

Britain: Why socialists oppose the monarchy - On the passing of the Queen

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Dave Kellaway writes on the passing of the Queen and why socialists should oppose the monarchy.

Anyone who thinks the monarchy is a secondary or peripheral issue for socialists today should just listen, talk and look at people around them and on the media over the next week or so. Yes, the media amplifies and manipulates the popular reaction, but it is real enough and certainly strong among working people. Walking home from the cinema last night a young Black woman in her car stopped in the middle of the road to tell us the Queen had died.

Listening to the radio now, ***Women's Hour*** is recuperating the Queen as a feminist icon or model and we just had speakers from Commonwealth countries extolling her multicultural credentials. National strike action by the RMT and the CWU has been suspended as a mark of respect. A largely negative reaction to the Truss energy tax, which gave £150 billion handouts to the fossil fuel corporations, has been utterly submerged by the wall-to-wall coverage.

Wigan Labour council even just cancelled the local Diggers festival, commemorating historical republican values. The bosses and the establishment must be raising their glasses once again to the ideological benefits of monarchist ideology for their interests.

Nearly all states reproduce an ideology of national unity through their heads of state who supposedly operate above partisan political interests and become the mother or father of the country. However, they are usually elected and sometimes their role is defined in a more or less democratic written constitution.

For example, Matterella, the Italian president, has a great deal of popular support but he is elected by the legislature and, at least formally, limited by one of the more progressive bourgeois constitutions following the end of fascism.

Here in the UK, on the other hand, the head of state is a feudal overhang, still decided by birth. The monarch sits on a huge personal fortune, extracted from its subjects over centuries, topped up with a big state subsidy (the civil list). The continuity of the British monarchy is its great strength; it makes it more difficult for its people to envisage any significant rupture to the political system. Although some of its members such as Edward VIII had a dalliance with the fascists, overall it did not collaborate, unlike other European royal families. This has allowed the British monarchy to parade its constitutional and democratic values.

What is striking about how both the media and ordinary people are talking about the Queen today is the way the Royal family is considered as part of one's own family. People define their own lives in terms of royal events. The Queen is considered the mother, the matriarch, a mode for and parallel

figure to our own mothers. Given we all live in some sort of family this linkage works effectively for the dominant ideology.

While the royal family is seen as celebrities sprinkled with the magic of god-given royal sovereignty, it is increasingly also perceived as being just like our families. So all the relationship bust ups, the divorces, and even worse, makes them human, like us. The media has given the celebrity spectacle of the Royal Family a premium niche within its extensive coverage of celebrities from entertainment and sport.

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Nowhere is the monarch's key role in reproducing national unity more important than in its military function. The monarch is the leader of the armed forces. Military uniforms adorn its members on state occasions and its children are obliged to do military service. All the rubbish about the Queen being above politics evaporates when it comes to its physical presence in the British state's imperialist interventions, from Ireland right up to Iraq and Afghanistan. The monarch helps maintain the glue of the union with Scotland, Wales and the Six Counties. You can understand why the Scottish Nationalist Party is cautious about adopting any slogan to abolish the monarchy.

How should socialists formally react to the death of the Queen? Probably yesterday it was not a good idea to organise some sort of carnival to celebrate the demise of the monarch. It is quite possible to accept that for any family, including the royals, it is a sad moment to lose a mother or a grandmother.

This is the tone of Jeremy Corbyn's statement, which also acknowledges a certain element of public service in her life. Compare that to the statement put out by one of her knights, Sir Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour Party. His eulogy is indistinguishable from the Tory and BBC consensus.

Our longest-serving and greatest ever monarch. Above the clashes of politics, she stood not for what the nation fought over but what it agreed upon. In crisis, she reassured us. Reminding us that we are all part of something that stretches back through time. A symbol of the best of us. (...)Every time I had the privilege to meet the late Queen, she would ask the most searching questions because she wanted to understand the lives and struggles of her people. And as Britain changed rapidly around her, this dedication became the still point of our turning world

Labour has historically talked about helping working people achieve a more progressive and fairer society, but this has always been based on the idea that such a society can be achieved through a parliamentary majority and implementing reforms. This could include campaigning but never any notion of class struggle or criticisms of a state that defends capitalist interests.

