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The Queue

The Queue — Mourning the Queen, how do we understand the response of so many people?

Monday 19 September 2022, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 18 September 2022).

Dave Kellaway reflects on the queue you can even see from space(!)

Today it appears that everyone in Britain is either in the Queue, going down to the Queue, looking at the Queue on live streaming or commenting on it. Social media is full of gentle and not so gentle humour and memes about the Queue. The radical left and republicans cannot go around the Queue even when some try and minimise or underplay its impact. There are some terrific poems that capture its essence and ideological Britishness quite brilliantly.

The Queue is the physical link literally between arrival of the Queen's coffin in Westminster hall and her funeral. It fills up and sustains the media coverage over the entire week. There might have been some difficulty in keeping the mourning spectacle at the front, back and behind of all the news. We have the government and independent Queue trackers letting us all know how long it is and how many hours you have to wait. There is an online YouTube stream. Everything is organised and regulated. You have plastic wristbands like in festivals or gigs. Toilets are spaced out along the route, bag drops set up and airport security established for the final lap. Various charitable organisations and random individuals come and service the Queue with food and drinks. The Archbishop of Canterbury has provided pizza. Media organisations from around the world queue to interview the Queue. Unused food is collected and recycled to Food Banks. I am sure they and the poor are thankful that out of the millions this is all costing they will pick up a few uneaten Tesco sandwiches.

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Is it a unique, record breaking event? According to historian, David Olusoga, on the Radio 4 Today programme the other day there were a million people at the funeral/coronations of the last few Kings. Someone has even colourised black and white footage from then and it does not look so different. There were as many or more in Rome when Pope Wojtyla died and I remember Khomeini's funeral in Iran being pretty big.

I saw a Facebook post where a left activist tried to show through some photos that the Queue was

really quite spread out and maybe the whole lot at any one time is only about 15000. He added that the TUC demo last time had 40,000 so really we should not get too excited about it all. Officially the authorities are calculating about 750,000 at least and that is probably more or less accurate. If they kept the coffin displayed for longer they could get a million or so. Let us have no illusions at the mass impact of the mourning.

No doubt they are assembling the nations' foremost mathematicians and crowd estimators to work out when and where they have to stop the Queue because the people still queuing will not be able to actually reach the coffin before it has to move off to the abbey. I can see the studio discussions already, it has already started this Sunday among the ranks of the Queue correspondents. How do they manage the final pause without devastating too many people? Already the early closure of the accessible queue has caused some consternation. It seems even when it comes to royal adulation disabled people miss out. Will they go in early or late to bring down the guillotine on the main queue? A nation holds its breath.

How do we understand the response of so many people?

First of all we need to distinguish between widespread respect for a 96 year old who is seen to have 'served' the country for 70 years and unconditional support for the monarchy. She appeared less corrupt and more ethical than politicians like Johnson or Blair. I have talked to a number of people who has expressed this sentiment in recent days. A golf partner said to me that he was not a keen royalist but had taken his grandkids down to the palace because he respected the Queen's personal contribution and he felt the kids needed to be part of an historic event.

Numerous vox pops from the Queue have said, *'It's History isn't it'* or we *'want to part of history'*. Well, yes and no. Clearly it is part of the dominant official history narrative. It is the history of Kings and Queens that I was taught in school. Thankfully the school history curriculum has moved on and does much more about ordinary people's lives today and even addresses race, gender and class - partly because of the efforts of many fine history teachers. It suits the establishment if working people think history really is about the lives and deaths of kings and queens or that nations have history without conflict or class struggle.

A lot of people have also talked about the sense of camaraderie in the Queue. People introduce new friends they have made, they swap addresses like we do on holidays - usually never to contact each other again. Today communities are much weaker than before and both work and leisure activities are experienced through screen interactions. Being able to spend 12 or so hours overnight with other people who are likely to be on your wavelength does have a real appeal. Consumerist and individualist ideology, which is the fuel of the capitalist spectacle fails to meet people's needs for meaning, purpose and community. People enjoy going to stadium concerts, festivals and big sports events partly for the fun and buzz of being in a crowd. Stephen Reicher correctly picked up on this phenomenon in his Guardian [article](#).

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In fact we witness the same process when there are mass strikes or campaigns. People talk to complete strangers more readily and there is a sense of exhilaration. Of course the key difference, and what we as socialists try to develop everyday, is an almost physical sense that our actions can change things, we can actually make a difference. The Queue on the other hand is a gigantic

mechanism that effectively reproduces dominant ideology. Some people on the left at the moment have become a bit pessimistic, seeing all this fawning around the monarchy but we should hang on to our living memories of mass movements that challenges people's everyday 'common sense' understanding of the world. We will not be able to replace the deference and backwardness of monarchist ideology just with ideas – even if writing articles can help a bit. The dominant ideology does not work primarily in the field of ideas or even the mass media. It is not just manipulated by the media or the government. No, we see it clearly at the moment.

