# "Not anointed to be served, but to serve":
# Reflections on the Coronation of Charles III, 6-8 May 2023

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As a historian who has spent over fifteen years researching representation of authority and the communication of royal power in the medieval and early modern periods, the last eight months have been awash with opportunities to reflect upon connections between past and present ceremonies. There have been many royal celebrations marked by pomp and circumstance in the long reign of Elizabeth II, most recently the Platinum Jubilee celebrations of her reign in 2022. Yet, the rituals of death and accession are a particularly critical moment when power is transferred from one person to another. In medieval times, particularly where a monarch was either very young or older, or at points where one dynasty ended and another began, this could witness direct challenges to succession that could lead to violence, or at least the threat of such. In modern times of constitutional monarchs, democratic governance and freedom of speech, this point of transition invites a renewed dialogue about the institution of monarchy and its value in a modern world. Consequently, while there is no need for a physical fight for the throne in the twenty-first century, a modern coronation is still a poignant moment in which the incoming monarch has a critical opportunity to set the tone for a new epoch.

Occurring amid a cost-of-living crisis and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, Charles III's coronation has divided opinion. Unsurprisingly, there have been a lot of questions arising about the purpose and importance of such a ceremony in modernity, particularly due to the associated cost that such a public event incurs. As many commentators have already suggested, there is a narrow path to be navigated by the modern royal family to satisfy supporters and their expectations of grandeur and royal display, while also appeasing critics and demonstrating awareness of wider public opinions. So, what is a coronation and why is it important?

Historically, a coronation or inauguration is a ceremony made up of ritual actions that confirm and acclaim a monarch's position within the realm. It usually included oaths made by both the monarch to the kingdom and from the people of that kingdom to the monarch, bestowal of objects and clothing, enthronement and – in many cases – an anointing ritual. It is a ceremony that seeks to define the relationship between the monarch and the people of the kingdom. Consequently, it must adapt to reflect the context in which it occurs while retaining sufficient traditional elements as to provide legitimacy and authority for the incoming ruler and their position within the society in which they function. With this in mind, the following reflections identify some of the key messages that resonated through the coronation of Charles III and speak to the reign over which he hopes to preside.

In the past, there have been many examples of contested debates over ritual elements in the coronations in the British Isles. An interesting example is the Scottish coronation of Charles I in 1633. Prior to 1603, the Scottish kingdom had its own monarch and their own coronation ceremony which, like so many other aspects of Scottish politics and culture, had developed in quite a distinctive manner to that in England. However, having grown up primarily in England, Charles I was less familiar with the traditions and expectations north of the border. In preparation for his Scottish coronation, which took place some eight years after his accession to the throne, he requested from the heralds of Scotland (the officials tasked with organising royal ceremonies in this period) an order of ceremony that outlined the 'ancient forme' of coronation of that country. The Lord Lyon Kings of Arms, Jerome Lindsay, happily obliged. However, the order of ceremony was clearly not what had been hoped for and the records of the Privy Council of Scotland illustrate that much debate occurred over various versions of the ceremony circulated before the event. Indeed, various prominent Scottish officials who felt their traditional rights were being challenged – such as the Earl Marischal, whose traditional roles included carrying the sword in the procession – petitioned the king to reinstate their rights.

While traditional roles, objects and ritual actions were important to the coronation of Charles III, it was also a coronation of many firsts and particularly so around the way it sought to embrace wider inclusion to better reflect modern society. To me, the most notable of these were the roles taken by women – including those carrying items of regalia

(Penny Mordaunt MP, sword of state; Baroness Benjamin, the sceptre; and Dame Elizabeth Anionwu, the orb) and three female bishops active in the ritual – and the consistent efforts to represent the rich variety of faiths active in the British Isles. Following the king's oath, he prayed "that I may be a blessing to all thy children, of every faith and belief, that together we may discover the ways of gentleness and be led into the paths of peace." This sentiment was tangibly identifiable in ritual choices and roles within the ceremony: in the Moderator of the General Assembly of Scotland presenting the king with the bible on which he took his oath, in the central involvement of various faith leaders involved in the bestowal of the regalia and in the musical contributions to the ceremony. These musical interludes were particularly powerful, and also spoke to inclusion of the component parts of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland through the verses of the plainsong, *Creator Spiritus*, piece that accompanied the start of the anointing ritual being sung in English, Welsh, Gaelic and Irish.

