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The UK Coronation: What is the appeal, and will it happen again?



Had my father been alive over the past few weeks he would have been shouting at the television screen, as he did whenever a news broadcast involved the Royal Family: "Right, there's obviously no news! I'm off to the Golf Club!"

Where he would have been spared the wall to wall UK media coverage of the run-up to one event: the Coronation at Westminster Abbey of our new British King, Charles III, ushering in the dawn of the "Carolean era".

Many non-Brits (and indeed some fellow citizens) find any such event and broader questions about the point of monarchy to leave them cold and indifferent, finding it odd.

And maybe, it peculiarly exposes the British preoccupation with considering ourselves as "being different".

Crazy, mad Brits! You are supposed to mobilise your entire military might to shock and awe, not to escort a pair of old aged pensioners to a ceremony where they change silken robes at least four times, and have ermine-lined crowns, studded with precious jewels of dubious provenance placed precariously on their heads!

Plumed horses? Strange men apparently hosting the ceremony who wear colourful coats embroidered with coats of arms and thick tights (they are known as heralds and they run the smooth running of the show)?

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Some people just see a royal event as a free holiday, although not this one, as it was held on a Saturday.

A great excuse to crack open the Champagne at 10.30am and eat Coronation Chicken, a strange confection of chicken curry sweetened with apricot jam, raisins and almonds, invented to celebrate the last

Coronation in 1953.

This other strange tradition coincided with food rationing in the UK post-WWII. So we can argue that ingredients were sparse.

But the deep-seated appeal of pageantry, wonderful music and ancient rituals steeped in the mists of yesteryear is so powerful yet intangible, it could appear on the face of it to be predominantly emotional.

Why do thousands of people defy the weather to witness the glory of majesty? Does it somehow originate in the untamed, unruly parts of our psyche as religious feeling can exist in some people?

The most critical and mysterious part of the 2-hour ceremony is the "anointment", which involves the use of "chrism" - holy oil which has been consecrated by the Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem.

This ritual is too secret for anyone apart from three senior bishops to perform and witness (it takes place behind a swiftly and efficiently assembled canopy).

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Will there be another British Coronation? Will such allegiances to one family survive? Is there any appetite in the UK for abolition of the monarchy and its replacement with a more democratic system?

On present poll findings (26 April 2023) 55% of British citizens remain pro-monarchy with 36% negative; 59% pro King Charles with 33% negative.

Much is made of the fact that the younger generation find the monarchy a less compelling concept than the older one.

A handful of diehard abolitionists protested outside the Abbey on Saturday but were given

short shrift by the police, who moved them on on the grounds they were “frightening the horses”. Very British, and very Royal Family.

The job of British monarch is more complex than many people believe. The UK has no single formal written constitution; rules and systems are assembled from a variety of ancient and modern statutes and acts of legislation.

The role of head of state and Church can appear to many to be restricted to cutting ribbons and visiting worthy local charities. But in fact, the monarch’s power supersedes that of parliament.

The late Queen, chose not to deploy this power. All prime ministers throughout the 20th and 21st centuries have visited the monarch for a weekly audience.

It has been acknowledged by all those prime ministers as a key part of their briefs, and nobody breathes a word about the content of these meetings.

Apart from arguably our wittiest prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, who considered it vital to gain favour from Queen Victoria (“Everyone likes flattery; and when it comes to Royalty, you should lay it on with a trowel”.)

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The key question is with what and whom would you replace it, were the public appetite become sufficiently significant.

It would probably be too radical for the UK to adopt any form of a representative democratic republic like the US or France.

More probable would be an elected president – a German-like ceremonial role for some former political grandee who somehow succeeded never to blot their copy book? Or a sports person, revered musician, a respected

broadcaster, a supermodel?

How would parliament deal with any unforeseen demands on their part? What happens when they say, “I have power. I want more palaces and more money like my predecessor”? Where is my fleet of private jets and superyachts?

It may seem strange for a man to begin his real career at an age when most people flee the work place.

When Shakespeare wrote, “Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown”, he was referring to ancient monarchs who had to lead his troops to battle and win.

It is highly unlikely King Charles will face this particular dilemma. But he will have a raft of more modern problems: to offer “wise counsel”; not to put a foot wrong publicly or privately.

Social media and unavoidable press intrusion would put paid to that, particularly given the behaviour of his more wayward and less favoured sibling and son.

His crucial task is to preserve his reign and present it as durable and relevant. That could be the uneasiest task of all.

The King has sworn oaths of loyalty to his people. He ensured that his Coronation reflected the diversity and less deferential attitudes of modern Britain, and taken a pledge to uphold these values.

He has waited a long time for his true destiny even to begin. He has had a good start. But it will not be easy.