

A Coronation of Magnificent Grandeur and Precision Signals Charles' Excellent Start as King

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King Charles III and Queen Camilla at the balcony of Buckingham Palace, May 6, 2023. AP/Frank Augstein

by Conrad Black

The coronation of King Charles III on Saturday was, as the world confidently expected, an event of magnificent grandeur and precision. On such occasions, there is always some grumbling about extravagance and allegations of anachronistic excess.

Yet the new king is the monarch of fourteen countries including Australia, Canada and New Zealand, as well as the United Kingdom, and the head of the Commonwealth that remains a loosely related but still significant association of more von 2 1/2 billion people.

It is only the third British coronation since 1911 and the cost of it may comfortably be amortized. It is perfectly in order for an institution that has been in existence and at the core of the government of one of the world's most important nations for nearly a thousand years to renew itself in an impressive, ornate, and tasteful ceremony.

The fact that the republican demonstrators were so few, so unprepossessing, and so abrasive in their message, confirms that the monarchy remains a widely supported component of the British political system, as huge crowds of well-wishers braved inclement weather to witness the great spectacle approvingly.

It was not anachronistic: British coronations are so rare they should be celebrated in this way. The contributions of all notable religious faiths, the presence of all of Britain's political leaders, the emphasis of the Scottish Irish and Welsh provinces of the U.K., the obviously very diverse composition of all of the participants and the presence of 94 government leaders and chiefs of state address any concerns that could have arisen about whether the ceremony had been updated and remained relevant.

There is inevitably a good deal of discussion about whether an

institution headed by an individual who has little real power and incurs significant expense to the country can continue indefinitely in a political era dominated in democratic countries by the ostensibly free and meritorious elevation of all significant officeholders.

Yet these institutions continue unless and until they irritate or offend the public that they are obliged to serve to the point that they dispense with them. There were in his 64-year apprenticeship as Prince of Wales a number of occasions when the lapses of judgment of the new king invited and received widespread reflection on his monarchical aptitudes. Yet it must be said that there have been no such indignities throughout the 18 years of his second marriage to the new Queen Camilla.

The world will never know all the rights and wrongs in his first marriage and it is generally impossible for outsiders ever really to know what goes on in someone else's marriage. But the Prince of Wales responded with dignity to the tragic death of Princess Diana and the subsequent embarrassments that he suffered were the result of illegal hacking of telephone conversations and dishonest exploitation of the late Princess by the unscrupulous British press. Time has healed those wounds.

The British monarchy is not historically, after all, such a serene, squeaky clean, and smoothly continuous institution. There have been a sequence of dynasties and prior to the invitation of the British royal family's distant Hanoverian cousins to take the throne in 1714 after the death of Queen Anne with no surviving heirs (despite 17 pregnancies), changes of dynasty were frequently sanguinary and sordid.

The last king to die violently, Charles I in 1649, was executed after a shabby trial by Parliament under the leadership of the formidable but narrow-minded Oliver Cromwell. A few months after Cromwell's death, the same

Parliament asked for the return of the son of the murdered king, Charles II, and Cromwell was exhumed, his head severed and placed publicly on a pike where it remained for 24 years.

In the two-hour coronation ceremony at Westminster Abbey on Saturday, there was naturally frequent reference to the British monarch's status as "defender of the faith." This honor was conferred upon King Henry VIII in 1521 by Pope Leo X because of the book "Defense of the Seven Sacraments," ghostwritten for the king by the visiting theologian Erasmus.

Notoriously, Henry wished to divorce his first wife who was childless, and when Pope Clement VII declined to give him a divorce, he apostatized, taking the entire British nation with him out of the Roman Catholic Church, seized the church's property, and persecuted continuing Catholics. Erasmus fled back to his native Holland, and Henry ordered his puppet Parliament to renominate him defender of the faith, though the second faith he was defending was judged by officials of the first to be a heresy.

The woman Henry desired to marry when he was eligible, Anne Boleyn, he executed after three years on a false charge of adultery because she had not given him a male heir, though the heir she did give him proved to be the greatest monarch in British history, Elizabeth I. Her historical position was admittedly much assisted by the fact that her public relations were effectively left to William Shakespeare.

The British monarchy has been an important part of the life of that country since even before it was conquered by the illegitimate son of the Norman king in 1066, William the Conqueror, all the way up the rickety ladder of national importance in the discovery and construction of the globe-girdling British Empire, including the entire Indian subcontinent of Asia, North America, Eastern and Central Africa from the Suez Canal to the Cape of Good Hope, and much of the Middle and Far East and Caribbean.

And with heroism and distinction under George VI and Elizabeth II, 86 years, the monarchy has helped to manage almost without embarrassment the brilliant descent from parity with the American and Russian superpowers into a special, subordinate, but influential relationship with the emergent American superpower.

In the afterglow of the Churchillian Gloriana when Britain and the principal Commonwealth countries stood alone against the diabolical alliance of Hitler and Stalin, Britain managed the independence of almost all the units of the old Empire with exquisite tact. The new king's mother and grandfather played their roles superbly and were invaluable.

Where European powers have replaced their monarchs, as in Germany and Italy, the parliamentary system requires a ceremonial chief of state to install the head of government, and a non-royal substitute for a monarch has proved a pretty colorless and bland institution. Republics work best when the president is the principal political figure, as in France and the United States.

Charles shows every sign of being an intelligent man who has admirably overcome past mistakes and has given a great deal of thought to his position. He is off to an excellent start, thinning out the royal family and continuing to reside in the former Queen Mother's residence Clarence House, not Buckingham Palace.

The only potential soft points appear to be the king's tendency to be peevish, as in his recent minor tantrum about an overflowing fountain pen, and the possibility that he might embarrass himself with his rather limousine-liberal and simplistic environmental views. He drank the Kool-Aid early on that subject and on three conspicuously public occasions predicted the world would come to an end by now. Assuming he has moderated his views or has at least learned to keep them to himself, he should be fine.

Charles III and Camilla, who has followed an astonishing trajectory to be his Queen, have earned the kind wishes of all people of good will.

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