

Into the Headlines_ Episode 8: Making a Monarchy

Speaker 1: (00.01) It's been 70 years since a British monarch was crowned. For some, the coronation of King Charles III is a time of celebration, for others, the day will pass without much thought at all. Whatever your perspective, May 6 offers each of us the opportunity to consider where today's monarchy has come from, and how it shapes up for tomorrow. From the University of Aberdeen I'm Laura Grant, join me in going Into the Headlines.

Intro music: (00.)

Speaker 1: (00.42) Episode 8 – Making a Monarchy. In this episode we'll be looking back with Dr Heidi Mehrkens, lecturer in Modern European History at the University; hearing what the Royals are like from the Lord-Lieutenant for Aberdeenshire, trustee and former chair of the University's Development Trust Sandy Manson; and discussing the King's affection for music, with composer and chair in composition at the University. Professor Paul Mealar. Heidi, as starting points go this would seem to be the natural one. From a historic perspective, can you tell us why we have a monarchy?

Speaker 2: (01.16) The monarchy in Britain is actually a really ancient institution, it traces its origins from kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England and early medieval Scotland, they were consolidated into the kingdoms of England and Scotland by the 10th century really so there's a really long history of monarchic institutions here in Britain.

Speaker 1: (01.35) Is the British monarchy unique? How does it compare to others in Europe or around the world?

Speaker 2: (01.41) Yes absolutely, I mean every monarchy is unique in some way because monarchy always represents a very specific political and social environment, of course. So to understand the British monarchy we have to look into the British history and national development and, of course, maybe, the most unusual aspect of the British monarchy, the one I'm highlighting here, is that it has an uncodified constitution which is really interesting. So the constitution of the United Kingdom comprises written and unwritten arrangements and they establish the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland as a political body, but unlike in other countries, in most countries really, nobody has ever made an attempt to bring everything together, all these rules into a single document. So this is what we know as an uncodified constitution and that is what is really quite special about the British case. The advantage maybe is that the uncodified nature of the British constitution means that it can be changed quite easily so because no provisions are formally written down somewhere that you can go in and make changes. And there is the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom and they recognise that we have to uphold constitutional principles whenever changes are being made, for example, parliamentary sovereignty and democracy and the rule of law so this is all guaranteed and so this is actually quite a flexible arrangement, which is really interesting historically.

Speaker 1: (03.18) I didn't know that. That is really interesting.

Speaker 2: (03.21) Yeah, and I think what makes Britain really unique is that if you look at Europe, overall, the constitutional era really begins after the French revolution. There are states with constitutions before that but normally you know after the French Revolution in 1789 and also after the Napoleonic era, 1815, that's really when the whole constitution idea kicks off as an estate establishes some sort of constitution, there's some shared power between the monarchical side and like, elected political institutions, so that's when this all

really starts, so that means that Britain had already by 1789 much more experience with constitutional arrangements than other nations and other nations were actually constantly looking at Britain and trying to understand how does it work in this country and can we make this work for our political and social environment as well? It doesn't mean that everybody tried to copy what was going on in Britain at the time but as an idea, can we find an arrangement where power is shared responsibly in some way to modernise our political system so that it works along the lines of how it works in Britain. So that was actually quite common in the 19th century, Britain was on everybody's radar.

Speaker 1: (04.45) How much power or influence does the British monarch actually have?

