

## The House of Windsor

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Genuine socialists have always detested the Windsor monarchs. They appear to confront a nation sucked into helpless crown-worship, without a single ounce of decent republicanism in its make-up. While they dream of communism, the country has not advanced out of this old feudal rhapsody. The 'serious' bourgeois Sunday papers lead their bloodshot cousins into new levels of hysteria. Given the opportunity Labour councillors slobber over the Regal fingers and the Dynastic feet. Huge crowds and street fêtes in Jubilee year testified to the continuing popularity of monarchy.

Yet the socialist challenge to this vast bewichment is often noticeably feeble. 'Parasites and Scroungers!', to quote a recent anti-Jubilee leaflet handed round by one group. 'The cost of all this frippery!', as William Hamilton and others from the fading non-conformist traditions of the labour movement tend to say. Marxists sometimes go beyond these homilies, but it is usually to give a standard, somewhat mechanical dismissal in their own terms: monarchy is a deliberately maintained illusion, a class opiate meant to dull and divert class consciousness. Our ruling class has always been strong on ideology, far superior to coercion as a method of domination when it can be made to work; this is one of its strongest ideological arms, and certainly one which works.

This is good enough, as far as it goes. However, few really feel it *is* far enough. Confronted by the appalling popularity of monarchy, it is not enough to choke with despairing indignation, or console oneself with tales of the one or two honest Queen-haters there were in the pub last Saturday night. Such attitudes lead either to a sort of disgust with popular unreason—the masses who let themselves be duped by a meretricious show—or to romantic notions of a people not *really* fooled by it all, secretly commonsensical behind the Union-Jack façade.

Both notions are dangerous to socialism. It is much more important to ask what are the historical reasons for the Great-British monarch's specific character. These cannot be reduced to abstract considerations of ideology and class. Furthermore, it is these same characteristics which help us to grasp the causes of the institution's popularity. The British people are not daft because they still adore a Crowned Head; but they *are* the victims of a political culture which is in certain definable aspects retarded and limited. These peculiar limitations descend from the experience of empire, and are rooted in the nature of the existing state. It is useless to criticize monarchy in isolation from these things. On the death of Queen Anne in 1714, the British ruling class invited the monarch of an obscure German princely state to step into her shoes. They did this to ensure the preservation of the social order established by the limited bourgeois revolutions of the previous century—1640 and 1688. It was essential that the new dynasty should be controllable, and Protestant. No other formula would guarantee the 1689 Bill of Rights, and the union with a mainly presbyterian Scotland achieved only seven years earlier.

The dynastic pretext for the change lay in the Hanoverians' distant blood connection to the old Stuart line. However, this was a secondary (though still quite important) technical question. Their distance, their Protestantism, and their foreignness were what counted. At home the Electors of Hanover were petty absolute rulers of the kind that still dominated the European political landscape. But the British élite—calculated, correctly enough, that the culture-shock of transplantation from their small homeland to a great mercantile state would keep them quiet.

Much more was at stake here than the desire for a quiet life. The post-1688 ruling caste of landlords and merchants dreaded the return of absolute kingship—still the normal form of government almost everywhere else. To gain some idea of the universe of mummified reaction which kingship represented at that time, one need only consult Perry Anderson's analysis of the period in his *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. It was still a world of benighted despots, showing few signs of following the Dutch or English path of revolution. The closer Stuart pretenders—with a far better blood-claim to the throne than George I—yearned to return the British Isles to that world of sanctified traditionalism. We should remember that the threat was not finally dispelled until thirty-two years after George was brought in, with the defeat of Charles Edward Stuart's rebellion at Culloden in 1746.

This was the negative side of the installation of the House of Hanover (who only retitled themselves as the House of Windsor in 1917, driven by a wave of anti-German feeling). But the positive aspect of the operation was more important. As well as preventing the return of Catholic Absolutism, the new family was forced to adapt itself to the character of the post-1688 state. This was—and still remains—the crucial point. From the outset the modern UK monarchy has been one part of a distinctive state-system.

### **Betraying the Revolution**

In the late-feudal world the British state was of course a revolutionary force. It was the first great achievement of bourgeois revolution, transcending the city-state limits of earlier forms of middle-class power. The enormous impetus it gained from the break-through would carry it, in a short space of time, to the defeat of France and a headlong career of colonial expansion.

And yet, this astonishing creation still unavoidably bore the marks of its epoch. This first-born capitalist state—like the first-born socialist states of the 20th century—suffered profound deformations which reflected its struggle against the hostile world-environment. Until 1746 its very existence was in doubt. The Bourbons and Hapsburgs were at the door, waiting on one false move from the upstart. They had powerful internal allies still eager to undo the Revolution Settlement, not all of them in Ireland or the Scottish Highlands.

