

Monarchy, Democracy and Responsibility in the Modern World

Yesterday, not far from here, at a Christ Church Cathedral packed almost to overflowing, people from across Oxfordshire came together to give thanks for The Queen and the sixty years of her reign. And in early June, we shall all enjoy an extended bank holiday weekend of celebrations for this reign; one of almost unrivalled length in British history.

But what will we be celebrating? Some no doubt will be joining in simply because the events are taking place; an opportunity to have a good time, with little concern for the underlying reason. The majority - say the opinion polls - will be celebrating with a genuine sense of affection and regard for the contribution the Queen has made to the life and reputation of our country. Already she is the longest lived monarch in British history, and to have reigned for sixty years is an achievement equalled only once before in our history.

No-one alive today witnessed the previous diamond jubilee. And - as far as we can foresee - it is very unlikely that anyone alive today will see the next one. So it is entirely right and proper that the event should be the subject of such national celebration.

But that still leaves unanswered the question of what we will be celebrating.

It used to be so much simpler. Before the invention of our constitutional monarchy, kings, and occasionally queens, actually ruled. They were indeed sovereign, making and unmaking laws and edicts, raising taxes, appointing those to act on their behalf and empowering them to do so, reaching judicial decisions, and so on. The Church of England whose liturgy we follow today is the product of one monarch's personal decision, and the 400 year old English Biblical text we still revere and admire is the product of another's.

It really mattered to the lives and welfare of ordinary citizens whether the reigning monarch was a "good king" - by which they meant possessing a range of virtues; chief among them was that they were wise; wisdom as we have just heard being more valuable than rubies or anything else you may desire. From wisdom came justice, strength, prudence, the obligation to resist the temptations of personal pride and arrogance, and instead to serve the interests of the realm. Ideals often espoused - less often achieved - but still nevertheless valued, sought - and hoped for.

So looking back over the centuries until the last 150 years, there would indeed have been very good reasons to celebrate and give thanks for the reign of a "good" monarch. It would mark not just personal affection, but respect and thanksgiving for the consequences of that monarch's qualities, virtues and skills on the personal lives, safety, liberty, security, and economic prosperity of the nation's citizens.

Whom though should we thank for such benefits now? Although we still refer to "our sovereign lady, Queen Elizabeth", and laws are enacted, prosecutions pursued, and the peace kept in her name, we all well understand that the monarch has relinquished her temporal power. The reality is that the direct control the queen has over public policy and governmental decision-making is marginal at most.

If not the monarch, then whom should we thank - or blame? The logical answer is, as the prayer has it, “those set in authority under her”; government ministers, judges, lawmakers, magistrates, officials of all kinds and powers. But this cannot be the complete answer.

The armies of people who have replaced the medieval king and his court, are not now there through royal patronage, nor through divine right (although some might occasionally have you believe otherwise) but because you and I and the citizens of this country have, directly - or more usually indirectly - placed them there.

It is the collective choices that we make as citizens which determine the nature of the realm in which we live. The monarch is now the symbol of power - not the reality – and those with power are there because of our choices.

This is not to disregard two things. First, that symbols are important and can be – and in the case of our present Queen have demonstrably proved to be - a powerful force for good. Many commentators have in their different ways demonstrated that a constitutional monarchy in the right hands, can add great value to society. We are therefore entirely right to celebrate it.

Secondly, it is not to say that our democratic system is particularly democratic, nor that it works particularly well. It certainly does not give all the people, all they want, all the time – although perhaps that is just as well.

But we are democratic in other, much more fundamental ways than voting, living as we do in a developed Western market economy. The accumulation of individual choices we all make every day and every year, as consumers, travellers, purchasers, donors, investors, lenders, borrowers, workers, supporters, protestors, whether major or minor, all combine to make our society what it is, and to influence what our society is like to live in, for everyone. .

So from a - topically - Olympian perspective, the virtues and vices of our society can legitimately be laid at all our doors – not simply the gilded gates of Buckingham Palace, or the less gilded versions in Downing Street. Some of course must shoulder more, and others less responsibility, but the ‘they’ are to some degree or other ‘us’..

