Insights from a Small Island

Prince Charles, Future King

The reputation of Prince Charles hit rock bottom 21 years ago and is still in recovery. His estranged wife Diana had just been killed in a tragic accident characterised as the finale of an epic battle between two mega-brands: the "People's Princess" as she was called, and "out-of-touch" royalty in the demonised form of Prince Charles. What followed was one of the strangest weeks of my life when the British sadness on display could have been scripted by Disney. Journalists competed to sound the most gloomy, while grief-stricken citizens accused the royal family of not caring, laid millions of flowers in memory of Diana, and wrote the worst poetry in the history of poetry. In front of Buckingham Palace, attached to a large bunch of chrysanthemums, one handwritten note will stay with me until the day I die:

"Princess Di, you were so fair;
What a shame you are up there."

THE PRINCE'S 1969 ASTON MARTIN VOLANTE now runs on English wine ("and smells delicious", he says).

PRINCE CHARLES ESCORTS MEGHAN MARKLE at her wedding to Prince Harry in 2018. She is the first mixed-race royal.

now-famous actor Idris Elba. In the last ten years the Prince's Trust has helped 875 000 young people find work and contributed £1.4 billion to the UK economy.

On British heritage: in 2007 Dumfries House in Scotland (dumfries-house.org.uk) was to be sold to private buyers. Its priceless collection of Chippendale furniture was on its way to Christie's in London to be auctioned. At the last minute Prince Charles raised £45 million: he borrowed £20m through his own charities and the rest was provided by rich benefactors he knew. The plan to restore the house evolved into an ambitious social project to revive the surrounding area which was almost dead economically. Today Dumfries House employs 300 people and is helping to rebuild the local community.

In addition to the role he created for himself, Prince Charles represents the Queen internationally because she is now 92. The overall effect is widespread approval: most of the British public (3:1) wants the royal family to

SEA OF GRIEF: Sorrow at Diana's death in 1997 fuels disapproval of Prince Charles... and crimes against the English language.

The most disconcerting part of that week was the absence of dissent: everyone agreed this was a unique tragedy in British history. I remember waiting until I met my oldest friend before asking if we were not over-reacting a little. He agreed.

This is important context because the popularity of Princess Diana still nourishes those who dislike Prince Charles more than all other sub-brands of British royalty. A few years ago a new play called "King Charles III" thrilled republicans when it explored the fantasy that Charles longs to take back the royal family's old powers from elected politicians and make executive decisions. ("I'm not that stupid", he said in a recent interview). The fantasy endures because it gives legitimacy to the instinct of republicans that the United Kingdom should become a republic. Otherwise they face troubling contradictions which they cannot reconcile: for over a thousand years a monarch has been the British Head of State, and we are a global reference point for the rule of law. This is arguably because of, not despite, the separation of parliament from the monarchy. To its critics the royal family is a symbol of outmoded social customs, and yet royal women have been making history for centuries.

THE PRINCE'S TRUST has helped almost a million young people on their way.

Prince Charles became heir to the British throne when he was four. As Prince of Wales he has no job description and the previous incumbent was no model to follow: he hung out with Nazis and then abdicated less than a year after his coronation, thereby creating a constitutional crisis. So Prince Charles crafted a role that was influenced by three passions: caring for the environment, preserving the country's heritage and creating opportunities for young people. The foundation for everything was and remains his sense of duty to his country and the Commonwealth, the intergovernment body made up of 53 countries around the world. Today he is supremely good at what he does. Some examples...

On the environment: plastic is finally seen as a global disaster. He was arguing against it fifty years ago. Most dismissed him as eccentric because so few others were talking about it. Ditto organic farming and sustainability. Prince Charles recently got Aston Martin to make his 1969 DB6 Volante run on surplus English wine, not petrol. He was way ahead of most Britons on climate change, and despairs that the world accepts scientific evidence in all domains except global warming.

Opportunities for young people: 40 years ago he formed the Prince's Trust, using what he calls his convening power (the influence that comes with his brand) to help 11 - 30 year olds learn new skills. They include the remain Head of State. And the enthusiasm is global. Seven years ago 23 million Americans watched William and Kate get married. This year 29 million of them watched the Harry-Meghan wedding (and the BCC estimated 2 billion viewers worldwide). The Crown is a top grossing drama on Netflix about the reign of Queen Elizabeth II and its third season will appear soon. True Royalty TV launched earlier this year to satisfy a global fascination with royalty and especially the British royal family. By spring 2019 it will be in 22 million American households.

No criticism I have read about Prince Charles, including several by the clever but churlish Economist, has given serious credit to his successes; still less to his wife Camilla. Interestingly, Americans are among the most supportive. They argue that his achievements deserve much wider recognition and have no doubt he will make a good king when the time comes. Perhaps this is because they understand better than we do that republics are not perfect either.

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