

Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee: The end of the "New Elizabethan Age"

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3 June 2022

Queen Elizabeth II succeeded the throne on February 6, 1952, and was coronated on June 2. Now 96 years old, she has been head of the British state and the Commonwealth for 70 years. She is the longest-reigning monarch in British history and the world's longest-reigning living monarch.

Her Platinum Jubilee is being marked by four days of state ceremony and celebration, followed around the world. The British state is pulling out all the stops in its still world-leading pomp and pageantry. A Trooping of the Colour with Royal Air Force flypast and lighting of beacons across the country and Commonwealth took place Thursday; a Service of Thanksgiving for the Queen's Reign in St Paul's Cathedral Friday. The Epsom Derby, a Platinum Party at the Palace music show, street and garden parties and a Platinum Jubilee Pageant are scheduled for the weekend.

Running through it all is a barely suppressed nervous tension. Given the queen's age and failing health, the jubilee has inevitably been the occasion for an evaluation of the so-called "New Elizabethan Age" and what might come next. To understand the concern requires an acknowledgement of what her reign has meant to the British ruling class.

There was always something pompous about the claim of a "Second Elizabethan Age", given the hardly comparable position of the monarchy in British life in the 20th versus the 16th century of her namesake. But Elizabeth Windsor has in some crucial respects lived up to the hype. The Platinum Jubilee, universally and fervently hailed across parliament and the media, is a celebration of her significant contribution to the history and indeed survival of British imperialism.

Elizabeth II came to power seven years after the Second World War and during the permanent eclipse of Britain by the United States. Her reign includes the prolonged decline of the UK's industrial economy and, in its latter half, a staggering deterioration in the social position of the working class.

The geostrategic and social consequences of these processes were enormous. Britain lost the bulk of its imperial possessions in the 1950s and 60s, an unravelling of empire and consolidation of US imperialist hegemony symbolised by the Suez Crisis of 1956. Major strike waves in the 1970s and 80s rocked the governments of Heath, Wilson, Callaghan and Thatcher. With the development of globalisation and the defeat

suffered by miners and other leading sections of the industrial working class at the hands of the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy, the British economy was transformed from a centre of manufacturing to the international home of financial parasitism.

The British state responded to these challenges with customary brutality. During the first eight years of Elizabeth II's reign, the UK carried out savage repression in Kenya against the Mau Mau Rebellion. Between 1967-1970, it supported the genocidal war of the Nigerian government against the breakaway Biafra region. Bloody military campaigns have been waged to maintain British control of the six counties in the north of Ireland and the Malvinas/Falklands Islands. Criminal wars have been launched in the Middle East and North Africa in support of a "special relationship" with the US. Every upsurge of the working class at home has been met with the necessary repressive laws and police crackdown.

Amid such roiling political turbulence, the queen's great service to the ruling class was to preserve the role of the monarchy as a stabilising force. She has performed that task with singular conviction, discipline and ruthless self-abnegation.

To an extraordinary degree, her personality has been almost wholly subsumed by the institution of the British monarchy. She maintains an image of complete emotional and intellectual impassivity. After 70 years as ruler, no one knows what the queen thinks about anything. As far as anyone feels they have a sense of what she is like, they are probably referencing the politely critical but generally sympathetic artistic interpretations of writer Stephen Morgan and actresses Claire Foy and Olivia Coleman in the Netflix series, *The Crown*.

The queen's diligence in avoiding scandal, an ill-advised word or false step, and care not to openly associate herself with the vicious class policy of the ruling elite has made her a tabula rasa on which can be written whatever beliefs are politically convenient at the time. When a prime minister is particularly unpopular, notably Thatcher and Blair, it is speculated that the queen, "like us", finds them distasteful. The same was done when US President Donald Trump came to visit.

