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Royal fairytales recount our nation's blessings



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Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

With planeloads of tourists descending on London for the royal wedding, and an expected television audience in the hundreds of millions, Britain's royalty remains the greatest show on earth.

In part, that reflects the pageantry it mobilises; but it is also because it so effectively merges the present with the past.

Only a few decades ago, the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle — a mixed-race divorcee descended from Africans who were slaves in the American state of Georgia — would have been unthinkable.

Now, as the Archbishop of Canterbury officiates over the vows in St George's Chapel, it seems a natural link in a chain that spans the centuries.

Perhaps nothing better defines the British monarchy than that ability to embody change and reassert continuity, using the rites of passage — births and deaths, coronations and marriages — to mark persistence through renewal.

Of course, we each do that ourselves, on an infinitely more modest scale, in family ceremonies that celebrate the ties between generations. But modernity has weakened those ties, and the ethical and religious foundations on which they rested are frayed or fractured.

Weakened with them is the force of tradition which, as well as providing a banister to guide our way in the world, served to hand down the treasures of earlier ages. Resolutely turned to the future, each of us is now "an endless seeker with no past at my back", as Ralph Waldo Emerson famously put it more than a century ago.

To that extent, it is not merely the pomp and circumstance of the royal wedding that smacks of a lost era: it is the whole notion of a past that can shape lives in the present.

Little wonder, then, that spectacles such as the royal wedding have an air of unreality, as if they were attractions in a super-sized Disneyland. It may be that they gain in sparkle what they lose in majesty, but that cannot stop the erosion of the broader function they historically played.

At the heart of that function was the concept, born in the late Middle Ages, of the king's two bodies: the first, Justice Southcote explained in 1651, "a body natural, subject to passions and death as other men are"; the second, "a body politic", which could never die, as it embodied the corporate entity defined by the king and his subjects — that is, the realm.

If elaborately staged rites of passage mattered in that perspective as much as they did, it was because they gave human form to the unending continuity of the body politic.

The belief that the king's person combined a natural body with an undying one was by no means solely English. However, it played a special role in the political history of England and its colonies.

In particular, it created room for the legal fiction to develop that while the king's body politic could do no wrong, the body natural was as subject to the law as any other. The monarch, acting as the body politic, therefore could continue to symbolise the realm while the decisions of the body natural were increasingly constrained by the courts and parliament.

Thus severing the monarchy's representational role from that of governing made it possible to move from an absolutist to a constitutional monarchy without compromising the symbolic order.

The ever greater grandeur invested in the rites of passage facilitated that transition, ensuring that what the great 19th-century constitutionalist Walter Bagehot called the "dignified parts" of the British constitution — "which excite and preserve the reverence of the population" — remained vividly intact while its "efficient parts", which did the governing, were reshaped.

Bagehot himself worried that the "old and complicated" artifices of the "dignified parts" were being undermined by "practical men" intent on "getting things done". Without the reverence those dignified parts elicited, he argued, a constitution, which "works better than any instrument of government that has yet been tried", would lose its legitimacy and solidity.

His concerns may have been premature; but it is difficult to deny that the rites of passage, from being grand symbols of state, have become extravagant re-enactments of fairytales. At the same time, democratic regimes have struggled to retain the dignity that tradition once brought.

Yes, power in a democracy rests, in some sense, with the people; but "the people" is hardly a coherent concept. And even if voters could be brought to believe that they were the ultimate sovereign, what they would actually see in the place of power reserved for "the people" are the squabbles of politicians, lobbyists and spin masters. Stripped of all majesty, shorn of its roots in collective memory, government's standing has inevitably declined.

To say that is not to suggest that a return to a vanished epoch would be feasible or desirable.

But it may be that the loss of authority in the modern age makes it possible for the past to speak to us with unexpected freshness, not to lament its passing but to rescue from oblivion those fragments that are still able to illuminate our situation.

Nowhere is that more urgent than in today's Australia, where — replacing an imaginary cultural inferiority by an equally imaginary moral one — we cringe not from the rest of the world, as was once the case, but from our own history. Yet if that history tells us anything, it is that it was the British legacy, with its extraordinary capacity to combine tradition and change, that made Australia prosperous and free.

As the royal wedding once again highlights that capacity, we should not merely be dazzled by the glamour. Rather, we should marvel at the gift of British liberty, received so long ago, yet still so young.