



Photo: Bruce Adams/Daily Mail/PA Wire

Birthday celebrations reminded me of why Queen personifies service for the common good

Leon Spence



Did you see it? All of the pomp and pageantry that accompanied last weekend's celebrations for the 90th birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II? Wasn't it wonderful?

I loved the national service of thanksgiving which took place last Friday in St Paul's Cathedral. I loved the splendour and the music. I loved the solemnity. But most of all I loved the words of thanks expressed by the Dean of St Paul's David Ison, who simply thanked Her Majesty for her years of "gentle constancy, royal dignity and kindly humanity".

Saturday brought us the annual spectacle of Trooping the Colour and with it the ceremony and history which arguably no other nation can match. Long gone are the symbols of globally domineering military power but in their place are signs of a Britain proud of its multi-cultural heritage and proud of the monarch who leads us.

The weekend ended with a street party in The Mall, and indeed others which although they may not have been similar in scale then certainly in passion. All celebrated the life of a woman – and her loyal husband, who we must never overlook – who has lived many years in a spotlight.

The Queen and Duke of Edinburgh have undoubtedly spent the best part of 70 years of their lives under scrutiny which virtually none of us can even begin to comprehend, yet throughout that time, putting the odd stumble or faux pas to one side, they lived lives with the honour and servitude to the nation that any of us would have the hardest of times replicating.

Since shortly after the end of the

Second World War, a time which to most of us is something studied from history books rather than something we lived through, this couple have been remarkable figureheads for Britain and the Commonwealth.

As a very young man I was adamant that the concept of the monarchy was a repulsive one. I thought then that the idea that anyone could become a head of state automatically, based on nothing more than who their parents and grandparents were, was one of the worst possible things about Britain. My 18 or 19-year-old self would have told me that we should be living in a meritocracy, a land where everyone should have the same equality of opportunity and where talent and ability should be the only reason for rising to the top. I thought it despicable that taxpayer money was taken from all of us to pay for the privileged life of a family who never had to work a day of hard graft as my father and countless others had done.

As a 40-something father of three I still fervently hold dear to much of that notion. I want my children and children from families richer or poorer than mine to have exactly the same chances in life as each other. I don't care whether a child is schooled at Ampleforth or a run-down primary in the very worst sink estate: they should all have the chance to succeed.

In the intervening years I have learned a great deal and when I look back the thing that I firmly believe has been my greatest lesson is that there are very few absolute rights and absolute wrongs in life.

The one simple fact which not only

politicians but all of us 'ordinary' folk have to learn is that if we are honest, life is about nuance.

One political party isn't all bad and the other all good. The European Union question isn't actually the binary decision it is purported to be, there are positives and negatives to both remain and leave. Media scrutiny of our faith and the scandals that have damaged our Church in recent years cannot be brushed under the carpet but similarly cannot negate all of the good the Catholic Church does around the globe on a daily basis.

So when I say I want to live in a meritocracy, unhesitatingly I do but I can also see the remarkable, lifelong roles that have been played by two people, now in their tenth decade, who set us all an example of a life of public service which, I believe, we should all aspire to.

When we look to our friends across the Atlantic and the cringeworthy presidential election campaign that's currently taking place, would any single one of us rather have the awful Donald Trump and his racist, misogynist comments as Head of State in place of a woman whose life has been about dignity and responsibility?

I don't know if many of my esteemed readers, who I am sure are highly educated and thoughtful people, are particularly conversant with the canon of American comic books. On the basis that you are but that you might need a small reminder, I shall prod your memory about a favourite quote of mine.

Shortly after being bitten by a radioactive spider, a young

photographer called Peter Parker is becoming aware of new superpowers that he has been given. Peter's Uncle Ben, who is shortly to meet a tragic end, in a speech which eventually inspires the young man to become Spider-Man, tells Peter "With great power comes great responsibility".

In essence, that one sentence encapsulates what Her Majesty has demonstrated in all those years since her coronation. Even as a figurehead her power is great but indeed she has never forgotten the responsibility she owes to the British public. I doubt we will ever see her like again.