If therefore, we had to pass judgment on the state of our realm after six decades of our rule what would it be?

Clearly, we live in a more prosperous age, with many more advantages and benefits than we possessed 60 years ago. We know this from all the economic, social and financial data; for we are fortunate to live in an age of measurement.

We undoubtedly have more worldly goods. Many of the worldly goods we now possess – and without which we apparently cannot function – were not even imagined sixty years ago. We did not even know we couldn’t do without them.

Our pursuit of scientific discovery and technological innovation has been phenomenal. We produce more food and in the developed world have eliminated not just the misery of hunger

but the inconvenience of seasonality. We have shrunk the world. We can be warm in winter and cool in summer. We have overcome many of the diseases which have ravaged our society in the past; Our life expectancy is consistently greater than ever imagined before.

We have thrown open the doors of higher education, previously closed to all but two or three percent of our society. We have greater personal freedom and protection under the law. And we know and seem to care more; we care about the old, the young, and the disabled and the vulnerable. Overseas, we care about the billion people who live on less than a dollar a day, and we care about the one-sixth of the world's population that live in urban slums coping with hunger, poverty, disease and early deaths.

All these represent huge advances over the last six decades.

But are we a better, a more just society? Have we made the world a better place? Here the judgment must surely be more mixed.

Many would say we are a more selfish society. One which has less community, is less neighbourly, more transient, more fractured, more divided. It is a society where obligations and responsibilities which would have weighed on previous generations can be slewed away. We may think we care more, but many care more by outsourcing that care to others paid to do it.

Temporary visible success holds a greater value for many than real achievement or contribution. We have used up much of the earth's resources – and left little behind except promissory notes, which may or may not turn out to be worth what they claim.....

Should we really be surprised that in a world where short term financial return, excessive competition, excessive personal income, winning at any price are all prized as virtues, that we should also find organisations where the old are maltreated; where government contracts are plundered for what profits can be extracted from them; where newspapers believe illegal activity can be an acceptable route to greater circulation and profit; or where individuals are encouraged to take on unrepayable levels of debt in order to enrich financial institutions, or where taxes are what other people pay.

Should we really be surprised that when no-one challenges it, people are tempted to take advantage of the opportunities they uncover to join the ranks of those they envy. We are told we should be grateful such cases are so few. Perhaps instead we should be alarmed that they are so many.

In politics, we seem to be forgetting that the job of leaders is to tell people what they need to know, not what they want to hear; why? because we would prefer to hear what we want, rather than know what we need. In business, can it really be the case that any products are worth selling if someone can be induced to buy them, whether they understand or need them or not. As individuals we all pay more car insurance because there are more whiplash injuries from car crashes in Britain than there are in the rest of Europe; and why? because some individuals can thereby plunder a financial gain.

Of course, we here are not alone in worrying about all this. Our society has tried to address all this, through new laws, regulations and codes of conduct. We have fertilised a positive jungle of them. And what have they bred? a culture which believes that if something is not explicitly and precisely forbidden then one can do it, especially if it benefits oneself. In the end it is self defeating.

In the past what would we citizens have hoped a good, a wise Christian monarch would do? To challenge these destructive influences and values, to proclaim what is right and what is wrong, what is acceptable and not acceptable. To be wise and brave. To risk losing if the cause is just, as perseverance will ensure that the fight goes on.

We would have expected that monarch to lead, and to set a personal example; only to appoint to positions of authority those with wisdom and without pride, prepared to serve the greater good; only to appoint those who share their values, and are prepared to act on them in their turn in the same way; to dismiss subordinates when they do not act as they should, rather when the newspapers find out.

We would expect the monarch to challenge and prosecute those whose actions undermine the realm. And to reward only those whose actions strengthen it.

So perhaps this is an appropriate time to reflect on how such a proverbial wise monarch might have celebrated a milestone in their reign. I suspect they would have welcomed and celebrated the genuine advances and achievements; rewarded those who had helped to achieve them; sought to learn from the failures and setbacks; proclaimed what more needed to be achieved, and set out to do so through the ways I have described.

But now we are now sovereign. We have made our society what it is. If it needs to be better, then perhaps it is actually our job to make it so.

John Harwood
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