The desire to represent the nations of the British Isles and members of the Commonwealth have been central to monarchical ceremonies of the twentieth century and earlier. For example, the Imperial Mantle Charles wore during the ceremony was originally created for George IV's coronation in 1821, and features emblems representative of the nations of the kingdom. Another far more ancient object that speaks to one specific nation's role in Charles's corporate kingdom is the Stone of Destiny. The stone was a central object in the inaugurations of Scottish kings at Scone in the thirteenth century, on which the king was enthroned to receive homage from his elites, until it was removed from Scotland by Edward I as a trophy of war, alongside other items from the Scottish regalia, at the start of a period of turmoil, known as the Wars of Independence (1296-1328, 1332-1357). The Stone was fitted into the coronation throne at Westminster and used in subsequent English coronations, initially as a statement about control, but following the Union of the Crowns in 1603, when the King of Scots also became the King of England, it became part of a shared royal heritage for the monarchy of a composite kingdom. Latterly, in the twentieth century, the Stone's narrative has been associated with the Scottish nationalism: through the theft of the Stone by Scottish students making a nationalist statement in 1950, and via its official return to Scotland in 1996, in the years before devolution of the Scottish parliament. Consequently, the Stone is a contested object that needs to be treated with sensitivity as

different people attach different meanings to it. In a recent interview, the son of Ian Hamilton, one of the men who 'stole' the Stone in 1950, felt that his father would not have wanted the stone to go back to Westminster for the ceremony, and he certainly is not alone in this sentiment. Yet, as king of the Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and as a descendent of Kings of Scots, Charles' inclusion of the stone in the ceremony speaks to making a statement about the continued integral role that Scotland plays in his kingdom.

Some objects were made specifically for Charles III's coronation, but there were also clear steps made that recognise the importance of avoiding unnecessary excess. The new items made for the coronation included pieces designed and embroidered by the Royal School of Needlework: the new anointing screen, with leaves representing each of the Commonwealth countries, and Queen Camilla's robe of estate decorated with floral designs representative of flowers important to this specific king and queen. As with most of the newly commissioned items, there was a keen and conscious effort to celebrate and promote British-based craftspeople and designers. However, the nature of a coronation means that the reuse of objects has always been important to making statements about continuity and tradition. Many of the glittering objects, and indeed much of the clothing, used in the ceremony were essentially hand-me-downs: from the regalia (many items of which date from seventeenth to nineteenth century) to the ceremonial robes, to the throne itself. While the reuse of some items is traditional, there were also objects that would usually be made for each new monarch (such as the *Colobium Sindonis*, or white linen shift, and the sword belt) that Charles reused (borrowing those used by his grandfather in 1937) with a specific desire to recognise the importance of sustainability.

One of the most prominent sentiments that emanated from Charles III's coronation celebrations – from the king's opening words at Westminster, [answering the welcome of Samuel Strachan](), a child of his Majesty's Chapel Royal, through to the [speech made by Prince William at the coronation concert on Sunday 7 May]() – was relayed in the Archbishop of Canterbury's sermon: the monarch is 'not anointed to be served, but to serve others'. The idea that the monarch's role is one of service and duty to the kingdom is certainly not new. In a speech by Elizabeth II, following her coronation in 1953, she stated that 'I have in sincerity pledged myself to your service, as so many of you are pledged to mine. Throughout

all my life and with all my heart I shall strive to be worthy of your trust.' (For full speech: [A speech by The Queen on her Coronation Day, 1953 | The Royal Family](#)) Yet, throughout Charles' coronation ceremony, the emphasis on the idea of the monarch as an individual whose role is to serve the people of the nation was a resolute message that stood out above all others. It reflects the work of the king in his long years as Prince of Wales, through initiatives such as the Prince's Trust that has helped over a million young people to make significant changes to their lives. The final day of the three-day celebrations – The Big Help Out – signals the proactive desire of the royal family to continue their support and encouragement of voluntary work across the charity sector.

Opinion on the monarchy in the British Isles remains divided, as protestors from #NotMyKing made vocally clear and the high percentage of indifference in some opinion polls aptly illustrates. Yet the messages that underpinned the coronation of Charles III illustrate that royal ceremony at the point of power transfer is still an essential tool through which the monarch can make potent statements about its role and relevance in a modern world.