

## The Queen's 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday

Among the many memorable lines from *Yes Prime Minister* there's the occasion, shortly after Jim Hacker has graduated from the Department of Administrative Affairs to become Prime Minister, when he is flexing his muscles in his new role.

Bernard, his Private Secretary, confides to Sir Humphrey, the Cabinet Secretary:

'I think he wants to run the country'.

Sir Humphrey responds immediately:

'Well, Bernard, you'll have to stop him'.

All systems of government need their checks and balances, and not least a democracy, where the temptation is for a government which has gained power through the ballot box to think it has a right to exercise a form of absolute power. The late Lord Hailsham, in his Dimpleby lecture 40 years ago, identified this modern tendency towards an 'elective dictatorship'. As he described it, all political parties were falling prey to this temptation when they happened to gain power.

The British monarchy itself used to exercise a great deal of political power, often dominating Parliament, as our television programmes have regularly reminded us. It's been a long journey from Henry VIII and his predecessors to Queen Elizabeth II and our modern constitutional monarchy.

From what I know of his reign, Henry VIII doesn't present an attractive picture to me, although he had one redeeming feature: in 1541 he created the Diocese of Chester. I can't judge him too harshly, then. Over the years our Kings and Queens have come and gone. Historians rightly point to the long reigns of three Queens in particular, when their wisdom has been lauded on all sides, and not least as they have helped the modern constitutional monarchy to evolve: Queen Elizabeth I, Queen Victoria, and now Queen Elizabeth II. Comparisons are odious, but I would wager that future historians will regard Queen

Elizabeth II as the greatest of them all. My earliest memories are from 1953 or 54, and so much has changed in Britain, and in the wider world, since then.

In 1953 the Archbishop of Canterbury, and former Bishop of Chester, Geoffrey Fisher offered some reflections in the weeks leading up to the Coronation. He argued that the reduced political power of the monarchy enhanced rather than diminished its importance, bringing about:

‘the possibility of a spiritual power far more exalted and far more searching in its demands: the power to lead, to inspire, to unite, by the Sovereign’s personal character, personal convictions and personal example.’

Throughout her reign, Queen Elizabeth II has exemplified, and personified, that spiritual power and calling of monarchy. I don’t think that the spiritual role of monarchy intrinsically requires a personal and particular religious conviction, but it clearly would be supported by it, and our Queen has made no secret of her own strong Christian faith. This has been particularly explicit in her annual Christmas broadcasts, especially since the start of the new Millennium. Her constitutional role as Supreme Governor of the Church of England has undergirded this essentially spiritual understanding of our monarchy.

The inner *raison d’être* of the British monarchy has helped it to evolve from a political force to the non-political role it has today, when, indeed, great care is taken to keep the monarch above the political fray. Other monarchies, where the political role and interpretation has been more central, have found that transition more difficult, and sometimes have not survived at all.

Inevitably, there is a strongly personal dimension to monarchy, and it would be hard indeed to think of any Head of State in the world who has more consistently and faithfully embodied the principle of selfless, even sacrificial, devotion to duty. In a period which has seen a sea change in so many aspects of our culture, and of moral values, in general, Queen Elizabeth has exemplified continuity, probity, and decency while moving appropriately with the times in an adaptable and gracious way.

Today we celebrate Her Majesty's extraordinary personal achievement, as we celebrate with her, her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday – not forgetting, of course, the equally remarkable Duke of Edinburgh, who celebrated his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday just yesterday.

Many fine words have been spoken about our Queen, and her achievement, more eloquently than I can offer – and not least earlier by the Lord Lieutenant. Rather than try to add to them, I would like to conclude by reflecting a little on a different aspect of today's celebrations: the underlying role of the monarchy itself.

As I indicated earlier, the monarchy takes its place among the various checks and balances which a democracy requires, lest power be concentrated too much in one place. But its rationale goes beyond this, and points to the levels and structures which a society inevitably exhibits, and indeed, ultimately needs.

Today, of course, there is a deep suspicion of institutions, and the hierarchies they tend to embody. Today the running is made by our consumer culture, and a belief in the rights of individuals, which we sum up as 'human rights'. In part we can agree that a healthy suspicion of institutions and hierarchies is a good thing; there is plenty of evidence from history of them becoming forces of oppression. And we are all individuals, with an inherent and personal dignity, as the modern emphasis on human rights justifiably emphasises. But if we put all our eggs in the basket of the individual, with his or her freedom to choose and decide in a search for self-fulfilment, with no need for structures in society which define and promote relationships, we are well on our way to the loneliness and isolation which so characterises life in Britain today. The more we say that everyone is the 'same' and 'equal', and regard 'equality' and 'sameness' as somehow identical, the easier it is to say that nobody matters in particular, that no one is actually of unique value and significance. Society easily becomes like the night, in which all cats are grey.

This is the paradox of the emphasis on the individual, and upon individual self-fulfilment, in our society: one easily ends up with an actual absence of individuality, and individual dignity. Human beings need to belong, and to know that they belong.

The Christian Faith has always emphasised both that we are unique individuals, children of God made in his image, but also that we discover who we are in relation to each other, as

members of his Body, the Church as the Body of Christ. The structure of that Body precisely defines and supports our individuality, and our particular place within it.

For me, then, our monarchy, at heart, provides a principle of order in a society which could too easily slide into a nightmare of individualism where everyone believes what they like as if it is true for them – and then there's no objective, stable understanding of truth at all.

Societies can try to embody this in other ways. The Americans do this with their Constitution, their flag, and the evanescent qualities of their Presidency. Our tradition is of a constitutional hereditary monarchy, under the oversight of Parliament. The monarch does not wield direct political power, but has a defined status, which we honour – and, yes, to which we show due deference.

To the Christian eye this points to the ultimate ordering of creation and human society under God's providential care. At the heart of the Christian Faith there is the anointed one, the King of the Jews, in the line of King David. He is only this as the Crucified One – but he remains a Kingly figure, and displays his kingship precisely as self-sacrificing love.

One needs an imagination graced by Christian insight to see this. But I believe that those of all religions and none can see in Queen Elizabeth II the broader representational role of a spiritual leader, the one who in a distinctive, royal way helps us all to understand that we belong not just to ourselves but to the wider family of our society too.

We can all unite to say: Long live Queen Elizabeth! Long may she reign!