



The Coronation Oath

Standard Note: SN/PC/435

Last updated: 30 November 2005

Author: Aileen Walker/Oonagh Gay
Parliament and Constitution Centre

This Note offers a summary of coronation procedures and sets out the statutory requirements for the Coronation Oath. SN no 683 *The Act of Settlement and the Protestant Succession* is also relevant.

Contents

| | | |
|----|---|---|
| A. | Introduction | 2 |
| B. | Coronation procedures | 2 |
| C. | The Coronation Oath | 3 |
| D. | Further reading: | 6 |
| E. | Text of the Oath as set down in the <i>Coronation Oath Act 1688</i> | 6 |
| F. | Text of the oath taken by Elizabeth II in 1953 | 7 |

A. Introduction

On the death of the reigning monarch, the person entitled to succeed to the throne does so as soon as his or her predecessor dies, as summed up in the phrase: "The King is dead; long live the King!" *Halsbury's Laws* gives some historical background to this maxim of common law that the King never dies.¹ The new Sovereign is proclaimed as soon as possible at an Accession Council.² Following the proclamation, the Sovereign reads a declaration and takes an oath to preserve the Church of Scotland. An oath to maintain the Protestant succession, known as the **accession declaration**, must be made before the Houses of Parliament. It is normally delivered some months later at the next State Opening of Parliament. The text of the accession declaration, as laid down in the *Accession Declaration Act 1910* is as follows:³

I [monarch's name] do solemnly and sincerely in the presence of God profess, testify and declare that I am a faithful Protestant, and that I will, according to the true intent of the enactments which secure the Protestant succession to the Throne of my Realm, uphold and maintain the said enactments to the best of my powers according to law

B. Coronation procedures

A **Coronation Committee**, composed of privy counsellors, is appointed to make the necessary preparations for the coronation.⁴ The appointment of the Coronation Committee is promulgated by Order in Council.⁵

The coronation itself consists of various different ceremonies. At the coronation of Elizabeth II, the following ceremonies took place:⁶

20. The ceremonies. The forms and ceremonies observed at coronations of various monarchs have differed somewhat. The ceremonies at the coronation of Elizabeth II were:

- (1) the presentation of the monarch to the people by the Archbishop of Canterbury accompanied by the Lord High Chancellor, the Lord Great Chamberlain, the Lord High Constable and the Earl Marshal, with Garter King of Arms preceding them, and the recognition of the monarch by the people;
- (2) the taking of the coronation oath in the form provided by statute;
- (3) the presentation to the monarch of the Holy Bible;
- (4) the anointing by the Archbishop of Canterbury with the consecrated oil;

¹ Vol 8(2) para 40 (see footnote 2)

² as described, for example, on the Monarchy web site - <http://www.royal.gov.uk>

³ *Accession Declaration Act 1910* (10 Edw 7 & 1 Geo 5 chap 29), schedule

⁴ for further details see *Halsbury's Laws*, Vol 12(1), para 18

⁵ as relates to the coronation of Elizabeth II see Order in Council of 6 June 1952, in *London Gazette* 10 June 1952

⁶ for further details see *Halsbury's Laws*, Vol 12(1), para 20

- | | |
|------|---|
| (5) | the investiture with the colobium sindonis, the supertunica or close pall of cloth of gold, with a girdle of cloth of gold; |
| (6) | the presentation to the monarch of the spurs and sword, and an oblation of the sword by the monarch; |
| (7) | the investiture with the armills, the stole royal and the robe royal, and delivery to the monarch of the orb; |
| (8) | the investiture with the ring, the glove, the sceptre with the cross and the rod with the dove; |
| (9) | the putting on of the crown; |
| (10) | the benediction; |
| (11) | the enthroning; |
| (12) | fealty by the archbishops and bishops, and homage by the peers; |
| (13) | the oblation by the monarch of a pall or altar cloth and an ingot of gold, and |
| (14) | the celebration of the holy communion. |

A full description of the ceremony is included in John Brooke-Little's *Royal Ceremonies of State*.⁷

C. The Coronation Oath

The basis for the **coronation oath**, which forms part of the coronation ceremony, is enshrined in statute in the *Coronation Oath Act 1688*.⁸ There is a statutory requirement on the monarch to take the coronation oath.⁹ The text of the oath as set down in the 1688 Act is appended to this note. This Act required the King William and Queen Mary, as joint monarchs, to swear an oath during the coronation ceremony; the form of the oath is set out in section 3. The text includes the promise that they would to the utmost of their power to –

maintain the Laws of God the true profession of the Gospell and the Protestant reformed religion established by law [...] and [...] preserve unto the bishops and clergy of this realm and to the churches committed to their charge all such rights and privileges as by law do or shall appertain unto them or any of them

A Queen Consort, as opposed to a Queen regnant, has not during the twentieth century been required to take this oath. However, the crowning of the Queen is immediately followed by the taking of communion, in both kinds, which of course a Catholic, or members of some other denominations, could not do.¹⁰

It is worth noting that the coronation oath has been modified without statutory authority. The present Queen swore a slightly different version of the oath, although it still included a promise to maintain the established Protestant religion in the United Kingdom. The text of the oath taken by Elizabeth II in 1953 is appended.

