# Address by the Rt Hon Lord Patten of Barnes, Chancellor of the University of Oxford at the Service of Thanksgiving and Commemoration for her late majesty Queen Elizabeth II

## Sunday 18 September 2022 at 4.30pm

My father’s life, like his own father’s, covered the reigns of four Heads of State from the House of Windsor. In my own life, there have been two monarchs. But the first died when he was only 56. I was just 7. So I have only really known one monarch, Queen Elizabeth. I remember, as I am sure many others do, watching her 1953 Coronation in a neighbour’s house on a small flickering television set. The young princess, the child as Winston Churchill called her, was weighed down by Saint Edward the Confessor’s crown and anointed like Solomon, not by Zadoc the Priest or Nathaniel the Prophet, but by a small swarm of elderly clerics, courtiers and politicians. Was she a little in awe of them? They should have been in awe of her. A young woman, who in her first wartime address at the age of fourteen, had committed herself to a lifetime of service. A promise that she kept.

During the 70 years of Queen Elizabeth’s reign she was, as many have said, like an anchor for the country through all the changes that came at home and abroad. She represented continuity, but like the character in Lampedusa’s great novel, ‘The Leopard’, she knew that ‘things have to change in order to stay the same’. The changes to the world outside came thick and fast and also in our own country, whose best qualities she strove to understand and to represent.

Empire became Commonwealth. War was followed by the long peace similar to that which in the previous century had followed the Congress of Vienna. The Soviet Empire collapsed. China rose from famine and Stone Age communism. We reluctantly joined our neighbours in the grouping of prospering European states and then left to strike out for, as yet, unidentified new horizons. We remained the fifth or sixth largest economy in the world, which is referred to when all else fails to cheer us up, though in terms of our wealth per citizen it is a rather different story. We have gone from ration books to credit cards, from telephone boxes bearing The Queen’s insignia to mobile phones, from postage stamps to emails, from a largely white country to one with citizens of every colour, from a community where people were sent to prison for their sexual preferences to one where gay marriage is celebrated.

But in all that time, a tsunami of turbulence, the words about Queen Elizabeth’s role and priorities have sounded much the same. The fact that the vocabulary may sound to some a little dated says more about them and maybe about many of us than it does about the late Queen. Duty. Service. The community interest. And there is what the former Australian Prime Minister, the Socialist Republican, Paul Keating, called ‘the public good’. He noted that ‘Queen Elizabeth understood and instinctively attached herself to the public good against what she recognised as a tidal wave of private interest and private reward. And she did that for a lifetime’, he went on, ‘never deviating’.

I hope that the present leaders of our political establishment understand these things too? Professor Peter Hennessy was making the same point recently when he said that we had not really in the past needed to spell out in laws and constitutional precepts, the exact borders between good and bad behaviour by public servants. We just knew when the red lines were being crossed and we believed that those who aspired to and assumed public responsibility would themselves be pretty certain that those who behaved decently in the common interest would normally prevail. He did not seem to think that all this is as widely accepted today as it should be and once was.

So Queen Elizabeth knew who and what we were. She went everywhere, and spoke to everyone. She knew this University well though no visit can ever have quite matched the one she made in 1960 with the Chancellor, Harold Macmillan, to lay the foundation stone for St Catherine’s. At the lunch afterwards, in Trinity College, the Lord Lieutenant, in full ceremonial fig, collapsed across the table with what seemed to be a heart attack. He was revived by the Regius Professor of Medicine. Queen Elizabeth asked who this successful doctor was and commented that he must be very good. The Vice-Chancellor replied “He should be good ma’am. He’s the Regius Professor of Medicine. You appointed him”. Shortly after that the senior College Steward dropped a huge tray full of plates and glasses. Finally, the Chancellor, Harold Macmillan, having proposed the royal toast, got his gown tangled up in the chair which was not available as he sat down and he crashed under the table. After lunch, The Queen was asked by the President of the Junior Common Room if she’d enjoyed the occasion. “Oh yes” the young Queen replied. “It was a wonderful lunch. Bodies all over the place”. No subsequent visit quite matched this.

