

Queen Elizabeth's 70 years of dutiful, faithful service to the world



by Conrad Black

Yesterday marked the 70th anniversary of the accession of Queen Elizabeth II to the throne of the United Kingdom, Canada and other realms in the Commonwealth and the scattered but distinguished remains of the British Empire (Gibraltar, St. Helena, Cayman Islands, etc.). Apart from ancient monarchs of fantastic longevity – such as the Egyptian Sixth Dynasty Pharaoh Pepi II Neferkare, who is alleged to have reigned from the age of six for 94 years – the Queen has reigned longer than anyone in modern history except Louis XIV, king of France from 1643 to 1715. But he was only five years old when he became king and was not able to govern in his own right until 1661. This Queen is the champion, and longevity is far from the greatest of her attainments. Despite occasional mockery from satirists, and embarrassments of some family members, and the shrinking of Empire, and the sometimes strained circumstances of the U.K. itself, Queen Elizabeth has not embarrassed her subjects or fellow citizens or herself even once in 70 years. History could be thoroughly ransacked without unearthing so blameless and diligent a record of service in so exalted and conspicuously public an office.

This Queen has watched the entire cavalcade of world events and personalities since she served in the Second World War as a mechanic in the Auxiliary Territorial Service. She has worked extraordinarily conscientiously all these years to try to make the Commonwealth a relevant, unifying influence among the world's peoples and a forum for continued solidarity, at least at certain levels, among all those countries that have been governed and shaped by British institutions. In her time as a princess taking on some of the burden from her much-admired father, King George VI, who was worn down by an office he did not seek but manfully filled, and who died prematurely at age 56, she saw the disappearance of the British Empire in India and in the Middle East. And as a young Queen, she saw the disappearance of the Empire in Africa.

She has nowhere toiled more diligently than in her efforts to maintain a constructive relationship with all the disparate and fractious Commonwealth leaders, such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, and with the many difficult personalities in the politics of India, which has had a complicated relationship with Britain for nearly 300 years. In her youth, during the abdication crisis of her uncle and his alleged status as an appeaser of Hitler, she conceived a vision of the Crown she was almost certain to inherit. It would transcend the demystification of royalty, the evaporation of Empire and the cynicism of a war-ravaged and partially dechristianized world. She was never a swashbuckling, rabble-rousing or otherwise proselytizing monarchist, but she has steadily surmounted all the ostensible demotions and trivializations of the monarchy over the past 70 years.

She has never set out her precise conception of the institution that she personifies. But gradually, over the decades, by her tireless devotion to good causes and to the broadly defined interests of all the peoples with which she has an official relationship, she has effectively created a new monarchy as the head of state of the United Kingdom,

Canada, Australia and New Zealand, in particular (though apart from the U.K., she is represented by someone acting in her name). And she retains an official connection as head of the Commonwealth with all the republics in that 54-state organization. Anachronistic and semi-colonial though it sometimes appears, she remains a credible non-political figurehead and conciliatory figure in the official lives of all of those countries, even if it is not widely acclaimed publicly. This in itself, considering that there are about 2.5 billion people in the Commonwealth, is a considerable achievement. No one should imagine that this has not been an implacable task all these years, when much of the time, a lot of what she has been trying to do has been widely disparaged as anachronistic and obsolescent frippery.

Even more complicated, though less important, has been her retention of the title of "defender of the faith," which was conferred upon Henry VIII by the Pope Leo X. Henry enjoyed the title so much he had it conferred upon him by his puppet Parliament after his apostasy from the Roman Catholic Church. The Queen has been the supreme governor of the Church of England in a time when adherence has declined. Anglicanism has become the official religion of a country of declining importance, and the position of the Anglicans has become ambiguous between the Roman Catholics and the non-episcopal Christian faiths, and in a time in which religious practice generally has softened in most of the advanced countries of the Commonwealth. She has managed this without sanctimony, abrasion or indignity, satisfying co-religionists without offending other denominations or agnostics.

Though she has not been a spectacular monarch, this Queen's achievement will be like that of a great circus performer whose talents are best appreciated after departing the stage: decades of decent, dignified devotion to duty with the highest and most Christian virtues have made Queen Elizabeth an almost universally admired figure. The monarchy that she incarnates

is one of selfless and unpretentious duty, great pageantry but no posturing, great dignity but no controversy. It is not fashionable because it is timeless and it is overwhelmingly popular because it is far more an act of service than of rulership. It remains to be seen how a non-residential monarchy will function, as in Canada. But in the United Kingdom, no non-royal institution could retain the mystique of the British Crown, which has withstood intense scrutiny and the misjudgments of some of the Queen's family. And no one could perform this difficult function more dutifully and faultlessly than Elizabeth II. Long live the Queen.

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