

Britannia Unchained: The King, his Prime Minister and the Class Struggle

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Martin Clarke writes on the spectacle of patriotism and nationalism as 'the nation' mourns the death of Queen Elizabeth II.

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The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.

GUY DEBORD

Ciaran Jenkins, Channel 4's Scottish correspondent, hit the nail on the head: 'Now the vast apparatus of the state will swing into action in a long-rehearsed plan.' And so it has proved to be, with wall-to-wall TV and radio coverage detailing every conceivable detail of Queen Elizabeth's life story, untold numbers of pages and images in every newspaper and an assumption that every individual, every institution, shares in the grief of the royal family as the long funeral procession from Scotland and lying-in-state begins.

Using the royals to boost patriotism and nationalism is a gift that goes on giving. We have a Coronation to come, plus numerous other events centred on Charles and his family, among them the Investiture of William as Prince of Wales, an enormous event as far as the establishment is concerned.

But the new King effect however powerful, will not solve the government's economic dilemmas or stop the social conflict it gives rise to. The proposal put forward by Liz Truss to address the energy price crisis is that the government gives the energy companies £150 billion or thereabouts, and then recoups it in taxation. Which is going to hit the working class and some middle class people very hard down the line. And it won't do anything for that huge section of the working class, now in the millions, suffering already from food and fuel poverty.

A new national anthem will be of little value as the battle over rising prices resumes. While the government has temporarily frozen rent increases, this is another price whammy that is going to eventually burst over private tenants, making tens of thousands homeless.

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A regular left wing blogger reported on the day of Elizabeth Windsor's death that the bars and restaurants in London's legal district were full of the usual noise of chatter and laughter of any Thursday evening. The well-to-do at least were not taking mourning too seriously.

Reactionary Tories

But this reactionary mobilisation attempts to sweep everything before it. So much so that [unions fighting](#) for a living wage like the RMT and CWU, felt compelled to call off planned one-day strikes. As Dave Kellaway [pointed out](#) on these pages, the ruling class must be raising a glass for extra special thanks to the departed monarch for delivering them respite from the storm over energy prices and from the wave of strikes.

For the new Tory Prime Minister, it couldn't have come at a better time, allowing her to play a leading role in the nation's mourning, constantly on air, looking solemn and prime ministerial, with all the Commons of whatever party looking on appreciatively. It won't last, but it's a useful launch pad for the wave of repression of the labour movement and democratic right that is coming, all wrapped in ultra-patriotic nationalism.

This new Tory government is designed to continue the reactionary class warfare on every front, super-Thatcherism in action, designed to throw back the unions, trash the environmentalists, call the media to order and envelop the whole of the nation in another wave of reactionary nationalism and militarism. What is planned can be seen from the composition of Truss's Cabinet.

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The centrepiece of the new legislative agenda will be a Bill enabling the government to ban strikes in the public sector—among rail staff, postal workers, teachers, civil servants in national and local government as well as the NHS. This will be the most contested piece of legislation since the anti-LGBT+ law in the 1980s ('Section 28').

The Cabinet against woke

Suella Braverman, the new Home Secretary, is set to be even 'tougher on immigrants' than her predecessor Priti Patel and will try to deport thousand to Rwanda. She will pursue her pet project, which is fighting 'woke' ideology, aka what she calls 'cultural Marxism', together with clamping down on environmentalist demonstrators like Extinction Rebellion (XR). People who chain themselves to railings can expect long prison sentences. Watch out for a harsh application of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, enabling the police to ban any demonstration it wants, allowing them to legally break up demonstrations and ban public meetings.

The war against 'woke' ideology is going to be pursued especially against trans rights. Expect from Suella Braverman and Liz Truss a grimly cynical defence of 'safe spaces' for women, and a new campaign against left-wing, feminist, and LBGTQ-friendly teaching in schools and universities. Expect also campaigns to drive out teachers and lecturers deemed to be too left wing.

There are three amazingly cynical appointments to the Truss government which shows what they are up to. Jacob Rees-Mogg, a climate change sceptic, has been put in charge of the environment. The joke of course is on any significant investment in renewable energy, a determination to open new gas and oil fields in the North Sea and promote fracking. Already announced is the scrapping of the so-called 'green levy' on income tax designed to fund the energy transition, which is a dead duck with this government.

James Cleverly, a lieutenant colonel in the army reserve, has been made Foreign Secretary. At this time of war, with Britain jostling with Poland for the position of most hawkish government in the pro-Ukraine alliance, it's especially good to have someone with a military background at the Foreign Office. Foreign aid will have a deepened military bent.

Therese Coffey has been handed the portfolio to 'fix' the NHS crisis. Without huge recruitment and billions more of investment, fixing the NHS really means privatisation. Coffey is an anti-abortionist. Expect a squeeze on the funding of family planning clinics. And don't expect any sensible social distancing and mask-wearing if Covid-19 spikes in the winter (very likely).