Her carefully cultivated public persona has allowed Elizabeth II to be deployed at times of heightened national crisis as an

illusory but politically necessary embodiment of stability and permanence. This representative of class rule and hereditary privilege has been portrayed as a figure rising above the blood and filth of politics, reflecting the supposed immutable traditions and sensibilities of the “British people” against the passing “extremism” of the times. Abroad, she helped front the transition from the unsustainable gunboat diplomacy of empire to the royal visit diplomacy of the Commonwealth, begun by Macmillan’s 1960 “wind of change” speech in South Africa.

Remarkably for a fabulously wealthy hereditary monarch raised in a fascist-flirting family at the head of the British Empire, she has never caused or compounded a serious political crisis—aside from briefly following the death of Princess Diana in 1997—giving as much space as possible to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to neutralise working-class opposition. The Platinum Jubilee is the ruling class’s debt of gratitude for a model monarch and her seven decades’ stoic work helping to manage the decline of British imperialism and its explosive social consequences.

But the stresses of the period have not passed without impact. The royal family came under increasing scrutiny from the 1980s. Its seedy underbelly of aristocratic cliques, cheats and liars was laid bare by the Princess Diana saga of the 1990s.

Today, the heir to the throne Prince Charles is considered such a liability that everything is being done to push him behind his son, Prince William. Prince Harry abandoned the monarchy with his wife Meghan Markle under a cloud. Prince Andrew has been stripped of his titles after paying his way out a trial examining his relationship with convicted sex trafficker to the billionaire class, Jeffrey Epstein.

In the last 10 years, YouGov polling shows a marked fall in support for the monarchy from 73 percent to 62 percent. The fall has been steepest among young people, aged 18-24; just 33 percent believe Britain should continue to have a monarchy, down from 54 percent a decade ago.

Much more is reflected in these figures than popular attitudes to an institution generally regarded as an anachronism. Britain, like every country, is in the grip of a terminal crisis of world capitalism bringing the global class struggle to boiling point. One need not buy in to a rosy view of the last 70 years, increasingly beset by social tensions, to say that it will be looked on by the ruling class as something of a *belle époque* compared to what is now coming at them like a runaway train.

Under such conditions, all symbols of “national unity” and claims that we are “all in this together” are being torn to pieces. With the queen’s declared hope yesterday “that the coming days will provide an opportunity to reflect on all that has been achieved during the last 70 years, as we look to the future with confidence and enthusiasm,” the lie has been stretched too far.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson cheers “God save the Queen” with the blood of nearly 200,000 killed and 2 million debilitated by COVID on his hands. Labour Party leader Sir

Keir Starmer tells a country still in the grip of the pandemic and suffering the worst cost-of-living crisis on record, with all measures of poverty skyrocketing, that it is its “patriotic duty” after the “extraordinary circumstances of the last few years” to “let its hair down”. Both men are spearheading Britain’s leading role in a NATO/US war against Russia, starving billions and threatening a world-ending military conflict. Neither’s despised party can muster the slightest popular support.

Elizabeth II has lived long enough to see the whole historical period associated with her reign come to an end. The queen ascended the throne at a time of capitalist stabilisation after a protracted economic breakdown, the rise of fascism, the widespread discrediting of the free market and two devastating world wars. She is nearing the end of her rule amid a renewed global economic catastrophe, the resurgence of the far right, the threat of a third world war and the total disenfranchisement of the mass of the population.

Her first prime minister was Winston Churchill, a significant political figure. Her last may well be Johnson, a vicious imbecile whose Churchillian pretensions offer only an unintentional measure of the decline and degradation of the ruling class.

The fate of the monarchy is bound up with this intractable capitalist crisis and the response it produces in the international working class. A global strike wave is building, with disputes affecting practically every sector in the UK economy and workers straining against the trade unions’ efforts to divide and betray.

Whatever faith the British ruling class might place in the queen’s power to “bring together” and remind everyone “that conciliation is always possible”, neither she, still less her successor, nor any government can stymie the immense social forces pushing aside the phantasm of a “New Elizabethan Age” and inaugurating a decade of socialist revolution.



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