**(CHECKED AGAINST DELIVERY)**

SPEECH: TRIBUTES TO HER LATE MAJESTY THE QUEEN

Thank you, Mr Speaker. I hope the House will not mind if I begin with a personal confession: a few months ago, the BBC came to see me to talk about Her Majesty the Queen, and we sat down, and the cameras started rolling, and they requested that I should talk about her in the past tense. And I’m afraid I simply choked up, and I couldn’t go on. I am really not easily moved to tears, but I was so overcome with sadness that I had to ask them to go away. And I know that today there are countless people in this country, and around the world, who’ve experienced the same sudden access of unexpected emotion. And I think millions of us are trying to understand why we are feeling this deep, and personal, and almost familial sense of loss.

Perhaps it’s partly that she’s always been there – a changeless human reference point in British life. The person who – all the surveys say – appears most often in our dreams. So unvarying in her polestar radiance, that we have perhaps been lulled into thinking that she might be in some way eternal. But I think our shock is keener today because we are coming to understand, in her death, the full magnitude of what she did for us all.

And think of what we asked of that 25 year old woman, all those years ago: to be the person, so globally trusted, that her image should be on every unit of currency, every postage stamp, the person in whose name all justice is dispensed in this country, every law is passed, to whom every minister of the crown swears allegiance and for whom every member of our armed services is pledged, if necessary, to lay down their lives.

Think what we asked of her in that moment: not just to be the living embodiment – in her DNA – of the history, and continuity, and unity of this country, but to be the figurehead of our entire system, the keystone in the vast arch of the British state, a role that only she could fulfil because, in the brilliant and durable bargain of the constitutional monarchy, only she could be trusted to be above any party political or commercial interest, and to incarnate impartially the very concept and essence of the nation.

Think what we asked of her – and think what she gave. She showed the world not just how to reign over a people, she showed the world how to give, how to love, and how to serve. And as we look back at that vast arc of service, its sheer duration is almost impossible to take in. She was the last living person in British public life, to have served in uniform in the second world war. She was the first female member of the royal family in a thousand years to serve full time in the armed forces.

And that impulse to do her duty carried her right through into her tenth decade, to the very moment in Balmoral – as my Right Honourable friend has said – only three days ago, when she saw off her 14th Prime minister and welcomed her 15th. And I can tell you that in that audience she was as radiant, and as knowledgeable, and as fascinated by politics as ever I can remember, and as wise in her advice as anyone I know, if not wiser. And over that extraordinary span of public service, with her naturally retentive and inquiring mind, I think – and doubtless many of the 15 would agree – that she became the greatest statesman and diplomat of all.

And she knew instinctively how to cheer up the nation, how to lead a celebration. I remember her innocent joy more than ten years ago, after the opening ceremony of the London Olympics, when I told her that the leader of a friendly middle eastern country seemed actually to believe that she had jumped out of a helicopter in a pink dress and parachuted into the stadium. And I remember her equal pleasure on being told, just a few weeks ago, that she had been a smash hit in her performance with Paddington Bear. And perhaps more importantly, she knew how to keep us going, when times were toughest.

In 1940, when this country and this democracy faced the real possibility of extinction, she gave a broadcast – aged only 14 – that was intended to reassure the children of Britain. She said then: “We know, every one of us, that in the end all will be well.” She was right. And she was right again, in the darkest days of the covid pandemic, when she came on our screens and told us that we would meet again – and we did.

And I know I speak for other Prime Ministers when I say – ex Prime Ministers – when I say that she helped to comfort and guide us, as well as the nation. Because she had the patience and the sense of history to see that troubles come and go, and that disasters are seldom as bad as they seem. And it was that indomitability, that humour, that work ethic, that sense of history, which together made her Elizabeth the Great.

And when I call her that I should add one final quality, of course, which was her humility. Her single-bar electric-fire, Tupperware-using refusal to be grand. And unlike us politicians, with our outriders and our armour-plated convoys, I can tell you – as a direct eyewitness -- that she drove herself in her own car, with no detectives and no bodyguard, bouncing at alarming speed over the Scottish landscape, to the total amazement of the ramblers and tourists we encountered.

And it is that indomitable spirit with which she created the modern constitutional monarchy. An institution so strong, and so happy, and so well understood – not just in this country, but in the Commonwealth and around the world – that the succession has already seamlessly taken place.

And I believe she would regard it as her own highest achievement that her son, Charles III, will clearly and amply follow her own extraordinary standards of duty and service. And the fact that today we can say with such confidence: “God Save the King”, is a tribute to him, but above all to Elizabeth the Great, who worked so hard for the good of her country, not just now, but for generations to come. That is why we mourn her so deeply, and it is in the depths of our grief that we understand why we loved her so much.