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A Moment of Madness?

5 It has become an embarrassing memory, like a mawkish, self-pitying teenage entry in a diary. We cringe to think of it. It is our collective moment of madness, a week when somehow we lost our grip. A decade on, we look back and wonder what came over us.

There were some who felt that way at the time, but they were the minority. Indeed, they complained they 10 were a marginalised, even oppressed, group - gagged dissidents in a new totalitarian state of the emotions. Some looked at the mountain of Cellophane-wrapped bouquets that piled up outside Buckingham Palace - a million of them, it was said - and sniffed "floral fascism" in the air. Later, Christopher Hitchens wrote that in the week after Princess Diana was killed in a Paris car crash, Britain became a "one-party state", such was the coercive nature of the public reaction. He sought out the Britons who had been forced to close their 15 shops or cancel sporting events on the day of the funeral, lest they feel the rage of the tear-stained hordes outside. The writer Carmen Callil was more specific: "It was like the Nuremberg rallies."

That view was not much heard in the first week of September 1997. Indeed, Granta magazine adopted the tone of a samizdat newsletter a few months later when it dared to publish a piece titled Those Who Felt 20 Differently. But how things have turned around.

Now Hitchens' and Calill's view has become the settled one. The conventional wisdom of 2007 holds that Diana week was an outburst of mass hysteria, an episode when the British public lost its characteristic cool and engaged in seven days of bogus sentimentality, whipped up by the media, and whose flimsiness was 25 demonstrated when it vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

The set text of this new consensus is Stephen Frears' Oscar-winning film, The Queen. By making the monarch the story's emotional centre of gravity, the audience was invited to see the week as she did: the baying mob outside, high on confected grief, utterly lacking the stoic, steady wisdom she personified. In the 30 heat of that September week, the Queen had been cast as villain and the public felt wronged. In the Frears film the roles were reversed. Confirmation of how much had changed came when the one-time republican Helen Mirren accepted her Oscar for playing the title role: "Ladies and gentlemen," her speech concluded to ecstatic applause, "I give you the Queen."

35 But which memory is right? Did that week of 10-hour queues to sign condolence books, of Elton John singing in Westminster Abbey, of a hearse heading up the M1, its windscreen obscured by bouquets hurled from motorway bridges - was all of that some bizarre lapse, a national psychotic episode? Should we be mortified when we look back on it? Or did something happen that week that deserves to be remembered another way - as a glimpse of the country Britain was becoming and something else too: a rare, collective 40 moment of tenderness?

Central to the revisionist thesis typified by the Frears movie has been the speedy fading of the sentiments that were on display that week. How sincere can all that grieving have been, runs the logic, given how quickly Diana has been forgotten? Back in 1997 some commentators, even the odd religious scholar, were 45 seriously discussing whether the late princess might one day be canonised. Yet here we are a decade later and her grip on the national consciousness has become tenuous. Her face is no longer on the cover of magazines; plenty of British teenagers would struggle to identify a photograph of her. Only the Daily

Express, with its near-daily diet of Fayed-fuelled conspiracy theories, maintains the flame - a sorry indictment in itself.

The explanation is not hard to fathom. Diana's fame rested in part on novelty: millions waited to see her latest hemline, haircut or lover. Now that she is dead, there is nothing new to see. She left behind no body of work that can be absorbed in her absence. Unlike Marilyn Monroe, there are no films; unlike Elvis, there are no songs. Instead, she was for 17 years the star of a compelling soap opera, one that found a global audience. Her sudden death was shocking, but for many millions what they had lost was not so much a real person as a beloved character in a story. They grieved but then they moved on - to new soaps, new celebrities, new heroines.

And so the past nine anniversaries have passed by, each marked less emphatically than the one before. Donations to the Diana memorial appeal have dried up, from £20m at the time (with a further £80m raised through commercial activities) to just £222,000 last year. Visits to the princess's burial site - an island in the middle of a lake in the grounds of the family estate at Althorp, Northants, which once threatened to become a British Lourdes - have fallen sharply. While 150,000 made the journey in 1998, that number had halved by 2004.

No better symbol exists for the fading of Diana than the creation that was meant to commemorate her life: not a great park or concert hall, but a water feature. The Diana memorial fountain in Kensington Gardens took seven years to arrive - only to be closed a matter of months later when it turned into a mudslide. (It eventually reopened, fenced off and with a ban on children playing in the water.)

Even July's Concert for Diana, though it brought 63,000 people to Wembley for what would have been the princess's 46th birthday, did little to restore her place in the national mind. Many of those who came told reporters they were there to hear Rod Stewart or Brian Ferry rather than to remember Diana. There was a hint of that in the reaction to her sons, William and Harry. They were hardly hailed as the bearers of some sacred Diana legacy; when they failed to stand up for a mexican wave they were greeted by distinct, if good-natured, booing. The virtual beatification of Diana that had occurred in 1997 was nowhere to be seen: those that did speak of her felt obliged to qualify their remarks by first acknowledging her flaws, describing her as "silly" or "difficult", a tacit recognition perhaps that the public view of the princess had changed.

