

Britain: Understanding the monarchy - a socialist analysis

Monday 19 April 2021, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 17 April 2021).

Following my previous article about Prince Philip [\[1\]](#) writes Dave Kellaway, I was lambasted by someone for being too journalistic in response to events and not providing a serious enough left analysis. That article was never meant to perform that role.

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This piece on the other hand will discuss the monarch, as an institution and one that is an important part of the ideological underpinning of the British capitalist system. It helps to reproduce the material conditions of existence of that system. It is not just a set of wrong ideas or illusions that the ruling class imposes on the majority as a false consciousness but a whole system of concrete processes and embedded practices that are always contradictory.

Simply put, monarchy divides working people enough to create another significant obstacle for socialists and progressives who want to win a decisive majority over to action for system change. For it to be effective you do not need to have all working people believe that the monarchy is a good thing. Keir Starmer is totally wrong in his cringe-worthy parliamentary eulogy to suggest that the British people have never 'faltered' in Philip's lifetime in their support of the monarchy. Surveys have shown considerable minorities approaching 30% at various times supporting republican views. Socialist Worker this week quoted an opinion poll "last October showed that only two-thirds of people in Britain preferred a monarch to an elected head of state". Scottish public opinion has definitely faltered in their support.

There are **three main ways** that the monarchy functions to help the ruling class.

A well organised and colourful distraction

Firstly, it is a well-organised and colourful distraction, a spectacle that diverts people from addressing the real oppression and exploitation that affects their lives. It's a modern form of the Roman Empire's bread and circuses.

Just compare the wall to wall 24X7 media coverage of Philip's death with the attention given to the 150,000 people killed by Covid. The lives of ordinary people, who are disproportionately poor, black, and of Asian heritage, are not valued the same as one royal prince. The 24-hour mass media places

the monarchy as a niche part of celebrity culture alongside film, TV, fashion, and sports stars. At one level it works as a soap opera. People project themselves into artificial communities like Eastenders and Coronation Street just as interaction in real living communities has declined over the last fifty years. In some ways, it is closer to the Sunday evening costume dramas that tell the stories of the upper classes.

It really does not matter if the Royal Family is emotionally fraught or dysfunctional with regular divorce and breakups. People accept that ordinary families are not as stable as they used to be so why should the Royal Family not be the same? Indeed it reinforces the myth that they are not that different from you or me. Allowing greater mass media coverage – a deliberate decision by the Royals from the late 60s onwards – was a price they thought worth paying so the ‘Firm’ could move with the times and enhance their appeal among a population that was no longer acted with the same deference to their betters and rulers. In fact, Philip was one of the people arguing for such modernisation. The mystery, mystique, and distance of Royal power and privilege were watered down in order to maintain its relationship with the British public. However, distraction and diversion alone are not sufficient to explain the relative success of the monarchy in maintaining certain popularity.

Reproducing the conditions for class system continuity

Secondly, the monarchy reproduces or facilitates the performance of Britishness, national unity, historical continuity, and stability. People participate in that performance and act within that narrative or constructed national story. How they participate varies according to their class position, their racial identity, specific oppression, or level of political awareness. We live our lives through stories we tell each other and ourselves, through a common-sense narrative. So not just the mass media but the schools, our own families, and how politics is presented all contribute. At primary school the royal family story is told, we may receive a royal visit or commemorate a royal event. Indeed royal events – births, deaths, and marriages are key cogs in the yearly process. Royal tours, visits, military shows or parades, and association with charities are all part of it. Pomp and ceremony are lived events and not just the transmission of a false ideology. Even the architecture and buildings concretise this story very effectively. Most of the time there is no need for anybody to keep saying the royal family is a good thing, it is so embedded in daily lives.

A residual political power aiming to win political consent

Thirdly we should not downplay or ignore the actual constitutional power of the monarchy. People, even on the left, often say that the monarchy is not a real issue because it has no power. In fact, all the bread and circuses and the performative power of the institution are directly linked to the residual political power it has. The remaining power expresses historical continuity and stability. These are useful in winning consent from people to accept how the current system works. A regular ideological message we hear is that unlike in much of Europe where there are no such ‘non-political’ heads of state this provides a guarantor of continuity and fallback if there were a crisis. The Queen decides on whom to call on to form a government and where there is an unclear majority her decision can be important. She is the head of state of the union of the different nations of the so-called United Kingdom.

It was not an accident that Cameron levered her into the Scottish independence referendum campaign. He got into hot water because his comments about her ‘purring’ when independence was defeated rather broke a cardinal rule – do not remove the veil of royal political neutrality. Such a

myth that royalty is above and beyond the political parties tends to reinforce the idea that it does not have any real power. However, this false neutrality would be particularly useful in a crisis of the system.

The Queen is the head of the armed forces. Soldiers, and more importantly, officers swear allegiance to her. If there was a crisis of the system where the ruling class required the army to restore its order then the neutrality of the Queen and her command of the armed forces would be extremely useful. The intervention would be in the name of the nation against warring political parties and the danger of chaos. Of course, this card can only be used once or very sparingly. Monarchies that took sides against the people in this way, as the Italian royalty did by siding with Mussolini, ended up being removed.

The rise of nationalism in both Scotland and Wales and the strength of republicanism in the Six counties have been strengthened by Brexit and are a growing threat to the constitutional arrangements in which the monarchy is an integral part.