The monarchy was an important part of the pattern of betrayal of the revolution. The penalty of being first into the new political universe was that the ruling clique had to feel its way into permanent hegemony, through a long process of shifts and stratagems. Judged in the light of the radical republicanism that had flowered during the revolutions themselves, these were shameful concessions. The gilded empiricism of the 18th century state could easily be depicted—and was—as an abject surrender to the epoch. Just as Soviet Russia can be caricatured as re-born Tsarism, so the Old Corruption of Walpole and Pitt could be seen as no better than the other *anciens régimes* of the continent.

In effect, the post-1688 political system could not help being a bastard form. It cleared a path towards bourgeois egalitarianism, the more rational constitutional order of the 19th century—yet never, itself, quite arrived in that novel world. The original great capitalist state never became a typical one. The ruling class fell foul of its own pragmatism, and became locked in the bizarre illogic of its transitional polity. To begin, with the Hanoverian kings were merely a part of that odd compromise position. Afraid of a return to Divine Right, the governing class did not feel able to dispense with kingship altogether. Quite rightly, they thought that a show-crown would help them to keep authority, both internally and in foreign affairs. Such a stage or 'constitutional' monarchy could help overawe a still unpoliticized people at home, and keep their end up in transactions with the continental despots. To this purpose, the oligarchy embarked upon a mighty programme of showmanship whose fruits are with us still. They were helped by the 1745 revolt, and the paroxysms of bourgeois relief which followed its defeat.

However, this primitive version of *la société du spectacle* registered quite limited success. It was not in fact simple to transfigure the 'wee German lairds' into an acceptable simulacrum of Great-Power Monarchy, and—as early 19th century radical history showed—popular scepticism about the institution remained fairly strong. The personal limitations of early specimens of the family had constricted the campaign; George III's dotage and the debauchery of the Prince Regent threatened to cripple it altogether. In the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, the true spirit of absolute kingship wreaked comic vengeance upon its phoney successors.

The usual myth is that Queen Victoria cured all that, through the personal charisma of a genuinely bourgeois monarch: prudish, sober, penny-pinching and deferential to the norms of a middle-class state. School text books have always dropped a veil of decency over the preceding decades, with suspect insouciance (incidentally, this is one reason why the Regency has qualified so notably as a period for romantic historical fiction). One recognizes here a typical idealist inversion of the historical process: a personality is made responsible for the change, rather than a material change for the personality. In reality it was military and colonial success that transfigured the stodgy British monarchy into the Disneyish charade of modern times. The British state's victory over the more radical bourgeois revolution in France had been the key. It is as if—pursuing the analogy with socialist states mentioned before—the Brezhnev régime were to conduct a successful conquest of China and carve up the whole Asian continent afterwards. Even the most doltish and reptilian of Establishments could hardly fail to acquire a new lease of life.

In the context of the times, the Windsor regime's successes were if anything greater than that. For a period, it virtually 'occupied' the world. The advances of its industrial revolution delivered continents into its paws, in a way that no subsequent state would ever be able to emulate. The rich life-blood of a world's wealth rushed to its head, lending a new magnificence and meaning to its mediocre dynasty. It is true that only a distinctly more *petit-bourgeois* life-style in the Royal Household made it quite acceptable to the newly-rich middle classes; however, this was only the necessary condition of the apotheosis, not its cause. Moral retrenchment was a petty price for external glory; and the glory was reflected from the state's position of primacy and imperial dominance.

### Imperial Counter-Revolution

It was imperial domination that provided the Crown with its brightest jewel in both the figurative and literal senses of the word. India provided the

material basis for enveloping the working class in bourgeois mythology. It also provided the Koh-i-noor, the largest uncut jewel in the world, which to this day is mounted in the ceremonial Crown.

Such remarkable external success had deep internal repercussions. It served to fix the old, transitional polity of England into an unbreakable shell. What could possibly be wrong with a society which had won these triumphs? The newer bourgeoisie of an industrial century was won over, first to tolerance then to love of the bastard-state. All the marks of crypto-feudalism were rhapsodized into supreme virtues. That generally backward-looking, sham-bolic character inflicted upon it by historical isolation turned into a manifestation of racial wisdom: the British gift for peaceable non-radical change.

Basking in its 'golden age' of colonial depredation, the new Anglo-Scottish bourgeoisie felt no particular need to reform and modernize its state system. The ramshackle machinery was simply patched up and expanded where necessary. Dynasty and all. Political sloth was justified as *laissez-faire*; ideological somnolence was under-written by the new, romantic myth of origins—a sickly travesty from which the Revolution drained away altogether, and where Charles I became a tragic hero. At the core of this system, all the vital features of the 18th century compromise remained intact (as they do today): hierarchy, deference, a civil-based elitism, gentlemanly secrecy in government, 'amateur' administration, and so on. This is the context that explains the new role of the monarchy in modern Great Britain—or, it is more strictly accurate to say, in a Britain which has refused to become 'modern' for so long that it is now incapable of the jump without a revolution. From mid-Victorian times onward, as the Westminster polity slumped into ever more convinced inertia and self-satisfaction, dynastic matters grew proportionately more significant. Under the Empire, socio-political conservatism was registering a success without precedent. Kingship became *the* mighty expression of this tendency—a tendency which, of course, could not help being really popular in nature, and basically affecting the development of Britain's working class movements.

