

## The Labour Party and British Republicanism

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The famous detective, Sherlock Holmes, once solved a case by referring to "the dog that did not bark." In the past 250 years of British history, republicanism is another dog that did not bark. This is particularly true of supposedly our most radical major political party, the Labour Party. Over the monarchy, as over constitutional matters generally, Labour's instincts have been conservative. Even after 1997, when the party, led by Lord Irvine, has indeed embarked upon major constitutional reforms—devolution for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; an elected mayor of London; the abolition of nearly all hereditary peers; incorporation of the European convention of human rights into British law; a Freedom of Information Act—the monarchy has remained untouched. Here the hereditary principle, rejected for the House of Lords, remains sacrosanct. All Labour prime ministers, Ramsay MacDonald (1924, 1929-31), Clement Attlee (1945-51), Harold Wilson (1964-70, 1974-6), James Callaghan (1976-9) and, up to a point, Tony Blair have remained deferential towards their King or Queen and their entourage. The present Queen Elizabeth II had by far her worst relationship with a Conservative premier, Margaret Thatcher who did not share the Queen's enthusiasm for a multiracial Commonwealth. Labour has thrown up only a few incidental protests, such as the "anti-jubilee" *New Statesman* in the summer of 1977 (in which I took part), described by the *Daily Mail* of the time as showing "the termites of the Left coming out of the woodwork!"<sup>1</sup> In the past twenty years, the British monarchy has certainly weakened. But this owes far more to its own self-inflicted wounds and the investigative and intrusive journalism of the tabloid press than to anything done by the Labour Party.

In the mid-nineteenth century, it is true, there was a lively tradition of working-class republicanism. The early trade unionists and socialists were naturally republican since they saw themselves as democrats and opposed to aristocratic influence. There were many Republican Clubs, especially in London, in the 1870s, and politicians such as Charles Dilke and Charles Bradlaugh had pronounced republican views.<sup>2</sup> The French Commune of 1871 excited widespread enthusiasm and encouraged republican sympathies in Britain. Bradlaugh was nominated by the city of Paris as a candidate in the French assembly elections of February 1871, as Thomas Paine had been eighty years earlier. There was a popular cult of the Protector, Oliver Cromwell, often projected, however bizarrely, as a kind of working-class hero who cut down aristocratic privilege along with the Stuart monarchy.<sup>3</sup> But this republican movement, such as it was, rapidly fell away in the last twenty years of the century, as the Queen emerged from the isolation of widowhood to identify herself with popular sentiments of patriotism and imperialism. The title of Empress of India in 1876, artfully manoeuvred by Disraeli, the Golden and Diamond Jubilees of 1887 and 1897, all encouraged a broad populist enthusiasm for the Queen. The culture of the music hall, of horse-racing and of popular sport, became strongly royalist in tone. In the music-hall in particular, crises such as the Eastern question of 1876-8, the death of General Gordon at Khartoum in 1885, and the outbreak of the South African War in 1899 all gave further impetus. Working-class audiences in the music-halls would bellow out stirring patriotic choruses such as "We're soldiers of the Queen, my boys" (Jones 223 ff.)

The Independent Labour Party, formed in 1893, a democratic socialist body, was initially republican in sympathies. Its founder, Keir Hardie, was always so. His speech of April 1894 in the Commons, at the time of the birth of a royal grandchild (the future King Edward VIII), condemning the House for finding time to celebrate a royal baby at a time when 251 Welsh miners had been killed in a terrible mining accident at Cilfynydd in south Wales, created a sensation. Hardie had written in his newspaper, the *Labour Leader*, that "the life of one Welsh miner is of greater commercial and moral value to the British nation than the whole Royal crowd put together, from the Royal Great-Grand-Mama to this puling Royal Great-Grandchild" (Morgan, *Keir Hardie* 72-3; *Labour Leader*, 30 June 1894). It gave Hardie a reputation for extremism which lasted for life. It was more damaging for his reputation than his socialism, his feminism or his pacifism. Hardie remained an outspoken republican,

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, "The Crown and Politics," *New Statesman*, 3 June 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Eugenio F. Biagini & Alastair J. Reids. For Bradlaugh, see Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner 308-31.

