

THE DEATH OF ELIZABETH II AND MONARCHISM IN THE LATE CAPITALIST AGE

DR. LAURA CLANCY
AN ANALYTIC EXTRA FOR STILLPOINT MAGAZINE

September 2022, UK. In the midst of political instability after the installation of Liz Truss as (fleeting) Prime Minister, a cost-of-living crisis, the worsening climate crisis, and ongoing war in Ukraine, the British mainstream media is focused on one thing: “the Queue.” The Queue was an at-times five-mile-long queue across central London, of people waiting upwards of twelve hours to view the coffin of Elizabeth II on display in Westminster Hall for her lying in state. The Queue had its own Twitter feed,¹ its own weather forecast,² and the BBC started a twenty-four-hour live feed³ of the coffin and people filing past it paying their respects.

The Queue has a central place in the mediatization of the Queen’s death. Public mourning was spectacularized as a national narrative of sacrifice and pilgrimage, with footage beamed from the “center” of the British state in Westminster to highlight its apparent importance. The number of people in the Queue was constantly narrated, making it seem as though *everyone* was joining because of their love for the Queen and, hence, for the monarchy.

The Queue was often presented as evidence of commonality and unity: a nation coming together in grief. This was none more so the case than when celebrity David Beckham queued for thirteen hours

overnight alongside the public. Sky News’ Political Editor Beth Rigby tweeted that “in this moment of national mourning, [he] was just like everyone else” (2022).⁴ Nationalist spectacle is being used here to flatten class politics, as a billionaire celebrity becomes “just like us.” Indeed, notions of “we’re all in this together” are directly contradicted by the very purpose of the Queue in the first place: to pay tribute to a woman who, by virtue of birth, was given power, wealth, and privilege beyond most people’s imagination, and throughout her long reign upheld systems of white supremacy, imperialism, patriarchy, and class inequality.

THE MONARCHY VS THE ROYAL FAMILY

This is the important point here. When we talk about the Queen, or now the King, we are not just talking about individual people. We’re talking about an organization, an institution, at the pinnacle of British society and benefitting from centuries of wealth and privilege. We can see this in how the week after the Queen’s death was not just about mourning for one woman. Rather, the spectacle of the funeral was attached to the accession of King Charles III. A smooth,

¹ <https://mobile.twitter.com/qe2queue>

² <https://www.indy100.com/news/queue-queen-lying-in-state>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-62913254>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/Beth-Rigby/status/1570796198776426496>

⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/7c1a834f-cb8c-47aa-ab20-16fa223ef1cd>

⁶ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/theroyalfamily/8137234/Royal-wedding-Kate-Middleton-will-be-first-middle-class-queen-in-waiting.html>

unquestioned transfer of power from one sovereign to the next, buried in language of mourning and public affection for the Queen.

This was reproduced in the media coverage, and indeed the BBC coverage covered both the funeral and the accession without much differentiation. Anti-royal protesters who attended accession events were moved on or even arrested. Paul Powlesland, a barrister and environmental activist who was threatened with arrest if he used a protest sign reading “not my King,” said, “it is disingenuous to suggest that anyone who opposes the accession of King Charles is somehow disrespecting the Queen.”⁵ Protesters sought to campaign against the institution.

In my book, *Running the Family Firm: How the Monarchy Manages Its Image and Our Money*, I argue that media representations of the royal family seek to mask the monarchy as an institution. That is, images of the Queen as an elderly (great-) grandmother clutching her handbag, or videos of Prince William and Kate Middleton taking their children to school, make us identify with the royals as individuals and believe they are “just like us.” An “ordinary” family doing “ordinary” things.

The Cambridge family is a particularly interesting example of this. Kate’s “middle-class” background was constantly narrated⁶ during the couple’s wedding to make the monarchy appear as though it’s a meritocracy: if Kate can do it, you can do it too! This is despite the fact that Kate’s parents are multi-millionaires⁷ and she went to private school. During the early years of Kate and William’s marriage, they eschewed symbols of wealth and privilege. The first official photograph of Prince George⁸ was taken in the garden of the Middleton family home, with Kate and William in casual clothing. Over the past few years, the official Cambridge Instagram⁹ account has been run like it’s a family photo album, giving everyone intimate glimpses into family life. But of course, all of the photographs are carefully staged, and the account is run by a team of professional communications staff.

Back in 1991, academic Michael Billig interviewed British families on their

feelings on the royal family. He found similar tropes: the families negotiated the ordinariness and the extraordinariness of the royal family. One woman said that Princess Margaret had visited their town and commented on someone’s baby: “Margaret turned right round and she waved and she said ‘what a beautiful baby,’ you know, just like a normal person would.” Billig says that by feeling the need to comment that they were surprised Margaret is “just like a normal person,” this shows that Margaret isn’t ordinary at all.

THE FIRM

By focusing on the relations of the family, we are not then paying attention to the power of the institution. In the context of late capitalism and global corporations, the monarchy cannot be dismissed as a traditional, backwards-looking institution. In my book, I take the monarchy’s own nickname for itself, the Firm, but use it more literally to frame the monarchy as a corporation, akin to other global conglomerates like Amazon.

The most obvious place to start with this comparison is the Paradise Papers. Alongside other global corporations like Apple and Nike, the Duchy of Lancaster (the British sovereign’s private estate) was found to have investments¹⁰ in two offshore financial centers: the Cayman Islands and Bermuda. This means that the monarchy is using the same tools as global businesses to avoid paying tax. These investments show that the monarchical institution is built like any other capitalist entity, rooted not in “service” and “duty” as it likes to report, but in self-interest.

