

Opinion – International Relations at the End of the Second Elizabethan Age

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, SEP 12 2022

This writer had the pleasure of meeting the late HRH Queen Elizabeth II three times and, on each occasion, one happily acknowledges that the opportunity was not only a genuine pleasure but far more emotionally manifestative than I might have expected. Decades of diplomacy, world-class advisors attending to her 24/7, choreography fine-tuned, and a rampageous soft power all combined to make each event uniquely revelational. Several US Presidents, including Barack Obama, have commented on their nervousness awaiting a regal audience. Indeed, Sir Tony Blair confessed that when he met the Queen for the first time, as Prime Minister Elect, he was so overwrought he almost tripped on the royal carpet. Here, I will explore the three occasions on which I was lucky to meet Queen Elizabeth II and the significance of these events I bore witness to on the international scene, alongside a brief analysis of Queen Elizabeth as an internationalist and as an illustration of soft power.

My first fortunate occasion was the Queen's first visit to Dublin in the state visit from 17 to 20 May 2011, at the invitation of the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese. It was the first by a reigning British monarch to the Republic of Ireland since the 1911 tour by the Queen's grandfather King George V, when the entire island of Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom. The intervening period saw the 1916 proclamation of the Irish Republic during the Easter Rising against British rule. One should not under-state the monarch's mastery of the symbolism of an Irish visit. However, only such a unique person could carry the symbolic into the realm of the genuinely reconciliatory, as she addressed her hosts in Gaelic, visited politically emotive sites such as Croke Park, and set aside decades of division and contention.

It is worth recanting a little of the maelstrom of significance of Queen Elizabeth's first Irish visit. A military conflict from January 1919 led ultimately to the partition of Ireland on 3 May 1921. Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom, while the Irish Free State became a self-governing and then fully independent Dominion within the British Empire. In 1936 the Irish Free State removed all reference to the British monarchy from its Constitution – whilst retaining an 'external association' with the British crown – and the Commonwealth kept it in its wings.

In 1937 the Irish Free State adopted a republican constitution and renamed itself Ireland. In 1949 it formally split from the Commonwealth. Elizabeth's visit was a symbolic normalisation of Republic of Ireland–United Kingdom relations following the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which settled most outstanding territorial disputes between the states, including the abandonment by the Republic of its territorial claim to Northern Ireland, thereby removing a major obstacle to a royal visit. Only a stateswoman as well-informed and genuinely altruistic as Queen Elizabeth II would take such personal risks for peace. In so doing she must have thought back to 1979 and the tragic murder of her family member Earl Mountbatten and yet she was capable of forgiving. She might also have recalled that when she opened the Queen Elizabeth bridge in Belfast in 1966 a brick was thrown unto her car. This was a future-looking monarch with a respect for international relations and a mastery of symbolism.

My second opportunity was in June 2014 at the former Crumlin Road Prison site, now essentially a "dark heritage" site. Predictably it was not overlooked by the late Prince Philip that the First and Deputy First Ministers were both detained during The Troubles as they accompanied the Queen on a tour of the premises. However, the royal party were even more surprised to be introduced to a man who had escaped decades before and had never been

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recaptured. Once a forbidding facility, synonymous with the dark years of the conflict, the transformation of the old Crumlin Road prison into a popular visitor attraction is symbolic of Northern Ireland's journey toward peace.

There could have been few stronger validations of that theme than the sight of Her Majesty and the Duke of Edinburgh alongside First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness in the corridors of the 19th Century building. Sinn Fein veteran and former IRA commander Martin McGuinness was held in the prison for over a month in 1976 on a charge of IRA membership – a count that was later dropped in court. Democratic Unionist leader Peter Robinson was detained on a number of occasions during the 1980s for his involvement in protests against the controversial Anglo-Irish Agreement. Once again, the Queen knew she must step delicately around the contentious issue of early release of former terrorists, and once again she was personally committed to internationalism and leaving aside the malodorous feuds of regional conflict

The third occasion was in June 2016. It was a particularly pleasant day for the Queen as, arriving by an historic steam train, she re-launched one of the country's most scenic stations. Her visit marked the re-furbishment of the Rail Stop at Bellarena in County Derry, which she and Philip had opened in 1953, in her coronation year. The area around Downhill beach and the Mussenden Temple is regarded by documentarian Michael Palin as one of the most beautiful railway journeys in the world. In 1953, Queen Elisabeth was still mourning her father and had assumed the crown suddenly, but she never forgot that afternoon in the shadow of the mountains above the Downhill Demesne. In fact, she praised the eccentric Anglican Bishop who constructed the temple as a philanthropist and helper of his Catholic neighbours. Writing in a personal letter to a relative long before the advent of The Troubles, the monarch prized the international treasure of good neighbours and peace.

This writer would suggest that it is too early to assess Queen Elizabeth II's place in history, but that few would identify anything but colossal soft power, despite the apolitical nature of her position. She had a momentous impact on national and world events. She served as head of state for the UK and numerous other countries in the Commonwealth for 70 years—the longest-reigning monarch in British history. Like her great-great grandmother, Queen Victoria, she ruled during a period of tremendous social and political change. She also presided over the end of the British Empire and assumed the crown at a time when society was notably uncomfortable with the idea of women in power.

Over the course of her reign the queen blended tradition with modernity, presiding over a monarchy that was both timeless and receptive to a rapidly changing world. She allowed her 1953 coronation to be televised, making the archaic ceremony accessible to the public. In 1969, she invited cameras into her home, allowing the public a rare glimpse of the royal family at leisure. As Queen, Elizabeth II led the Commonwealth Heads of Government, unwaveringly committing to the world body – a symptom of her global concerns. The Queen's grandparents, King George V and Queen Mary, also displayed a lifelong commitment to public service. When Queen Elizabeth said on her 21st birthday that she would devote her whole life, whether it was long or short, to the service of her people, she was following in a family tradition. She was also influenced by her husband, Prince Philip, who supported the queen in her public engagements and helped modernize the monarchy by making royal engagements and philanthropy more accessible to the public.

How will Queen Elizabeth II be remembered? Through all the changes of her reign, the queen remained a widely respected and admired figure. At a time when there are fewer monarchies in the world than ever before, her biggest legacy may well be ushering the British monarchy into the 21st century. Ultimately, while the pace of change across the world has inevitably weakened all but the most remote monarchies, Elizabeth II was a change-setter. She subtly encouraged enormous social change in the UK and abroad, and did so by means of deft persuasion and example. If one might not over-speak the conclusion of the second Elizabethan age, it might be to remember a monarch who placed public service first and foremost over everything she did.

Elizabeth II was undoubtedly one of international relations' strongest soft powers, not just in longevity, but also in her subtle influence upon infusing global change. In her unspoken, reflective, style she encouraged a once great empire, that risked becoming peripheral, to remain at the very centre of international affairs. While her politicians were often dogged by incipient Francophobes and generic contempt for the emerging European Union project she remained a

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heroine to the French. Her own outlook was always refreshingly internationalist. One should not underestimate her role in steering the Commonwealth along a route of modernity, sometimes against forces of trenchant and fierce retaliation. She stood for all that was best about an international perspective.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning and holds awards from Dublin, Oxford, Harvard, and several other institutions including the Diploma in International Relations at the University of Cambridge.