<sup>3</sup> The late Raphael Samuel did much important unpublished research on this theme.

a view popular in his Welsh constituency of Merthyr Tydfil, which he represented in the Commons from 1900 to his death in 1915. During the Boer War, Hardie used the crisis further to attack the monarchy, to claim that King Edward VII had financial links with Cecil Rhodes's mining enterprises in South Africa—"it is no secret that his Majesty has been all along a party to the war gang in South Africa." He went on to allege that, at the royal funeral in 1901, militarists and their clerical allies had "used the Queen's dead body as a recruiting sergeant" (*Labour Leader*, 11 July 1901). In 1907 Hardie and other Labour MPs were denounced for condemning Edward VII's visit to meet the hated Czar of Russia by sailing up the Baltic in the royal yacht (Morgan, *Keir Hardie* 258). Hardie said that it meant that the King virtually condoned the atrocities of the Czarist regime in Russia. He continued to attack the King's privileged and debauched life-style. For his pains, he was excluded from royal garden parties at the Palace—which it is inconceivable that Hardie would ever have attended anyway!

But the Labour Party generally was most reluctant to follow this lead. After all, virtually all European countries were monarchies or empires anyway prior to 1914. Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the party from 1911 was anxious to show his party as a moderate, constitutional party. After the first world war, when so many imperial dynasties disappeared, MacDonald gave this still further emphasis as a way of showing that Labour was fit to govern. In its entire history, Labour has had only one formal vote on the future of the monarchy, at the 1923 party conference. There, a republican motion produced just fifteen minutes of debate, and was humiliatingly defeated by 3,690,000 votes to 38,000 (*Labour Party Conference Report of 1923*).

All Labour governments have been highly favourable to the monarchy. In his two administrations of 1924 and 1931 Ramsay MacDonald built up a good personal relationship with George V—which, indeed, helped to decide MacDonald's policy in August 1931 in forming a National Government with the Tories and dividing his party (Marquand 775ff). In 1924 MacDonald kept George Lansbury out of his first Cabinet, after that old socialist had attacked the monarchy in a speech and referred George V to the sad fate of King Charles I in 1649 (Shepherd 210)! MacDonald, like Snowden, J.H. Thomas and other Labour ministers, were well aware of the renewed popularity of the British monarchy after the first world war, the way that George V identified himself with popular festivals such as the football Cup Final at Wembley, and built up a convincing image of the monarchy as the symbol of the family (a great trap for Charles and Diana, amongst others, in the 1990s as events turned out) (Rose 211ff.). The monarchy, as we have seen, was a major factor in the formation of the National government under MacDonald in August 1931. After that left-wing figures like Harold Laski and Stafford Cripps strongly attacked the role of the Crown in the 1931 crisis and the secret links between government, the establishment and the banking community as they saw them. Laski vigorously attacked what he called "The Palace Revolution" of 1931 in his pamphlet, *The Crisis and the Constitution* (1932) and other writings. But Labour fought shy of advocating republicanism. Hugh Dalton's otherwise radical *Practical Socialism* (1934) made a particular point of regarding the monarchy, in its present constitutional form, as standing above party politics and therefore in no way a target of Labour's future programme of reform (Dalton 9-11). In 1936 it was said that Labour MPs of nonconformist working-class background were important in persuading Stanley Baldwin that he could remove King Edward VIII by forcing him to abdicate after his affair with his mistress and future wife Mrs. Simpson.<sup>4</sup> Labour after all stood for traditional artisan principles of respectability and moral probity, the sanctity of the home and the primacy of the family.