A further significant appointment, predicted on these pages, is Wycombe MP Steve Baker to the number two spot in the Northern Ireland office. Baker is the leading ideologist of the European Research Group the core of which is the ultra-right nationalist faction nicknamed the Spartans for their refusal to vote for any Brexit deal under Theresa May. Baker is another military type, a former engineer in the RAF, and a noted climate sceptic. He is at the Northern Ireland office to ensure no deal with the Irish Republic or the European Union over the border conflict. He is also there to ensure the Spartans come onside during the Truss premiership. Baker himself said after Truss's election that he had been a rebel for seven years and didn't want to be a rebel anymore. You don't need a weatherperson to tell which way the wind blows.

Baker is an evangelical Christian and is opposed to same-sex marriages. On a world scale, for example in Brazil, Central America, Africa and the United States, evangelical Christian churches play a major political role, opposing abortion and LGBTQ+ rights. The key themes of the Evangelicals are currently on display by Giorgia Meloni, leader of the neo-fascist Brothers of Italy, likely to do very well in the September 23 national elections. Meloni told a Republican rally in the United States 'I am a Christian, I am a mother and I oppose same-sex marriages, we must fight the LGBT lobbies'—to thunderous applause. If Meloni becomes Italian prime minister and Trump wins the 2023 presidential election, together with Liz Truss the balance of politics in the Global North will pitch significantly to the right. None of these leaders are traditional fascists, but they are on the creeping fascism spectrum, assuming many of the themes championed by more traditional fascists.

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Britannia Unchained

Liz Truss and incoming Chancellor Kwame Kwarteng were both among the five signatories to the 2012 book 'Britannia Unchained', whose central proposition is that the British don't work hard enough and don't understand the liberating power of hard work (aka 'aspiration'). According to the authors, the new 'Masters of the Universe' are not the billionaire bankers that the left goes on about, but the industrial innovators and software engineers that East Asia has in abundance. Two

other signatories were ex-Home Secretary Priti Patel and ex-Justice Minister Dominic Raab. Both are not in the new Cabinet because they backed Rishi Surnak in the Tory leadership race.

The five authors of [the book](#) were accused by many commentators of angling to input into practice the ideas of American radical right theorist [Ayn Rand](#). Ayn Rand believed that the state does not have the right to tax anyone, that the main enemy of reason is altruism, that individuals owe nothing to anyone else and that altruism, empathy for others, is undermining modern capitalism. This set of ideas had the contradiction that Rand believed in the state's role as the provider of an army and police to defend the rights of 'the citizens.' Which logically means at least some taxation. People who sympathise with her ideas today, at least those in pro-capitalist governmental parties, understand that Rand's ideas won't work, because capitalism needs a state apparatus broader than the police or army to underpin and back up capitalist profits. Who gives the billions to collapsed banks, as happened in 2008?—the government of course (in Britain and the United States especially). Who recycles the earnings of working people into the profits of the military-industrial complex—the same answer again. So contemporary politicians who sympathise with the outlines of Ayn Rand's politics, that wealth and social advancement are the result of individual effort and thus the most deserving come out on top—they understand that capitalism needs a state. They want a small state with minimal social provision, of course. But enforcing this needs the police force, courts and ultimately an army. If spending on the army and police is maintained, the only bits of the modern state that can be significantly downsized are those concerned with social provision, like health, education, social care for senior citizens, unemployment and disability benefits. This is the terrain that will be fought over in the upcoming period in Britain.

The conflict over 'woke' ideas—the rights of disabled people, minority genders, women and ethnic minorities, will become much more centre-stage in the next period. The term 'work' is the modern equivalent of 'politically correct', ie a term of abuse that justifies racism, misogyny and the repression of gender minorities. Think of the millions of times a day people say 'I know this isn't politically correct, but...'—generally followed by something grossly sexist or racist

All this will be overlain with the gigantic spectacle of coronations, investitures, speeches, openings and walkabouts. The publications like *Majesty* and *Royal Family* are going to see their profits go supercharged.

Guy Debord, the author of *The Society of the Spectacle*, would have had a field day explaining the plethora of royal images and events before us, as the deceased Queen is almost deified and her son becomes the symbol of authority, patronage and deference. As he put it:

The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as part of society, and as instrument of unification. As a part of society it is specifically the sector which concentrates all gazing and all consciousness. Due to the very fact that this sector is separate, it is the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness, and the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of generalized separation.

Martin Clarke

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 12 Sep 2022:

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/the-king-his-prime-minister-and-the-class-struggle/>

• We at the Anti*Capitalist Resistance wish to hear your views, too. If you have an opinion about either this or another piece we have published, please contact us at editorial anticapitalistresistance.org to share your comments, criticisms and ideas. We will consider any email marked for publication for “Letters to ACR” or as a future ACR article.