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OPINION

With Charles III coronation, colonialism is coming home to roost

Saturday 6 May 2023, by [GOPAL Priyamvada](#) (Date first published: 5 May 2023).

From a plundered economy to a police force ready to crush protests, Britain today looks like its colonies once did. It had to happen.

For fans of Netflix's *The Crown* and other period dramas, the coronation of King Charles III will have it all: ermine and tiaras, horses and livery, kneeling and curtsies, expensively refurbished gold carriages and choral music soaring into vaulted ceilings.

A sufficiency of kings, queens and aristocrats will bear international witness to pomp and circumstance as the BBC repeats on a self-congratulatory loop that "no one does pageantry quite like we Brits."

Like the British Raj's fabled 1911 Durbar in Delhi, also held to celebrate a coronation, that of George V, Charles's crowning will aim to showcase British pre-eminence to the apparent admiration of the world, an imperial power move actually taken, like much else, from the Mughals of India. About 6,000 troops will march in full regalia in the largest military ceremonial in 70 years. Even the Mughals, however, did not propose that the entire population chant fealty in unison to the new monarch as Britons are being urged to do.

Unlike [George V's Delhi Durbar](#), which glittered with the imperial puissance of a nation that controlled vast swathes of the globe, behind the velvet curtains of Charles III's extravaganza is a [much-diminished entity](#) in which a majority of the population isn't much interested.

According to a recent poll, more than 70 percent of Britons under the age of 50 are indifferent to the coronation. Even so, a staggering 250 million pounds (\$315m) of magicked-up [taxpayer money will be spent](#) on this single day even as thousands of nurses, doctors, teachers and other key public workers have been told for months there is no money in the coffers to offer them a meaningful pay rise.

They, like other Britons, are reeling under a stupendous rise in the cost of living as inflation hits 11 percent, the highest rate in 40 years. As waves of strikes continue across the country, leading economists have, with breathtaking arrogance, instructed Britons to not ask for wage increases and just ['accept they're worse off'](#).

Use of charity food banks by working people has shot up in the past year with more than 750,000 first-time users and 3 million emergency food parcels distributed. In 2021, it was estimated that 20 percent of the nation lives in poverty and living standards have fallen even further since then.

Yet all of this is happening in what remains one of the richest countries in the world. The number of

billionaires in the country has gone up by a fifth since the pandemic, their combined wealth estimated at more than 653 billion pounds (\$823bn) in 2022.

Charles, whose private wealth has been estimated at just under 2 billion pounds (\$2.5bn) while the monarchy's is about 28 billion pounds (\$35bn) will not be spending his own money on any of the coronation just as he deprived the public coffers of inheritance tax on the huge fortune left to him by Queen Elizabeth II.

How does the existence of such [extraordinary affluence](#) square with the [increasingly bleak realities](#) faced by a populace when not long ago, a pensioner died of hypothermia because she was worried about the truly astronomical energy bills all households face? Meanwhile, energy companies have seen their profits increase by several billions. Multiple calls to mitigate inequality by increasing taxes on the extremely wealthy have not been heeded even as the burden on the rest of the taxpayers has increased.

The glittering durbar this Saturday will try to remind the world of a Britannia ruling at her benign best in a conspicuously inclusive pageant with Black peers carrying ceremonial objects and religious leaders from major faith traditions proffering blessings.

But after the trumpets fade and the last antique carriage clatters back on palace cobblestones, bleak daylight will reveal a Britain with a shrinking economy, 3 million hungry children, lowered life expectancy and pensioners choosing between a meal and keeping themselves warm. The once world-beating National Health Service, the real jewel in this country's crown, is spiralling into deliberately inflicted destruction with underfunding resulting in chronic staff shortages and [more than 7 million people on waitlists](#) at last count.

Far from being anomalous, the extravagance of this unnecessary coronation precisely represents and even glorifies this morally untenable social order in which to be rich is to have the right to rule and to get richer.

"Subjects" not only become poorer by the day but are required to pay joyful obeisance to the very system that renders them so. As the Labour MP Clive Lewis, one of very few politicians to risk voicing criticism of the coronation, has noted in a [recent video](#), far from being the social glue that it is touted to be, monarchy is the 'gilded veneer that makes grotesque inequalities of wealth and power seem normal'. In that sense, the British monarchy is no anachronism except in style. Behind the encrusted gowns and feathered helmets lies a perfectly modern set of disparities presided over by a billionaire king and his "firm".

While the coronation has rekindled discussions about the British Empire and monarchy, the focus is on the Koh-i-Noor diamond and other gleaming foreign loot in royal hands.

But perhaps there is another way in which colonialism is evoked by this coronation – as an economic and political order of extreme inequality that has now come home to roost in Britain itself.

It is a fate, "the ruin we have inflicted on others", that many British critics of empire like Wilfrid Blunt, whom I wrote about in my book, *Insurgent Empire*, warned against. They argued that the heart of colonialism — extracting wealth from the labouring many, corporate profiteering and authoritarian state repression — would eventually bare itself at home as a corrupt and venal governing class enriched itself. One piece of doggerel I recently saw on social media summarised this state of affairs pithily: "Now we've no foreign natives to subdue, so homegrown stock will have to do."

Although exploitation was never absent, for some time Britain was able to build a welfare state and

enjoy wider prosperity as a consequence of the wealth brought home by the British Empire.

Britain today looks much like one of its colonies might once have: an increasingly impoverished population reeling from regular looting by multinational corporations and governed by the iron hands of the wealthy descendants of its imperial ruling classes who, like their forebears, fear resistance.

Concerned about the possibility of a little protest at the coronation, London's Metropolitan Police force, itself under fire for several cases of alleged sexual and racial misconduct, has just announced, astonishingly, that it will "deal robustly with anyone intent on undermining this celebration".

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk has criticised Britain's recently passed draconian Public Order Bill as violating Britain's international human rights obligations, saying the new law "imposes serious and undue restrictions" on the right to peaceful protest and assemble. All par for the course under the heels of the British Empire.

On Saturday, the British people will be called upon to commune with each other through shared elation at a new monarch. Many already know this oneness to be false, for no real communion can prevail inside such a deeply unequal order.

As patriotic hymns rise in the abbey, perhaps Britons will remember the question posed by the great English poet William Blake, who is often misrepresented as a purveyor of traditional Englishness:

Is this a holy thing to see

In a rich and fruitful land

Babes reduced to misery?

Repudiating the "the iron chest of cursed covetousness" that underlay "dark kingly power", the 17th century reformer and activist Gerrard Winstanley had called for a robust defence of the Commons — shared land and resources as a common "storehouse of livelihood to all". It might be time for Britain to finally heed that call.

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P.S.

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