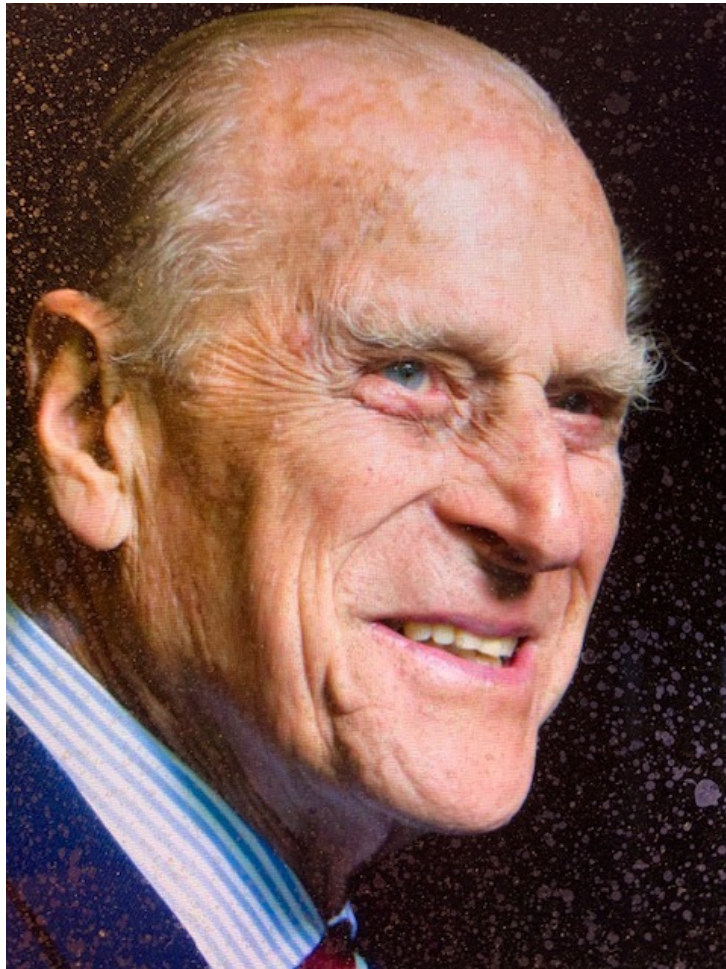


The Magic of Monarchy



FORMER COMMUNIST LEADER, Frank Furedi, recently described Philip Mountbatten-Windsor as “a very human prince”. This rather surprising assessment made by my former comrade was, perhaps, even more bizarre than the scene in which an erstwhile revolutionary of my acquaintance, decked out in ermine-trimmed robes, was filmed swearing allegiance to our Sovereign Lady, Queen Elizabeth, her heirs and successors, in the neo-gothic splendour of the Palace of Westminster.

From the top to the bottom of British society, from the left to the right, and everywhere in between, the magic of monarchy holds the British people in a wintery snow globe, seemingly forever trapped in its luminous glow.

The bravery of the Grand Old Duke is not in doubt, nor was his commitment to monarchy, whether in Greece, in Denmark, or in Britain. True, his many fascist and Nazi relatives took some living down, but his bravery, and quick thinking, during battles with Benito Mussolini's navy and Hitler's air force, off Crete and Sicily during the Second World War confirmed the regard of his uncle, Earl Louis Mountbatten, rendering his loyalty to Britain and her Royal Navy, indisputable.

Groomed by Louis Mountbatten from an early age to play a prominent role in the preservation of the British monarchy, Philip Mountbatten, of the family Battenberg (Anglicised in 1917 to Mountbatten), did his best throughout his long life to serve the interests of a decaying aristocracy, and of trembling thrones with striking success. War and revolution, and Nazi occupations, tumbled many a King and compromised many others. In Greece the monarchy collapsed once-and-for-all in 1974. After eighty years of ineffectual resistance to tyranny and compromises with fascist and military dictators, luxurious living, and political interference, the Greek people finally showed the buggers the door.

Prince Philip of Greece and Denmark, was saved from the shipwreck that was the Greek monarchy, by his exile as an infant. After his time as a teenager at Gordonstoun school in Scotland, and a term as a cadet at the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, he went back to Athens to live with his Mother, and King George II of Greece. In September 1939 Philip's uncle, Mountbatten, and his cousin, King George II, wisely took the decision to send Philip back to Britain to serve in the Royal Navy. In the twenties and thirties, Philip had also attended an American school in Paris, the Schule Schloss Salem, in Baden-Württemberg, and Cheam School, in South London.

But it was his time at Gordonstoun and Dartmouth that proved most influential in shaping his future, as a naval officer, husband, and Consort of the Queen.

In 1960 the Privy Council recognised his role by hyphenating Mountbatten with Windsor. Henceforth “Mountbatten-Windsor” is the name used by members of the royal family when a surname might be needed. Normally, like carrying cash, passports, or other ID, members of ‘The Firm’ have no need of surnames, because, although they might be “very human” they are not ordinary mortals.

This is where we have to confront the conundrum head-on. In the past a king, emperor, or tsar, could be remote, ill-served by advisers and ministers, but essentially, good. Consequently, shielded by his raft of ministers, the king or tsar could be said to be good, because he was not responsible for the bad things done in his name. In complete contrast, following the First World War, the British ‘constitutional monarchy’ had to embody the signal qualities of being both exalted, placed on high by God, and really – despite everything – quite middle class and ordinary.

