

# On myths and monarchs.



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## On Myths and Monarchs

The coronation of Charles III on May 6th 2023 enshrines the transfer of the crown of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland ('Britain') from the late Queen Elisabeth II to her eldest son. Both within Britain and around the world there has been seemingly little in the way of protest with respect to this political process. The Daily Express newspaper noted in its online edition of 16.02.2023 that a demonstration coincided with a visit of Charles to Milton Keynes; the article also made reference to previous individual protestors and the often exaggerated response of the police to these incidents. For example, a man was detained for holding up a sign saying "Not my King" which explains the 'dozens of' signs saying the same thing at Milton Keynes. The same phrase was also used in a billboard campaign in various cities late in 2022 organised and paid for by the pressure group, Republic.

The fact that Britain is referred to generally as a 'constitutional monarchy' is, in itself, something of a contradiction given to the

fact that there is no single, written document that lays out exactly what the constitution of Britain is or what the role of the crowned head of state is within that system. Indeed, while Parliament at Westminster is often accredited as the 'mother of all parliaments' there was no democratic consultation involved in the passing down of the crown, it is taken as automatic. While it is true that, in theory, the monarch has absolute control over the political system, in practice the role has very little power. This then leads to an intriguing question: why does Britain still have a king? We might extend the same question to the eleven other monarchies in Europe but not, of course, to Portugal!

It has been argued that the monarch is the personal, individual embodiment of the nation and symbolises a certain kind of unity and stability that the actual government (subject to periodic democratic elections) cannot achieve. The monarch may also act as a final check, through a refusal to grant the 'royal assent', on the government: to thwart any situations which were illegal or undemocratic

or potentially dictatorial. Furthermore, given that ceremonial duties are largely the responsibility of the monarch, the actual government does not need to be concerned with such matters and thus has more time to concern itself with the running of the country. There is also an economic argument as it is supposed that the monarchy and its associated events / buildings fortify the tourist industry which results in great monetary benefits; however, actual numbers here seem difficult to find. (see Chapter 7 in 'Britain for learners of English')

Returning to Portugal as a point of comparison, the reader might like to consider how many of the functions outlined above might be attributed to the President of the Republic or whether not having a monarch weakens the local tourist industry to any great extent. Here in Portugal, the President must also give her / his assent before any new law is enacted. Here, we have other symbols of national identity / unity, such as the flag (national colours?) or the national anthem which seem to function in a powerfully socially cohesive manner. With the possible

exception of Sintra (?), the most popular tourist destinations here have nothing to do with the defunct Portuguese monarchy. We could also refer to world tourism, in that of the ten most visited countries in the world only Britain (in tenth place) maintains a monarchy.

The supposed unchanging nature of the monarchy in Britain is both a characteristic and also an objective: the monarch represents invariance and also resists innovation in public life. Validity for these attitudes and practices is derived from a specific sense of history, such as, the often cited but untrue claim of a thousand years of unbroken lineage: what has been termed ‘validity through the sanction of perpetuity’. These are conditions which enable habit formation and the familiarity through repetition enhance ‘traditions’ which may, in fact, be relatively recent inventions. Examples include the Christmas Day TV broadcast which started in 1932 or the televising of the State Opening of Parliament which began in 1958. The way in which the life of the royal family became increasingly conducted in the public eye during the 20th century (and ‘live’ on TV) reinforces their

rituals and ceremonies: the lying in state before a funeral, the weddings of various family members, the successive ‘jubilee’ celebrations providing significance based on a sense of nostalgia for the power and influence on the world stage of imperial times. These royal events are deemed to represent certain ‘values’ and ‘norms’ which are relevant to British society and they have been construed as ‘acts of national communion’. (see Chapter 4 in ‘The Invention of Tradition’)

While it might be claimed that Queen Elisabeth II personified duty, continuity and respectability, the same cannot be said of all the members of her family, an extensive, dysfunctional social unit which has exhibited a wide range of highly questionable, unethical and illegal behaviours over recent years. The popularity (sustainability?) of the institution tends now to be measured in terms of tabloid newspaper coverage, much like an up-market soap opera, as well as in a swirl of opinion polls. Yet, perhaps the greatest challenge facing Charles III is: How can an elderly, white, privately-educated, infinitely advantaged, astonishingly wealthy, male aristocrat be said

to embody the 21st century, pluri-cultural nation that is Britain? This is a state which still maintains its historically refined class-consciousness and a deep suspicion of any indication of undeserved privilege despite being deeply divided both within its own administrative boundaries and with respect to its relationship with Europe.

The presence of a sovereign in Britain in 2023 remains hugely paradoxical given its inherently undemocratic nature and its incompatibility with contemporary notions of human rights and the rule of law.

**Main References (non-fiction):**

“Britain for learners of English” by James O’Driscoll (Oxford, 2nd edition, 2009).

“The Invention of Tradition” edited by E. J. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger (Cambridge, Re-issue, 2012).

**Additional reading (fiction):**

“England, England” by Julian Barnes (Vintage, 2008).

A humorous, provocative exploration of nationhood, the monarchy and heritage in general in which the Isle of Wight becomes one huge amusement park containing replicas of everything that represents Englishness.

“The Queen and I” by Sue Townsend (Penguin, 2012).

A satire of modern Britain where a republic has been established meaning the Queen has to live on a housing estate in the Midlands. An exploration of what it is that makes us human.