The British monarchs do not stand alone in the social sky (as fairy-tale accounts pretend). They are surrounded by a necrophiliac state-order groaning with beautified relics, rusty talismans and mystic precedents. Reconstruction of this tomb was a first priority of the post-1945 Labour Government. The Crown rests, as it has done since the Revolution, upon a narrow but determined civil élite devoted to the sapient management of that mass passivity linked to empire. It is the whole pre-modern hegemony which supplies the climate of British Royalty. Without the former, the latter would at once lose the peculiar ideal power and popularity it still enjoys.

This is why it is quite misleading to compare the Windsors to other surviving forms of monarchy. It is true that some modern states (like Denmark or Sweden) have retained a ceremonial dynasty in preference to an elected president. But this is the obverse of what happened in the United Kingdom. Here an archaic state-order has employed—one might say over-employed—the symbolism of monarchy to avoid modernization. The Windsors are not really bicycling kings and queens, egalitarian monarchs. They are the essential tools of a social conservatism which has successfully disabled both egalitarianism and political democracy.

### Compensation for Defeat

As British imperialism shrank and the regime wobbled on the long downward course, the Crown swelled in importance. Each new retreat was

accompanied by louder Royal salvos, more obsequious slaverings from the high bourgeois Establishment and more hysterical flag-waving down below. In general, a Crowned Head is supposed to function as a palpable image of continuity and reassurance; here, it acts as a powerful guarantee of stifling over-continuity and Empire-style complacency.

It would be a much happier situation if Queen Elizabeth were functioning as an opiate to forestall the coming socialist revolution. The truth is many degrees more dismal. She and her pyramid of lackeys constitute a dead-weight repressing—so to speak—the revolution before last in Britain. Their ideological force is built upon a now ancient loss of radical nerve by the bourgeoisie itself—upon the inner capitulation of last century, most strikingly expressed for us by the virtual disappearance of middle-class republicanism in Victoria's reign. The 'magic' of our monarchs is the sweet odour of decay arising from this mountainous dunghill of unfinished bourgeois business.

The particular, exaggerated popularity Royalty enjoys is the voice of a still-active social conservatism. It is one manifestation of a nation which turned its back on the pains of progress generations ago, then grew unable to do anything else. Now, each new half-hearted and knock-kneed failure to 'put Britain on its feet again' is followed by a relapse into Tolkien-like reveries of compensation. The Dynasty is essential for this. Thus, the Labour Party launched its last white-hot painless revolution in 1964–67; a decade afterwards it presided over the Silver Jubilee and quite openly prayed for North Sea oil to make the Golden event of 2002 possible. Oil will keep the invalid carriage going as the empire once did. At the end Sir David Owen's Government will stage a 21st Century Spectacular making the Jubilee look like a village fête.

It is odious, but not surprising, that so much of the working class in four countries remains enthralled by this geriatric symbolism. The social conservatism in question is *not* a confidence-trick practised on them by the governors (although of course there are elements of this in the stage-management of the Royals). It is a deeply-embedded cast of mind, and one not yet shattered by mass experience. Imperialism has left behind a detritus far bigger than superficial judgements on the left admit, and several generations have squeezed this substance into compacted, resistant form. It is transmitted in a thousand ways through the capillary vessels of popular culture, as well as whipped up by Ministers and press barons.

For this reason counter-hysteria against the Queen has small effect. Denunciations of what she costs, or how many acres she owns, are a futile sidetrack. This is not in any way a counsel of despair. It goes without saying that an uncompromising republicanism will remain central to all the non-Labourist forms of socialism in Britain. However, there is little value in abusing the Monarch herself, in isolation from the decrepit Cathedral-State where she is enthroned. When this edifice is at last shaken down it will bury her dynasty in its ruins. Unable to raise much public protest against these orgies, socialists can take some comfort from the fact that the ruling class is losing its marbles. As one stone after another falls on its head off the crumbling old pagoda, the ancient Windsor *Weltanschauung* will give way too. The *Observer* and the BBC will go on stuffing royalist polyfilla into the cracks as long as they can. But the foundations themselves are collapsing under the added stresses of world recession, political divisions and nationalist agitation in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Rather than squirming socialists ought to plan—I hope with at least a measure of optimism—for the day when the rulers admit that the old building is uninhabitable, and come out of it fighting.

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