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# Queen Elizabeth II's Soft Power and Britain's Place in a Post-Elizabethan Age

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## Queen Elizabeth II's Soft Power and Britain's Place in a Post-Elizabethan Age

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RICHARD J. COOK AND ALARIC SEARLE, OCT 16 2022

The sun has now set on the Second Elizabethan age. Former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, in a speech in the House of Commons, dubbed her 'Queen Elizabeth the Great', perhaps fitting as she was revered by monarchists and republicans alike across the UK, 'Her' realms and territories, and even beyond (Casalicchio, 2022). She has been described as a constant throughout a reign that saw a multitude of changes in both British and global affairs. Her 70-year reign, the longest of any British monarch, and second longest in history (second only to King Louis XIV of France, the famed Sun King), saw the (a) last vestiges of the British Empire slip into history, (b) Britain navigate its imperial hangover, (c) the modernization of monarchy and, of course, (d) Brexit.

She possessed no formal powers beyond ceremony despite the masquerade of grandeur, spectacle, ceremony and traditional symbolism. In essence, she relied exclusively on Soft Power and used it to great effect. Her soft power certainly acted as a unifying force within the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, and was an effective tool for the British state when conducting international diplomacy. For many, the Queen and the Royal Family appeared to be public diplomats for the United Kingdom, and a public relations boon as British cultural icons, giving the impression of a mystical throw-back to Kings and Queens; they have also provided a platform for a 'soap opera of royal family life' which has created an 'insatiable appetite for foreign publics' (Hill and Beadle, 2014: 33). Former President Barack Obama once quipped to Prince Charles: 'The American People are quite fond of the royal family. They like them much better than their own politicians.' (Elam, 2018) Opinion polls have attested to the broad popularity of the Royal Family and the Queen (IPSOS, 2018). This has more recently been backed-up by the popularity of the hit Netflix series *The Crown*. Likewise, many of the UK's most notable tourist attractions and products have maintained their appeal because of their links to the monarchy and the Queen herself.

With her passing, the United Kingdom has lost its greatest soft power asset, and her funeral will likely come to be seen as a significant moment in the history of Britain's place in the world. A degree of soul searching for the British appears likely in the post-Elizabethan age, as questions surrounding the continuation of the monarchy, the status of the Commonwealth and the very existence of the United Kingdom as a unitary state become more pressing. Yet, what was the nature of Queen Elizabeth II's soft power and how was it utilized? Equally, does her funeral truly represent a historic punctuation mark for Britain as a major power in the world? To address these questions, we provide a brief explanation of soft power and how it is exercised, before analysing the Queen's soft power and its significance. In conclusion, we argue that the Queen's funeral marks the symbolic end of an era, and the loss of her soft power will further impact Britain's declining place in the world.

### Monarchical Soft Power: Attraction and Political Utility

Power, as Robert Dahl famously noted, is defined as 'the ability of A to make B do something' (Dahl, 1957: 202). Soft power can therefore also be understood as the ability of A to attract or persuade B to do something, or, as Joseph Nye phrased it, 'the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction' (Nye, 2009: 160). The result of exercising power, in this case soft power, is influence. Put simply, influence is the actualization of power (Zimmerling, 2005:105). Its deployment, nevertheless, requires nuanced considerations of cultural, social and political contexts in order to attain, 'attention', 'attraction' and 'persuasion'. Attention is a prerequisite for soft power: a spotlight must be

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shone on those who aim to exercise soft power, whereas attraction induces interest. Both attention and attraction represent the 'soft' in soft power. Persuasion represents the action of 'power' itself being orchestrated successfully and complied with by the recipient (Womack, 2016: 136-139). However, Alexander Vuving's explanations of the intricacies of attraction in the mechanism of soft power, paired with those of Brantly Womack, help us dissect soft power with greater conceptual clarity when referring to attraction, namely through the lens of four mutually reinforcing factors: *beauty*, *brightness*, *benevolence* and *consistency* (Vuving, 2009; Womack, 2016: 138). *Beauty* encompasses aesthetic attraction; *brightness* envisions governmental competence; while *benevolence* refers to the power of generosity and provision of public goods. Womack has added a fourth, referring to the need for *consistency*, which provides not only credibility to attraction but also stability of expectations. With regards to HM Queen Elizabeth II these factors resonate well with the soft power she possessed and how it was utilised.