Yet the truth is the Queen is an example to all of us. In the US the notion of public service, the idea of working for the greater public good, is one which is much admired. Many people will make a conscious choice to work in the public or charity sector, when they may attract far greater salaries in the corporate world, because service to one's nation matters for the greater good.

In Britain, while we do have a culture of volunteering, with a few exceptions those who choose to work in our public services are sadly seen by far too many as being 'in it for an easy life' or 'not up to working in the real world'. Yet the truth is that without men and women who recognise the importance of community and the role that working for the greater good has in our lives, the poorer the nation would be.

Like a great many other things, a constitutional monarchy is not perfect: it undoubtedly has its faults. Yet given the choice of what we have and the remarkable example of the woman who has filled that role for so many years, who among us would really rather have the alternative of a canvassing, all too often divisive, politician doing the job? Certainly not me.

Leon Spence is a county and parish councillor (Lab). He serves as chairman of scrutiny for children and families at Leicestershire County Council. You can follow him on twitter @cllrleonspence.

Walk a meaningful mile for charity

Inspired by the words of Pope Francis, "Unity happens when we walk together," hundreds of people of all ages will be walking together in the coming weeks to do something uplifting in solidarity with the poor.

From mid-June to July, children, adults and older people in 15 towns and cities around the country will participate in The Big Mile and raising awareness of poverty in England and Wales. The walk is deliberately limited to one mile to make it as inclusive as possible.

The Big Mile is being organised by volunteers from the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) and CSAN (Caritas Social Action Network). The two charities are heavily involved in work nationally and locally to help people in need.

Money raised through the events will go to helping the homeless, disabled, children from troubled backgrounds, the deaf and the lonely and isolated. A range of charities will benefit including the SVP, CSAN, Catholic Children's Society, St Joseph's Hospice, Caritas Salford, and DePaul UK.

Elizabeth Palmer, CEO of the SVP, said: "Walking can be a very enjoyable and beneficial activity, and joining the Big Mile makes it meaningful as well. Walkers will be supporting the SVP which has been helping alleviate poverty in England and Wales since 1844. This walk is an opportunity for people to join with the SVP to do something practical and enjoyable to step out against poverty."

Phil McCarthy, CEO of CSAN, said: "If you are going for a walk you need to know where you are going. The Big Mile allows us to walk towards a physical destination but also towards a better world, freed from poverty. It's also good to walk together. I wish all who wake part in the Big Mile an enjoyable experience."

To find out more, phone the SVP on 020 7703 3030, email BryanA@svp.org.uk or visit www.bigmile.org.uk.

Pope to rule over canonisations

Pope Francis will preside over a consistory to approve the canonisation of four men and one woman, including Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, a French Discalced Carmelite mystic and writer, the Vatican has announced.

The consistory, scheduled for 20th June, will also look at the canonisation claims of Blessed Manuel Gonzalez Garcia, Guillaume-Nicolas-Louis Leclercq, Lodovico Pavoni, the Italian founder of the Sons of Mary Immaculate, now commonly known as the Pavonians; and Alfonso Maria Fusco.

The meeting of cardinals and promoters of the sainthood causes formally ends the process of approving a new saint.

Pope Francis earlier approved miracles attributed to the intercession of the sainthood candidates.

School vote on 'more Catholic' new name

A Scottish primary school is to be renamed to make it sound more Catholic.

Fox Covert RC Primary School, Edinburgh, backed the idea in a recent consultation and teachers and families were asked for their suggestions for a new name last week. The top three names are to be put to a vote, with the selection being finalised by the end of term.

However, the name change will not come into effect until the city's education committee grants it approval.

A spokesman for the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh told *The Scottish Herald* that the decision seems sensible and had its full support. "In terms of enhancing the school's visibility and ethos while also maintaining very good intra-campus relations, it seems like an eminently sensible decision by the parents to back a change of name for Fox Covert RC Primary," he said.

"Certainly, there are many saints who could prove to be an inspirational role model for young people today."