After 1945 Clement Attlee developed a warm personal relationship with King George VI; he felt genuine sympathy for him for his patriotism and sense of duty in following the errant Edward VIII and his service in London during the blitz, and for his grappling with personal tensions and a speech impediment. Attlee and the King shared among other things a common interest in the future of India. In the autumn of 1951, Attlee disastrously hastened the call of a general election since the King was due to go to Africa on a royal tour in early 1952; in fact, the King was to fall ill and die, and never in fact went to Africa at all. Labour went on to lose the general election (Harris 485-7). In 1964 Harold Wilson developed warm relationships with Queen Elizabeth—the *New Statesman* actually referred to Wilson as "the working man's Melbourne" (a reference to Victoria's avuncular prime minister of 1837-41)! When the Post-Master-General, Anthony Wedgwood Benn (later recycled as Tony Benn) proposed issuing postage stamps without the Queen's head on them, Wilson vetoed the idea. He also

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<sup>4</sup> Middlemas & Barnes 1012; Ziegler, *King Edward VIII* 321.

persuaded the Queen to have Charles formally invested as Prince of Wales at Caernarfon castle in 1969, a colourful if bizarre event which had the effect of stifling much of the growing nationalist movement in Wales.<sup>5</sup> After 1976 James Callaghan had a warmer relationship still with the Queen even managing to compliment her on her dress sense (remarkably!). Over the Commonwealth and the illegality of the unilateral declaration of independence of white-led Southern Rhodesia, Labour prime minister and queen were as one.<sup>6</sup> The royal jubilee of 1977 was well stage-managed by Callaghan. After much debate, the Cabinet had a "whip round" in collecting money and gave the Queen a silver coffee pot, chosen personally by Mrs. Callaghan (Benn 31). Others had offered different suggestions: Tony Benn proposed a vase carved out of coal by a Polish miner.

Tony Blair after 1997 was harder to assess, so pragmatic a politician was he. But his political antennae led him to lead the royal mourning after the death of Diana in Paris in 1997, "the people's princess" as Blair called her, and to defend the Queen over that crisis, and after as the death of the Queen Mother and the celebration of the royal golden jubilee of 2002. The Queen, Blair excruciatingly announced at a grand banquet, was "simply the best of British," even a symbol of the alleged "cool Britannia." When another crisis flared up in late 2002, with the collapsed trial of the former butler of Princess Diana, Paul Burrell, after the Queen surprisingly intervened, Blair was quick to rush in and state that the Queen was totally blameless and the royal prerogative in no way impugned.

Now why has the Labour Party been so sympathetic to the undemocratic hereditary crown and the royal family? Why has it never come close to embracing Republicanism, unlike, say, the Socialist Party in France or Germany? In part, it is because the monarchy has been surprisingly skilful in identifying itself with a variety of popular movements and aspirations after the first world war. After all, George V was well aware of the terrible fate of his cousin, the Russian Czar, Nicholas II, during the Russian revolution, especially after he refused to allow his cousin refuge in Britain itself (Rose 211). The monarchy variously identified itself with the transition from an empire into a Commonwealth in the years after 1945, with the growth of a multi-ethnic culture in Britain after 1960 (Prince Charles's Trust has been a significant factor here as have been his efforts to identify with the ideals of the Muslim community), and with pressures for devolution in Scotland and Wales. In a remarkable jubilee pronouncement before the Scottish parliament at Edinburgh in 2002, the Queen warmly commended devolution for Scotland as strengthening the ties of unionism and loyalty that bound Scotland to the United Kingdom. This kind of adaptability has enabled the Crown to deflect criticisms that it is out of date and out of touch. Indeed, it is just conceivable that the current alienation from politicians amongst the British public (intensified by the Iraq crisis in 2003) could reinforce the prestige of the unelected monarchy still further.

