

A Kingdom fit for Charles III?

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Prince Charles believes that he has a clear vision for his future kingdom. He has certainly mastered the pop mantras, such as: sustainability, human scale communities, respect for people of all faiths. But there is a flaw in his thinking: he wants to tag his vision onto the culture of greed. The physical embodiment of his hybrid community is annexed to Dumfries House in Scotland.

The house is an example of the opulent mansions built by patricians of the 18th century. It was inherited by the 2nd Marquess of Bute in 1814, and remained in that family until 2007 when the 7th Marquess sold the house and 2,000 acres for £45 million. The estate and its entire contents were purchased by a consortium headed by Charles, with the aid of a £20m loan from the Prince's charitable trust.

Charles did not realise that the price far exceeded what the property was worth. It was based on speculative values. Charles bought at the top of the market. So his grand plans were destined for a reality check. In 2014 the project for a “model community for Scotland” suffered when £6.3 million was knocked off the value of the estate. Land values in East Ayrshire had crashed. The completion date for his dream community of sympathetically designed homes was put on hold for 18 years.¹

The prince was a victim of the 18-year business cycle. The disappointment could have been avoided if his advisers had been acquainted with the cyclical nature of booms and busts in the land market. I had provided his mother's government (back in 1997) with the warning that land prices would peak in 2007. Tony Blair and his finance minister, Chancellor Gordon Brown, chose to ignore my warning.²

CHARLES had grand plans for the Dumfries Estate. His charity established projects for young people to learn skills that would enhance the quality of life in sustainable communities. But the plans, which he had outlined in *A Vision of Britain*, were foredoomed when land values crashed in response to the sub-prime mortgage crisis in 2008. What Charles did not understand when he condemned the “ugliness and mediocrity” of architecture and town planning in Britain was that these were the consequence of the rent-seeking culture. He could not be blamed for this gap in his knowledge. His tutors at Trinity College Cambridge did not alert him to the dark side of life on the British Isles. Nonetheless, as he went about the business of being the king-in-waiting, he did realise that there was something profoundly wrong. He wrote:

The further I delve into the shadowy world of architecture, planning and property development the more I became aware of the powerful influence of various interest groups. Hence the frequently violent and vitriolic reactions to the points I have been making. I am condemned for entering complicated and dangerous waters where even the most sophisticated professional might founder. I am even accused of abusing my power (*sic*) as Prince of Wales by intervening in matters best left to the architectural profession and, can you believe it, of acting undemocratically.³

Charles, however, was not able to decode the Brave New World architecture of concrete mass and angular steel which he found so distasteful. This was a world in which everything was tailored to maximise rent by minimising people's satisfaction with their living and working spaces, the better to crush as many more units onto land as possible. His confused reading of the past was revealed in statements such as this: "[O]ur forebears, to the last man, understood and followed an accepted set of ground rules". In fact, those ground rules were manipulated by the aristocracy and gentry in a way that would one day morph into the monstrous constructions that Charles censured.

The problem was *not* with the new technologies that made it possible to build sky-high and compress ever more families into tiny apartments. Appalling psycho-social conditions have been with us for generations. Buckingham Palace symbolises the culture that ordained the inhumane style of life which Charles found revolting. The palace was constructed by the Duke of Buckingham in 1703. It was not designed to reflect human scale or the values of people in general. It symbolised arbitrary power, material profligacy, domination over the population and private property rights over territory. This ideology nurtured the conditions that made it inevitable that, one day, steel and concrete fused with high technology would find its place in serving the primary interests of the rent-seeking culture. And so, Charles was not describing an authentic folk history when he lamented: "I believe that when a man loses contact with the past he loses his soul". He was unwittingly recalling the way people were severed from their communities and cultures over the course of many centuries.

HOW might Charles re-visualise the foundations of a kingdom fit for his reign? One good starting point would be to learn the lessons of the reigns of his two namesakes, Charles I and his son Charles II.

Charles I understood the source of problems in England at the beginning of the 17th century. Back in 1480 the Depopulation Act was aimed "agaynst pullyng doun of Tounes". Charles (1600–1649), revealed his concern for his subjects by opposing the enclosure of common lands. Enclosures were depopulating the countryside and turning peasants into destitute vagabonds. Social historian W.E. Tate recorded the turbulent events that Charles sought to control, earning him the title Commoners' King:

In 1603 the Council of the North were ordered to check the 'wrongful taking in of commons' and the consequent 'decay of houses of husbandry...' From about 1607 to 1636, the Government pursued an active anti-enclosure policy. In 1607 the agrarian changes in the Midlands had produced an armed revolt of the peasantry, beginning in Northamptonshire, where there had been stirrings of unrest at any rate since 1604. The counties mainly affected were Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Huntingdonshire, Leicestershire, the three divisions of Lincolnshire, and Warwickshire....

...[I]n 1630 the justices of five Midland counties were ordered to remove all enclosures made in the last two years. In 1632, 1635, and 1636 more commissions were appointed, and the justices of assize were instructed to enforce the tillage acts...From 1635-8 enclosure compositions were levied in thirteen counties, some six hundred persons in all being fined, and the total fines levied amounting to almost £50,000. Enclosers were being prosecuted in the Star Chamber as late as 1639. However, the Star Chamber was to vanish in 1641, and the Stuart administrative policy disappeared....

... If the reign in its social and agrarian policy may be judged solely from the number of anti-enclosure commissions set up, then undoubtedly *King Charles I is the one English monarch of outstanding importance as an agrarian reformer...*[E]ven the most unsympathetic critic must allow a good deal of honest benevolence to his minister Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, and some measure of it to his master. On the whole it is perhaps not too much to say that for a short time after the commissions issued in 1632, 1635, and 1636, Star Chamber dealt fairly effectively with offenders.⁴

Charles had to be stopped. He was: his head was chopped off in 1649. Britain was torn apart by a civil war. Dictator Oliver Cromwell defeated Charles II at the Battle of Worcester in 1651, and presided over a republic that made no further attempts at restraining the enclosure of common lands.

