

From Elizabethan to Carolinian: A New Era

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Elizabeth has finally been laid to rest. The Elizabethan Era has ended. The Carolinian Era begins, coming from the Latin for Charles, “Carolus.” It’s the same root as the names of two US States, North and South Carolina, named after King Charles 1.

In all honesty, I am ambivalent about the death of Queen Elizabeth. I am an antimonarchist, and that is certainly part of it. Nevertheless, I did watch much of the ceremonial surrounding her death. I wasn’t glued to the television, and I certainly didn’t get up to watch the funeral at 4 am, but I watched a fair amount of the ancient, historic ritual surrounding the death of Elizabeth, child of God.

I am also aware that this column may stir up some strong sentiments. I waded into the hot water with some trepidation, but I trust you will read me with a gentle spirit. I’m not alone in these feelings.

I want to begin with the positive. I mourn the death of a good and faithful woman, who was gracious in her dealings with others, and who treated her position as a vocation, a deep calling from God. She sought with all her heart to live out her calling as faithfully as she could. As she said, “For me, the teachings of Christ and my own personal accountability before God provide a framework in which I try to lead my life.”

It was remarkable, for example, that mere days before her death, she met with the incoming British prime minister. Duty was the watchword of Elizabeth’s life, and I honour her. I suspect that history will treat her very kindly. As Queen, she was a faithful servant and a beloved child of God.

But ... like Pope Francis, Elizabeth is not simply a person in her own right. She represents the British Empire, a system with a terrible history of oppression, racism, and colonialism.

She and her family led an inordinately privileged life. She was born into great wealth. The Royal Family’s net worth is estimated at \$28 billion. Her personal wealth is in the range of \$500 million. All of it has been inherited. She has multiple homes, staffed by people who exist to serve her every whim. Downton Abbey on steroids!

A superb example of her family’s privileged life is seen in the fact that her family will pay no inheritance taxes on her estate. The British Parliament passed a special exemption for the Royal Family, while everyone else in Britain must pay a tax of 40% for estates valued at more than £325,000.

But it’s not just the wealth of the royal family. Queen Elizabeth and the Monarchy has participated in harmful practices of imperial colonialism throughout history. I still remember people talking about the British Empire circumnavigating the globe. Atlases still showed the huge pink swatch of Empire; today’s Commonwealth is a relic of that time and way of thinking.

The purpose of the Empire was to impose the (superior) British way of life on other, less developed nations. In Rudyard Kipling’s words, to “bear the white man’s burden” in the Raj in India, the suppression of indigenous peoples in New Zealand, Australia, Africa, India, the Caribbean, and Canada, the slave trade of people in Africa and elsewhere, and the imposition of British rule where it was not welcomed. The Crown benefitted greatly from these practices of British imperial rule.

That’s why we are seeing demands for reparations from the Crown from various countries around the globe. Some countries have removed the British monarch as head of state and

replaced her with a republican form of government. Other countries are thinking of doing the same; I can't see it happening soon, but I wish Canada would follow their example.

The Crown is also responsible for the treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada and the Indian Residential Schools crisis. Treaties with First Nations were "treaties with the Crown." All parliamentarians swear allegiance to the King; when legislation originates in the Canadian Parliament, royal assent is required for bills to become law.

The monarchy participated in practices of colonialism, enslavement, and racism, even to the point of recently discriminating against a black member of the royal family; they upheld harmful systems of oppression and tyranny; they maintained colonies and took the wealth of those lands for their own; and they continue to use British taxpayers' money to maintain their power and wealth. The funeral alone cost over £10 million for security.

Some have said that God chose Elizabeth because she was anointed. It's an age-old theological argument designed to legitimize the monarchy. It has been used by kings and queens throughout history and in all manner of empires. I would argue instead that she became queen and was anointed for it not so much because God chose her, but because she inherited the position, just as Charles has inherited it from her.

These are just a few of my ambivalent feelings about it all. Without doubt, Elizabeth was a servant of God. She was a generous, courageous, patient, and prayerful person. She took her role extremely seriously. But she is also part of a deeply flawed system which may be past its best-by date.

One last thought. If you loved the Queen and the monarchy, and mourned her death deeply, I pray that you will also spare the same thought for Indigenous Peoples and survivors of the Residential School system on September 30, when Canada marks Truth and Reconciliation Day. They are equally worthy of our care and devotion; they have certainly suffered far more than the royal family. As one Indigenous person said, "I can only offer as much sympathy as the Queen offered my Residential School ancestors."

It occurs to me that grief and accountability can and must exist simultaneously. We dare not forget the harm done in the name of Empire, even as we honour Elizabeth for her service.