So progress is seen as being in the national interest, business can be convinced to operate in a way that helps people and there is no real class enemy. The current state can be occupied and used to bring about socialism. Hence Labour has always been monarchist even if some MPs may have argued for a republic.

Labour's alternative to the Truss tax rejects public ownership of the energy companies, but at least it taxes those companies and Starmer was effective in the house of commons in demolishing the Tory plans. However, out of respect for the Queen, how long will he now hold off on his opposition to Truss's failure to tax and the general Tory inaction on the cost of living crisis?

Much has been expounded on the way the Queen carried on her public service to the very end. Admittedly when you think of Boris Johnson's ethics and record it is not hard to look better. But we should gain some perspective. She has an army of advisors and a lot of her public service consists of visiting places, hosting foreign visitors and opening things. If you offered this job to the millions of people alienated from their work today, most would bite your hand off for the chance.

You have to laugh when the all the commentators are talking about how she was reluctant to become queen, but it was her destiny and she took it on. That is exactly how monarchy works, you are not elected, it is a blood thing.

A decade ago my mother had been discharged from hospital into a temporary care home while the family looked for a permanent place. I visited her and could not believe how bad it was. It stank of urine, the facilities were poor and there was a complete lack of stimulation. We managed to find somewhere better, but there must be hundreds of thousands of old people who die early in such awful conditions. Everybody should benefit from the five star care and support the Queen benefitted from. We should all be able to carry on doing useful and interesting things until we are 96 years old.

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I am sure when socialists try to gently raise some of these issues with friends, family and work colleagues they will be accused of bringing politics into everything. Claiming something is not political is how the right wing try to conceal the reality that most things have a political aspect (see Rowan Fortune [here](#) on this).

Another point to remember is that the monarch does have an important constitutional role in forming and dissolving governments and as leader of the armed forces. In normal times this is not controversial and the advice of the elected government is followed. In a crisis, where capitalist and state interests are threatened, this role could be crucial.

We already saw in the 1960s there were actual moves against Wilson's government, which was discussed (and rejected) by the Queen. In a deeper crisis this reluctance might not be so strong. For the ruling class this could be seen as their ace in the hole, that can probably only be used once since if it failed the monarchy would be finished.

It is fitting to finish with some wise words from James Connolly, the Irish revolutionary. A hero of Mick Lynch, who is now leading the struggle of the RMT workers.

Dave Kellaway

What is monarchy? From whence does it derive its sanction? What has been its gift to humanity? Monarchy is a survival of the tyranny imposed by the hand of greed and treachery upon the human race in the darkest and most ignorant days of our history. It derives its only sanction from the sword of the murderer, and the helplessness of the producers, and its gifts to humanity are unknown, save as they can be measured in the pernicious examples of triumphant and shameless iniquities.

Every class in society save royalty, and especially British royalty, has through some of its members contributed something to the elevation of the race, but neither in science, nor in art, nor in literature, nor in exploration, nor in mechanical invention, nor in humanizing of laws, nor in any sphere of human activity has a representative of British royalty helped forward the moral, intellectual, or material improvement of mankind. But that royal family has opposed every forward move, fought every reform, persecuted every patriot, and intrigued against every good cause. Slandering every friend of the people, it has befriended every oppressor. Endorsed today by misguided clerics, it has been notorious in history for the revolting nature of its crimes. Murder, treachery, adultery, incest, theft, perjury—every crime known to man has been committed by someone or other of the race of monarchs from whom King George is proud to trace his descent.

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 9 September 2022:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/italian-elections-heading-for-a-meloni-far-right-government/>
- Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.