

Monarchy: from 'divine right' to 'The Firm'

Behind the pageantry, the monarchy remains a central part of Britain's constitution – but it has evolved through the ages to fit the country's changing needs.



The Queen wearing the Imperial Crown on the balcony at Buckingham Palace after her 1953 coronation.



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This week, the whole world is invited to witness a public celebration of the private decision of Prince William and Kate Middleton to get married.

Why? Behind the frivolity (we all love a party) there's something very serious going on: the continuation and renewal, through a new generation, of the ruling dynasty to which all Britons are subjects.

The United Kingdom, while among the most modern nations in terms of culture and prosperity, has a monarchy with a long pedigree.

Our current Queen can trace her forebears back to the ninth century King of Wessex, Egbert, and we have had nearly twelve centuries of rule by his descendants.

From the middle ages, the official story was that the king ruled by 'divine right' – chosen by God. In reality, the monarch has always been controlled by representatives of wider interests – in the beginning, a court of advisors and ministers who could

depose an inadequate king, now our elected parliamentarians and the law. And British history has seen a gradual whittling away of royal powers.

Now we have arrived, over time, at what is known as a constitutional monarchy – a parliament and set of governing institutions backed up by a king or queen with very limited role in government. One of Britain's foremost constitutional experts, Vernon Bogdanor, calls this 'reigning but not ruling'.

Queen Victoria's long reign saw the transformation of the Queen from an arbiter between political factions to a national figurehead.

And our first family has, by now, trained itself so ruthlessly for the top job that it has come to be known as 'The Firm'. Political observers describe the royal family as a sort of British social glue.

Prof Bogdanor, although he argues for reforming parliament, is a firm believer in

keeping the monarchy. He claims it provides 'emotional sustenance' and popular support, therefore stability, to our political system. 'The survival of the monarchy may be said to symbolise the process of evolutionary change,' he writes.

DYNASTY AND DESTINY

Historians can describe for us how as the real powers of our kings and queens ebbed, the monarch's 'dignified' role developed, as head of the nation as well as the state.

But it's for each of those watching to measure how this feels to us, as subjects, at the beginning of the 21st century and watching younger generation of royals confirmed in their role as public servants.

As Charles Moore, a Conservative commentator, writes, Friday's wedding ceremony is about 'a dynasty and a national destiny. It matters in our history and therefore in our future.'

Q & A

Q So what's the next step in updating The Firm?

A The realities of our changing society mean some rules will have to change: Prince Charles might have a divorced woman, Camilla, as his queen – something that forced an abdication in the 1930s. David Cameron has already hinted that if William and Kate have a girl as their first born, we would revisit the succession rules that dictate titles and

estates pass first to sons.

Q Sounds sensible.

A Well it's a long way from Charles I and the Stuart kings insisting on their divine right to rule – they were put in their place by a revolution and by the House of Commons. Charles I was beheaded for trying to claim too much power.

Q Wow, that's radical.

A Yes, historians say that we avoided a

later, bloodier revolution by having a fight over the role of the English king fairly early on. Unlike France and Russia, who rejected their monarchies wholesale.



SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'After the Queen we need a younger monarch. William should take the throne.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?