Our kings and queens had, from the late twenties to represent a society in which all men and women could vote, at the same time as ruling over an autocratic colonial empire, spatchcocked together with white ‘self-governing dominions’. This ramshackle brutality, which rang the changes between lawful representative government, and the dictatorial powers of governors, police, soldiers and feathered viceroys, began to disappear with the loss of India – the same year that Philip and Elizabeth were married – and was followed over the next twenty years by the escape of most of ‘our’ colonies from ‘our’ benevolent rule. Juggling the magic of monarchy through such enormous changes in the life of the ‘Mother Country’ took some doing.

Consequently, the memories of Philip, despite his racist asides about Oriental facial features or the technical incompetence of Indians, and his sailor’s penchant for rudery, he was rather like, his disorderly daughter-in-law, the aristocrat Diana Spencer, in her

capacity to break the rules and play fast-and-loose with protocol; he was the “People’s Prince”. In recent days we have been told in reverent and hushed tones, *ad nauseum*, what a regular fellow the Duke was. He could put everyone at ease with a surprising remark or a joke. He was both a very ordinary decent chap – almost one of us – and simultaneously a blue-blood to his finger-tips. Even more royal than the Queen, whose mother was Elizabeth Bowes Lyon, *merely an aristocrat*, whereas Philip was directly related on both sides to all the crowned (and deposed) heads of Europe.

Now, I have to admit being a sucker for royal pomp and pageantry. I never miss a wedding, a funeral, or national services of remembrance attended by the Queen. I’m always glued to the telly, fascinated, and confused. I think I have the same sort of relationship to this as I do to the Roman Catholic Mass; the miracle routinely performed by the priests in evoking the ‘virtual presence’ of our Lord with the Body and Blood of Christ.

From any rational point of view this is absurd, utterly indefensible, and capable of shrouding the most dark and reprehensible doings with the mystery of faith. Monarchy, appears to be similar. Like religion, royalty is not subject to rational discourse or argument. Proofs and evidence cut no more ice with those who love the Queen (and most of Her family) than they do with devout Muslims, Catholics, and Jews. Such beliefs are beyond ordinary reason, and require the most arcane kind of theological thinking, and highly specialised encounters with double-speak and double-think.

This has always presented the far left in Britain with profound difficulties. The left-wing’s roistering disrespect – references to “Phil the Greek” or slogans like “Stuff the [Royal] Wedding” – have to stand in for a formal republicanism that is never seriously pursued or theorised. Consequently, we have to look on, silently, as rock stars, actors, sportsmen and women, trade union leaders, and Labour politicians, bow and scrape to The Royals on every available occasion.

This is because the monarchy is irretrievably tangled up with both God and the Nation. Concepts which the left has always tended to side-step, incapable of doing more than talk of hypocrisy, privilege, and luxury.

The difficulty here is that the great majority of working people in Britain are no strangers to inequality, and double-dealing. Whether they are in Megan and Harry's corner, or that of the rest of the family, their essential royalism is unaffected. Whether or not they want a smaller royal family, shorn of the 'hangers-on', or the full-bodied imperial monarchy of the fifties, complete with bevvies of aristocratic ladies-in-waiting, luxurious yachts, royal trains and aeroplanes, debutants, and presentations at 'Buck House', makes no difference. Seventy or Eighty per cent of the population love the Queen and stand full square with the monarchy. This number of folk, along with those who are indifferent to the entire road show, accounts for almost everybody in the country. The number of people who are principled or serious republicans in England, Scotland, and Wales, is very small indeed.

Consequently, I would focus upon the way that monarchical patronage and privilege masks the exercise of the more or less autocratic powers of prime ministers with regard to the appointment of judges and government ministers, and half of our legislature. If the monarchy was removed by constitutional reform from political life, if the monarch was relieved of all her formal and ceremonial powers, with regard to Parliament, the Armed Forces, legislation, and government appointments, those who love the monarchy and the trappings associated with a hereditary realm could be satisfied with an intrinsically republican state of affairs, well-camouflaged by the royal blood of a titular head of state.

All would be satisfied and our elected representatives could take democratic control by imposing full Parliamentary scrutiny and vetting of the appointment of judges, government ministers, generals, admirals, and law officers. This, coupled with

the disestablishment of the Church of England, would complete the Revolution of 1688.

Buckingham Palace could become a national gallery and museum, with free admission, and a venue for special state occasions. Clarence House and St James's Palace could become official residences for visiting dignitaries. The family could reside in flats in Kensington Palace and Windsor Castle; they could continue to be kept at public expense in Kensington and Windsor; the jewels, regalia, pictures and other treasures would belong to the nation, not the family. They would have to make an inventory of what they regard as their personal property, and a parliamentary commission could adjudicate. The rest of the royal residences, houses, duchies, and landed estates, could simply revert to the nation, or be bought-out by the family with their own considerable funds at current market values.

Members of the family could meet foreign dignitaries, and make approved foreign visits, 'on expenses', and they could open things, make public appearances, support charities, and charitable works, with resources culled from their considerable investment portfolios. Of course, the army would continue to lay-on pageantry and martial spectacles, at birthdays, weddings, and funerals, and other national ceremonies in support of the monarch, together with provision for their personal security, charged to the tax payer, not the family. Then the monarchy would truly become an ornament of our constitution, rather than a faux medieval drag upon it.

These arrangements enacted by the House of Commons – A Bill to Liberate the Monarch – the last statute to be given royal assent, would be a very British compromise, in keeping with our perpetual invention of tradition, our national perfidy, and our unwritten constitution.