⁷ John Brooke-Little, *Royal Ceremonies of State*, 1980 (pp 41 ff)

⁸ *Coronation Oath Act 1688* (1 Will & Mar chap 6)

⁹ *Act of Settlement 1701*, s2, and see *Halsbury's Laws* Vol 8(2), para 39 for statutory conditions of descent of the Crown

¹⁰ For more information on this point see SN/PC 683 *The Act of Settlement* and the Protestant Succession

The legal obligations surrounding the oath are set out in *Halsbury's Laws*:¹¹

28. **The Crown's duty towards the subject.** The essential duties of the Crown towards the subject¹ are now to be found expressed in the terms of the oaths which every monarch is required to take before or at the coronation. The duties imposed by the coronation oath² are:

(1) to govern the peoples of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the dominions etc belonging or pertaining to them according to their respective laws and customs³;

(2) to cause law and justice in mercy to be executed in all judgments, to the monarch's power;

(3) to maintain the laws of god, the true profession of the Gospel, and the protestant reformed religion established by law, to the utmost of the Sovereign's power;

(4) to maintain and preserve inviolable the settlement of the Church of England, and its doctrine, worship, discipline and government as by law established in England; and

(5) to preserve unto the bishops and clergy of England, and to the Churches there committed to their charge, all such rights and privileges as by law do or shall appertain to them or any of them⁴.

The monarch is also bound by oath to preserve the Presbyterian Church in Scotland⁵.

1 See para 26 ante.

2 The coronation oath must be taken at the coronation under the Act. As to the statutory form of the oath and the alteration in the oath as at present administered see para 39 note 3 post. As to the citation of the Act of Settlement see para 35 note 3 post.

3 By the Act of Settlement s 4, it is declared that 'whereas the laws of England are the birthright of the people thereof and all the kings and queens who shall ascend the throne of this realm ought to administer the government of the same according to the said laws and all their officers and ministers ought to serve them respectively according to the same...the same are...ratified and confirmed accordingly. As to the Crown's duty to exercise the prerogative in conformity to law see para 368 post.

4 The duties as set out above are based on the oath in the Form and Order of Service In the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, 1953. These duties incorporate the duties set out in the coronation oath enacted in the Coronation Oath Act 1688 s 3.

5 Union with Scotland Act 1706 art XXV (embodying art XXV of the Treaty Union) ss 2-5; and see paras 51-66 post. This oath is taken before the coronation; see para 39 note 4 post. As to the accession declaration see para 39 post.

39. **Statutory conditions of tenure.** The descent of the Crown in the present line of succession is subject to certain statutory conditions as follows:

¹¹ Vol 8(2) paras 28 and 39

- (1) a person who is a Roman Catholic or marries a Roman Catholic¹, is excluded from inheriting, possessing or enjoying the Crown, and in such case the people are absolved of their allegiance, and the Crown is to descend to such person or persons, being protestants, as would have inherited it in case the person so reconciled etc were dead²;
- (2) every person inheriting the Crown must take the coronation oath in the form provided by statute³;
- (3) every king or queen must make, subscribe and repeat, sitting on the throne in the House of Lords, either on the first day of the meeting of the first Parliament after the accession, or at the coronation, whichever shall first happen, a declaration that he or she is a faithful protestant, and will, according to the true intent of the enactments which secure the protestant succession to the throne, uphold and maintain those enactments to the best of his or her powers according to law⁴;
- (4) any person coming into possession of the Crown must join in communion with the Church of England⁵; and
- (5) it is also provided as a fundamental term of the union of England with Scotland that every person who succeeds to the Crown must take and subscribe the oaths for the preservation of the Established Church in England and the Presbyterian Church in Scotland⁶.

- 1 The terms of the Act of Settlement are 'any person who shall be reconciled to, or hold communion with, the see or Church of Rome, or profess the popish religion, or marry a papist': s 2. As to the citation of the Act of Settlement see para 35 note 3 ante.
- 2 This is the joint effect of the Act of Settlement s 2, and the Bill of Rights, s1. As to the history and citation of the Bill of Rights see para 35 note 3 ante.
- 3 Act of Settlement s 2. The form of the oath is provided by the Coronation Oath Act 1688 s 3, and must be by the Archbishop of Canterbury or York, or any other bishop of the realm appointed by the monarch for that purpose, in the presence of all persons attending, assisting or otherwise present at the coronation s 4. The form of the oath as at present administered differs from that provided by the Act owing to the disestablishment of the Irish Church (by the Irish Church Act 1869), and to the provisions of the Union with Scotland Act 1706 art XXV. As to the oath for the preservation of the Established Church of England see the text and note 6 infra. For the form of oath as administered to Her present Majesty see para 28 ante.
- 4 Bill of Rights s 1; Act of Settlement s 2; Accession Declaration Act 1910. The declaration was made by King George V at the opening of Parliament, and therefore the necessity for making it at the coronation did not arise:7 HL Official Report (5th series) col 4. The same was true in the case of Elizabeth II. King George VI made the declaration during the coronation service: see Supplement to the London Gazette, 10 November 1937, p 7054. For the purposes of any enactment requiring an oath or declaration to be taken, made or subscribed by the monarch on or after the accession, the date on which the monarch attains the age of 18 years is deemed to be the date of the accession: Regency Act 1937 s 1(2). However, it should be noted that the monarch has no minority, and his exercise of the prerogative is valid even if he has not attained 18 (see Co Litt 43a, b; 2 Co Inst, proem, 3; 1 BI Com (14th Edn) 248), although the Regency Acts (see para 40 post) mean that the prerogative is exercised in the monarch's name while the monarch is under 18. By 28 Hen 8 c 27 (Succession to the Crown) (1536), power was given to future monarchs to revoke all enactments made by Parliament whilst they should be under the age of 24. This enactment was repealed temporarily by Edw 6 c 11 (Repeal of 28 Hen 8 c 17) (1547), and both these statutes were

