



# 2012 demonstrates the triumph of Britain without empire

*by Alastair Stewart*

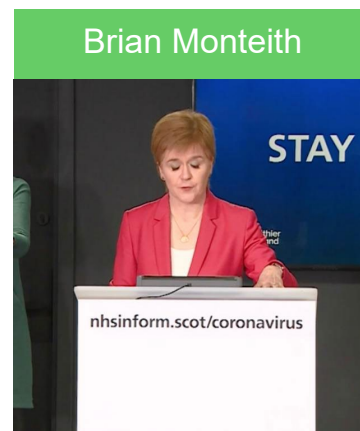
*article from Friday 17, August, 2012*

OF ALL THE transformations throughout her sixty-year reign, none can be more obvious to Elizabeth II than Britain's reduced presence in the world. But are the clichés of Great Britain losing an empire and failing to find a role in the world convincing?

International relations scholar Hans Morgenthau argues anthropomorphic qualities such as honour and prestige are anachronistic, belonging to an age of shared familial bonds and a communal orthodox morality between leaders. Modern statesmen who dare invoke such qualities are usually called pretentious, at worst criminally ignorant, of power politics in a nuclear age.

Yet the worldwide reaction to the Diamond Jubilee, the wedding of the Prince of Wales and the Queen's hilarious Olympiad inclusion suggests prestige is alive and well with

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the British Monarchy.

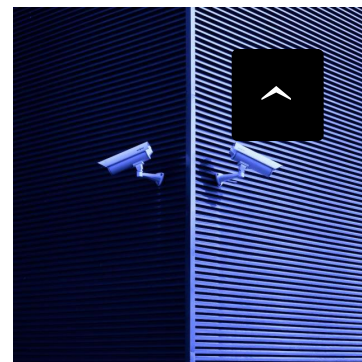
If prestige is key to how the British see the world and how the world sees us, it overlooks a half-remembered truth: Monarchy was once the centerpiece and symbol of a derided empire still considered taboo to justify.

The 1956 Suez Crisis exposed Britain's post-war inability to counteract what Edward Gibbon concluded of Britannia's Roman predecessor: "nothing is more averse to nature and reason than to hold in obedience remote countries and foreign nations, in opposition to their inclination and interest."

In sixty years the Queen has undertaken 261 foreign visits and 96 state visits to in the spirit of friendship. Global attention has refocused on Britain as a place of cultural, if not military, significance. The Diamond Jubilee celebrations alone have brought £10 billion in tourism revenue to the British economy. Global viewing figures for the Olympic opening ceremony were at 900 million, peaking at the Queen's Bond girl cameo.

Jeremy Paxman recently argued that the fear of Britain's best days being behind her have induced a cultural amnesia over our illustrious past. But is the past so different to what we are in the world today? Present successes, epitomised by 2012, are a credit to the Queen not as an innovator of a new international diplomacy but as a protector of continuity.

Born in 1926, the Queen came of age at a time when the relations between Dominion countries were already an



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*Trigger warning: we are not an effing amusement park*

equal, multilateral affair. The experience of the First World War, and the subsequent decision by Lloyd George to allow dominion nations to sign the Treaty of Versailles individually, confirmed the national identity of each dominion in the British Empire.

This precedent was ratified in 1931 with the Statute of Westminster that confirmed a status of autonomy and parity among all dominion nations. The only bond that remained was cultural as represented by a shared commitment to the British Monarchy. It is often overlooked that this arrangement was in effect at the onset of the Second World War: no dominion had a legal obligation to support Britain's war effort, as was the decision of the Irish Free State (a dominion until 1949), yet all others chose to.

The Queen was the first British monarch to be born into an age where empire was to be practiced by a society of states with cultural and emotional ties centered on the British Monarchy.

This fact necessitates a reappraisal of the label of 'decline' when considering the UK's international relations in the 20th century. It is more accurate to call instances of Britain fighting to retain territory - such as Churchill and the Mau Mau rebellion and Eden with the Suez crisis - as exceptions to a new multilateralism that began long before Britain's alleged deterioration.

The supreme irony, but the great accomplishment of the Queen's reign, is the maintaining of the British Monarchy as a transcendental institution operating concurrently with the UK's foreign policy. The British Empire may have faded, but the means by which it evolved are still alive, as the Queen's powerful reconciliation trip to the Republic of Ireland demonstrate.



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Gibbon was correct: to impose a value system by force is ineffectual and self-defeating next to natural inspiration and loyalty.

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