The Firm’s business is managed bureaucratically. There are hundreds of people working in the Royal Household (the official name for the monarchy’s staff), and those in the top management jobs like Private Secretary and Director of Communications have worked in prestigious positions in industry. Sir Clive Alderton,¹¹ the King’s new Private Secretary, has worked in the Foreign Office. Tobynd Andreae, the new Director of Communications,¹² was previously co-deputy editor of the *Daily Mail*. This is not a stuffy organization struggling to keep up with the times, it is one that knows exactly

⁷ https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/money-and-power/a20166559/kate-middleton-parents-carole-michael-net-worth/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1669138629089652&usg=AOv-Vaw1AGyFFC4_rtnQA-BIIeURS

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23759337>

⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/princeandprincessof-wales/?hl=en>

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-41878305>

¹¹ <https://www.tatler.com/article/everything-we-know-about-the-kings-new-private-secretary-sir-clive-alderton>

¹² <https://www.buzzfeed-news.com/article/ellievhall/tobynd-andreae-royal-communications-secretary-daily-mail>

how contemporary society and media culture operates.

Landownership is historically a way that the aristocratic classes have reproduced their wealth, with “the landed gentry” a descriptor of those who live luxurious lives in their properties and do not have to work. The British monarchy still owns huge swathes of land through organizations like the Duchy of Lancaster (the sovereign’s private estate), the Duchy of Cornwall (the Duke of Cornwall’s private estate, now Prince William) and the Crown Estate (which belongs to the Crown). All of these are run as land and property portfolios. The Crown Estate announced a net revenue profit of £269.3 million in 2021,¹³ and it is run as an “independent commercial business” with 450 staff.¹⁴ While much of its holdings were conquered by historical monarchs or taken during the Reformation, the Firm has diversified its portfolios over the years. The estate now encompasses huge swathes of prime land, including London’s Regent Street, Eltham, Richmond, Egham, and Hampton; fourteen retail parks; much of the UK’s wind, wave and tidal power sites; and 336,000 acres of agricultural land and forestry. As monarch, King Charles inherited the Crown Estate and the Duchy of Lancaster upon the Queen’s death, and due to the exemption on sovereign-to-sovereign bequests, he will not pay inheritance tax.¹⁵ You can see here how historical custom is used to ensure the monarchy and its assets remain forces of wealth and value in a late capitalist age.

The monarchy also still benefits from its colonialist legacies. The British monarchy was central¹⁶ to the establishment, expansion, and maintenance of the British Empire and the transatlantic slave trade. Goods now owned by the monarchy were stolen during colonization, such as the Koh-i-Noor¹⁷ diamond from India used in the Crown Jewels, which Pakistan and India have repeatedly asked¹⁸ to be returned. Ideas of a “global family” circulate in royal international visits. In reality however, royal visits have historically had colonialist implications, or as Indigenous Australian Studies scholar Holly Randell-Moon argues, “perpetuate colonial ‘ways of seeing,’” through invocations of the white (royal) savior.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

The monarchy and its power are rarely addressed in political discourse. In England in particular, republicanism is dismissed as a fringe issue and irrelevant to “more important issues” of Tory party cronyism, Brexit, and austerity. These are, of course, central issues that impede our democracy and ensure wealth and power remains vested in the most privileged in our society. But monarchy is an important issue too.

The death of the Queen, and a disruption of the status quo of monarchy that spans most people’s lifetimes, has reignited people’s interest in the institution. But the tide was already beginning to change. YouGov polling (2022¹⁹) has shown that support for the monarchy is at its lowest point in history for British eighteen to twenty-four year-olds, and Republican sentiment is much more widespread in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Globally, Barbados²⁰ is the world’s newest republic after voting to abolish the monarchy in 2021, and other Caribbean countries seem likely to follow suit.

As we prepare for the coronation of King Charles III, an unelected leader, we should be considering why the abolition of monarchy must be central to any campaigns for radical democratic change and social justice. Calls for “modernizing” the monarchy are not enough, and indeed recent events (such as the treatment of Meghan Markle) have proved that the institution cannot be modernized. The monarchy underpins multiple forms of inequality, and until it has been abolished, we cannot move forward.

¹³ <https://www.thecrown-estate.co.uk/en-gb/media-and-insights/news/the-crown-estate-announces-2693-million-net-revenue-profit-for-202021/>

¹⁴ <https://www.thecrown-estate.co.uk/en-gb/about-us/>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/14/the-sovereigns-wealth-uk-royal-familys-finances-explained>

¹⁶ <https://theconversation.com/five-ways-the-monarchy-has-benefited-from-colonialism-and-slavery-179911>

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/20/koh-i-noor-by-william-dalrymple-and-anita-anand-review>

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/20/india-changes-tack-over-return-of-koh-i-noor-diamond>

¹⁹ <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/05/21/young-britons-are-turning-their-backs-monarchy>

²⁰ <https://time.com/6213217/caribbean-republican-movements-queen-elizabeth-ii-death/>

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BY DR LAURA CLANCY**

DR LAURA CLANCY is a Lecturer in Media at Lancaster University. She is the author of *Running the Family Firm: How the Monarchy Manages Its Image and Our Money*.

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