

Obituary: Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II

“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.” (Henry IV, Part II)
Queen Elizabeth II, aged 96, who served as queen of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth realms for 70 years, died at Balmoral Castle in Scotland on September 8, 2022.

When the death of the Queen was announced in the late evening hours of that day, there struck a deep and solemn note in our lives – a note that resounded far and wide across the world. I dare say the traffic and relentless frenzy which defines twenty-first century life took a brief pause in many parts of the world, as did the people, to contemplate mortal existence in all its serenity, sorrow, splendour and pain. As Her Majesty passed, a long life came to a swift end. She became for many the one constant point in a rapidly changing world as British influence declined, society changed beyond recognition and the role of the monarchy itself came into question.

Elizabeth II bore the name of that same sovereign who defined an entire age and dyed many parts of the world in her own image. Famous have been the reigns of England’s Queens – some of the greatest achievements known to man have passed under the mercy of their sceptres. Yet unlike most of her predecessors, the new world, with all its power and might, has, at many points, sensed negative aspects in the existence of the Royal Family. Many a scandal has taken place amidst the walls of Buckingham Palace and resounded throughout the world, resulting in much distrust, dislike, disapproval, even hatred concerning the monarchy itself, her own person (especially finances), husband (due to various reasons) and her children’s failed marriages (among other things). Yet she

always stood firm against a sea of troubles, once announcing that "criticism is good for people and for institutions that are part of public life. No institution, city, monarchy, whatever, should expect to be free from the scrutiny of those who give it their loyalty and support. Not to mention those who don't. But we are all part of the same fabric of our national society and that scrutiny can be just as effective if it is made with a measure of gentleness, good humour and understanding." – in this, she followed the example of Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill, once stating how "criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfils the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things."

Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor was born on April 21, 1926, to the then Duke and Duchess of York during her grandfather King George V's reign – when the role of king was thrust upon her father in 1936, much against his will, 'Lilibet', as she was known to her family, was pronounced Heir Presumptive – not yet Heir Apparent, for legal reasons. But as such, she did not pass her childhood in any certain expectation of the Crown. In October 1940, the 14-year-old Princess Elizabeth made her first ever public speech and radio broadcast during the BBC's Children's Hour, sending a "message of true sympathy" to wartime evacuees. Not much later, in 1942 as it were, young Elizabeth registered with the Labour Exchange and was eager to join a division of the women's armed forces. In 1945, she finally was able to join the Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service as an honorary second subaltern; therein, having been trained as a mechanic, showing the world that she was a woman not at all afraid to dirty her hands; showing ambition, valour, loyalty, admiration and sympathy to the struggling British people. Enjoying closeness to those very same, she and her sister linked arms

with the vast crowds marching down London's streets on Victory Day.

At the age of 21, the then Princess Elizabeth married Prince Philip of Greece and Denmark at Westminster Abbey. Their relationship was never without controversy, with many not seeing Philip as a fine match or fit candidate to rule alongside his wife – already then, she showed candour and conviction in all her decisions, standing by his side. With her beloved father's death, 25-year-old Elizabeth ascended to the Throne. In 1953, at the time of coronation, the political sphere was entirely male-dominated, with a 77-year-old Winston Churchill at the helm of the British government – yet he was very fond of the young Queen from her very birth onwards, only ever remarking positively as to her nature and temper. Elizabeth fought to ensure her voice was heard, and that her age and gender would never be a barrier to a serious appearance concerning the more conservatively positioned senior members of British politics. Gradually, though, the deferential mood changed, with more questioning of the monarchy's place in modern society. The Queen was diligent enough and serious in her work, but the royal rituals and the annual round of horse racing, hunting, shooting and fishing, not to mention the luxury of the Royal Yacht Britannia, became harder to defend and easier to mock in the new societal environments of the period. The institution appeared increasingly both fusty and remote and the Queen herself, no longer the sparkling princess, more dutiful than inspiring – which is the image she had been maintaining for decades yet to come. Ever the pensive, responsible, stiff, yet warmly smiling head of state, she reminded all of their duties. In periods of crisis – the demise of the Commonwealth, outbursts of Margaret Thatcher, familial disputes and untimely deaths – she stood firmly and seemingly unphased, being a composed

woman of visible calmness and assuring the world with her appearance. She grew into a much respected figure, admired for her stoicism and diligence; one who was well aware of the condition of the country and the state of the world, more experienced in diplomacy than virtually any other world leader, having been at it longer than anyone else. Yet despite all the exposure, personally she remained largely unknown – and unknowable, which was perhaps her most remarkable feat. She never once gave a contentious interview and restricted what she said in public largely to only generalities or platitudes. While, in private, she was said to be witty and sharp, even a mimic, these traits were not on public display. Even devoted monarchists knew of her only at second hand, as a cipher, a still, small, largely silent, smiling figure, bound by her sense of duty and service, surrounded by turmoil and disarray.

And so, not only by an overwhelming majority of those small isles called the United Kingdom, but by grand parts of the whole world, she was greatly loved by more than just her own people. The simple dignity of her life, her many virtues, her sense of duty alike as ruler and servant over the vast spheres over which she bore responsibility – all those were aspects of her character which have won the very glint of admiration, from the innumerable eyes whose gaze fell upon the Throne. We thought of her, very much as we do of her father, once she ever so calmly and without self-ambition, succeeded him, as more than only faithful in state affairs. But also as having been strong in her devotion to honouring the United Kingdom, self-restrained in judgement, uplifted above mere party politics, so shrewd in judging between what matters and what does not. Her conduct on the Throne may well be a guide to constitutional monarchs all over the world. Despite all the monarchy's vicissitudes, Queen Elizabeth II, a figure from

another age, had won and retained the affection, loyalty and support of countless persons, who respected her for her diligence and sense of duty.

Leaving the treasures of the past behind and turning onto Britain's future, it is no secret that the name "Charles" does not evoke much happiness when referred to as the name of an English Royal. King Charles I led the country into a civil war — and remains the only English monarch to be executed. His son, King Charles II, spent years in exile after his father's beheading and then fanned sectarian flames in Britain while fathering numerous children with a number of mistresses. And yet, unphased by such history, we shall go on with much hope and admiration for the Heir to the Throne, so that I may well feel a thrill in invoking, for the first time since 1952, the prayer and the Anthem: *God save the King*.