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At a time of shattered loyalties and diminished trust the King's coronation can unite us

Coronations have taken place in Westminster Abbey for 900 years, the Archbishop of Canterbury always presiding. That puts our own paltry timescales in sobering perspective. This, the 40th coronation, seems the ultimate expression of the permanence of institutions while the generations come and go. Nothing changes.

Yet of course everything is changing – and at breakneck speed. At this stage in the nation's life, in world conditions, in human affairs, the event seems full of glaring contradictions. Issues that barely entered the minds of most people at the last coronation, on that wet day in June 1953, now dominate the national debate.

This time, at the very heart of the ceremony, there is the highly relevant matter of the unity of the kingdom itself. Will devolution turn to dissolution? Can it be held together in all its diversity when powerful centrifugal forces are at work, with the ancient kingdom of Scotland in breakaway mood (though maybe pausing at this moment as its local quarrels proliferate) and when Northern Ireland's status is yet again in question?

Will a strong and sanctified monarchy, with a popular new incumbent and equally popular consort, check these trends and calm these divisions?

Then there is the international dimension. At the ceremony, the new King fulfils his role as head of the Commonwealth. Some would have it that this is just a leftover of empire, given a last few breaths of life by the dedicated late Queen, but now passing into history.

But in that case why are nations queuing to join it? Why at non-governmental level are a myriad of organisations, interests and communities, networking together via the internet as never before in history? Here the public debate is in a hopeless muddle, made worse by misleading media comment.

To clarify once more (and perhaps the coronation will help), of the current 56 Commonwealth members, 15 still retain King Charles

as constitutional head of state. These are the realms over which he rules in theory, if not in practice.

The muddle comes, and is perpetuated by commentator ignorance, when a realm decides to change its status to a republic. It remains as much as ever a full member of the Commonwealth, under the headship of King Charles.

In the modern context this actual shift in status makes very little difference at all – perhaps a few shuffling of titles, some legal redrafting, with more – not less – engagement in the Commonwealth in many areas as the outcome.

A much more serious threat to this remarkable system – which has emerged out of both empire and Commonwealth as “an entirely new conception” (Queen Elizabeth's words) – is the growing pressure from China and Russia seeking to entice numerous Commonwealth members into their orbits; larding the process with cash and tempting offers of military cooperation and weaponry, along with political subversion and bribery operations – greatly to the disadvantage of both maritime freedom and our own interests.

The King's coronation pledge means, surely, that we are not just going to stand by like cowed spectators while the autocratic powers move in, flouting every Commonwealth value and seriously endangering both global and our own security.

To be sure, some second order issues at the coronation will get maximum publicity. Where Prince Harry sits in the Abbey is of the utmost unimportance but will doubtless be one of them. Whether the Stone of Scone pinched from the Abbey in 1950, goes back again to Scotland or stays at Westminster, is another. Who wears full robes is a third.

Coronations do not solve problems but at a time of gloom, uncertainty on all sides, and real cost of living pain this one makes us walk a little taller. It speaks of hope and confidence. In an age of shattered loyalties and diminished trust it is a combining force. It reaches the parts politics cannot reach. Worth every penny. 🙏

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