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Opinion

# Britain: We can mourn Prince Philip, but not the monarchy

Monday 19 April 2021, by [HIRSCH Afua](#) (Date first published: 15 April 2021).

**The Duke of Edinburgh may have been a man of his time, yet the royal family cannot be separated from the history of empire.**

Within minutes of Prince Philip's death having been announced, I began receiving messages from friends in Ghana. "My sincere condolences for your loss," one said. "May God bless you and everyone in the UK who is grieving," said another. On a human level, acknowledging respectfully the loss that comes with death makes sense. But why did these messages describe it as *my* loss?

I am not alone in feeling that the monarchy is an institution that cannot be embraced – although even now, it is not easy to say so. If I fail to express my deference and loyalty, I will be viciously attacked by those who regard me as unpatriotic. I will be the bad Black person, the ungrateful "guest" (never mind that this is my country), the disloyal colonial subject who forgot how much Britain did for me.

The [public reaction](#) to Prince Philip's death has centred on how much he, personally, has done. By all accounts he was the most active member of the royal family, having conducted, apparently, more than [20,000 engagements](#), and holding more than 800 presidencies and patronages. Many young people benefited from the Duke of Edinburgh awards scheme.

But these acts of public service come with strings attached. We become complicit in a toxic transaction that, in exchange for their privileges, deprives the royals of their privacy or control over their own destinies, and entitles us to endless and poisonous coverage of the minutiae of their lives.

On our side of the bargain, we abandon our supposed commitment to meritocracy and equality by accepting that these human beings are born deserving of special reverence. We receive access to their charity, but in return we lose our freedom to challenge their authority. The royals' good deeds and charitable endeavours are not in themselves a justification for the monarchy.

The truth is that there is no escaping the haunting legacy of empire. Its ghosts have long taken possession of our royal family, turning them into emperors without colonies, bounty hoarders without raids, conquerors without wars. Instead, they are the heads of a Commonwealth in which the colonised are rebranded "friends" with "a shared history". This is [fantasy stuff](#).

As is the idea – ludicrously popular in tributes to Prince Philip – that he was some kind of frustrated comedian. We have all by now been reminded of his famous remarks: telling the Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, who was wearing national dress, "You look like you're ready for bed"; or advising British students in China not to stay too long or they would end up with "slitty eyes". A Black British, Cambridge-educated friend of mine received a classic Prince Philip "compliment"

when she met him: "You speak English beautifully!" he said.

In the past few days we've heard numerous euphemisms deployed to cover these outbursts without calling them what they were. "His 'gaffes' were [typical of the clubbish humour](#) of the officer class." He was "politically incorrect", and "blunt". Nobody likes to speak ill of the dead, but these are not excuses for Philip so much as alibis for British commentators, desperate to avoid confronting the real legacy of British imperial expansion: racism. A dirty word that inconveniently undermines the glorious narrative the royals still help project. The colonisation of "lesser peoples" was by definition a project of white supremacy, and one personified by the royal family at the head of the empire: of course he made racist jokes.

If calling Prince Philip "a man of his time" is an admission that the royals exist in something of a time capsule, then I have to agree. The institution is, as the experience of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex has made clear, outdated.

Both Meghan's presence and the racist press treatment to which she was subjected offered the monarchy a unique opportunity to embrace a woman of African heritage, acknowledge its complicated relationship with this heritage in the past, and at least appear committed to a new era of equality. It could not have failed the test more dramatically.

Meanwhile, Britain's honours system continues to glorify the pain felt by survivors of colonialism and their descendants. This system - which, two generations on from Prince Philip is still being actively promoted - rewards British people for their achievements on remarkable terms. It asks us to aspire to see ourselves as "Members", "Officers" or even "Commanders" of the British Empire - a painful act of betrayal to our histories.

For those who object to projecting this painful history on to a single, recently deceased old man, this is the very problem with the concept of monarchy. Of course there is an individual analysis, in which Prince Philip was a fascinating historical actor whose passing points towards the end of an era. His childhood was shaped by the collapse of the Ottoman empire. His body carried the genetic memory of the Bolshevik revolution and its fatal consequences for the Romanovs: in 1993, [his DNA was used](#) to identify their remains.

Philip's marriage to the Queen is a legacy of Queen Victoria's project to unite Europe through dynastic marriages, based on a deep appreciation of the need for peace on the continent. It's a virtuous ideal with much to offer the very same people most noisily prostrating themselves before the royals, if they actually cared to learn.

But our personal relationships with the monarchy cannot exist in a vacuum. Before expressing any fondness for the royals, I have to ask myself, am I subconsciously seeking the approval of the predominantly white society that rewards particular Black people for showing their allegiance?

Am I threatened by the penalties for not engaging in this period of forced mourning? Many TV journalists like me are, after all, at the mercy of a governing party that has made clear its willingness to [upbraid broadcasters](#) who do not appear sufficiently patriotic.

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.

**Afua Hirsch**

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- The Guardian. Thu 15 Apr 2021 07.00 BST:  
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