How the coverage of Philip's death shows these processes at work

All the three aspects above have played out following Prince Philip's demise. The spectacle does not have to be coherent or logical. So Philip can be both the 'father' of environmentalism and a tiger hunter. He can be the wise grandfather of the nation but refuse to talk to Sarah Ferguson when she split with Andrew. He can be dutifully accepting the cards he was dealt (Archbishop of Canterbury) and always keeping two steps behind the Queen but at the same time philandering through a number of relationships and mouthing off racist or sexist comments whenever he wanted. The leading Italian newspaper, Corriere della Sera, had a very detailed article on all his affairs but I have not seen anything in the British press.

We have seen a well-honed PR machine organised by the Palace. The spectacle is constructed. They have released a new angle each day in the run-up to the funeral – new photos, behind-the-scenes views of parade preparations, and so on. How many times have you heard the refrain, it's unfair to criticise the royals you know because they can't answer back. The days when the Palace maintained an aloof radio silence have long gone. They hire experienced mass media hacks to run their operation these days, not aristocratic ex-military.

A favourite media genuflection to Philip this week? It must be this idea that he was extraordinary because he could talk to anybody. Apparently being able to chat with anybody is supposed to be an incredibly rare skill. Yes we know this was beyond Theresa May but most people are pretty good at doing this – even if people up north are more used to doing it than southerners. Ordinary people take it for granted but I suppose the upper class and exalted give themselves extra brownie points for speaking to the little people. The mass media play this game the whole time when they render themselves speechless when they arrange some meeting between a celebrity and an ordinary member of the public – often someone they define as 'afflicted'. They treat such events as magical and exceptional. Mark Steel has written a much funnier riff on this here.

The military is central to the funeral arrangements and the Royal Family helps to project the armed forces as a benign force acting in the interests of the whole nation as well as being world-class at parades and ceremonies. Every royal male has to 'earn their spurs' by doing some semi-protected active service. It is a residual feature of feudal monarchical power that royals have to be military leaders to secure and maintain their power. No wonder Prince Edward who could not cut it in the military has been portrayed as such a pathetic loser in the media.

Philip's relationship with the ex-colonies or the Commonwealth was foregrounded in all the documentary material this week. We won't repeat the list of all the racist comments we published in our last article but Afua Hirsch, one of the few critical journalists to have written something, makes a very good point:

"above all, the unspoken requirement for us to publicly celebrate the monarchy's gains – or mourn any of its losses – demands that I internalise a history of violence and racism against my own ancestors. The instinct I still feel to apologise for not doing so is evidence of how strongly those forces still exist. So if there is a fitting tribute to the passing of Prince Philip, I believe it would be to learn – with honesty – the lessons from both his life and the reaction to his death." (Guardian 15th April [2])

How should the left raise the issue of abolishing the monarchy?

Over 100,000 people contacted the BBC to complain about the unnecessarily blanket TV coverage. The fact that people placed watching the Masterchef final or Gogglebox over wallowing in grief for a royal does show that the monarchy does not fool all of the people all of the time. This is, even more, a reason for people in the Labour Party not to feel that they have to rush to compete with the Tories in utter obsequiousness in order not to lose any electoral support. A couple of lines sympathising with a family loss would be quite enough. Of course, nobody expects Starmer to do anything else but to join in but for supposedly left MPs like Nadia Whittome to join in is a mistake.

Now some people on the left – this probably includes Ms. Whittome – say that taking up the monarchy is a waste of time because it is not something that really concerns people. They claim people generally do not see it as a hot issue that affects their daily lives so why raise what is a minority concern. Yes, it would be silly for the left to raise the abolishing of the monarchy as a campaigning issue of the day. We do indeed have far more urgent campaigns such as on the Police crackdown bill or defending renters or public services.

However, the radical left does not just have to campaign in broad-based struggles but has to help develop a more developed, left-wing political culture amongst the most politicised activists. Many youths also are open to critical positions on the monarchy. Hence articles like this one that aim to convince activists of the need to discuss and think about the monarchy. And a time when it becomes of bigger relevance is not so far away if Scotland votes for independence and decides on a new relationship with the monarchy. Any constitutional crisis will inevitably lead to debate about the issue.

Finally, we should not forget that the reproduction of the class system takes place through the class struggle. It is never total, perfect, or watertight. We do not agree with New Statesman editor, Stephen Bush's article [3], which suggests the game is all over. Republicanism is dead and buried. The wonderful skills of people like Philip have outmaneuvered the progressives. So we should just put up with it.

A big minority are already sceptical of the monarchy. Ideas can change rapidly when mass mobilisations are on the rise. Actions can bring people into opposition to existing ideology. I always remember seeing miners in the great 1980s strikers confronting the police with copies of the pro-Thatcher, anti-miner Sun newspaper in their back pocket. As Marx reminds us it is a social being that determines social consciousness.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 17 April 2021:
<https://www.anticapitalistresistance.org/post/understanding-the-monarchy-a-socialist-analysis>
- Dave Kellaway, the Anti*Capitalist Resistance Royal correspondent somewhere near Buckingham Palace.

Footnotes

- [1] ESSF (article 57614), [Britain – Prince Philip – Isn’t the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme Fantastic?](#).
- [2] ESSF (article 57729), [Britain: We can mourn Prince Philip, but not the monarchy](#).
- [3] ESSF (article 57730), [Monrachy \(Britain\): The greatest tribute to Prince Philip is not media panegyrics, but the silence of republicans](#).