

The Human King

by Jochen Ressel



How much do you know about the King of Belgium? You know his name, don't you? Or let's talk about Hans-Adam II, Prince of Liechtenstein. What are the names of his children? Or about Queen Margrethe II. Do you know which country she is Queen of?

There are 12 monarchies in Europe and only about a very few of them we have some knowledge. Besides Andorra, Belgium, Denmark, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Spain, we only have a broader knowledge of the ruling house of Monaco and Pope Francis as Head of the "Stato della Città del Vaticano", the Vatican City State, as the oldest monarchy in Europe. However, there is no question that the British monarchy, along with the Vatican, is by far the most important monarchy when it comes to public interest. Over more than a hundred years, media interest in the House of Windsor has been outstanding, which is the reason why the structure of the Royal family and major family events are widely known - tragic moments, e.g. when a member of the Royal family passes away or when family relationships break down, but also beautiful events, such as royal weddings or the birth of children. We as the Austro-British Society also follow such occasions and are extraordinarily successful in media coverage as this makes us attractive to wide-reach society magazines, which thereby help our society to become well known.

The former Prince of Wales, now known as King Charles III, is the most famous member of the Royal family following the deaths of both Queen Elizabeth II and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, 17 months earlier. For decades, Charles was constantly in the media spotlight, which is the reason we know so much about him and his experiences, making him much more of a "human King" than any other Monarch before.

Challenges in his childhood

Even as a child, he was closely watched by the media and it was reported that Charles was a very sensitive child, so very different from his father. He was separated from his parents and sent to the same educational institution that Prince Philip once attended, the strict Gordonstoun School. Relief came for Charles in 1967 when he was admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge. This is thus the first point that makes him "human": he knows from his own experience what emotional stress means for a child - probably a driving force why he worked intensively on his project "The Prince's Trust" to make life easier for disadvantaged children.

Despite all the challenges, he was forced to take on responsibility. At the age of ten, in 1958, he was created Prince of Wales. Ten years later, the widely known ceremony of his coronation as Prince of Wales took place at Caernarfon Castle, which meant that he had to learn Welsh in order to deliver an excellent speech in this newly learned language - hard work that helped to be accepted by the Welsh people. This leads to the second point: he knows what responsibility means at an early age - an experience that many children also have today.

Challenges of his youth

Although hardly any of us were pressured to find a wife or husband, this was true of Prince Charles. Even in the early 1970s, the media were full of speculation as to who might become Princess of Wales and thus one day Queen. When Charles dated a few ladies but no favourite was in sight, the pressure mounted. However, he did find a great love - but unfortunately with an "unsuitable woman" as she was not of the highest noble rank and it became public knowledge that she had lost her cherry. While the Monarchy was under pressure, marrying a young, beautiful, Madonna-like girl of the best noble rank was supposed to be an opportunity to reasonably improve the Royal's reputation. With Lady Diana Spencer, the ideal Princess of Wales had been found - at least that is what the Royal family was convinced of. And we all remember the biggest wedding ever - a media spectacle of unknown proportions. This experience makes Prince Charles human as a third point: he knows what "unrequited love" really means. Perhaps one or the other of us has also experienced this unpleasant feeling - even if it certainly had other reasons, but Prince Charles knows what it means when one's wishes and dreams are destroyed by circumstances.

Challenges following his marriage to Lady Diana

Everything has been said and written, countless films have been produced, and there is nothing more to add. The marriage of Lady Di and Prince Charles is common knowledge.

But we can hardly imagine the enormous pressure the world public put on him and also on Lady Diana when they were in partnership problems. Perhaps we ourselves have experienced gossip about our own partnership problems - and now imagine it being discussed worldwide - just as Charles and Diana had to experience!

Many of us know the despair of a failed marriage, which is felt in every case - even if it was obviously not a happy marriage, since otherwise it would not have failed. Separation and divorce is always a drama, regardless of social standing. And even worse when children have to cope with it. It causes pain on all sides: On the side of the parent who is then solely responsible for the upbringing of the children - on the side of the other parent who from then on has only very limited opportunities to participate in the children's lives. But above all, the pain on the side of the children, as they do not have both parents as an important stability factor. All this makes up the fourth point of the life experiences that make King Charles so human: He knows first-hand the despair that comes with family break-up.

