

The People's King?

by Jochen Ressel



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What should a Monarch be like? What should be the attitude towards political issues? What kind of behaviour is appropriate? For most of us, these questions have not arisen because there hasn't been a need to do so. In the 70 years of her reign, Queen Elizabeth II shaped the way she dealt with public opinion and addressed political issues. She used her opportunities to influence developments whenever she felt it was necessary - through her extensive contacts and companions over decades. Many of us have experienced how difficult it was for her to address current needs triggered by societal changes – be it her son's love for an "unsuitable" woman, the national grief following Lady Di's fatal accident, or the situation with Harry and Meghan that arose towards the end of her reign, to name but a few. And we remember how she managed to express her opinion publicly without making big speeches, e.g. her famous dress and hat style in blue with yellow flowers after the Brexit decision. But the longest reign in history came to an end and a new era is to begin. We have a new King, a man better prepared than anyone before by his decades as Prince of Wales and heir to the throne. And suddenly the above questions arise. What is the role of a Monarch in our changing and multi-media times? Is the familiar concept as established by Queen Elizabeth II still relevant, or does it need to be adapted to keep the monarchy fit for the future?

From the first day of his reign, King Charles' III every gesture has been observed and commented on, every handshake and every word he has spoken has been carefully analysed to find out how he will shape his reign. Current and upcoming events will give a better impression and create hard facts instead of vague assumptions about what to expect from King Charles III.

Current and future events to shape the King's profile

- 1) The coronation will take place on 6 May, which is sure to shed some light on the matter. Announced to be cosmopolitan, the celebrations are set to last three days, with Britons getting a one-off extra bank holiday on 8 May to mark the occasion. "The coronation will be a magical moment, bringing people together to celebrate the best of Britain over one special weekend," Buckingham Palace said. Given the current political turmoil in the UK, e.g. the fierce debates in the House of Commons, the immigration problems caused by "small boat immigrants", the still dramatic situation of the NHS with unacceptable waiting times for ambulances and treatment, disastrous reports and scandals at the Metropolitan Police, strikes on a scale not seen since Thatcher's time, and discussions on the impact of Brexit including the Northern Ireland debate or Scotland's independence aspirations, to name but a few, an opportunity to celebrate as a nation and a Union could have outstanding significance. Therefore, how King Charles III chooses to mark these special days including his own behaviour is of great importance and matters.
- 2) Last week, King Charles' III first official inaugural visit to Germany took place – and it is not without explosive power, emphasises British political scientist and ABS Board member Melanie Sully in an interview: ¹⁾ "The first state visit of a Monarch is tremendously important." The German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his wife welcomed the King and his wife Camilla to Berlin. "A tribute to relations," Buckingham Palace stressed in advance – Sully agrees: "Charles' style is different from his mother's, he puts it on 'business-like'." But it's not all glitz, glamour and state banquets: on Thursday, after a speech in the Bundestag, Charles met Ukraine refugees and helpers at the arrival centre in Tegel – currently, 300 arriving refugees are counted at Berlin railway stations every day.
- 3) A state visit to France is also planned, which had to be postponed due to the highly explosive political situation in France because of Macron's reforms of the pension system. Regardless of whether the King's visit will take place before or after the coronation, this important event will also be significant in answering the question of how the King will define his international role. In any case, King Charles' III diplomatic skills will be in demand when it comes to smoothing the migration-related waves between the two countries.

According to British constitutional conventions, the King will never be able to have political power, but: "Charles can at least encourage, advise and warn," Sully emphasises. And he will certainly do, as he did during the decades he served as Prince of Wales. The commitment to climate protection and the energy turnaround were topics of the highest priority for him - even if he was once mocked as an "Eco-Prince" because he addressed these issues in times when they were not yet on the agenda of all nations. (See also the ABS Blog article "The 'Green King'", published on 11 March 2023 - <https://www.oebg.at/the-green-king/>).

Which King will Charles be?

The now 74-year-old is still practising self-definition as King, but so far has done nothing to become a mere blueprint of his mother. It was a generational change, at a high age level, but still noticeable: "So far, Charles has been able to distinguish himself from his mother, at least in some nuances: His Christmas address was very direct, and you could sense that he was sympathetic to the striking people on the streets. He also does not emphasise the role of the Commonwealth in the same way as his mother. "The first destination as King is not a country from this confederation," says ABS Board member and political expert Melanie Sully.

Familiar family disputes have accompanied Charles not only since he became King: his brother Andrew is even no longer part of the Royal firm after an abuse scandal. Add to this the scandal book of his younger son Harry, in which he directly attacks Camilla. In response, the expatriate rebel has been stripped of Frogmore, an estate in the grounds of Windsor Castle. He knows the people are very much behind him in this measure.

Elizabeth II hardly approached the people, played in a barely tangible league. King Charles III, on the other hand, wants probably to be more of a "People's King", but in the end also makes himself (more) vulnerable: There have already been egg-throwing and posters with the message "Not My King" to be seen. As the UK people have real problems to deal with, the coronation on 6 May could be a unifying turning point and probably shape Charles' role as "The People's King", appropriate for the times in which we live in.

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. In his previously held professional position as Executive Director-Operations at the Senate of Economy, he supported companies to align their strategies with sustainable, eco-social, and global development goal requirements. He served as Editor-in-Chief of the "Senate" magazine, highlighting eco-social topics. 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.

1) Source: Kleine Zeitung (https://www.kleinezeitung.at/international/6268546/DeutschlandBesuch_Erste-Reise-als-Koenig_Wie-Charles-III-seine)