In terms of *beauty*, the Queen came to be viewed as the ultimate expression of palace diplomacy, sartorial elegance, as well as the perfect image of monarchical ceremony. Her palace diplomacy combined state visits, diplomatic receptions, audiences and engagements at splendid royal residences. However, the Queen's duty of hosting state banquets for visiting foreign heads of state or dignitaries was a key exercise of her soft power due to 'pomp and ceremony'. The Queen's wardrobe certainly provided an aesthetic attraction, most notably from the designers Norman Hartnell (1952-1979), Hardy Amies (1955-2003) and Angela Kelly (2003-2022); many of these garments can be seen in the Royal Collection. From such associations, the Queen's clothing would go on to make her representative style, able to attract attention amid large crowds. Likewise, her choice of clothing often made headlines, from her cherry blossom embroidered dress during the 1975 visit to Japan, to her silk shamrocks and Irish Harp brooch on the 2011 visit to the Republic of Ireland. For some, they not only represented goodwill, but often political statements, like the blue and yellow flowered hat perceived as a reference to the European Union and Brexit during the 2017 state opening of parliament, although this was later claimed to be a coincidence (Indvik, 2022).

Monarchical spectacle or ceremony put under the lens of *beauty* is more controversial. Not all approved, citing the costs of the Queen's visits and palace ceremonies, but many would gather in person for events, visits, or tune in on TV. The Queen was literally able to roll out the red carpet for international guests such as leaders, diplomats and dignitaries, in a way that is simply not the same in republics. The spectacle of the ceremonies instilled a sense of Britishness, if not nationalism or patriotism. From the carriage rides down The Mall, the balcony appearances on the occasions of royal weddings and jubilees, to ribbon cutting events, her grandeur was consistently captured as the personification of the traditional British nation and, hence, forged a crucial aesthetic attraction.

British cultural norms were also communicated through the Queen, in particular when hosting foreign dignitaries and guests. Surface culture in the form of 'food and drinks [...] tea and scones', and deep culture referring to 'accents and vernacular, and politeness', represented the 'best of British' and were critical to the Queen's exercise of soft power (Penler, 2022). Many of Britain's notable victual products, for example, feature the emblem of a Royal Warrant which lends prestige to a brand. Notable Royal Warrant holders include Cadbury's chocolate, Heinz tomato ketchup, Burberry, Twinings tea, and Laphroaig whisky.

*Brightness* here connects with the actual role of the Queen and constitutional monarchy, much less its evolution through the course of British and Commonwealth history. She took her coronation oath and her position as head of the Commonwealth very seriously. Political neutrality, or governmental non-interference, may have insulated the monarchy to some extent, but it lent a sense of legitimacy and stability to parliamentary democracy, as famed British historian and constitutional expert Vernon Bogdanor has noted (Bogdanor, 2022). On only a few occasions was royal protocol broken with a breach of confidentially vis-à-vis private conversations, much to the Queen's irritation. Notorious examples include David Cameron's comments that the Queen 'purred' over the phone when being told of the 2014 Scottish referendum result (Cowell, 2014). The Prime Minister went on to apologise for the indiscretion. Perhaps most significant was the Queen's clash with the Margaret Thatcher over British policy toward the Commonwealth, for which the Queen took her position as head of the organisation as her most significant field of engagement. She made it clear that she was displeased with Thatcher's stance on apartheid and Nelson Mandela in South Africa, not to mention the Government's attitude towards the Commonwealth (Burwell and Roberts, 2022).

Concerning *benevolence*, a major marker would be her philanthropic work, wherein she would patron, sponsor or

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donate to over five hundred charities and patronages. Here, her soft power would aid in attracting attention to certain charities and causes (often in the form of a metaphorical or literal 'Royal Seal of Approval'). Honours, too, played a role, as a means of rewarding philanthropic activities, since they were officially conferred by Her Majesty.

