

I was a career diplomat for 35 years, and British Ambassador/High Commissioner [= an ambassador in a Commonwealth country], several times. In the UK, ambassadors formally represent the Head of State, i.e. The Queen (or King), rather than the government of the day. Thus you are "Her Majesty's Ambassador" - not, for example, "Boris Johnson's ambassador" - even if in practice you have to take your orders from the Foreign Secretary. So you set off for your new post as Ambassador/High Commissioner (the last time for me was in Pakistan, plus Afghanistan) bearing an old-fashioned formal letter to the Head of State in the country you are going to, signed by The Queen. I didn't think of taking photocopies - and anyway these large parchment documents wouldn't fit into a photocopying machine! But I've preserved one or two by accident. They start off like this:

Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of her other realms and territories queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith, &c, &c, &c.

To all and Singular to whom these presents may come, Greetings! Whereas it appears to Us expedient to nominate some person of approved Wisdom, Loyalty, Diligence and Circumspection to represent Us in the character of Our Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary in[name of country].....: now Know Ye that We, reposing special trust and confidence in the discretion and faithfulness of Our Trusty and Well-beloved Sir Alastair Christopher Donald Summerhayes McRae have nominated him..... Etc etc etc.

...and so on and so on. On arrival, you have to hand this quaint document over to the Head of State concerned. Before you set off for this new job, in principle you would be received for a short meeting with The Queen. In practice, She has such a busy schedule that She did not always have time to do this; but I was received several times in this capacity. The Queen was always well- briefed about the country I was going to, and asked pertinent questions or offered opinions. I only have time to recount one of these sessions.

Mette and I (yes, in our days, spouses were invited to attend too) were ushered into the waiting room outside The Queen's private drawing-room. There was already someone else sitting there, ahead of us in the queue: he was wearing clerical robes. I didn't have time to discover who he was before he was summoned. Mette and I waited for another 15 -20 minutes until he came out, and it was our turn. The Queen asked us to be seated. But then, rather than open the interview with some leading question about the country I was going to, She asked: "Do you think I was right to do that?" I must have looked baffled, so She explained that the cleric she had just received was the diplomatic representative of The Vatican. In most countries, the Vatican's "ambassador" is called "The Papal Nuncio". But in the UK, because of the delicate historical relations between the Anglican Church and the Vatican, relations had always been at a slightly lower level. So The Queen had just told the Vatican's man that from now on, he would be upgraded and received as Papal Nuncio. I chose this little anecdote to show that The Queen has always taken her duties as titular Head of the Anglican Church ("Defender of the Faith") very seriously. And for 70 years, has been incredibly hard-working and dedicated to her job.

I first saw The Queen as a 16-year-old schoolboy watching the carriages roll by in The Mall at Her coronation on 2 June 1953. And I've had the privilege of meeting Her a number of times since then. But I won't take more of your time. I hope you have a highly enjoyable party to celebrate the reign of this remarkable and much-loved monarch.

Sir Christopher MacRae