It is a lived performance repeated throughout people's lives and across generations. People see the Queue, they have certainly either seen the Queen at some event or know close friends or family who have. They may have served in the police or military where your job starts with an oath of allegiance to the monarch. These are all significant actions, not just being told some ideas or stories. Socialists need stronger mass actions that can begin to bring into question the meaning of those dominant rituals of their everyday lives and jobs. For example a strike can open workers eyes to how exploitation works. I talked to a friend who works for BT who usually goes on about the high taxes he has to pay but when on strike recently he spontaneously raised the difference between his proposed pay increase and the super bonuses of his bosses. As Marx said, *social being changes social consciousness*, not the other way round

While the British people are less religious than some other European countries and certainly go less to church, a majority still generally have a generalised belief in a supreme being. So it does not require much for them to recreate with the Queue many of the aspects of the pilgrimage. I ever heard the TV journalists beginning to use the term.

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When I was a young lad I remember going on a pilgrimage to Lourdes (the place in the Pyrenees where the Madonna was supposed to have appeared to Bernadette, a peasant girl). In those days it was a tougher journey than today and I remember being told that the hardship and suffering was all part of the deal. You showed your devotion and strength as a Christian by putting up with such discomfort. You see similar sentiments today from the people in the Queue putting up with 12 hours on their feet in the cold and wet. A common refrain is '*She gave me 70 years of service and love, what is 12 hours of queuing?*' I am sure some creative is thinking up a TV drama about the 12 hours in the Queue as I write these words.

The religious self-abnegation fits quite well with a long-noted stereotype about British people liking a bit of austerity, putting up with things: *it's not so bad, mustn't grumble, could be worse, let's not make a fuss*. My mum was furious with me for once complaining about food and service in a restaurant. Britain must be one of the few places where people actually seem to like queues. Maybe this is changing but people in Italy or France get irritated and angry much more quickly in a long queue. So I guess many people queuing for 12 hours actually have a sense of pride in the Britishness of the Queue above and beyond their support for the Queen.

Many people have talked about doing the Queue in order to remember or honour the passing of their own mother or grandmother. In this way the Royal Family and ordinary people's families become mystically as one, in total overlap. People mark out their family lives in terms of royal events. I have often heard people say their brother or sister is the same age as one or other of the Royals. Another

feature has been the number of women and their daughters or granddaughters in the crowd. The Queen as a feminist icon, flourishing among the male politicians she had to deal with for most of those seventy years, has even been highlighted by articles in the Guardian.

Those leftists desperately trying to compare the Queue numbers with the big anti-Iraq war demo or saying it is less than for Diana do have a point. Watching the TV you would think there is absolute unanimity but polls show that a solid 20 to 30 percent of the population are for a republican alternative and a further 10 to 20 percent are for some modification of the system. The 60% who support the monarchy is less than decades ago and support is declining significantly among the younger generation. I am sure the transition to Charles will have this as a main concern and his team is working on it. His 'eco credentials', the more informal walkabouts and efforts to perhaps slim down the 'Firm' are all attempts to deal with that issue.

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There has been opposition even during the mourning. Small groups of activists have braved hostile crowds to demonstrate their opposition particularly where the imperialist union is more keenly felt in the nations of Scotland and Wales. The crackdown by the authorities has been shameful with even the **Times** denouncing it as overreach. However it is a sign of what Truss has in store for anybody resisting her government's policies. Already she is talking about more restrictive trade union laws to make striking even more difficult.

On social media there has been a huge amount of critical, disrespectful and quite funny interventions. There have been some great poems too. My favourite joke on Facebook was the wag who suggested that a simple solution to the Queue and to reach more people was to reverse the whole process. Instead of people marching for 12 hours past the coffin why not have the coffin move down the queue. You could even lengthen the Queue or keep replenishing it. Job done and a lot less waiting. On the other hand you would not have the Queue as the physical and temporal link across the week - a sort of build up the main event, the funeral on Monday.

Here is a poem from Facebook by left activist and poet, Janine Booth:

THE QUEUE

A fortnight ago, complaining about
having to wait behind two others
to use the cashpoint
Now, happy to stand all day and night
to file past a box
with a crown and a cushion on top
and inside, the body of
someone you never knew -
it's the nearest you could ever get to her
It's the ultimate display of Britishness:
an awesome combo of
queueing and deference
No pushing
No jostling
Everyone knows their place

Not having a go
Heavens, no, it's up to

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 18 Sep 2022:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/the-queue/>