Cinco de Mayo, 2023 / Charles in charge

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

<<phone rings>>

MAMA CHIT (SEAN’S MOM): Hello!

SEAN RAMESWARAM (HOST): Hey, I'm calling with an important question. Are you excited for the coronation this week?

CHITS: <laughs> My sister in Sri Lanka was asking the same question. I said not really, but I will watch it.

SEAN: How come?

CHITS: Well, Charles, I never thought he'd be a king.

SEAN: What do you mean? He was the heir to the throne for, like, 70 years.

CHITS: It's a different era now. We don't need a king, right? It's a little bit too pompous. I don't know. It's kind of boring now.

SEAN: What do you mean? These people got all sorts of drama. There's Harry and Charles drama. There's all sorts of drama.

CHITS: That's the reason I'm watching that one, what drama is going on there. Harry …

SEAN: Okay, So you're watching it for the drama, for the soap opera. But you're not excited about the coronation of King Charles.

CHITS: That's right. You got it right.

SEAN: I have a feeling that there's a lot of people like you out there, Mom.

CHITS: Yeah

SEAN: We're going to dig into this on Today, Explained.

CHITS: Oh, wow!

[THEME]

*<CLIP>   
 CHOIR: Long live our noble king!  
 God save…  
 Today, Explained’s Paul Robert Mounsey: … Today, Explained. <clears throat>*

BROOKE: My name is Brooke Newman, I’m an associate professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University and author of the upcoming book *The Queen's Silence: The Hidden History of the British Monarchy and Slaver*y.

SEAN: For people who have never seen a coronation before, which I imagine is much of our audience, what can we expect this weekend? Is God going to come down and part the heavens and bless King Charles?

SCORING - RULE BRITANNIA MARCH

*<CLIP>SKY NEWS: The Stone of Destiny has completed its journey from Edinburgh Castle to Westminster Abbey.*

*<CLIP> THE TODAY SHOW: Well the bunting is up, the Union flag is almost everywhere you look and people are trying to perfect the coronation quiche.*

BROOKE: The point you made is interesting because the last coronation was 70 years ago.

*<CLIP> QUEEN ELIZABETH II CORONATION BROADCAST, 1953: So today the Queen will ascend the steps of her throne. There symbolically to be lifted into it by the Archbishop and the Earl Marshal in the sight today of a great multitude of people. It is at the moment that she is seated upon her throne that she takes possession of her kingdom.*

SCORING OUT

BROOKE: It's a ceremony involving a lot of pomp, a lot of grandeur, a military procession. King Charles will be anointed with sacred oils. He will swear an oath to uphold the British constitution. You know, for most people, what what's really happening is a very elaborate, extremely expensive ceremony to crown someone who was already king. He was king the moment his mother died.

SEAN: How does it shake out in the U.K.? Are more people excited about this and mystified by the pomp and ceremony? Or are more people questioning why this extremely rich man is having this extremely expensive ceremony this weekend?

BROOKE: There are, of course, your die hard royalists in the U.K. These are the people who are camping out in advance of the coronation.

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS: And we can't wait to see him coming down the mile in the gold coach. And we’ll be all cheering, doing the Mexican wave in red, white and blue. And we’re CHEERING God save the king… and his queen.*

BROOKE: They're the ones buying the souvenir biscuit tins and the little bobbleheads of Charles the third. Then there is the bulk of the country who is sort of politely ambivalent, a little bit apathetic. This is just, you know, yet another expensive ceremonial event.

*<CLIP> GB NEWS: According to the Express, the majority of Britons don't care about King Charles’ coronation, a shocking YouGov poll finds….and it is kind of shocking it said that 64% of Britons don't care very much or don't care at all. While only 23% care a lot or care a fair amount.*

BROOKE: And then you have the Republican movement people in the U.K. which is about one in five, and they are annoyed and actively hostile to not only the king but also the coronation …

*<CLIP> GLOBAL NEWS: <<chanting>> NOT MY KING! NOT MY KING!*

BROOKE: … seeing it as essentially a useless process…

*<CLIP> THE GUARDIAN: Down with the monarchy! A federal republic is what we need. I find it a little bit upsetting for a reported net worth of 1.5 billion. And yet we got to foot the bill for the coronation.*

BROOKE: …and especially given the current cost of living crisis, the rising cost of energy. Inflation is hovering at around 10% in the U.K. and this is something that is on people's minds, you know, why is it that we don't have the money to pay for the NHS, the health system or teachers, but we've got millions of pounds to throw at this potentially unnecessary and over-the-top coronation?

SEAN: Hm.

BROOKE: So I do think that it is really a wide spectrum of response. But compared to Queen Elizabeth's coronation, which had people, like throngs of people lining up in the streets, millions of people watching on TV because it was the first televised coronation and people going out and actually buying TVs because they didn't have them, just to watch it, it is a completely different mood, much more apathetic, much more disinterested and even ambivalent in the sense of what is the point of all of this?

