

THE PRECARIOUS INFLUENCE OF BRITISH ROYALTY

ANTOINE CLARKE



There is more to the British State than the British Head of State. But the principle of having a hereditary royal family which goes through the motions of possessing an entire nation - of reigning over *subjects* rather than serving *citizens* - is the very opposite of the philosophy of libertarianism. So the British royal family and the chances of it collapsing, or being got rid of, are of special interest to libertarians.

Once upon a time, the British *did* get rid of their monarchy. On January 30th 1649, King Charles I walked out of Whitehall Palace, said his prayers, and was decapitated. Britain was ruled as a "Commonwealth" from 1649 until the restoration of the monarchy in the person of Charles I's son, also called Charles, in 1660. Monarchs have reigned over Britain uninterrupted from that date onwards.

Charles I had attempted to establish his authority over and occasionally against that of Parliament. He was accused of supporting Roman Catholicism, a strong central government under his direct rule, and the power to levy taxes without the burden of obtaining the agreement of tax payers as to their extent, use or duration.¹ Civil war eventually broke out over the Ship Tax and the king's clumsy attempts to stifle opposition in Parliament. Some of the present day rituals surrounding the Queen's Speech embody the clash between the divine right of kings and the more earthly rights of commoners.

Every lesson from that chapter in English history, which is inculcated into generations of English monarchs if not into the children of today's commoners, hammers home the message that the king must be separated from state fundraising operations - for his own sake as well as that of the state's finances.

THE FRENCH EXPERIENCE

The contrast with France over the following one hundred and fifty years is revealing. Louis XIII got a Machiavellian genius - Cardinal Richelieu - to install a system of centralised state control which has persisted, with temporary setbacks in 1870 and 1943 until the present day. Indeed some institutions have survived intact, such as the Académie Française, the state regulatory authority over the French language. Louis XIII and Louis XIV, at the height of their power, were able to deflect accusations of dirty tricks onto their chief ministers who legally had no power. This curious arrangement gave the aura of power to a Sun King figure of quasi-mystical importance, and the exercise of power to some extremely capable bureaucrats who would fall from grace when the king thought that the going was good and stooges unnecessary.

At least, this is how it was supposed to happen. Sometimes the kings were weak² and sometimes they played favourites. Then there was trouble. A divinely appointed king with total power at the

age of twelve did not carry much weight in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most people assumed - rightly - that it was uncles and mothers and friends and (after maturity) wives and mistresses who were the powers behind the throne. It was with these characters that the blame for most catastrophes was laid.

Everyone knows that Marie Antoinette is associated with the final collapse of the Ancien Régime. Mme de Pompadour declared war on Prussia, concluded alliances with Austria, Russia and Sweden and most of Germany, all of which was done in total contradiction with French political and military interests. All of this was caused because King Frederick II of Prussia had called her Mlle Poisson.

Shortly after one of the most resounding military defeats of all time, suffered by the French and German Imperial troops at Rossbach, Mme de Pompadour bestowed a Marshal's baton upon the defeated Duc de Soubise, a celebrated playboy at the court. Frederick II became known as Frederick the Great.

The most devout champions of radical reform might still have prayed in all sincerity for the good health and personal rule of French monarchs, for nothing is worse for a nation than a weak but absolute monarch. In England absolutism never stuck, and a weak king meant a relatively independent Parliament, the Westminster model being already considerably less subservient to royal pressure than its Parisian counterpart.

The divine right of kings and absolute monarchy was taken as a serious constitutional arrangement in England, with support and opposition alike most vehement. Much the same could be said of European unity in the present day. In practice both absolute monarchy and the United States of Europe are merely moderately incompetent courts where sixteenth century Italian power intrigues are played out under the guise of national or international politics. King Charles I, sadly for him, believed the sales pitch; Oliver Cromwell, who did not believe it, learnt how to use it and was actually the most effective practitioner of absolutism that Britain has ever known.

