

Her Majesty's Birthday | Queen Elisabeth II turns 95

by Colin A. Munro



I first became aware of the Queen's remarkable impact in remote parts of the Commonwealth during my posting (1973-77) to the British High Commission (embassy in a Commonwealth country) in Malaysia. One of my duties was to report on developments in East Malaysia, including Sarawak. James Brooke, a soldier in the East India Company's Bengal army had struck out on his own to suppress piracy in the south China sea. He helped the Sultan of Brunei suppress an uprising against his rule. The grateful Sultan granted him the title of Rajah/ruler of Sarawak in 1841. The Brookes ruled Sarawak as their family fiefdom until the Japanese invasion in 1941. After the war it became a Crown Colony. The White Rajah succeeded in suppressing not only the piracy practised by the largest single ethnic group, the Sea Dayaks (also known as Ibans), but also headhunting.

Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. By the time I arrived, a low level Chinese communist insurgency was all but over. Indonesian "Konfrontasi" had been defeated by 1967. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was well underway.

An Iban friend of mine, an academic at the University of Malaya, invited me to visit his home in Sarawak, a longhouse on stilts by a river in the jungle. It could only be reached by boat. A longhouse is like a small village. On arrival we were greeted by the headman. Inside the longhouse I noticed shrivelled heads, impaled on poles. In response to my question about the abolition of headhunting, the headman grinned: Blitish come, plactice stop: Japanese come, plactice lesume. Next, I noticed posters of Queen Elizabeth, probably left over from Her state visit to Malaysia in 1972, but none of the Malaysian head of state, the yang di Pertuan Agong, a position which rotates between the Malay Sultans. The headman had an answer to my question about the missing head of state as well. We love "Queen EE". Then it was the turn of the children who had rehearsed a song in my honour: London Bridge is falling down.

The colonial period was not invariably experienced as one of oppression and exploitation. Twelve years after independence, British District officers (the equivalent of Landräte) were remembered in Sarawak as fair and uncorrupt, qualities which their Malay successors often lacked. Queen EE symbolized these qualities for the Ibans, who also had bitter memories of the brutal Japanese occupation.

From the moment of her accession in 1952, until today, the Queen has been dedicated to serving the UK, and her other Realms, including Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, as head of state. She has attached high priority to her informal role as head of the Commonwealth. Even in former colonies which take a jaundiced view of the British, the Queen personally enjoys great respect, even affection.

It is therefore absurd to describe the Royal Family – her family – as nowadays institutionally racist. It is not the present Queen's job to apologize for her predecessors, either as head of state or for their personal conduct. She has in fact adapted better than many of her British subjects to the end of empire, and to the UK's circumstances, much reduced since her father's coronation as King Emperor in 1937, when she was eleven. She has also adapted to the new Europe. Her first state visit to Germany in 1965 was an outstanding success.

My boss, Peter (later Lord) Blaker, was FCO Minister in attendance for the Queen's state visit to Switzerland in April 1980. For once, the Minister's Private Secretary had very little to do, apart from making sure that we both always got into the right car at the right time. A royal tour of Switzerland was, for me, the equivalent of living like God in France. Not however for the Queen: she was working all the time, well prepared, well informed, performing her duties to punctilious perfection. At the diplomatic reception she and the Duke of Edinburgh (who sadly passed away on 9 April, aged 99) paid most attention to the heads of mission from the African Commonwealth. The Rhodesia/Zimbabwe negotiations had just been brought to a successful conclusion by Lord Carrington.

The Queen reigns within the constitutional sovereignty of Parliament. A government with an absolute majority in the House of Commons can do as it likes. The weaknesses in this arrangement, as they affect the Queen, have been evident during the Brexit drama. But it will be for parliament, the people and the courts to resolve them, probably during the reign of the Queen's successor. Meanwhile, Queen Elizabeth remains immensely popular and respected. She has earned her popularity and respect.

Let us have your views and comments!

About the author



Colin A. Munro is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society and is a UK native. He attended the George Watson's College and the Edinburgh University and joined HM Diplomatic Service in 1969. During his career he held numerous positions in Berlin, Kuala Lumpur, Bucharest, Frankfurt, Zagreb and served as the Private Secretary to the Minister of State responsible for Central and Eastern Europe. His last posting in HM Diplomatic Service was as Ambassador to the OSCE. He chairs the UK Citizens in Austria and in the ABS he is also a member of the Expert Council. The opinions expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the opinions of the ABS.