SEAN: How is this being viewed around the world, starting with the Commonwealth? Because I feel like I've been seeing articles for months now saying eh Canada doesn't care about the Coronation, Australia doesn't care about the Coronation, Jamaica doesn't care about the coronation.

BROOKE: I think across the Commonwealth the mood is also divided, but there is definitely a sense of disregard for the coronation. People don't really care and certainly not in the former slave colonies. And actually in Jamaica the Prime Minister there has said, you know, he is not attending the coronation and they're also planning to hold a referendum in 2024. They just announced this to completely sever ties with the monarchy.

*<CLIP> NOW THIS:*

*JAMAICA PRIME MINISTER ANDREW HOLNESS: What Jamaica is, as you would see, a country that is very proud of our history and very proud of what we have achieved and we are moving on.*

BROOKE: You know, these have kind of come to a head because of the coronation and the fact that there hasn't been an apology for colonialism and slavery, the legacies of slavery, and this is pretty widespread throughout the Caribbean.

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS:*

*JAMAICAN MINISTER OF LEGAL AFFAIRS, MARLENE MALAHOO FORTE: Why not a full apology? Is it because you may have to give back the wealth of the monarchy, taken from the people? Taken from the places that were colonized? Taken from the places where the people were enslaved?*

BROOKE: But then when you look at places that are considered, you know, white settler societies initially, like Canada, New Zealand, Australia, even there, the mood is ambivalent.

*THE GUARDIAN AUSTRALIA:*

*SPEAKER 1: I don't even know when the coronation is.*

*SPEAKER 2: It doesn't interest me at all.*

*SPEAKER 3: I think he’s too old to be king. And I think they really if they want to do something and get people interested, they should just have him step down and give it to … is it William? yeah…*

BROOKE: People, I think, are continuing to wonder why they have the British monarch as head of state in the 21st century, given the fact that retaining the monarchy is not the same source of political legitimacy and stability that it once was.

SCORING EDWARD ELGAR, NIMROD (ENIGMA VARIATIONS)

BROOKE: His reign will necessarily be much shorter. His influence will be limited. When compared to his mother, he rarely measures up, according to most people. Whether you're being… whether the polls are being conducted at home or around the world, he's just not as popular. And partly that is because he's had so many decades to show the public, you know, what he believes, who he is…

*<CLIP> PRINCE CHARLES: I’ve come to the conclusion that really it would have been far easier to have had two wives. <<laughter>>*

BROOKE: And so much of the job of being monarch is about being a figurehead and being politically neutral and essentially projecting that you are above scandal, you are above corruption, that you are essentially someone who is worth all of this deference. And Charles, though, has in the past been involved in multiple scandals, not just involving, you know, Princess Diana and the breakdown of his marriage and all of the embarrassment that came out after that in the media and the interviews that they gave.

*<CLIP> BBC:*

*MARTIN BASHIR: Do you think Mrs. Parker Bowles was a factor in the breakdown of your marriage?*

*PRINCESS DIANA: Well there were three of us in this marriage, so it was a bit crowded.*

BROOKE: But the treatment of Meghan Markle, which accelerated, again, the response of people in places like Jamaica where they thought, well, look how she was treated …

*<CLIP> OPRAH: Were you silent or were you silenced?*

BROOKE: … viciously attacked by the tabloids and not protected by the palace. Not only that, she contemplates suicide and ends up leaving the country and all of her royal duties. So this, I think, really tarnished Charles's reputation, particularly abroad and in the realms.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: But that hasn't stopped him from literally asking the entire world to essentially bend the knee.

BROOKE: Right. And yell out their support of him and their loyalty.

SEAN: Yell out?!

BROOKE: Oh, yeah, did you not hear about this? So this is something that Buckingham Palace has announced and they thought this would be a great way to modernize the coronation ceremony…

*<TAPE> GILES MCSPEARMINT: I, Giles McSpearmint, do swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to his majesty, King Charles, his heirs, and successors, according to the law!*

SEAN: <laughs> Modernize the ceremony?? <laughs>

BROOKE: Yes. Yes. So normally, when the king is anointed, the peers of the realm essentially swear their allegiance. And so what they were thinking was, well, we're going to democratize this and we're going to invite the people around the world so millions of people at home to yell out and swear their allegiance to the king. But this statement that they wanted the world to do this, just immediately backfired.

*<CLIP> THE GUARDIAN AUSTRALIA: will be saying an oath. Will you be standing up, putting your hand, your heart in your loungeroom and reciting the oath along with them, pledging allegiance to the king?*

*Speaker 1: I can't imagine doing that.   
Speaker 2: No! <laughs> No, not at all. <laughs>*

*Speaker 3: If someone paid me, then I might. But other than that, definitely not.*

SEAN: It sounds like what we call at Today, Explained, ‘Mandatory Fun’.