King Charles II, after spending the best part of ten years throwing pebbles into the wrong side of the English Channel was more circumspect about ruling. Charles Junior may well have desired absolute power, but was far more attached to his head. The trappings of power and other pastimes were sufficient.³

FOREIGN KINGS OF ENGLAND UNDERMINED ROYAL POWER

Charles I's second son James II, a genuine Catholic, is the second villain of this paper. He appears to have thought that what Louis XIV could do, he could match. He is remembered, especially in Northern Ireland, for wanting to suppress protestantism, convert anglicanism back to Rome, revert to pre-Cromwellian views on royal conduct and wreak revenge upon the English people for what they had done to his father.

Louis XVIII behaved as badly as this in France in 1815, going as far as to have some of Napoleon's generals shot, abolishing any pretences at constitutional monarchy, and unlike James II of England he got away with it. In England, there were no Austrians, Prussians and other foreign forces of occupation or 'allies' camped across the border to prop up the Stuart regime. The Glorious Revolution of 1688, with the support of foreigners, rid the country of male English speaking monarchs for a century and with it the impetus for absolutist monarchy. How was one to get Englishmen to understand, let alone obey an order pronounced in a Dutch or North German accent? Interpreters of the Royal will appeared as inter-

Historical Notes No. 14

ISSN 0267-7105 ISBN 1 85637 038 0

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1991: Libertarian Alliance; Antoine Clarke.

Antoine Clarke is a student at London University, and Chairman of Hampstead Town Conservatives.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb
Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



mediaries with Parliament, the seat of power shifting to Westminster. They eventually became known as Prime Ministers. This did not happen quite as cleanly as we are given to believe in G.C.S.E. text books.

The post-Stuart monarchy has conserved its power of patronage and its money, though until Victoria it gradually lost most of its mystique and with it its popularity. George III is considered the most interesting of Hanoverian kings of England. He was insane at various times in his reign. That and his being king during both the losses of the British colonies in America and the victories against Napoleon are his most obvious claims to fame.

The king who spoke to trees was however an active political operator. In G. O. Trevelyan's admittedly hostile view George III attempted to subvert constitutional monarchy.

Those liberties had been in jeopardy from the moment when George the Third [...] set himself deliberately to build up a solid and enduring structure of personal government. To maintain in power ministers of his own choice, irrespective of the estimation in which they were held by their countrymen; to exercise his veto on legislation, not by announcing [...] that the King would further consider the matter, but by contriving that the measures that he disapproved should be defeated in the Lobby of one or another of the two Houses.

[...] Before he had been ten years on the throne he was in a fair way to succeed where Charles the First and James the Second had failed.

[...] George the Third had no occasion to march his Guards to Westminster, or commit the leaders of the Opposition to the Tower of London, as long as he could make sure of a parliamentary majority by an unscrupulous abuse of government patronage, and, (where need was,) by direct and downright bribery.⁴

Burke's *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770) comments sharply on some of the practices of George III's "Influence". The use to which Influence was put included the escalation of hostility between the American colonies and Britain. This led to the employment of Indians to harrass the colonists (against the contemporary equivalent of the Geneva Conventions) and the pursuit of a long and ruinous war which never stood a chance of recovering and pacifying the colonies.

The mistake made by the French in openly supporting America alone saved Britain from total disaster. The opportunity for the Royal Navy to sweep French fleets out of the Carribean, the Indian Ocean and the destruction of French ships at St. Vincent arose out of open hostilities. As long as French support remained covert the war cost Britain more than France, the Royal Navy was weakened, and French merchant ships carried British goods.

The legacy of 'personal government' as well as personal scandals associated with George IV and William IV almost ended popular support for the monarchy.

A FUTURE MONARCH WITH STATED POLITICAL OPINIONS

Today a third Charles awaits the throne. Given the current Queen's health it is not certain that he will do so, but if he accedes he would be the first monarch since Edward VII to have had no direct experience of war, either as a warrior or as the target of bombs. Unlike his grandparents and his mother who stayed in London during the Blitz there is no obvious bond between Charles and his future subjects.