Speaker 2: (04.49) In a constitutional monarchy we usually have the idea that responsibility for political decision-making lies with the government and with elected institutions and the monarch is taken out of this responsibility and the monarch has different functions as head of state. So there's a shared responsibility for what's going on in the state but the monarch has quite a specific role to fulfil and the sovereign's role as a constitutional monarch is largely limited to non-partisan functions, for example granting honours, and this really goes back to the 19th century. We have a very interesting writer in 1867, the political journalist called Walter Bagehot who wrote about the English monarchy and he identified the monarchy as the dignified part of the state system and then he said the government is the efficient part which it's a quite an interesting distinction. What he meant is that the government is doing the hard work of creating legislation and so on and the monarch is representing what they come up with but the monarch doesn't have responsibility for government decisions in some way. And he wrote about the rights of the monarch which is interesting because I think it still rings true today so he wrote about the three rights of every monarch in 1867. The sovereign has, and I quote: 'The right to be consulted, the right to encourage, and the right to warn'. And that's what he thought would be the major role of a monarch under a constitution. So at the time that Bagehot was writing this Queen Victoria was head of state and she would have completely disagreed with this kind of notion because she was very much a very political monarch still and she wanted to be engaged in political decision-making processes in her own way, so 19th century monarchs were still very much involved in political decision making but I think the first modern monarch in the sense that political opinion is a private view, then I think this is George V, who reigned between 1910 and 1936. He saw himself as an arbitrator, a negotiator between political factions and parties. He was quite well known for bringing political representatives around a table to discuss things through and he offered himself as a negotiator. So that kind of view I think is what we understand as the modern role of the monarch. So many crown prerogatives have fallen out of use or have permanently been transferred to parliament. For example, a modern monarch can't impose or collect taxes, such an action always needs authorisation by act of parliament but the monarch is head of state, head of the Armed Forces, head of the Church, they appoint prime ministers so there are still various functions out there so yes, it's quite a complex role I think a monarch has but not a very obvious or visible role all the time, a lot of what the monarch does I think happens more behind the scenes.

Speaker 1: (08.09) Are there benefits to having a constitutional monarch?

Speaker 2: (08.12) That's a super interesting question and I really want to answer this historically. So it's quite difficult to imagine this today but if you look back at 19th century Europe it really was a continent of monarchies, unlike today. Monarchy was just the most popular political system even when new states were created, for example after a revolution, the creators of these states basically went for a constitutional monarchy by design. And I think we have to think about the changing role of the monarch as a person and as a function

and as a role. So, if we look at the 18th century or the Middle Ages, it was generally assumed that the right to rule was given by God, but after the French revolution this changed, and it wasn't part of what people thought in the 19th century anymore about where the right to rule came from, so legitimacy of the monarch had to come from a different source. And monarchs were very much aware of the dangers of revolution, for example the death of King Louis XVI of France as a consequence of the revolution was very much on the radar so monarchs developed new strategies to remain relevant to changing societies and to be accepted with their political institution. So in the 19th century monarchs had the potential to become figureheads of their societies. We look at a century of nationalisation and those states with an empire actually often saw monarchs as imperial representatives of the nation's power, so they became like personifications of the nation's power. But they also fulfilled roles in other views. For example, many monarchs became role models for morality or charity at the time and this is really interesting. And this is the time where courts, royal courts, became less opulent and less extravagant compared to previous centuries because they reflected a new set of rules and of values. It seemed more acceptable to various audiences, including the rising middle classes, including members of the working class, who were also looking at the monarchy for maybe guidance. So royal dynasties went to great lengths to be seen as a family unit, for example, and in harmony. Queen Victoria is a wonderful example, she commissioned so many paintings showing her and the Prince Consort Albert playing with their children and being surrounded by the happy family. And this image of the happy family is very important at the time so they were often seen in public with their kids and we know that Queen Victoria doted on her husband so the whole aspect of having a mistress and adultery and cheating is gone at least for Queen Victoria and Prince Consort Albert, it comes back with Edward VII and Queen Alexandra but generally speaking if we look at other courts as well happily family life is like, the value to radiate, so it's really important. So in Italy and in Belgium and in various German states at the time we see monarchs and families walking in the park, shaking hands with the common people, this kind of engagement. Dynasties trying to create relations with their subjects through the means of royal tours and visits, all carefully staged of course to address the union between the crown and the people which is the new foundation for why a monarchy is still relevant. I'm doing research into this field, into this relationship, it's really interesting to look at the emotional side of the relationship between monarchies and dynasties and the people and audiences. For example we can look at expressions of emotions not just in written sources but also in visual sources, in material culture. Just think of all the trinkets produced especially for these big royal events like the coronation, we've got tea sets and biscuit tins and flags and emblems and remembrance books and medals. This is not a modern invention, since the 18th century people have bought very similar items and kept them and passed them on to other generations and looking at these trinkets and looking at images it shows us an emotional side of monarchy and the soft power of monarchy that actually becomes much stronger in the 19th century and we can still see it at work today. I think if we think about benefits of constitutional systems per se we might also mention continuity. Let's just take Queen Elizabeth II as an example. She was crowned in 1953 when Winston Churchill was Prime Minister and 14 more PMs were to follow until she passed away in 2022 after more than seven decades on the throne. Of course, if you turn this around you can also ask the other question, what about the challenges and the difficult side of having a monarchy like this. Of course it's a hereditary system, it depends on biological happenstance in many ways that you might find in the 19th century for example you might find yourself on the throne as an heir and you may feel you are not suited for the job, you are not cut out for this on various levels. For example you may be a very shy person and you have to perform constantly in public so that can be very tough, and it can create tension, so it depends a little bit on how authentic you feel and how well you can represent yourself in the position and this makes a

good relationship between you and your subjects when you are monarch in the 19th century and maybe today as well.

