

Extract from 'This is Charles's chance to turn personal passion into soft power'

by Trevor Phillips, writing in The Times on Saturday 29th April

Few people are as experienced and as effective at deploying his convening power as the new King. His technique of taking wealthy philanthropists and business leaders to deprived inner cities and refusing to let them leave without pledging to help could come in handy in such a drive.

However, it is on the international stage that the new King may make his mark most tellingly. The divide emerging across the world could hardly be clearer. On one side there is an axis of authoritarianism: China, Russia, Iran. Countries such as India, Poland, Hungary are drifting in that direction. The hundred or so nations that in effect regard themselves as non-aligned are weighing up the virtues of messy, noisy and disruptive democracy with its regard for freedom of speech and plurality of views, against the efficiency of China's one-party state, which can reasonably claim to have lifted hundreds of millions out of abject poverty. All too many are tilting the wrong way.

There is just one pan-global club that could be the basis for a fightback against Putin's cynicism and the ruthlessly effective realism of the Chinese Communist Party: the Commonwealth. In a nerveless stroke of raw political power, the late Queen named her son as successor of the global alliance. It was a daring move. Many had made noises about their refusal to bow the knee to the crown, and muttered about electing a leader not from the old mother country. She dared them to defy her; they blinked and acceded to his leadership.

Charles can now – if he wants to – use his ascendancy to promote democracy and freedom. He has already declared his support for Ukraine, strikingly sending his son William on a high-profile visit to a Polish base near the battle zone. As Prince of Wales he pointedly snubbed China's leader during his last state visit. He cannot do so now as King; but he can be an active leader for the Commonwealth's values. I suspect he won't shrink from taking on some of the alliance's own backsliders, arguing that we can hardly criticise China, Russia or Iran when some of our own allies undermine democratic freedoms by, for example, persecuting gay people and rival ethnic groups. This is an exercise in soft power that a divided, fractious US shows no sign of being able to pull off.

Our King is restless, driven and capable summoning up great force in prosecuting his own beliefs on the environment, architecture and farming. But he knows his years of waiting were a rehearsal for the real thing – a life in which his passions must now become those of his people, his campaigns advance the interests of the state. Will he apply his prodigious energies to those demands? I for one hope he does, as I believe he really can make a difference. And only he, by his actions, can answer the question that will be hanging in the air next Saturday: what exactly is the monarchy for?