And imagine the worst: Your marriage has broken up and you are in love with the absolute most hated woman on the entire globe - and even more unbelievable if this woman you love is the one you have loved for decades and were not allowed to marry at that time... Partnerships have broken up for more minor reasons and it is very likely that in such a complex situation the fear of losing the great love of your life for a second time will arise, as public pressure can overwhelm all other emotions. Therefore, this is point number five: It makes King Charles very human that he managed to deal with such an extraordinary emotional situation in a way that a great love could survive.

Late happiness – and difficult moments

This great love came to an exceptionally happy end after 37 years of loving affection. In 2005, the wedding of the former Prince of Wales and Camilla Parker-Bowles took place at Windsor Castle - probably one of the happiest moments in the couple's lives. That this was possible was the result of hard work required to restore respect and prestige. It took seven years after Lady Diana's tragic death in Paris for people to adjust their view of Diana and her life and let the grief subside, and in parallel to get to know Camilla as a person. In the years before, she was only "the enemy of a fairy tale", although the public knew almost nothing about her. Hardly anyone had ever heard her voice, how and what she had to say, how she behaved and dealt with Charles - all that was unknown. But time heals all wounds, and the public has reconciled with her. Hence the sixth point: King Charles III has shown sensitivity to the public's feelings, to those of his sons, and at the same time stood by Camilla's side - an admirable balancing act that he has managed.

In the meantime, King Charles III has earned the highest reputation as a diplomatically and ecologically highly competent expert. He witnesses the obviously functioning and happy marriage of Prince William and Kate, who perfectly represent the Royal family and prove that the experiment of marriage with a woman from the upper class can ideally work.

The Royal couple's children are loved by the public and social media are full of adorable pictures, e.g. taken during Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee. But not all current marriages seem to be so happy: The next, quite courageous step of a marriage to Meghan, an American divorcee with Charles' younger son Harry has unfortunately not shown the best result because the integration into the firm did not work out. Harry made a decision that the former Prince of Wales as heir to the throne and current King Charles III never had: to stand by his wife, knowing very well that his father was forced to put the Monarchy above his wife's personal feelings and needs. Harry even dared to take the step of leaving not only the Royal family but also the country – certainly an emotional strain for the king. Point seven: It makes King Charles III human that we know he faces all kinds of happiness and suffering that one experiences with one's children. No matter how old they are, one always cares for them.

Finally, as the eighth point, King Charles knows what deep grief means. Although it was a difficult youth for him because he never seemed to live up to his father's expectations, it was evident peace and loving affection had developed between them when he lost his father in April 2021. The speech he gave showed a touched Charles and it was clear that the loss hit him hard as he spoke about "my dear papa".

The same goes for his relationship with his mother. We remember his touching speech at Buckingham Palace on the occasion of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, in which he said: "Your Majesty, Mummy...". All of us may have lost a loved one, but hardly anyone knows what it means to lose someone with whom you have spent 74 years. Therefore, in his first speech after the Queen's death, he even took the opportunity to renew the promise his mother had made on her 21st birthday. The King said: "As the Queen herself did with such unswerving devotion, I too now solemnly pledge myself, throughout the remaining time God grants me, to uphold the constitutional principles at the heart of our nation. And wherever you may live in the United Kingdom, or in the realms and territories across the world, and whatever may be your background or beliefs, I shall endeavor to serve you with loyalty, respect and love, as I have throughout my life."

Conclusion

We are all the result of our life experiences. It is through the humbling events that we learn and become valuable as human beings. Personally, I am convinced that King Charles III experienced more turbulence, problems, and pressures during his life than probably any of us have. And because we know so much about him, he is much more "human" to us than any other Monarch before.

With the four-part series of ABS Blog articles on King Charles III, the ABS has now moved on to the highlight of this year from a Royal perspective: The coronation ceremony on 6 May 2023. We are curious to see how he will shape his reign - from the points of view we have highlighted in the previous blogs: As "Green King", as "People's King", as "Political King" and finally as "Human King".

The ABS is looking forward to receiving your views and comments!



About the author

Jochen Ressel is the Secretary General of the Austro-British Society. He worked several years for a UK company and its HQ in London. Currently, he holds the position as Head of Communications, PR & Fundraising of the Sovereign Order of Malta – Priory of Austria. As a tenor, he is a member of the choir ensemble of the Vienna Cathedral Music, which provides regular musical accompaniment to high masses, masses, requiems, and concerts in St. Stephen's Cathedral.

The opinions expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the views of the ABS.