

Rule Britannia

After more than 60 years on the throne, the Queen arguably has a greater experience than any serving politician. Vernon Bogdanor reveals the delicate balance of power between Monarch and Prime Minister.

A modern constitutional monarch reigns but does not rule. She has influence rather than power. Her influence is exerted by means of three fundamental constitutional rights: the right to be consulted, the right to advice and the right to warn. The Queen exercises these rights primarily through weekly meetings with her Prime Minister, meetings held every Wednesday when both are in London. It is not clear when audiences began. During the war, however, Winston Churchill was accustomed to regular lunches with George VI. But regular audiences probably did not begin until the reign of the present Queen.

The purpose of the audience is to enable the Queen and the Prime Minister to speak to each other in perfect confidence, sure that their comments will not reach outside ears. Edward Heath, Prime Minister from 1970 to 1974, wrote that: "You can say things that you would not say even to your Number Two". James Callaghan, Prime Minister from 1976 to 1979, used to say that the weekly audiences were like visits to a psychiatrist. He would use the Queen as a sounding-board for his views on politics and personalities, knowing that she would not divulge his confidences. To ensure confidentiality, no private secretaries are present at the audience, and no minutes are taken. If the audience were not confidential, an enquiry by the Queen as to, for example, the aims of government legislation might be misconstrued as criticism of the government, and the audience would lose its value.

The Queen must always remain free from political involvement. That is because she is not only head of state, she is also head of the nation- or rather multi-national state. As head of the nation, the Queen has to represent all the people, not just those who adhere to a particular political creed.

But this does not mean that the Queen has no influence, that she is a mere automation. The Queen's longest serving Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher has written in her memoirs that: "Anyone who imagines that the audiences are a mere formality or confined to social niceties is quite wrong; they are quietly business-like and Her Majesty brings to bear a formidable grasp of current issues and breadth of experience". Edward Heath told Panorama in February 1993 that the Queen can exert influence through an "Exchange of views" but she would never tell a Prime Minister what he or she should do. One writer on the monarchy has reported that "A Dean of St Paul's cathedral once asked the Queen what she could do if a Prime Minister submitted a name for an ecclesiastical appointment with which she was not happy. "Nothing constitutionally," she replied, "but I can always say that I should like more information. That is an indication the Prime Minister will not miss". Perhaps the same technique is used in the audience. James Callaghan records in his autobiography how in early 1976 the Queen encouraged him to take initiative, which he already had in mind, to resolve the Rhodesian problem. Inevitably the Queen's opinion was enough to tip the scales, for she is an authority on the Commonwealth and I respected her opinion. "I have always thought that the Queen's initiative on Rhodesia was a perfect illustration of how and when the Monarch could

effectively intervene to advise and encourage her Minister from her own wide experience and with complete constitutional propriety”.

What then is said at the audiences? Since there is no documentation, all we can say is based on speculation. The Queen has so far been served by 12 Prime Ministers, two more than served Queen Victoria. Her first Prime Minister when she came to the throne in 1952 was Winston Churchill, the great war leader, enjoying the second peacetime innings at No 10. Churchill first entered Parliament in 1900, when Queen Victoria was on the throne. His knowledge and experience was by now formidable and it would not be surprising if the Queen was somewhat in awe of him. Even so, it appears that the audiences were great fun. Sir Allan Lascelles, the Queen's Private Secretary at the time, wrote in his diary that „he could not hear what they talked about, but it was more often than not, punctuated by peals of laughter, and Winston generally came out wiping his eyes”.

By contrast with Churchill, the current Prime Minister, David Cameron, was not born until 1966 when the Queen had already been on the throne for 14 years. Indeed, she now enjoys a far longer experience of politics than anyone else in public affairs. It would not therefore be surprising if 21st century Prime Ministers were in awe of the Queen. Her knowledge, based on assiduous reading of Cabinet papers, reports from ambassadors, parliamentary papers and reports, as well as meetings with every prominent figure over the last 60 years must be quite unrivalled. The Queen might well say to a 21st century Prime Minister, „A measure similar to the one you are suggesting was proposed around 20 years ago when you were barely out of university. You probably do not remember, but it did have some bad results. Perhaps you might have a look at what happened and discuss it with your colleagues”. The Prime Minister is under no obligation to accept such a suggestion, but he would be unwise to dismiss it without serious consideration.

(from: „The Monarchy and the Constitution” by Vernon Bogdanor, Oxford University Press, 1995)

I. Read the text and answer:

A; True or false, correct the false sentences

1. The Queen's influence on politics is significant.
2. The three rights of the Queen are exercised during Parliament session
3. Regular audiences probably started during the II War
4. The Queen and the Prime Minister have an opportunity to speak in confidence once a month.
5. James Callaghan visited the Queen instead of going to a psychiatrist.
6. The Queen has to be politically involved.

B:. Discuss the questions:

1. What is the purpose of the audiences?
2. Compare the audiences with the Queen at the beginning of her reign and nowadays

II. Explain the following words and expressions:

formidable, innings, be In awe of..., peals of laughter, assiduous, unrivalled, tip the scaleń

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