If the reverence has receded, so too has the anger that burned so fiercely that week. Back then, Camilla Parker Bowles was a hate figure. A story circulated, denied by her friends, that she had ventured into a supermarket only to face enraged shoppers who began pelting her with bread rolls. A poll at the time found 54% believed Charles should step down as Prince of Wales, while 60% said he could certainly not become king if he married Camilla. But that hostility had melted away by April 2005, when the middle-aged couple married quietly in Windsor, to a murmur of warm-hearted public approval.

The Queen's recovery was even more rapid. Tony Blair hailed her as "the best of British" at her golden wedding celebrations, less than three months after Diana's death. Her golden jubilee in 2002 brought gushing tributes, as did her 80th birthday four years later. The recovery of the institution itself from the anti-monarchist buffeting it received in 1997 seemed to be confirmed when the crowds turned out again in 2002, this time to mourn the Queen Mother. The Firm was back on a solid footing; the lunacy of Diana week now recalled as a mere blip in the company fortunes.

Frears' film captured one subtle aspect of all this. In September 1997, the hero of the hour was Tony Blair: he who captured the moment by lamenting the death of "the people's princess", he who seemed to speak for Britain while the monarch was tongue-tied. But six years later, it was Blair who faced the crowds, taunting him and shaking their fists. The contrast between prime minister and sovereign now favoured

Elizabeth. That much was apparent from reaction to the best line in The Queen, when Helen Mirren reflects on the public backlash she has just endured, warning the fictitious Blair: "One day, quite suddenly and without warning, the same thing will happen to you." The audience all but cheered.

In other words, says the now-prevailing view, Diana week was an illusion. It struck poses that were not real. It crackled with emotions that were reversed within months. It may have caught the eye for a brief while, but it was fleeting and therefore of little value. It offered nothing more lasting than, to coin a phrase, a candle in the wind.

Yet that is hardly the whole story. It was not just a few overexcited Dianistas, leaving their teddy bears and rhyming poems at Kensington Gardens, who believed something important happened those seven days in September. The royal family believed it, too.

A month after the funeral, the Windsors gathered for what was billed as a crisis meeting. They decided, in keeping with the New Labour-ish spirit of the times, to commission some market research. Mori duly convened a focus group, which reported that the royals were seen as "remote, out of touch, wasteful, not genuine, lacking in understanding, poor value for money and badly advised".

So began an intense, and effective, exercise in rebranding. Chastened by the experience of Diana week, the royals moved swiftly to modernise, to present themselves as less stuffy and distant, more in step with the mores of the day - more, in short, like Diana. Charles posed with the Spice Girls; the Queen visited a pub, rode in a taxi and even entered a McDonald's.

It seems the live televised address the Queen was pressured into making on the day before Diana's funeral, in which she said there were lessons to be learned from her daughter-in-law's example, was more than empty rhetoric. Ten years on, the monarchy, superficially at least, no longer looks centuries behind the times. When Diana's sons strode on to the stage for that memorial concert, their ID badges hanging, roadie-style, around their necks, they bellowed: "Hello, Wembley!" Hard to imagine either their father or grandfather doing that.

Beyond the palaces, that week left other lasting marks. It set a kind of template for public mourning. The subsequent deaths of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells at Soham, or of Jill Dando, or indeed the Queen Mother, all seemed to elicit a similar response, one whose format was shaped in September 1997. The pile of bouquets, the handwritten notes, the childlike messages: they all appear routine now, but 10 years ago they were new for Britain and even shocking.

And that fits a wider shift. Part of what scandalised "those who felt differently" was the abandonment of traditional British reserve, the sudden and public outflow of emotion. What happened to the traditional, steady upper lip, they asked. It wobbled and it hasn't stopped wobbling. Crying in front of others and on camera felt novel in 1997. Now it is commonplace, among men as well as women. Watch the male candidates to be Alan Sugar's Apprentice or Andrew Lloyd Webber's Joseph: blub, blub, blub. The change has even reached into what until this year we imagined was the last redoubt of national steadfastness: the military. Arthur Batchelor, who was captured along with 14 other British naval personnel in the Persian Gulf in March, admitted that when the Iranians stole his iPod, he cried himself to sleep.

These are legacies that have not gone away, but Diana week did something else important, too. It allowed us to see who we had become. In a perceptive essay written for the first anniversary, Andrew Marr wrote that "with Diana's death, Britain suddenly stared at itself in the mirror and didn't quite recognise the face looking back. No longer was the expression tight-lipped, white and drawn with reticence. Diana was the Queen of another country, a multicultural, liberal and emotionally open Britain."