Speaker 1: (14.20) It's definitely not a job I would like, that's for sure. Are there any unwritten rules about how to keep your monarchy flourishing that we can draw from history?

Speaker 2: (14.29) Yes, I think so. I think the most important one that is discussed in constitutional settings is the stay neutral rule, which is interesting because it's not written down anywhere but it's become some sort of unwritten rule or rule by experience maybe. So heirs to the throne, these people don't have really a job description of how to become a successful monarch, in the 19th century at the very least. They had to find their own way into how to represent monarchy and how to be a monarch in many ways. Many heirs to the throne in the 19th century and many dynasties weren't even properly trained to do the job, as in, politically trained or trained in how to deal with media interests or something along these lines. And we still see this with George V, for example, who was a second son and who wasn't destined to be king and was trained as a sailor and somehow this upbringing was part of his success story afterwards, because he really endeavoured to reign above party lines. He always had strong political views, absolutely, and especially in the beginning he wasn't always successful in keeping them to himself, we know this, but he learned on the job and became quite successful. I think the other unwritten rule is monarchies have to find a balance between tradition and going with the times. You can't do just one or the other as a monarchy, I think that is a big learning curve from the 19th century as well. So a display of royal tradition is very, very important. His Majesty King Charles III will be crowned King on St Edwards Chair, which was made over 700 years ago and first used at the coronation of King Edward II so there is regalia and ritual, and this is really, really important to preserve the mystery of the monarchy, the symbolism, especially on these gala days like the coronation so basically to really put it in a nutshell, the golden carriage is still really important for monarchies. At the same time, it's important to keep an eye on values, to keep an eye on how societies are changing. The other, I think another point is media presence. The British royal family has always been very good I think at using new media and accessing channels of communication with their audiences. Last point, I think an ongoing challenge for the monarchy in the future will be to negotiate the Imperial past and to further develop and inclusive monarchy so the union but also the union with the Commonwealth and that is I think a major point for the future.

Speaker 1: (17.25) Now picking up on some of the points Heidi has made, Sandy, as Lord Lieutenant you've seen numerous members of the Royal family in action – what are they like?

Speaker 3: (17.34) Aberdeenshire is a large, diverse, a very beautiful county and home to the Royal residences of Balmoral and Birkhall so we've always been very fortunate, Laura, to have such a special and enduring connection with their Majesties and other members of the family and all members of the Royal family work incredibly hard, they bring their particular magic to whatever occasion they are attending. They attend a very diverse number of events ranging from supporting the work of countless charities, to attending Highland Games and agricultural shows, to walkabouts in town centres. So there's a huge demand for royal visits and I can't overstate the benefit that these visits create. The King and Queen are always so interested in what's happening in the various parts of the country and they love meeting the crowds who assemble for their arrival on a visit. And they always read their brief so well too. During a visit last year to Ballater to say thank you to some of the many people who assisted in Aberdeenshire with the arrangements for her late Majesty's cortege, as it travelled south from Balmoral two horses and riders were part of the line up, and the Queen

appeared out of the royal car on arrival with carrots in her hand to feed the horses. So these are the sorts of small touches that people hugely appreciate and notice. And when you are out on a visit, for example, with the King, he is so brilliant with people, he has a wonderful sense of humour and he's more than a match for some of the great local characters we have in Ballater and Braemar. All members of the Royal family that I have been fortunate to meet are naturally inquisitive, they are hugely knowledgeable on a vast range of subjects but and they always seem to have an appetite for learning new things. They are also exceptional at putting people at their ease. I well remember sitting next the Princess Royal at a lunch in Aberdeenshire and a rather exotic-looking starter arrived. On further examination we didn't quite know whether it was better to drink it, to eat it with one's hands or use a spoon or perhaps a knife, and at that precise moment in seeing the collective unease and predicament around the table, Princess Anne piped up and said, 'how do you think we should best tackle this?'. So that's a wonderful skill to have to put people at their ease at just the right time.

