

## **HM The Queen Longest Reigning Monarch**

In 1975, the Church of England created an *Ecclesiastical Offices Measure*. It is the sort of thing you read if you are having trouble sleeping. The significant thing about it is that it requires clergy to retire. Clergy retire either before, or at, 70. Now in 1974, so a year before the Measure, Eric Kemp was enthroned as Bishop of Chichester. The new legislation was not retrospective; if you were appointed to your post before 1975 it did not apply to you. Eric Kemp knew that and he stayed on, and then he stayed on some more. He finally stood down as Bishop in 2001, after twenty-seven years in office, at the age of at the age of eighty-six. They used to say of the Bishop of Chichester, that he had all the Christian virtues save that of resignation.

Twenty-seven years' service as bishop and eight-six years old. It was considered remarkable at the time, it is still considered remarkable. And it was less than half of the service Her Majesty the Queen has given to nation and Commonwealth. We gather tonight to mark Sixty-Three years of Her Majesty's reign; to be precise (because the landmark we reach demands precision), sixty-three years, seven months and two days. Not yet, not quite yet, sometime around 5.30 pm, Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and of Her other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith will overtake Queen Victoria's record as the longest serving monarch of the United Kingdom.

What sort of achievement do we mark? Let's look back. February 1952 was another time altogether. A post war world, with rationing was still in place; the average price of a house was £1,891, but, even so, only a third of us were home owners. The state pension was £1.50, that controversial pint of milk cost four pence. The death penalty was in force (there were twenty-three executions in 1952). Homosexuality was illegal, and 1952 was the year Alan Turing was prosecuted. If you bought a car, it might have been a Riley, or a Talbot, and it would have cost nearly as much as a house. Our celebrities then were Ava Gardner, Rita Hayworth, Gregory Peck. Miley Cyrus had not been born; come to that neither had Ruby Wax, Pierce Brosnan, or Victoria Wood. 1952 was the year *Singin' in the Rain* was released, the year Steinbeck's *East of Eden* was published – now it is republished and called a *classic*.

Her Majesty the Queen has been a constant in all that separates us from those days of bowlers and furled umbrellas, Len Hutton at Lord's, Preston North End in the First Division a constant from a year when smog was still a killer;

thousands of Londoners were killed in early December 1952. She has held the same office, with the same spirit in all that change. Did you hear Peter Hennessy the other night remarking that her first red boxes will have discussed Stalin's military capability? She is an extraordinary constant.

And this is not a simple business of survival or longevity. She has stayed the course and that is not a given. George the Third, was 59 years a king, but, poor man, he was utterly demented by the end of his life, blind, deaf and speaking nonsense, not for hours, but for days. So, in the last ten years of his reign he did not reign at all, they were years of Regency. Henry III was on the throne for fifty-six years, but that was not a distinguished reign. We do not expect much of our medieval monarchs, but like English rugby players one thing we do require. They must beat the French. Henry lost, twice, and so abused his power that his own people captured and imprisoned him: not happy, not glorious. Consistency is not a given.

Today, as her achievement is surpassed, our attention is directed towards Queen Victoria and a reign that left us with sepia memories of a queen empress who was grandmother of Europe. It is was also a reign in which she retreated into stubborn seclusion. So absolute was her private grief that she refused even to entertain visiting heads of state. In the last thirty-nine years of her reign Victoria attended the state of Parliament only seven times. Small wonder, some London humourist pinned a note to the railings at Buckingham Palace. 'These commanding premises to be let or sold, in consequence of the late occupant's declining business'. The present Queen, by the way, has missed the state opening just twice in 1959 and 1963, on both occasions she was pregnant.

We are not marking longevity or survival. Sovereignty, even modern constitutional monarchy, is taxing and complex, you can do it badly, get it wrong. What we are celebrating is the extraordinary business of duty done. At the age of twenty-one, five year before she came to the throne, she made a starling speech broadcast to the Commonwealth, from Cape Town where she was staying.

*I can make my solemn act of dedication with a whole Empire listening. I should like to make that dedication now. It is very simple.*

*I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.*

She has kept that promise. She has kept that promise and put at the heart of our national life a model of duty and service that almost beggars belief. She has kept that promise and is profoundly instrumental in the re-birth of the idea of Commonwealth. She has kept that promise and set monarchy before us not just a monarch. In our age of image she is unique. It is a principle she would have us see not just a person. It would not be true to say that the Queen is oblivious to the business of image – if she faded away like the Cheshire cat we would still see her smile and quite a significant hat. She deeply understands the significance of her presence and is alleged to declare, from time to time, *I have to be seen to be believed*. Nonetheless, what we will always remember of this Elizabethan age is an utterly selfless commitment to duty and service; a commitment entirely devoid of pride. Visits to 116 countries, twelve prime ministers; seven archbishops of Canterbury, three and a half million letters, patron to more than 600 charities, never been absent at the Trooping of the Colour, 129 portraits and more than 30 corgis. It is more than longevity. The Queen reminds us that a thing might be done for its own sake, and as she does it, she helps us see the virtues of restraint.

This is not a landmark or a milestone, this is a moment when we stop and look closely at those unfashionable words like duty and service presented to us by a woman who has turned them into a life's work and enriched us all. Her own command performance has been to set self aside in order to offer to us all the greater possibilities of nation and Commonwealth. God's servant and ours, we have been richly blessed. May she too be blessed.

*Long to reign over us, God save the Queen.*