*Consistency* was established over the long duration of the Queen's reign. It incorporated both a sense of stability and expectation in her actions and demeanour, which was rarely broken. One element of consistency could be witnessed in the Queen's speeches especially in times of hardship, for instance her Christmas broadcast in 2020 when she acknowledged families' suffering at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. This calming effect was praised by commentators during her state funeral. Every aspect of the Queen's life, and the Royal Family for that matter, should be taken into consideration in order to understand the appeal of her persona in the British, but also foreign, media. But due to this constant scrutiny, one slip-up could have seriously damaged the appeal of the monarchy of which the Queen was the ultimate symbol. The flawlessness of the monarch's record meant, however, that she was able to survive multiple family crises (the break up of three of her children's marriages), which were all reported on in the media with carnivorous relish.

The collective composition of these factors was used to great effect over the course of her reign and helped generate a long list of positive results for Britain, both internally and in its external relations.

## Declining Britain: The Loss of the Queen's Soft Power?

Still, a hard truth is now dawning. It is questionable whether King Charles III will be able to demonstrate similar qualities in his reign. Charles has in the past been more outspoken on political matters; also, he often comes across as aloof from the average citizen. Queen Consort Camilla is certainly no favourite of the people due to her role in the infamous love triangle between herself, Charles and Diana, the 'People's Princess' (Hare, 2021). Some commentators have speculated that it might have been better for the crown to pass to Prince William and Princess Catherine, who are more popular in the eyes of the public. It would have at least presented a prospect for a more modern, youthful monarchy.

Already the ties of monarchy are being questioned in Commonwealth countries. In the Caribbean, for instance, following Barbados' transition to a republic in 2021, six Commonwealth territories have indicated they are seeking to become republics and are preparing referendums (Yang, 2022). Prince William and Princess Catherine's mismanaged royal tour of Belize and Jamaica in early 2022 provides an example of where attempts at royal soft power can go wrong if the mood in a country is misjudged. Following protests in Belize, and the Jamaican Prime Minister Andrew Holness declaring he would prefer to ditch the monarchy completely, alarm bells started ringing. The situation appears to be coming to a head for the monarchy in Kingston, too, with Holness proposing a referendum on the monarchy within the next few years, only days after the Queen's passing (Grant, 2022). It seems almost fitting that with the passing of the Queen the sun may have finally faded on the last remnants of Britain's Empire. It is not just a case of the Commonwealth realms' relations with the monarchy, the wider Commonwealth as an organisation may be questioned, particularly in an era of renewed great power competition between Washington and Beijing (as well as Moscow), in which Britain's role seems to be shrinking, particularly as today's great powers can dangle much more in terms of security, economic or institutional clout in front of the leaders of developing countries.

Equally, important questions concerning Britain's post-imperial age, as it continues to navigate an imperial hangover, need to be grappled with, particularly considering the monarchy's central role. Past issues of slavery, racism, colonialism, de-colonisation, and the legacy of imperial sins have yet to be seriously addressed. In an era of Global IR, where non-Western rising powers such as China and India will take on greater roles, it will not have been forgotten that it was Britain's imperial age that triggered their previous marginalisation. Britain's central role in the Opium War, for example, triggered China's 'one-hundred years of humiliation' (Westad, 2020: 32; Wang, 2022: 31; Searle and Zhang, 2020: 86).

## A Funeral Fit for a Queen

The Queen's funeral as her last monarchical spectacle certainly communicated a sense of her enduring soft power,

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with over five-hundred international guests attending and a sea of onlookers and mourners who lined the streets. Noteworthy were those not invited, namely foreign heads of state or dignitaries from Russia, Belarus, Myanmar, Syria, Venezuela and Afghanistan. The scale of the Queen's funeral was possibly only matched in grandeur (and in genuine public mourning) over the last hundred years by the funeral of Sir Winston Churchill on 30 January 1965. That event marked the final burial of the British Empire itself. It may be that future historians will come to see the funeral of Her Majesty the Queen as the final burial of the British monarchy, with all it has represented in terms of deference, hierarchy and tradition.

Certainly, in the coming years the loss of the Queen and her soft power will impact Britain's place in the world. The funeral itself came at a time when India's Gross Domestic Product overtook Britain's, relegating the British economy to the sixth largest economy in the world (Armstrong, 2022). A great deal rests on the shoulders of the new King and his own approach to fulfilling the role of a 'modern monarch' and the soft power which he can exercise. With much of Britain's hard power diminished, a loss of soft power as it was exercised by Queen Elizabeth II may well be bad news for Britain. Charles III's crown must be feeling very heavy on his head right now.

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