

Notes from a very small island

The Queen

Winter is now here, on St Helena that means the locals all start dressing up in fleeces, hats and occasionally gloves. Given that it rarely drops below 20 degrees in town, and yesterday got to 28 degrees, gloves seem a bit much. The school kids seem to take this to extremes with puffer jackets looking like they are about to scale the north face of the Eiger, however claiming that it is too cold is a bit of a local affectation matched only by the summer refrain that it is too hot.

One benefit of the cooler weather is that the courthouse is not so uncomfortable, this being especially welcome during the recent sitting of the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court is a hybrid of the Crown Court and High Court and sits twice a year. The Chief Justice travels out to the island, stays in judge's lodgings and has his own car and driver. We have a formal opening with speeches in court followed by sherry at 10.30am, before starting on with a day's work. The sherry has the benefit of putting a slightly different complexion on the day but can catch up with you a bit later on. Like most St Helena traditions the formal opening is done with cordiality and informality, for some reason a man in red robes wearing a wig getting out of his car in the centre of town is not incongruous at all.

There are however one or two exceptions to the lack of formality, Remembrance Day is one but the other is the Queen's Birthday. In St Helena she is very much revered. The Governor is her representative on the island and probably has greater powers than she has in the UK, he could declare war for instance, though I am not sure if there is anyone small enough to attack. We could have a crack at one of the uninhabited islands in the South Atlantic but it's unlikely that any of the boats bobbing around in the harbour could make it that far.

Back to the Queen. Her birthday is celebrated with gusto, especially at Plantation House, the Governor's residence. A marquee is erected and suits or formal wear are the order of the day. Food and drink are provided and then there is a speech by the Governor, followed by the giving of honours from the birthday honours list. It being a public holiday everyone is in high spirits and, given the liberal interpretation of the already lax drink driving laws by those who drove to the shindig, few restrict themselves when free booze is on offer.

I must say I enjoyed it enormously and despite erring on the side of republicanism I have come to understand that the Queen is not just venerated because of who she is but also by what she represents. The islanders still feel betrayed by the passing of the British Nationality Act 1981 where they lost their British citizenship along with all British Overseas Territories, only to see the Falkland Islanders exempted from this loss in 1982. Only once Hong Kong was safely returned to China did the British government reinstate citizenship in 2002. That reinstatement had the impact of shrinking the population from 6000 to 4500 in very quick order as many escaped the poverty which is still prevalent on the island to work in the UK (for some reason mainly in Swindon).

However, the breach of faith shown by the British government in removing citizenship from these most loyal of subjects still rankles. That the islanders remained staunchly loyal during the wilderness years is due to a very real sense of belonging. I suspect that without the constancy of the Queen, that feeling of affiliation to the UK would have dissipated considerably. So when the toast to the Queen was given by the Governor I, along with everyone else, had no hesitation in joining in.

- Duncan Cooke



"The Governor is her representative on the island and probably has greater powers than she has in the UK, he could declare war for instance, though I am not sure if there is anyone small enough to attack."