



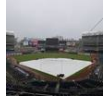
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OPINION

A grim post-Elizabeth future: What the queen's death means for the UK and the monarchy

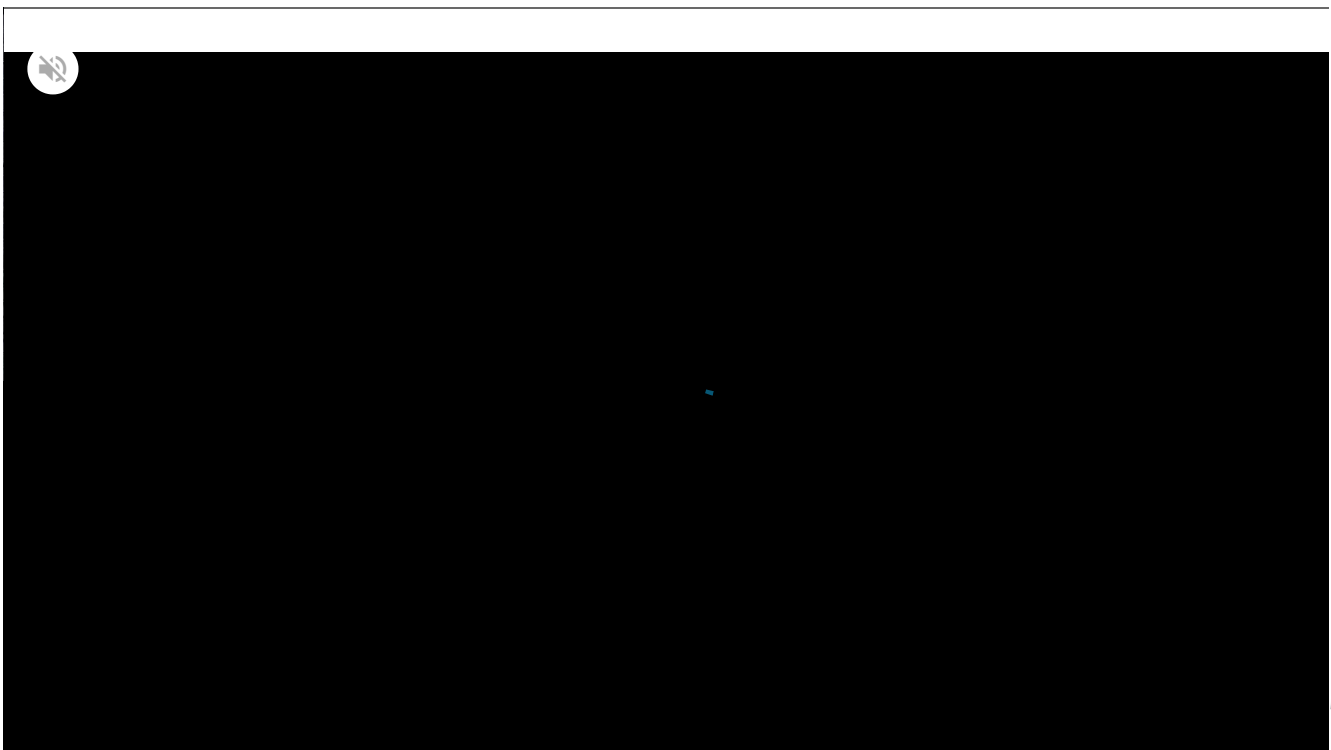
By David Armitage

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[London Bridge is down](#). These were the code words for the passing of Queen Elizabeth II. A monarch has died but the monarchy endures. At the instant of her death, the crown passed to her son, now Charles III. [He will only be proclaimed officially on Saturday](#) but [crowds are already singing “God save the King!” outside Buckingham Palace](#). Today, the weather in London is shifting between sunshine and showers, as if reflecting the hopes and fears of a nation very much on edge right now.

The queen's death could hardly have come at a worse time. Only on Tuesday, she received the resignation of one prime minister, Boris Johnson, and asked another, Liz Truss, to form a government. Never in modern times has Britain changed both the head of state and the head of government anything like so quickly.

The new PM faces a daunting in-tray. [Inflation is spiraling over 10%](#). Recession looms. The public sector, including [the National Health Service, is on its knees](#). War rages in Ukraine. The cost of electricity and natural gas is skyrocketing. Food prices are soaring. As the nation mourns, politicians have put aside their differences to praise the late monarch. Yet after the queen's funeral in 10 days' time, the sense of national crisis will surely become starker as Britons realise a bond that held the country together for 70 years has finally dissolved.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II visits the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL) at Porton Down, England on Thursday Oct. 15, 2020. (Ben Stansall/AP)

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“Have you come far?” was the Queen’s famous ice-breaker when meeting strangers. She had certainly gone far in her 96 years — and not just literally, though she had visited more than 100 countries. Born the daughter of a king-emperor, she died head of a Commonwealth of independent nations.

Her reign witnessed the often violent end of the British Empire in Asia, Africa and the Middle East as well as the rise of the global Commonwealth. The waves of migration that followed turned what had been the overwhelmingly white British society of her childhood into the multicultural one of today. [For the first time, people of color today hold three of the four top jobs in the British government: chancellor of the exchequer, foreign secretary, and home secretary.](#)



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On her watch, the United Kingdom joined, then later left, the European Union. Another union, that between Scotland and the rest of the UK, was put to a referendum in 2014 when the queen expressed a rare political opinion as she obliquely advised the Scots [to “think very carefully”](#) about their decision. With all this still raw, she has left a nation united in loss but deeply unsure about the future.

A summer of strikes is temporarily on hold but will resume when national mourning ends. The Scottish government has been preparing for another independence referendum. Tensions between the UK and the European Union could explode again as the issue of the Northern Ireland Protocol stays unresolved. The reunification of Ireland is no longer unthinkable in our lifetimes.

It is quite possible Charles III will start his reign with industrial unrest, a tottering economy, a British union under strain, and the country’s presence on the world stage “moldering into insignificant islandhood,” as the 18th-century wit (and prime minister’s son) Horace Walpole put it after the American Revolution.

The evident success of the queen’s unparalleled period on the throne has only postponed the United Kingdom’s reckoning with history. Britain’s fractious politics will return to business as usual. Bills will rise and wallets feel the pinch. Despite a [£150 billion package of utility subsidies](#) from the government, millions could still fall into poverty this winter. And friction with neighbors could ramp up. The first season of what [Liz Truss called “our new Carolean age”](#) looks set to be a winter of discontent.

Amid all this, [Britain remains one of the most unequal countries in the world.](#) The new government’s fiscal policies look set to increase that inequality. Inherited wealth, and the privilege that accompanies it, hampers social mobility. [Former pupils from private schools still dominate the professions](#) and an unelected House of Lords holds sway over legislation. When the smoke clears from the gun salutes and the queen is laid to rest at Windsor Castle, it will be painfully evident that the national cohesion she embodied has gone forever.

Charles III will take the throne of a country not at ease with itself. His 17th-century namesake, Charles I, began his reign during a major European conflict, oversaw national unrest that blew up into civil war,

watched his kingdom fall apart, and lost his head to an executioner’s axe in 1649. Missteps by the new king will not lead to the demise of the monarch. Nevertheless, they could bring an end to the monarchy his mother had so skilfully steered for seven decades.

Armitage is a history professor at Harvard University and the author of “The Declaration of Independence: A Global History.”



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