The land owners of England – especially the gentry, who had now joined the nobility in claiming the right to a share of the nation's rents – were pragmatic. They knew that there would come a time when they had to restore the monarchy. Charles II was brought back to preside over the kingdom in 1660: but he had to pay a price. He had to abolish feudal dues. The rents of the kingdom now fell under the formal sway of the land owners. The English Parliament granted him an annual income which was insufficient, drawn from the customs and excise duties that raised the cost of living of the population at large. The cumulative effect was mounting sovereign debts and yet more burdensome taxes on working people.

But the landowners still had a problem with Charles II. He favoured religious tolerance, and he even entered into a deal with the King of France to convert to Catholicism. This would undermine the strategic decision taken by Henry VIII during the Reformation. He neutralised God as a competing source of authority by turning the

Protestant Church into an arm of the state. This checkmated those who might be dissenters. They would not be able to appeal for support from an alternative source of power, for spiritual life was subordinated to the state. Now, the vicars of God were no longer free to point out that the Jubilee doctrine was an effective guide to the good life.

- ❖ *Sustainable economics*: when debts grew too burdensome, and when too many people lost their land, communities would fragment. The princes and priests of ancient city civilisations knew how to deal with that crisis – they issued a proclamation known as the Jubilee. This ordained the restoration of land to families, and the cancellation of state-based debts. The economy was rebalanced. This doctrine found its way into the Hebrew covenant, which we now call the Bible, where it is discussed in Chapter 25 of Leviticus.
- ❖ *Justice*: the claim that land could be owned by earthlings could be challenged by invoking God as the creator and owner of planet Earth. If anyone had the right to enjoy the fruits thereof, it had to be everyone, equally. This was the principle of justice which the dispossessed could invoke in their hour of need.

If the people of England felt that the temporal power was abusing them, there was certainly little point in appealing to the courts for justice. For, as W.E. Tate pointed out:

[T]he local administrators, upon whom the Crown depended to implement its [anti-enclosure] policy, were of the very [landed] class which included the worst offenders. A (practising) poacher does not make a very good gamekeeper!

If the religious life of the people was capable of serving their interests, they could invoke God against the tormentors. The Archbishop of Canterbury was significant in the policies pursued by Charles I. Under Charles II, the people – had they been free to do so – could have drawn inspiration from the Scriptures, and strength from worship in communion with others who felt similar grievances. That was the threat posed by Charles II. The Anglican Church was muzzled; not so the Church of Rome. Charles II reigned until 1685, but his Catholic brother, James II, enjoyed a much shorter period on the throne. The land lords knew that they had to strike, once and for all, to neutralise God's influence. Their solution was elegant: replace the Catholic king with a Protestant king. The coup was successful. The plotters invited a foreign prince to head the English state, a deed which they had the gall to call (and which we continue to celebrate as) a "Glorious Revolution". James was dethroned in 1688. He was the last Catholic monarch to rule Britain.

IF CHARLES III wishes to unite his disunited kingdom, he would do well to learn the lessons of his namesakes. His public pronouncements throughout his long period of waiting to ascend the throne reveal him to be a caring individual who wants change of the kind that falls under the rubric of "sustainability". We don't know what he has been saying to

governments and Whitehall departments, because his letters are deemed to be secret. But we do know that his public pronouncements are strung around spatial realities. As Prince of Wales, he had the right to build Poundbury, a Dorset housing estate on land owned by the Duchy of Cornwall. Here, he displayed his architectural aesthetics. From his vast agricultural holdings in the West Country he could produce and market organic food. With his status, he could sponsor a charity to help young people to create self-employment enterprises.

Poundbury evokes what Charles believes to be authentic folk architecture. The layout of the dwellings is sympathetic to the lifestyles people would choose if they had the choice. But this experiment was that of the dilettante with the exceptional resources to indulge his private preferences. It cannot represent a template for others to emulate unless Charles helps his first government to reconnect people's lives, in a tangible way, with the substance of nature and society.

False prophets are emerging not just in Britain, but throughout Europe, who seek to fill the void in philosophy. People like the comedian-actor Russell Brand, who preaches revolution and encourages people not to vote in elections. They gain a hearing because of the discontent caused by public scandals, one of which is the epic scale of homelessness. Across Europe, 11 million homes stood empty in 2014. That was sufficient to accommodate twice the number of the continent's homeless.⁵ Each vacant dwelling bears silent witness to the failure of a financial system which is exclusively concerned with serving the voracious appetite of the rent-seeking culture.

People know that their democratically elected politicians do not have the solutions to the problems that make life a misery for millions of citizens. It would be supremely ironical if someone representing an arcane institution from the past, an unelected monarch, was to give voice to the land-and-tax project that would put the people of Europe back on to the path of social and constitutional evolution.

Charles's son, William, is second in line to the throne. Through his mother Diana he is descended in blood from Charles II. Will Charles III bequeath a kingdom fit for William?

References

¹ "Princely Cost of Estate", *Sunday Telegraph*, 11 January 2015.

² Fred Harrison, *2010: Inquest* (2010), available as a free download from www.sharetherents.org.

³ HRH the Prince of Wales, *A Vision of Britain*, London: Doubleday, 1989, p. 9.

⁴ W.E. Tate, *The English Village Community and the Enclosure Movements*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1967, pp.125-126. Emphasis added.

⁵ Rupert Neate, "Scandal of Europe's 11m empty homes", *The Guardian*, February 24, 2014.