The popularity of the monarchy is waning. The present Queen was never Empress of India. Our future King may not even be the head of the Commonwealth and has already discredited his role as Defender of the Anglican Faith by attending a mass in the Vatican officiated by the Pope. He has political views, about town planning, environmental protection, and now electoral reform. His wife has been exploited by anti-smoking pressure groups for their own ends.⁵ The Prince of Wales discusses rural housing in Wales with a group of Members of Parliament.⁶ He is seen on television promoting certain planning schemes and opposing others. The MPs apparently

asked for an "informal input"; Burke would have called it "Influence". Prince Charles has gained "widespread support" but this logically implies converse "substantial opposition". The crown prince is dev-elopeing what appear to be factional opinions and has either lost control over their appearance in print or else has thrown caution aside.

For the first time this century, we face the prospect of a monarch with stated political wishes *before* his accession to the throne. It seems probable that this habit of expressing personal opinions would continue even after coronation, despite royalist optimism to the contrary. It was after all supposed that his marriage would distract him from public debate. Those who care about the Prince of Wales' marital status must hope that the state of his marriage is not reflected in the volume of comment.

Recent press hostility during the Gulf War against the royal family in general is remarkable considering the difference during the Falklands War of 1982. During that war, as during both world wars, a prominent member of the royal family was an active serviceman. During the Gulf War no member of the royal family came close to combat despite the presence of service women at or near the front.

The royal family has appeared frivolous and out of touch with the modern world as a result of this war. Even the Queen's broadcast was criticised in the press as an irrelevance. In the midst of this Charles makes some more of his potentially divisive comments.

Prince Charles should perhaps pay more attention to Japan. The Japanese Imperial family has done very well in the last hundred years, in the sense that it has survived a uniquely threatening series of historical upheavals. Before 1868 the Shoguns held actual power, with the Emperor promoted out of harm's way to the status of living god and therefore beyond merely temporal power. As a result Japanese factionalism surrounded the Shogun and not the Emperor. Since 1945 the Emperor has been stripped of virtually all authority. Today the Emperor is as neutral and as impersonal as the man who reads the football scores on Saturday afternoon television.

On the other hand it is worth noting that Henri, duc de Chambord, the would-be Henri V of France, was offered the monarchy in 1872 only to be turned down because of his dislike of the 'Tricolore' flag.⁷ A publicly stated opinion on a minor issue was enough to prevent the restoration of monarchy in France.

INERTIA REIGNS

No widespread support would be conceivable today in Britain for the restoration of the monarchy if it had lapsed in, say, 1950. Prince Charles does not appear the best candidate for maintaining impartiality and a distance from the turmoil of political life.

To conclude, the British monarchy is now in quite serious trouble. It has survived crises before., but what makes this crisis special is that almost nobody, not even Prince Charles himself, believes any longer that this family rules by the grace of God. A symptom of this fundamental lack of accord between royalty and its "subjects" is that the monarchy has ceased to work as a rallying totem during wartime. The only reason we in Britain still have a monarchy is inertia; it would be a tiresome chore to dispose of it. This is quite different from positive belief in the arrangement.

NOTES

1. For an account of Charles I's trial, see *The State Trials*, Volume III, in the Lobby of the Supreme Court Library, Royal Courts of Justice, The Strand, London.
2. Both Louis XIV and Louis XV were crowned when still children.
3. Charles II had several bastards, eight being admitted to. Louis XIV sired about a hundred natural children.
4. George Otto Trevelyan, *The American Revolution*, abridged by Richard B. Morris, Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., London, 1965.
5. *Silly Stunts a Failure*, FOREST, London, 1991.
6. *Evening Standard*, Wednesday March 6th 1991, p. 1-2.
7. Whitney Smith, *Flags Through The Ages and Across The World*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., Maidenhead, 1975, translated into French by Georges Pasch as *Les Drapeaux à Travers Les Ages et Dans Le Monde Entier*, Librairie Anthème Fayard, Paris, 1976.