughter a throne more stable than England has known throughout almost her entire history.

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