BROOKE: Right. I'm actually really curious to see what kind of commentary and length satirical approaches come out as a result of the coronation. My favorite post-Queen Elizabeth's death commentary was Trevor Noah. Trevor Noah had this amazing skit about Charles and pens.

*<CLIP> THE DAILY SHOW:*

*TREVOR NOAH: It's going to take a lot of work to shape the monarchy into something that everyone can get behind. But based on his first week in power, it looks like King Charles isn't the guy to do it.*

*ABC4: We begin with King Charles and his problems with pens….*

BROOKE: Which made me laugh so hard because he basically had to use this pen and it was leaking and he was freaking out.

*KING CHARLES: Oh GOD I HATE this….*

*QUEEN CONSORT CAMILLA: Oh it's going everywhere…*

*KING CHARLES: This bloody thing… it’s always leaking*

*TREVOR NOAH: And by the way, I love how Charles says the pens leak on him all the time. “This bloody thing! Arhghgughh!” You are literally the king of England. Dude, if you don't like the pens, get different pens. I'm not an expert in the monarchy, but I'm pretty sure the hierarchy doesn't go: Prince William, King Charles, and then the guy who buys the pens. I don't think that's how it goes. Just get a new pen!*SCORING UP AND OUT – RULE BRITANNICA

[BREAK]

<TAPE OVER “RULE BRITANNICA”> *GILES MCSPERAMINT: I, Giles McSpearmint, do swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to his majesty, King Charles, his heirs, and successors, according to the law!!!!*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with Professor Brooke Newman from Virginia Commonwealth University. And since she’s just written a book about the British monarchy and she teaches at Virginia COMMONWEALTH University, I asked her how on Earth the monarchy and the commonwealth have survived into the electric car / artificial intelligence era we find ourselves in right now.

BROOKE: So I think there's a real paradox when you're thinking about an ancient hereditary institution surviving as a key part of modern democracies. But we also have to think historically and realize that monarchy has a very long history in Europe. It was the predominant form of government from, you know, the Middle Ages all the way up to World War One. But by the start of the 21st century, many of these monarchies had ceased to exist. And actually three quarters of the member states in the European Union now are republics. And if you talk to experts about monarchies, why have they survived? Generally, what they'll say is that monarchies that have survived and that have continued into the 21st century have been accompanied by a steady decline of their actual political power, which has shrunk, you know, almost to zero. So these monarchies are in many ways symbolic. At the same time, they exist still because they're seen as nonpartisan heads of state.

*<CLIP> THE CROWN:*

*QUEEN ELIZABETH: But surely doing nothing is no job at all.*

*QUEEN MOTHER: To do nothing is the hardest job of all.*

BROOKE: And there's something about this idea of being nonpartisan, of being neutral that people seem to gravitate to, especially those who continue to defend the existence of monarchies, that I think, if anything, going to undermine the monarchy, it's going to be just the people within the institution kind of crumbling under the pressure of having to uphold this thousand year old institution and public expectations and demands in the 21st century in our all access, 24 hour news tabloid world.

SEAN: Is there any version of the modernization that, that King Charles is planning on doing or already doing that seems to be working other than shrinking the size of their footprint?

BROOKE: I only know what he's announced. So he's announced that he's going to shrink the family. He's also announced that he's going to step back from his more activist roles on, you know, climate change and the environment, for instance, and allow his heir, William, to take over some of those functions so that he can be seen as neutral. But I do think, and this is this is something I've been thinking about a lot lately because I work on slavery, the question of political neutrality is something that can be also complex because is, for example, the history of slavery and the issue of reparations – is that something where it has to be on one side or the other politically? Can it be something that the government and the Crown just decides to do and still view it as a politically neutral choice? Is talking about climate change something that could be seen as good for the nation and a global issue that could potentially be politically neutral. But instead, that's not what's happened. All of these issues, whether we're talking about slavery, racism, colonialism, the environment, climate change, they've all now become part of the culture wars. So it's become increasingly difficult for him to say anything without alienating somebody.

SEAN: I get that the royal family can mean something to people in the UK in times of national duress. What about the Commonwealth nations? What are they getting out of it? The Canada's and Jamaica's and New Zealand's?

BROOKE: In the Commonwealth realms, the monarch's powers are largely ceremonial. Political decisions are made by an elected parliament, by a Prime Minister who implements those decisions. So monarchs are head of state, but they're not the head of the government. But they have constitutional duties like approving new governments, formally approving legislation, appointing certain officials, granting state honors. And so I think the real question is really they're not getting a lot necessarily from this relationship with the monarchy. It's just historic. It's part of the process of these various former colonies, in particular becoming independent. And there isn't much much to say, I think, in terms of wanting to maintain this relationship, if you do not value both the institution of the monarchy itself and the person who is embodying that institution, which is Charles.