Queen Elizabeth knew what was required to keep our potentially divided country together. When she said during the broadcast at the time of the pandemic lockdown, ‘We’ll meet again’, she was not simply remembering the reference to the hopes of the whole country during the war, to see once again the ‘blue skies over the white cliffs of Dover’. She was pointing to those things that bind us together as a community made up of several nations – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. A shared history, a shared language, cherished institutions, families, clubs, civil society, workplaces. We were all different, but not split apart like the upturned pieces in a jigsaw. Her personality, her decency and her instincts ensured that the pieces did not fly apart and, when that was threatened, she knew how to try to prevent it.

And she also knew that, cut as we are from the fabric of humanity, not everything we had ever done together as a country was a source of pride. Often revered as much abroad as at home, she was not afraid to confront some of the issues that had dogged our past. She was able to show humility in the face of some of the darker episodes in our history, and her own humility encouraged magnanimity on the part of others – a magnanimity which came easily to her. She showed these qualities from Amritsar to her meetings with Nelson Mandela in South Africa, to Ireland. She welcomed the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement and the strengthened bonds between the Republic and the United Kingdom. She spoke of the complexity of our history and its dark side when visiting Ireland’s Garden of Remembrance. In Dublin, she said “To all those who have suffered as a consequence of our troubled past, I extend my sincere thoughts and deep sympathies. With the benefit of historical hindsight, we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently - or not at all”.

Governing the last of Britain’s large colonies, I was the beneficiary of both Queen Elizabeth’s wit and her calculated and welcome support. Not wanting when I went out to Hong Kong to wear feathers and a Ruritanian Field Marshall’s gubernatorial uniform, I asked the Palace if I could be allowed to dress normally. The Queen’s approval came back with the coda that she hoped I would wear a collar and tie to undertake investitures.

In the years when I was being most fiercely attacked by Chinese communist apparatchiks and some British business leaders and former diplomats, I would have regular invitations to visit The Queen at Windsor or Buckingham Palace whenever I was back in London. She was clearly making a small but important point. Naturally, she was interested in what was happening in Hong Kong. But above all, she wanted people to see in the Court Circular that she was regularly meeting me. It was a nod of approval and despite having on each occasion at Windsor to negotiate a dark corridor to her study, between normally sleeping but vigilantly suspicious corgis, I much welcomed these visits.

Writing about Queen Elizabeth’s commitment to service, Simon Schama recalled the cold and drenching day during the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee when The Queen and Prince Philip stood freezing and dripping wet in a royal barge on the Thames battling into the storm down the river between cheering crowds under their own umbrellas. The following day, Prince Philip had to go into hospital. The Queen herself was out and about on the same day in front of Buckingham Palace in another drenching downpour moving among the crowds. Simon Schama wrote that he asked himself ‘why does she do it’? He knew the answer straight away. ‘Because she said she would, and because really, what would Britain be without her?’

We are about to find out. But I have no doubt that her successor, King Charles III, will meet the challenge. Given the global threat from climate change it should perhaps be a comfort to know that our Head of State was one of those who first warned about this at a time when he was regarded as being slightly eccentric for doing so.

The King himself referred in his first address to the nation to the words of Horatio over the body of the Prince of Denmark; he talked of ‘flights of angels’ singing Queen Elizabeth to her rest. It was a reminder of the source of her notion of service: she was not just the Head of the Church of England (which she described as an umbrella over those of all faiths), but she was herself a profound believer in God and the Resurrection. She was, in short, someone who would sing the second verse of Cecil Spring-Rice’s great national hymn; ‘I Vow to Thee my Country’ as enthusiastically as we all sing the first.

Yes, of course she had vowed to her country…… ‘with love that never falters, a love that pays the price, entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love.’ But there was, she knew, another country – ‘most dear to them that love her, most great to them that know’. A country whose virtues of ‘peacefulness, gentleness and faithfulness’ reinforced her enduring commitment to our own earthly country. So we express throughout the land our gratitude to Queen Elizabeth. May she rest in peace. Today and tomorrow we commit ourselves wholeheartedly in our loyalty to her successor King Charles III ‘Long may he reign, may he defend our laws and ever give us cause to sing with heart and voice, God Save the King.’