The popular perception has been that the Crown has always been there at times of crisis, unchanging, imperturbable. A powerful image was of the King and Queen staying in London during the blitz, when indeed Buckingham Palace itself was bombed. A legendary event was the Queen Mother tip-toeing through the rubble of bombed houses in the East End of London in 1941. When the Palace was itself bombed by the Luftwaffe, the Queen Mother famously observed, "Now we can look the East End in the face again" (Pimlott 62-3). This was important not only for wartime solidarity but also for the importance of the wartime ethos (Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, the blitz etc.) as an abiding symbol of modern British identity. This comes out so strongly in the cult of Churchill and our "finest hour," in the suspicion of continental Europe in recent times, and the monarchy is one important part of it.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, it is clear that the public attitude to the monarchy is far less deferential than in the 1940s and 1950s. There is a marked decline in royal symbolism—far less playing of the national anthem (it has long since ceased to be played at the end of cinema performances or at sport events or concerts, and in Scotland and Wales is actively disliked), while the Union Jack is flown less often by far, and commonly identified with the neo-fascism of the National Front and the working-class supposedly racist supporters of West Ham United football club in the east of London. Since the 1970s, indeed ever since Prince Philip memorably complained that he was so hard up that he could

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<sup>5</sup> Pimlott 388-92; Ziegler, *Wilson* 215-6.

<sup>6</sup> Morgan, *Callaghan* 511-3.

<sup>7</sup> 20. Robert Colls, *The Identity of England* generally on this theme.

hardly afford to play polo, there has been growing criticism of the style of the Crown—its vast, largely untaxed wealth; its lavish and anti-democratic lifestyle (at least presenting “debs” at Court has disappeared); its social exclusiveness such as the schooling of the royal princes at exclusive private schools such as Eton; its antique modes of speech—such as using “one” instead of “I”—and curious forms of pronunciation, its obviously undemocratic character. The spectacle of an anxious, uneasy Queen looking in at a pub or having tea with the tenant of a Glasgow council house provoked widespread ridicule. The satire directed against the royal family has become a major industry with Fergie, Sophie, Edward “count of Wessex,” various Spencers, and other baroque personalities simply figures of fun. There was scant public sympathy for the death of the unpopular Princess Margaret, commonly regarded as the “guest from hell” in social habits. And yet when my parents were told on their wedding day, 21 August 1930, that a little princess had just been born, it was said by their friends to be a sign of almost divine blessing!

The monarchy went through a dreadful period in the 1990s from the *annus horribilis* of 1992 with the memorable fire at Windsor, the long running tragicomedy of Charles and Diana, their divorce added to the divorces of Prince Andrew and Princess Anne and other misfortunes. It was hard to identify the British monarchy any longer with the cherished “family values” of George V or George VI or indeed the young Elizabeth II, when the royal family was perhaps as dysfunctional as any in the land. The jubilee of 2002 seemed to go quite well, with a popular rock concert at the Palace, until the Paul Burrell case and various other financial apparent scandals associated with Prince Charles’s household led to a further decline in esteem. What the current inquiry by Sir Michael Peat into the running of Prince Charles’s affairs will reveal remains to be seen. The newspapers forecast (9 March 2003) that, since it was conducted by a royal employee, it would just be another whitewash and carry no authority.

Recent events, therefore, have shown that the position is fragile. It has depended greatly on widespread regard and respect for the Queen personally—and that was severely shaken by her response to the Windsor fire in 1992, her cold reaction to Diana’s death in 1997 and the intervention in the royal butler trial in 2002. Prince Charles, should he become king, is likely to be far more difficult a monarch, with his strong and controversial opinions on such issues as fox-hunting and rural affairs, quite apart from religion, alternative medicine, Shakespeare, architecture and the teaching of Latin, and his tendency to spray them at ministers at the slightest opportunity. His observation that farmers were more discriminated than blacks or gays was widely ridiculed. As the example of Edward VIII, with his populism and apparent sympathy for fascism, indicates, an opinionated monarchy could pose a real problem. So, too, of course could popular sympathy for the dead Princess Diana and the position of the little-liked Camilla Parker-Bowles as *de facto* mistress of the bedchamber. In that case, we could have a powerful reaction against monarchy and a sustained move towards republicanism, or at least a powerful indifference or alienation. There are already strong pressures for a republic in Australia, of course, and to a lesser degree in New Zealand and Canada, and it is possible to see the role of the Crown as head of the Commonwealth rapidly becoming redundant.<sup>8</sup> Bodies like the influential Charter 88, especially through the writings of Anthony Barnett, call for a fundamental reform of the monarchy as part of a written, democratic constitution based on clear principles of accountability and citizens’ rights—in other words, to make Britain more like France.