Speaker 1: (20.07) You're right, putting people at ease and mixing with folk from all different walks of life is not something that everyone is good at and this picks up on one of the points that Heidi was making earlier about different monarchs and how they respond. How would you characterise the role the Royals play in modern society?

Speaker 3: (20.24) If I was to sum up what I see the Royal family do for the many people and organisations they meet it's this. They inspire, they encourage and, importantly, they show sincere and genuine gratitude for the work thousands of volunteers do the length and breadth of the country. The King, of course, has particular themes which he is passionate about: youth, community cohesion, the natural world and the built environment and the King is enormously sensitive and in tune to the ever-changing landscape of the challenges we face, locally, regionally and nationally, and in the wider world. I've also seen the incredible support that His Majesty has provided to local charities and community groups and these are never publicised and His Majesty does these things because he cares passionately about the welfare of people and community cohesion and he wants to do all he can to make a positive difference. And you need to look I think no further than, for example, than the work and the vision that the King had for the Prince's Trust, just to see how he has positively impacted the lives of over one million young people by giving them such opportunities in life and I'm in the fortunate position, Laura, of witnessing first hand in Aberdeenshire this tangible, lasting difference the work and thinking of His Majesty makes to society in so many different ways. In fact, if I was asked to name two people who have done the most for the enduring wellbeing of Scottish society through their pioneering thinking and philanthropy, in say the last 100 years or so, it would be King Charles and Andrew Carnegie. His Majesty is very modest about the work he does, even though he does this huge amount of work but he always wants to do more. He's a man in my experience who is very much in touch with what is going on and he wants to know what's happening in the area, especially an area like Aberdeenshire where he and Her Majesty have a home.

Speaker 1: (22.35) Well I'm going to ask you about that in just a moment but the stories you've been telling again show us how, as Prince, Charles has publicly championed numerous issues over the years. Do you think that he's going to be able to maintain his interests and his work around those issues as King?

Speaker 3: (22.51) There is no question that His Majesty will be enormously respectful of his role as the monarch, that goes without saying, but of course he will continue to have his interests and I think the nation, the Commonwealth, the world would be a lot poorer if that was otherwise. It sounds like a bit of a cliché but the King is a man who is ahead of his time

and most of the rest of us quite frankly are trying to play catch up. But he has this incredible vision of a world working in harmony where rather than trying to address and solve one particular issue you need to think about the bigger picture and how everything is connected.

Speaker 1: (23.31) You have been very good at pre-empting my questions as I was going to say, historically monarchs and royal households have been quite detached. But the Windsors do seem to be much more accessible and it sounds to me what drives that is a genuine interest in the lives of those around them, rather than it's because it's what's expected of a modern monarchy.

Speaker 3: (23.51) I couldn't agree more, I mean the King and Queen are the most approachable and engaging people you are ever likely to meet and it's quite usual on arrival at a visit for their Majesties to go straight to speak to the crowd before starting their official visit because they just love meeting people and hearing what's going on and they are always so genuinely grateful to people for turning out to see them. I do think the monarchy has been brilliant at adapting as society changes and you can already see how the King is introducing some notable changes to reflect how society has changed over the last 50 years or so. His Majesty is a different person to her late Majesty, he will have a different way of doing certain things but he is totally committed in the same way as her late Majesty to serve the people of the nation. In fact I would strongly argue that he has been already serving the nation, the Commonwealth, the rest of the world for most of his life, so that's not new. For example, if you look at how diverse and inclusive the coronation will be, and my experience of His Majesty is that he's someone who is so naturally, he so naturally embraces diversity and inclusion, so I would expect King Charles to continue to look at ways in which the monarchy and the Royal family can be as accessible as possible and as His Majesty's Lord Lieutenants we have an important role too to play in supporting His Majesty by amplifying the work that he does throughout the country so I have no doubt that with his incredible work ethic and desire to support good causes, to support business, to support the nation, the Commonwealth and the wider world, that His Majesty will remain as accessible as possible.