determined and annulled by 24 Geo 2 c 24 (Minority of Successor to Crown) (1750), s 23 (repealed).

5 Act of Settlement s 3.

6 See paras 51, 53 post. The oath for the preservation of the Established Church of England is now administered as part of the coronation oath: see text and note 4 supra. The oath for the preservation of the Presbyterian Church was taken by Queen Elizabeth II at a meeting of the Privy Council held immediately after her accession, the instrument being subscribed in duplicate, and one part sent to the Court of Session to be recorded in the Books of Sederunt, and afterwards to be lodged in the Public Register of Scotland, the other part remaining among the records of the Council to be entered in the Council book: see the London Gazette Extraordinary, 8 February 1952, p 839; London Gazette, 12 February 1952, p 861.

D. Further reading:

Monarchy web site - <http://www.royal.gov.uk/>

R Allison and S Riddell (ed), *Royal Encyclopedia*, 1991

Roy Strong *Coronation* 2005

Janos M Bak, *Coronations: Medieval and Early Modern Monarchic Ritual*, 1990

Nicholas Kent, *A Modern Monarchy* TRG, 1995

Edward Ratcliff, *The Coronation Service of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II*, SPCK, 1953

E. Text of the Oath as set down in the *Coronation Oath Act 1688*¹²

3. Form of oath and administration thereof

Will you solemnly promise and sweare to governe the people of this kingdome of England and the dominions thereto belonging according to the statutes in Parlyament agreed on and the laws and customs of the same?

The King and Queene shall say,
I solemnly promise soe to doe.

Arch bishop or bishop,
Will you to your power cause law and justice in mercy to be executed in all your judgements.

King and Queene,
I will.

¹² *Coronation Oath Act 1688* (1 Will & Mar chap 6), s 3

Arch bishop or bishop
Will you to the utmost of your power maintaine the laws of God the true profession of the Gospell and the Protestant reformed religion established by law? And will you preserve unto the bishops and clergy of this realme and to the churches committed to their charge all such rights and priviledges as by law doe or shall appertaine unto them or any of them.
King and Queene.
All this I promise to doe.

After this the King and Queene laying his and her hand upon the Holy Gospells, shall say,
King and Queene.
The things which I have here before promised I will performe and keepe Soe help me God.

Then the King and Queene shall kisse the booke

F. Text of the oath taken by Elizabeth II in 1953¹³

The Queen having returned to her Chair, (her Majesty having already on Tuesday, the 4th day of November, 1952, in the presence of the two Houses of Parliament, made and signed the Declaration prescribed by Act of Parliament), the Archbishop standing before her shall administer the Coronation Oath, first asking the Queen,

Madam, is your Majesty willing to take the Oath?

And the Queen answering,

I am willing.

The Archbishop shall minister these questions; and the Queen, having a book in her hands, shall answer each question severally as follows:

Archbishop. Will you solemnly promise and swear to govern the Peoples of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, Pakistan, and Ceylon, and of your Possessions and the other Territories to any of them belonging or pertaining, according to their respective laws and customs?

¹³ transcript supplied by Buckingham Palace; see also Edward Ratcliff, *The Coronation Service of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II*, SPCK, 1953

Queen. I solemnly promise so to do.

Archbishop. Will you to your power cause Law and Justice, in Mercy, to be executed in all your judgements?

Queen. I Will.

Archbishop. Will you to the your utmost of your power maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel? Will you to the utmost of your power maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law? Will you maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England? And will you preserve unto the Bishops and Clergy of England, and to the Churches there committed to their charge, all such rights and privileges, as by law do or shall appertain to them or any of them?

Queen. All this I promise to do.

Then the Queen arising out of her Chair, supported as before, the Sword of State being carried before her, shall go to the Altar, and make her solemn Oath in the sight of all the people to observe the premises: laying her right hand upon the Holy Gospel in the great Bible (which was before carried in the procession and is now brought from the Altar by the Archbishop (The Bible to be brought) and tendered to her as she kneels upon the steps), and be brought saying these words:

The things which I have here before promised, I will perform and keep. So help me God.

Then the Queen shall kiss the Book and sign the Oath. And a Silver Standish

Queen having thus taken her Oath shall return again to her Chair, and the Bible shall be delivered to the Dean of Westminster.