But the other reason why the monarchy has met with such limited criticism in Labour circles is simply that Labour has never seen republicanism as one of its priorities. None of its political philosophers has raised the issue since Harold Laski did so in 1932-3. Democratic socialism has been concerned with social and economic change rather than with institutional transformation, with issues of class not of hierarchical status. Labour has sought power—“*la conquête du pouvoir*” in Léon Blum’s vivid phrase—but within the existing framework and sense of national identity. The brief anti-monarchism of post-1931 soon passed away. The supposedly radical Army Bureau of Current Affairs during the second world war, which was conducted for troops serving at the front, in the deserts of Africa or the jungles of Burma, lauded the concept of “The Queen in Parliament.” That was the basis of our liberties, and it was what we were fighting for. There were only isolated rebels in parliament like the Scotsman, Willie Hamilton; there was just one dissident in June 2002 in the Scottish parliament when a loyal address was presented to the Queen—he was the Independent Socialist,

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<sup>8</sup> For a good academic discussion of the monarchy, see Vernon Bogdanor, *The Monarchy and the Constitution*.

Tommy Sheridan. The Labour MPs probably include now many dozens of republicans (they are rumoured to include such ministers as John Prescott and Clare Short). To my personal knowledge, at least 20 Labour peers are members of a republican group, led by Lord (Jack) Dormand. But the issue is most unlikely to be raised publicly for many years.

I am currently chairing the Fabian Society Commission on the monarchy (due to report in late April 2003). It is an unusual body since the Crown is never publicly discussed in parliament or in the courts. We do not have royal commissions on the monarchy; its precise influence and key aspects of its role and its finances are unknown. Our Commission is looking variously at the political legal roles of the monarchy and the royal prerogative, its relationship to the established church of England, the Crown's finances and property, and its social exclusiveness. We will try disentangle various themes that are too often confused—the constitutional role of the monarchy, the legal role of the Crown and the social and personal role of the Queen and royal family as individuals.

But we will not advocate a republic (a topic on which our ten members have different views). Our themes will rather lead to different possible conclusions. First there will be a critique of the royal prerogative in government (exercised in effect by the prime minister, notably in the right to declare war, as in the case of Iraq). This will, perhaps, be more a critique of the premiership than of the Crown. It will merge into a wider discussion of the general theme of centralization, unaccountability and secrecy in the pragmatic British governmental system, rather than of the monarchy. There will be discussion of the merits of a bill of rights and of a written constitution. Secondly, there will be a critique of the social detachment of the monarchy (going far beyond such issues as fox-hunting or polo), but also balanced against the clear awareness that, historically, the monarchy has been a powerful social glue, giving Britain an historic continuity since the seventeenth century, not known in France or other European countries. Until October 2002, opinion polls showed that a much more democratised monarchy was the most popular opinion. A republic was supported by only around 10-15 per cent, even amongst the young. At a time of doubt about the future of the United Kingdom and the endurance of the British identity—with the various changes implied by a multi-ethnic and multi-faith society, a transatlantic imported culture, membership of the European Union, and Celtic devolution at home—monarchy, even though much weaker than earlier, remains a point of continuity and perhaps of stability.

In the immediate future, therefore, republicanism is nowhere on our political agenda. But you should never say never in this unpredictable life. The United Kingdom has gone through tumultuous changes in recent decades since 1945, and continues to do so. It is not inconceivable at all that, some time in the coming years, the established Church, the pound sterling and even the monarchy could follow the Empire and the Union into the dustbin of history.

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