Speaker 1: (25.53) King Charles also read archaeology and anthropology at Cambridge, which are both subjects related to human society. And he spent time in the navy, where leadership, teamwork and inclusion are essential skills. Do you think these are things we can expect him to draw on going forward?

Speaker 3: (26.10) I think one of the most important roles of any leader is to inspire and energise and the King has an extraordinary ability to do just that. He has such knowledge and vision, he skilfully breaks down barriers which have been holding back progress because, like no other person I've ever met, he brings people together. His convening powers are remarkable, they are astonishing. Of course he has opinions, many of them passionately felt, but I've never met anyone who can pull people together to rally round a cause. And His Majesty always leads from the front, he will never give up trying to help others and make a positive difference. I think His Majesty's life experiences will certainly have influenced the person he is today but I'm always in awe of how visionary, how wise and how energetic a person the King is. He's determined to make a positive difference with his time on this earth and just look at what he's achieved with the Prince's Trust, the Prince's Foundation, the Prince's Countryside Fund and the many, many other charities and good causes he supports and I've sat in meetings absolutely amazed how various people who were connected with a common cause but they'd never actually sat down and met and collaborated together until the King brings them together and inspires a group to jointly work to find solutions, it's remarkable.

Speaker 1: (27.38) Well, the starting point is the coronation itself and, Paul you are now officially part of our national history as, during the ceremony, the world will hear a new piece of music that you composed for the choirs of Westminster Abbey and His Majesty's Chapel Royal. What can you tell me about it?

Speaker 4: (27.54) Well I was asked to write the music for the Kyrie, which is the very first part of the spiritual section of the coronation. So a Kyrie, which is Greek actually, normally the English translation would be 'Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us, Lord have mercy upon us' and so I was asked to set that, which happens right at the beginning.

Speaker 1: (28.21) What brief were you given? How did you approach the composition?

Speaker 4: (28.26) The brief was pretty specific. So the King asked me to set a piece, the Kyrie, in Welsh, the first time that's ever been done, which is brilliant as a proud Welshman myself it was great to set this piece in Welsh. And the idea is we're coming from the kind of great pomp and ceremony of the opening into now the spiritual aspect of the coronation and so, my piece of music is that transition which takes you from that great pomp and ceremony now into the very, very specific and sacred part and so the music does that, or tries to anyway.

Speaker 1: (29.08) We've been speaking about the fact we know much more about King Charles and his interests than the nation did about Elizabeth II when she came to the throne, is music important to him?

Speaker 4: (29.19) We know an enormous amount about King Charles as you say and I think he's been around for nearly 75 years and has been the longest serving Prince of Wales and Duke of Rothesay. I think music and the arts are incredibly important to him, I don't think we've had a monarch since Queen Victoria who cares so much about music. Victoria of course was married to a composer. Prince Albert was a composer, an organist, a pianist, and Victoria played piano and sang and was a huge champion of the arts and I think King Charles III follows in that vein and music, art, culture – he sees the importance of it in everyday life. You only have to go into one of his studies at Birkhall or in Highgrove and you'll see in his study the walls full of CDs and recordings of music, classical music, folk music. He's a huge fan and lover of music.

Speaker 1: (30.24) The details of what we're going to hear have been kept a closely guarded secret but in addition to some historic pieces, King Charles has commissioned a total of 12 new compositions for the day. You might know more than the rest of us Paul, what do you think the choice of music overall tells us about the King's personality, or perhaps even his intentions as monarch? And, you've mentioned this will be the first time that Welsh has been sung at a coronation – is there added pressure that comes with doing something completely new that debuts on such a global stage?

Speaker 4: (30.55) Yes, this first time that Welsh has been sung at a coronation and I'm the first composer to have set it. It's an enormous honour for me obviously to not only represent Wales but also represent the Celtic nations with this. I think the choice of music generally is a reflection of the King's personality. The King knows the countries of the UK and the Commonwealth extremely well and has chosen composers and music from across that gamut of styles and ways of life so that this truly is a reflection of the country.

Speaker 1: (31.35) And that's all we have time for today. In fact, it's more than we had time for but I suppose what's a few extra minutes when we're condensing centuries of history down into one bite sized chunk. A huge thank you to all my guests, and thanks also to you

for listening. Into the Headlines will be back but if you want to keep up to date with the latest stories from the University of Aberdeen, visit abdn.ac.uk/news and read all about it.

Outro music