It's worth remembering this, when you hear those who mock the recollection of that week. The crowds that gathered in those days of bright sunshine were striking then in a way that would be unremarkable now. They were mixed, an assembly of black and Asian faces alongside white; gay people alongside straight. There were middle-aged women, tissues balled up into their sleeves, but also the young, tattooed and pierced, who somehow felt Diana, cast out of the royal house, spoke for them. As only a great public occasion can, the Diana event let us see what Britain now looked like. Contrast the crowds for Diana's funeral with those who lined the streets for Winston Churchill in 1965: they are two different countries. Many of the political themes that would dominate for the next decade could draw upon that week for their legitimacy. Whether it was a more relaxed attitude to gay rights, attempts to make Britain more ethnically inclusive or an assumption that the age of deference was over, much was predicated on what had been witnessed after Diana's death.

And the politics did not end there. For one thing, Tony Blair added to the electoral mandate he had gained on May 1 a kind of emotional mandate, forging a bond with the nation that Sunday morning when he correctly intuited the public reaction to the death of the princess - a connection that kept him riding high until the Iraq war.

More deeply, the week carried an intense political charge, a distinct tinge of protest to the mourning. The writer Bea Campbell called it a "sub-republican rumbling in the discontent", and that is about right. The crowds were not about to lop off any heads; they were easily appeased by a belated royal walkabout on the Friday. Nevertheless, there was an anger that caught the palace, politicians and most of the media by surprise - and which alarmed them all. (It is a myth that the whole thing was "got up" by the press. Those who were involved in it hour by hour know: the newspapers were following the mood, not leading it.)

Dan Balz, who covered those events for the Washington Post and still marvels at them, says it was palpable, "the public's modest contempt for a royal family that was clearly out of touch". Reporters only had to undertake a brief vox pop to hear the quiet anger, much of it clearly bottled up for many years. Its sources were various, starting with the immediate irritation at the Windsors' refusal to emerge from Balmoral or to break with protocol by flying a flag at half-mast over Buckingham Palace. Also in the mix was fury at the royals' past cruelty towards Diana, their stripping her of the title HRH, their failure to pay taxes, their life of remote privilege. (Campbell also reckons there was a collective howl of rage from women, with Diana the symbol for all those who had struggled with low self-esteem, eating disorders or callous husbands.) As the crowds started demanding the Queen appear, to "stand with her people", it was easy to imagine the whiff of revolution in the air. The clock seemed to have wound back to 1820, when the equally spurned Queen Caroline brought rioters and radicals on to the streets, backing her against George IV.

If that feeling, vague and inchoate as it was, dissipated as soon as it arrived, then that is not the fault of those who were there. If anything, it suggests a failing of our political system, that it did not know how to channel this challenge to the British class system, a challenge to an aristocracy that had dared present its own peculiar mores as "national tradition" for so long.

But perhaps the most persuasive defence of that week is the one that simply recalls what it was like at the time. The sceptics, the self-styled dissidents, sneered that all those candles and flowers were Mediterranean and Catholic rather than British and Protestant. One might point out that England was Catholic for more than a thousand years and Protestant for only a few hundred, so if there remains an appetite for ritual and spectacle, it's hardly surprising. Or you could simply say that, despite everything, it all felt very British.

There was next to none of the wild shrieking and shouting one would expect from the "mass hysteria" that was claimed. On the contrary, people queued patiently for hours at a stretch, an act of quiet contemplation rather than a manic outburst. On the day of the funeral, whole streets were draped in silence; even the
200 famed applause, which started outside and spread into Westminster Abbey, was soft and low.

It all combined to make an atmosphere that was, despite the revisionism of recent years, a warm one to inhabit. I visited Kensington Gardens the night before the funeral and it remains one of my most cherished London memories. There were clusters of people sitting on the grass, chatting in a low murmur. Pictures
205 hung from trees, flowers were everywhere, and the whole place was lit with 1,000 candles. A London park had become an outdoor cathedral, its congregation led by no one but themselves.

The mood that week was, much of the time, rather tender. People felt they ought to honour the Diana that had campaigned against landmines or hugged those with Aids and so they were on best behaviour,
210 determined to be civil and kind to each other. The sun shone and Britons experienced something that had become rare: a moment of togetherness. They would try to recapture that mood, watching England in the World Cup a year later or at the turn of the millennium. They wanted it to feel like 1997 again.

So this was not Nuremberg, nor was it George Orwell's hate week. It was seven days when we let down our
215 guard, together and under blue skies. It didn't change the world, but nor was it meaningless. We can look back on it now with nostalgia or indifference, but one thing is clear: we have nothing to be ashamed of.

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