

Her Majesty the Queen's "Official" 80th Birthday, 2006

Her Majesty the Queen will be in the City this week for a Service of Thanksgiving at St Paul's for her 80th birthday and for Prince Philip's 85th. The Queen will have lunch at Mansion House and make a speech. Today here at St Michael's we give thanks for all The Queen and the Prince do for the country, we pray for them and send them both our thanks and warmest wishes.

In 1928 Winston Churchill visited Balmoral and saw the two-year-old Princess Elizabeth for the first time. He wrote to his wife: "She is a character. She has an air of authority and reflectiveness astonishing in an infant". A year or so later, Sir Owen Morshead told of an incident at Windsor. The officer commanding the guard strode across to where the pram stood and said, "Permission to march off, please, Ma'am?" There was the inclination of a bonneted head and a wave from a tiny paw.

The Queen has often deployed her ready wit, especially to defuse embarrassing occasions. Once when she was in a tea-shop near Sandringham, a woman leaned forward and said, "Excuse me, but you do look awfully like the Queen". The Queen replied, "How very reassuring!" Again, at a banquet she was served with asparagus and her neighbour at the table watched her to see how she would deal with the stout, buttery, home-grown stems. When he came to be served, the Queen turned to him and said, "Good. Now it's my turn to see you make a pig of yourself!"

On another occasion The Queen's coach splashed mud over a pedestrian in Sandringham. The pedestrian, a woman, shouted something and the Queen answered her, "I quite agree". The Duke of Edinburgh turned to the Queen and asked, "What did she say, dear?" The Queen replied, "Bastards!"

Much later at a public ceremony Mrs Thatcher felt embarrassed because she'd turned up in an outfit which closely resembled the Queen's. Afterwards, Downing Street discreetly asked the palace whether there was any way by which in future the Prime Minister might know in advance what her Majesty intended to wear. The palace phoned back with a message directly from the Queen: "Do not worry. The Queen does not notice what other people are wearing".

We should not – nay cannot, dare not – leave Prince Philip out of our celebration. We are fortunate to have a close connection with him for he is Patron of the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators who come here for two services each year, and I have the honour to be their Chaplain and a Freeman of the Guild. Prince Philip was the Guild's Grand Master for fifty years before becoming Patron when the Queen retired from that position.

So we see quite a lot of Prince Philip – and great fun it is when he's around. He has not – or not yet – commented on our slitty eyes but he did once come into a Court meeting and, seeing the Master and wardens in their livery fur said, "Ah, medieval airmen!" We gave him a party in the RAF Club for his 85th and I can honestly say his speech had all the best jokes.

Well now, the levellers, following Walter Bagehot, try to persuade us to regard the dignified aspects of our constitution as outmoded habits of mind which belonged to

the bad old days before, in a plethora of ludicrous and unworkable declarations of *rights*, we were urged to replace our traditional understanding of ourselves as *subjects* with the alien and republican term *citizens*. There are many who would reduce the Royal Family and make the remnant of them abandon the state coach and take to bicycles. Polly Toynbee has written that the Queen should move out of Buckingham Palace and into a council house. Any suggestions as to where Ms Toynbee should go and live?

And now a Labour Party think tank – surely an oxymoron? - says that a useful role for the monarchy would be to travel round the world apologising for the sins of the empire. They say future monarchs should be educated at comprehensive schools – like what they are. And even their grudging support for the retention of a little royal ceremonial is only out of the pig philosophy that says it's good for the tourist industry.

But ceremonial is not useless trimming. *Things* cannot be adequately replaced by mere *thoughts*. Because we are bodies as well as minds, we need the externals. Appearances are themselves part of the reality they point to. This is the sacramental way of being. I'm sure you remember from the days of your Confirmation classes that a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. The Orb, the Sceptre and the Crown embody what they represent. The Coronation Service is sacramental, complete with holy oil. There is a nice remark by the poet Robert Graves, who met the Queen not long after her Coronation. He said: "The holy oil has taken for that girl: it worked for her all right".

But some will say that in the modern world the Queen does not rule. They are mistaken. The Queen rules through her ministers just as the ministers govern through their civil servants – or at least they used to before the coming of the likes of Alastair Campbell. Of course the minister does not attend to every small item of business. It is his job to secure the coherence of his department. It is the Queen's function to secure the coherence of the realm. T.S.Eliot wrote in 1939: "You cannot expect continuity and coherence in politics, you cannot expect reliable behaviour on fixed principles persisting through changed situations, unless there is an underlying political philosophy: not of a party, but of the nation". The Queen is the centre and guarantee of the nation; She is its embodiment.

Having defaced and deformed institutions such as parliament, the church, the law and the university, the modernisers, in a fit of hysterical self-hatred, egged on by ignorant, envious and sensationalising sections of the mass media, have also turned their destructive spite on the monarchy which too will have to be *modernised*. Do you remember when the Queen was forced into a nauseating, sentimental linking of arms in that other temple to the modernisers= failure, the Dome. We know not what we do: for the monarchy is the living symbol of the nation. Any lack of esteem for it is the outward and visible sign of self-contempt. We need to value something. And what you value shows you what you're worth. People will revere *something*: better a thousand year old monarchy than Victoria Beckham and Chantelle. The marvellous tide of respect shown by the people for the both the natural and the official birthdays of the Queen has demonstrated vigorously that the majority in Britain still prefer *Rule Britannia* to Cool Britannia.

We have been here before. In the 17th century the monarchy was abolished and the country was governed for eleven years by a puritanical, politically-correct dictatorship until the Cromwellian totalitarianism was shown up for what it was and we got our king back. The cries at the time of Cromwell were eerily similar to what we are hearing today: the need to Amodernise≡ - think of the new model army - and so destroy the traditional institutions which had served the country well for centuries. Even a bad king is better than a so called ALord Protector≡ who in reality was a dictator. Cromwell abolished Christmas and he also abolished parliament. There are those today who sideline parliament, bye-passing it at every opportunity and governing instead by a clique, close circle of cronies and a horde of un-elected advisors. Where=s the democracy in that?

By contrast, Her Majesty has served this country with distinction and self-sacrifice for the whole of her eighty years. Every day she gives us a living example of what love of country means. Long may she reign. God bless her!