

The Political King

by Jochen Ressel



She had never spoken out on political issues - that would have been an absolute no-go for her. Not a single speech, not an official statement from Buckingham Palace, not an interview in which she ever informed her citizens about her stance on political, often controversial issues. This is how Queen Elizabeth II shaped her reign and created an image of how a monarch should fulfil Royal duties - and hardly any of us have seen a different way of dealing with political issues as she did for 70 years on the throne.

Why this was so is perfectly understandable. The Monarch of the United Kingdom is obliged to be impartial and neutral, and the role is very representative. But the role goes far beyond mere representation, and there is no question that there are many ways to exert influence. Not expressing political views protects the Monarch from attacks and avoids vulnerability – if no one knows the views, no one has any reason to attack the Monarch for his views.

The powers of the Monarch

- *Part of the Parliament:* The Parliament is the highest legislative body in the United Kingdom and consists of the House of Commons, the House of Lords and the Crown. So, the Monarch is an integrated part of British parliamentarians.

- *Opening and dissolution of Parliament:* Every year, the Monarch opens the session of Parliament in a magnificent ceremony and reads out the programme of Government for the coming twelve months. The ceremony begins with a procession of the King or Queen from Buckingham Palace to the Houses of Parliament. There the Monarch makes his way to the House of Lords. An official known as the Black Rod is sent to summon the MPs of the House of Commons, and the door is slammed in the Monarch's face as a symbol of Parliament's independence from the Monarchy. Before a General Election, the Monarch formally dissolves Parliament.
- *Establishment of the Government:* On the day after a General Election, the Monarch calls on the leader of whichever party has won the most seats in the House of Commons to form a government.
- *Royal assent to laws:* After both houses of Parliament have approved a bill, it is forwarded to the Monarch, who assents to it and thus brings it into force. Theoretically, the Monarch could withhold consent.
- *Weekly meetings with the Prime Minister:* The Monarch welcomes the Prime Minister for a weekly meeting where the head of Government could tell about plans and concerns. Queen Elizabeth II said in a 1992 documentary about her role in the meetings "They tell me what's going on and if they have any problems, and sometimes I can help in some way. They know I'm impartial, and it feels good to be something of a sponge."
- *Best informed person of the United Kingdom:* As the Monarch has direct access to the Prime Minister and all documents of each Parliament and chamber of the United Kingdom and all Governmental documents, the Monarch is the best-informed person in the country and hence can judge developments and plans based on a holistic view.
- *Intervening in constitutional crises:* In the case of "grave constitutional crises", the British Monarch can act against the advice of the members of the Government. However, this has never happened in modern times.
- *Head of the Church of England:* As secular head of the Anglican Church, the Monarch can appoint bishops and archbishops in consultation with ecclesiastical bodies.
- *Additional duties:* The Monarch is Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, consisting of the British Army, Royal Navy, and Royal Air Force, accredits Ambassadors as well as High Commissioners and receives foreign diplomats.

What must be remembered is the fact that the former Monarch, Queen Elizabeth II had an extensive network of decision-makers worldwide, all of whom were most likely appointed during her reign - a network she could have used to informally express her views and recommendations.

Personally, I am convinced that she has had more influence on politics than we officially know, although she has always been strictly impartial in public.

But that didn't stop her from making her opinion known sublimely. We remember, for example, her famous blue dress and hat with yellow flowers that she wore during the Queen's speech in the Houses of Parliament after the Brexit decision.



King Charles' III political activities as Prince of Wales

Already in his time as Prince of Wales, King Charles III was a politically engaged Royal and was in close contact with many decision-makers. He expressed his views and made recommendations about what he considered important to be taken into account in political decisions. Parts of his communications became known as the "Black spider memos", written between 2004 and 2005. He claimed these were written in his private capacity. However, after a ten-year struggle, the documents were revealed in 2015 and provide an insight into his political work.

In an "Independent" article¹⁾ we learned that in a missive to the then Prime Minister Tony Blair written in February 2005, the Prince raised a European Union directive on complementary medicine which he said would have the effect of banning a number of herbal extracts. In a letter to Mr Blair in 2005, the Prince criticised what he described as the "badger lobby" for objecting to the killing of badgers while disregarding the slaughter of cattle which contract a disease. The rising number of cases of TB in cattle was the most pressing and urgent problem facing the agricultural sector at that time. In September 2004 Charles wrote to Mr Blair expressing his concern at the lack of resources for British troops fighting in Iraq to contain the aftermath of the allied invasion. He raised the issue of whether the Lynx helicopters being used in the Middle East were fit for purpose and comes close to suggesting that the Government has sent troops to Iraq without appropriate equipment. Other issues of his concern were the state of education, the fate of buildings, and issues on fishing rights.

He actively expressed his views to politicians on what needs to be done regarding sustainability and environmental protection. (See also the ABS Blog article "The Green King"²⁾)

How political will/can he be as King?

As already mentioned, the Monarch is committed to strict neutrality and impartiality. King Charles III is undoubtedly aware of this, having spent decades preparing for his new role. However, he is also mindful of the fact that the public may demand a more active role, as the discussions and issues raised are of crucial importance for the future of the United Kingdom, e.g. whether there will be a Great Britain or "Little Britain" in future if the Union may break up. The Irish and Scottish question of their future status concerns the Monarchy as such, and therefore the position of the Monarch is of vital interest.

As British governments in recent years have not proved to be very stable partners for European decision-makers, King Charles III could play an essential role as a stabilising factor for Britain's foreign policy. The new King's first official state visit to Germany a few weeks ago gave a foretaste of how he will shape his role in foreign policy, as he became the first British Monarch ever to address the German Bundestag. His planned and postponed visit to France will require diplomatic skills, as the problem of "small boat immigrants" cannot be solved without consultation with France. (See also the ABS Blog article "The People's King?"³⁾)

Another clue was the announcement which has been made on 6 April 2023. For the first time, the British Royal family has agreed to a review of its historical links to slavery. King Charles III takes the issue very seriously, Buckingham Palace told "The Guardian". The Palace will grant access to the Royal archives and the Royal Collection for academic enquiry, investigating involvement in the slave trade. The British Monarchy has benefited from the slave trade for centuries and the investigation is due to be completed by 2026.⁴⁾

Constitutional requirements vs. public expectations – detachment vs. vulnerability

For King Charles III, it is a difficult task to balance: his personal political interest with the constitutional requirements - to be impartial, not to make himself vulnerable and to meet the expectations of the public. On the other hand, this is an excellent opportunity for King Charles III to shape his reign. With his long experience as heir to the throne, he might have a specific understanding of what modern society expects from a Monarch leading Britain as head of state in our time. Or can we imagine i.e. the Union is in danger to disintegrate and the Monarch says... nothing? The demands on a Monarch have certainly changed in the last 70 years as our world has evolved from a post-war society to a multimedia and technology-driven secular society of our days. I look forward to reading this ABS blog article in ten years to compare it retrospectively with how King Charles' III reign as „a political King" has actually evolved.

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) "The Independent" article 14 May 2015 (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/6-things-we-learned-about-prince-charles-influence-on-politics-from-the-release-of-his-black-spider-letters-10249008.html>)
- 2) "The Green King" – ABS Blog article by Jochen Ressel, published 13 March 2023 (<https://www.oebg.at/the-green-king>)
- 3) "The People's King" – ABS Blog article by Jochen Ressel, published 4 April 2023 (<https://www.oebg.at/the-peoples-king>)
- 4) ORF article of 6 April 2023 (<https://orf.at/stories/3311714>)