

## **The Queen's Demise: the end of the Elizabethan Era**

**Melanie Sully**

The last public photograph of Queen Elizabeth II was taken in Scotland and showed a frail, diminutive figure receiving her last Prime Minister, the luckless Liz Truss. Minutes beforehand she had accepted the resignation of the controversial Boris Johnson. Her hand was blue, badly bruised, punctured presumably by numerous injections. Johnson found Her Majesty as radiant and alert as ever. Right up until the last she carried out what she saw as the constitutional duties a Monarch and head of State should fulfil. Subsequently the Queen appointed senior and junior ministers in the new government but the list was to remain incomplete. The World knew these were the dyeing days of the long Elizabethan era which had seen turbulent political and economic years after the Second World War, the transition from Empire and the exit from the European Union. Throughout the Monarch had acted with circumspection and discretion. What would now follow?

That something was afoot became quickly apparent in the hours that preceded the death of the Monarch. Parliament was sitting and pieces of paper were pushed around both on the government side and in the Labour ranks. The leader of the Opposition, Sir Keir Starmer was on his feet as his deputy received a note indicating the end was near. How to get the message to him though without appearing too melodramatic and starting a media panic? The Speaker became impatient and indicated to the Labour members behind Starmer that they must inform him so the note was passed before his eyes and the speech thus ended.

When the final hour came, the news ricocheted around the World. The death was announced on Twitter, and the following formalities in the Accession Council for the first time broadcast live on television. British news outlets interrupted their programmes and the sombre strains of the National Anthem rang out across the Globe. "The Queen is dead, God save the King" because the Sovereign never dies. The sceptre passed automatically to Charles as it had done each time on the demise of the sovereign for centuries. All speculation in the past that Charles would hand over to his son William was never realistic at this moment and would have raised constitutionally complex questions and procedures.

Strikes and sporting events were called off and ten days of public mourning followed. The US flag was flown at half -mast on the White House ordered by President Biden. Soon after the Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau, a great admirer of Queen Elizabeth, signed the documents proclaiming the new King of Canada. The proclamation was then read out in English and French. Similar proclamations also took place in the Commonwealth Realms as also separately in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. In the coming years the Kings head will replace that of the deceased sovereign on stamps and coins in the UK but will look in the opposite direction to symbolise the royal change.

Charles' sister, Princess Anne, a hardworking and respected royal, assumed an important role. Charles was preoccupied with the formal proceedings with parliamentarians and dignitaries to complete his accession. Anne stoically stayed by the coffin of her mother. She accompanied the cortege which wound its way through the picturesque Scottish countryside from Balmoral to Edinburgh where the coffin laid in rest at St Giles' Cathedral, stood guard, was on the Royal plane for the journey to London and walked in step with her brother, the King for the funeral procession. She has since been elevated as one of the state counsellors who could take over royal duties if necessary when Charles and Camilla are out of the country. Her younger brother Edward has also been named state counsellor to avoid the embarrassment of either Harry or Andrew fulfilling such a task, counsellors who for very different reasons are surrounded by controversy.

In the capital there was the expected outpouring of grief. The Queen for many **was** the Monarchy, she incorporated the very institution. Most had only known her as the head of state and no one else, and they sensed this was an historical moment that would never be forgotten. The assassination of John F Kennedy, the moon landing, Diana's death or the Twin Towers would be joined by an occasion that everyone knew where they were and would tell the story though the coming generations. But the emotional grief swelled and took on unimaginable proportions. People travelled from all parts of the World to London to pay their last respects as the coffin lay in state. It became in its own way a quasi-religious act of its own to file past the coffin and bow before walking on in silence. But the queues grew and wound snake-like around London edging forward at a funereal like pace but continually in movement. It was a particularly eerie spectacle seen from the air. And these queues at some point merged and became THE queue, a mystical phenomenon in itself that existed only for this short time and on the day of the funeral would evaporate for ever. People waited for hours and then days and would say, "the Queen was there for us for 70 years, so a few days is nothing". The Queen was seen as the Mother of the Nation and head of the Commonwealth family. Some VIPs were accused of jumping the queue whilst others were lauded for standing shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the population. All walks of life were represented in the Queue, people from many faiths, backgrounds and countries, elderly in wheelchairs, the young in prams. They had Selfies taken by the Queue which had for a short time become one of London's sightseeing attractions. It was emotional, it was irrational and no one could really explain it. Either you felt this occasion or you would find it baffling but it was undoubtedly a fascinating feature of the demise of Queen Elizabeth II, the likes of which probably will never be seen again.

So much had changed in those 70 years of her reign. A country which had stood proudly alone for a while in War against totalitarianism, used to an Empire with domestic predictable structures and with it what Harry would rather disparagingly call the "Institution" of the royal family with its rigid hierarchy. The Anglican Church complemented this part of the Establishment, "long to rule over us". But over those 70 years Britain had changed. The Empire did not just fall away but was replaced by

a Commonwealth of Nations, many of whom now question the more notorious aspects of the past. The Church has lost its own sheep and these seem lost souls in an uncertain world. According to the last census around 22 million people in Britain have no religious faith at all. For the first time Christians are in a minority. Many others have lost faith in politics and politicians whether at home or abroad. The moral and political compass of the past has come unstuck. The grief that was genuine before the coffin of the deceased Monarch was in part sorrow for the present and a fear of what the future would bring.

The burden of public service now fell on the head of Charles. As Shakespeare's play Henry IV reminds us, "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown". But the formalities of the transition and the funeral had been minutely planned right down to the last funeral toll. Or to recall Ernst Hemingway, "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee". The funeral passed with pious precision and if one thing works in modern Britain it is a royal occasion. Beethoven's funeral march, and Chopin's that was played at his own funeral, made words superfluous. At the end is the music. The solitary piper of the Royal Regiment of Scotland played "sleep, dearie sleep" as the coffin was laid to rest beside that of the Duke of Edinburgh.

It was in this chapel where the service was held that King Charles III was to make his first Christmas broadcast to the nation. A fixed ritual for decades every year on Christmas day, December 25<sup>th</sup> at 3pm the Monarch broadcasts to the country. It is a speech unusually that the Sovereign writes personally, most are penned either by or in coordination with the relevant government ministry.

Instead of the usual references to the Commonwealth and the spirit of the Second World War, Charles chose to reflect more on the crisis gripping the country with a wave of strikes in the public sector including the health service. He praised volunteers and civil society for their selfless service in troubled times. The King refrained from an attack on the government but the speech was seen as indirectly a plea for harmony and for a restoration of stability. A majority of the public sided with the nurses against the government in the pay dispute.

Charles takes over at a time of multi-crises and reigns over a country ill at ease with itself. War, pandemic and political turbulence have taken their toll on a population weary of chaos and stagnation. The Monarch can constitutionally "advise, encourage and warn". However if this is done too often without anything changing the Sovereign too will be seen as weak and ineffectual. By 2032 Prince George will come of age. Until then King Charles and the new Prince of Wales Tywysog Cymru, heir to the throne Prince William, have to ensure the survival of the institution.

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