SEAN: Yeah. I mean, you make it sound like a marriage of convenience,

BROOKE: Right.

SEAN: Is there any drawback to that marriage of convenience for these 14 commonwealth realms?

BROOKE: Well, there's a drawback in the sense that Britain is still the power around which they pivot. It's still everything is about Britain as the centerpiece of this relationship. If you go to Jamaica, if you go to Canada, New Zealand, various realms, there are, you know, state…state names, there are place names, there are streets, there are festivals connected to the monarchy.And so it's hard for these realms to have a sense of their own history, independent from Britain and independent from the institution of the monarchy, because so much of their culture and belief system and education system is intertwined with Britain and British history and the trappings of empire. And I think that that is part of what the Republican movement is mostly about. It's the sense of we've been in this relationship for so long, you know, why are we still in this relationship? Is it dysfunctional or is it just a relationship of convenience, as you said? And if it is, what's the point? You know, why not essentially get rid of this relationship and then start to rename places and buildings and streets? And that's what they're doing in former realms like Barbados, where they said, we're out, you know, we're going to take this square and rename it after a local hero. And there's something. Very inspiring about that.

<CLIP> *RIHANNA’s “What’s My Name?”  
 Rihanna: Oh, na na. What’s my name?*

And I think you're more likely to get people to rally around, you know, national heroes and elected head of states than you are a figurehead from some other country that was your former colonizer.

SEAN: And and really, King Charles is getting in the way of putting Rihanna and all the money in Barbados.

BROOKE: Right. Exactly.

<CLIP> *RIHANNA’s “Bitch Better Have My Money”  
 Today, Explained’s Michael Raphael: Charles …  
 Rihanna: … better have my money*

SEAN: If King Charles's rule as king of England will be characterized by a bunch of countries bouncing from the commonwealth. Do you think that will make the British monarch stronger in a way because there will be fewer people?

BROOKE: No

SEAN: No, no.

BROOKE: No. It will diminish the British monarchy's global role and and it will diminish Britain's soft power and influence, because having the king as head of state over these realms, where there's 150 million people total, is a way of securing and maintaining Britain's power and influence overseas. And we shouldn't discount the importance of soft power. The British and Queen Elizabeth in particular, have been very strategic about using their soft power when they want to and when they think it's beneficial. And so once that once thought is eroded, you decrease the number of subjects that the monarch has. You decrease the level of influence of the monarchy and Britain around the world, and you decrease the stature and significance of the sitting monarch.But at the same time, you'll see, I think, announcements from Charles that he's fine with all of these realms leaving because there's nothing you can do. And so he would, for a PR move, it's better for him to say, you know, we support you in your Republican movements rather than to try to fight to keep them. But if I were him, I'd be thinking about my my legacy is as a historian, I tend to think take the long view. And I think, you know, he doesn't have that much time left, but he could make a real impact if he came out and actually acknowledged some of these issues and engaged in conversation with, you know, descendant communities that have been impacted by colonialism and slavery, that could make a real difference in public perceptions of the monarchy.

SEAN: And maybe can make life a little easier for for his descendants William and that little George kid.

BROOKE: <laughs> Exactly! Because otherwise he's just punting this reckoning down the road. He's essentially saying, William, you can deal with this, because eventually I think they're going to have to deal with this. This is not going away. And the paper trail is there. We know that the monarchy was involved in many, you know, brutal and heinous things in the past. And so you can't have an institution that exists because of hereditary wealth and privilege and then have it say, well, you know, the sins of our ancestors don't touch us or are unconnected to us, when clearly the only reason that you know, Charles is even on the throne is because of this hereditary system, it's because of his ancestors.

SEAN: And incest!

BROOKE: …Let's not go there. <laughs>

SCORING - YOU’LL BE BACK, HAMILTON (INSTRUMENTAL)

SEAN: Okay.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Brooke Newman. She’s a history professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. She’s got a book coming out titled *The Queen's Silence: The Hidden History of the British Monarchy and Slaver*y.

Our program today was produced by Queen Victoria (Chamberlin). It was edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact checked by Serena Solin and Laura Bullard, and mixed by Michael Rapahel and Paul Robert Mounsey. The rest of us at *Today, Explained* are Avishay Artsy, Hady Mawajdeh, Miles Bryan, Siona Peterous, Amanda Lewellyn, Haleema Shah, our managing editor Matthew Collette, and my co-host, Noel King. We’re blessed with extra help from Jolie Myers, music from Breakmaster Cylinder, and the expertise of Mama Chits. I’m Sean Rameswaram. *Today, Explained* is on the radio in partnership with WNYC and we’re part of the Vox Media Podcast Network.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]