

Republicanism: The Pros and Cons

Arguments in favour of a republic

Republicans feel that a republic is the next logical step of a historical process of gradual democratic reform. They assert that the British people will excel within a non-hereditary democratic and open system for selecting the head of the executive branch of government as well as the head of state.

"The new office of President would represent a new political culture - social inclusiveness would replace social hierarchy, mutual respect would replace deference, genuine intellect would replace the spurious wisdom of princes. Pompous titles, counterfeit 'generals' and royal chancellors of universities would be consigned to history. The current system of honours would be simplified and modernised and based only on merit."

Republicans argue that such a system would advance the egalitarian cause of meritocracy, and create a political consciousness less connected with social class or birth. Every child growing up in a British republic, from whatever background, would know from an early age that they could aspire one day to becoming Head of State.

Arguments against monarchy

Most republicans assert that hereditary monarchy is unfair and elitist. They claim that in a modern and democratic society no one should be expected to defer to another simply because of their birth. Such a system, they assert, does not make for a society which is at ease with itself, and it encourages attitudes which are more suited to a bygone age of imperialism than to a "modern nation". Some claim that maintaining a privileged royal family diminishes a society and encourages a feeling of dependency in many people who should instead have confidence in themselves and their fellow citizens.

Further, republicans argue that 'the people', not the members of one family, should be sovereign.

(1) Monarchy is the opposite of democracy

Monarchy denies the people a basic right -- Republicans argue that it should be a fundamental right of the people of any nation to elect their head of state and for every citizen to be eligible to hold that office, and that such a head of state is more accountable to the people.

Monarchy devalues a parliamentary system -- Monarchical prerogative powers can be used to circumvent normal democratic process with no accountability.

(2) The British monarchy is religiously discriminatory

Due to the history of Great Britain and especially Plots of Catholic Jesuits against Protestantism within the Nation, it is law that Roman Catholics may not inherit the Crown. It is argued by Republicans that having an Anglican head of state is

unrepresentative of a nation where only 4% of adults are practicing Anglicans (although over 38% of the British Population would still consider themselves Protestant).

(3) Monarchy is gender-discriminative

The British Royal Family uses male primogeniture, which means that the crown is inherited by the eldest son, and is only passed on to a daughter if the monarch has no sons. If absolute primogeniture were used instead of male primogeniture, the crown would be passed on to the eldest child irrespective of sex so that daughters had the same rights as sons. This method of succession disinherits not only daughters but their descendants.

(4) A monarchy demands deference

It is argued by republicans that the way citizens are expected to address members, however junior, of the royal family is part of an attempt to keep subjects 'in their place'.

(5) It is the enemy of merit and aspiration

The order of succession in a monarchy specifies a person who will become head of state, regardless of qualifications. The highest titular office in the land is not open to "free and fair competition".

(6) It devalues intellect and achievement

Republicans argue that members of the royal family bolster their position with unearned symbols of achievement. Examples in the UK include the Queen's many honorary military titles of colonel-in-chief. The Queen's sole military experience, though honourable and bold for its day, was as a driver and mechanic. There is debate over the roles the members of the monarchy have played in the military, many doubt that members of the royal family took any part on the front line for any length of time. It is seen to some as more of a PR exercise than military service. It is also seen that members of the royal family are fast tracked to higher ranks in the army.

(7) It harms the monarchs themselves

Republicans argue that a hereditary system condemns each heir to the throne to an abnormal childhood. This was historically the reason why the anarchist William Godwin opposed the monarchy. Johann Hari has written a book 'God Save the Queen?' in which he argues that every member of the royal family has suffered psychologically from the system of monarchy.

(8) Monarchs are not impartial, and lack accountability

Republicans argue that monarchs are not impartial but harbour their own opinions, motives and wish to protect their interests. Rather than feeling comforted that monarchs are impartial by their freedom from election, republicans claim that monarchs are not accountable. For instance, republicans argue, Prince Charles has spoken or acted in ways that could be interpreted as taking a political stance: his

refusal to attend, in protest of China's dealings with Tibet, a state dinner hosted by the Queen for the Chinese head of state; his strong stance on GM food; and the contents of certain memos regarding how people achieve their positions which were leaked to the press.

While monarchists tend to feel that an impartial advantage is gained by various aspects of the civil service reporting to the Crown, republicans see a lack of important democratic accountability and transparency for such institutions.

(9) The monarchy is expensive

Republicans claim that the total cost to taxpayers, including hidden elements (eg, the Royal Protection security bill), of the monarchy are over £100 million per annum. The Telegraph claims the monarchy costs each adult in Britain around 62p a year.

(10) The monarchy makes the UK look backwards

Republicans argue that the monarchy may be considered an embarrassment: as a concept it is dated and while the UK has a hereditary head of state it can not claim to be a modern nation.

Arguments in favour of constitutional monarchy

(1) Provides an impartial arbiter

Monarchists argue that an impartial, symbolic head of state is a step removed from political, commercial, and factional interests, allowing them to be a non-partisan figure who can act as an effective intermediary between various levels of government and political parties, an especially indispensable feature in a federal system. The fact that the monarch nominally holds all executive authority is seen as advantageous by monarchists, who state that the Crown is a guarantor against the misuse of constitutional power by politicians for personal gain. This view of the monarchy developed after Oliver Cromwell's Republic which eventually became a military dictatorship and there has been little desire to attempt a republic since.

(2) Provides a focal point for unity and tradition

Monarchists argue that a constitutional monarch with limited powers and non-partisan nature can provide a focus for national unity, national awards and honours, national institutions, and allegiance, as opposed to a president affiliated to a political party.

(3) Provides links with other states

Monarchs tend to be linked with the monarchs of other nations, or in the case of the Commonwealth, one person is the head of state for a number of nations.

(4) The Church

The Queen is the head of the Church of England and plays quite an active role.

(5) A separation from government duties (in figurehead monarchies)

Monarchists argue that separating the head of state from the head of government (the Prime Minister), offers some advantages. This separation can be achieved by a constitutional monarchy.

(6) Offers a bridge to non-governmental organisations

Monarchists argue that in a limited, constitutional monarchy the monarch is able to give impartial non-political support to the work of a wide range of different types of organizations, faiths, charities, artists, craftsmen, etc. It is difficult to prove that the support of the monarchy is politically impartial, but it is easily documented that monarchs have supported charitable causes and NGOs. The police in the UK are charged with protecting the monarch's peace, and are thus servants of the Crown and not of the government: this allows them to be independent of the government, thus separating the administration of justice from the executive power. In practice the monarch exercises no direct power over such institutions, which are, therefore run by the government, for the people.

(7) Monarchies have staying power

Monarchists argue that constitutional monarchy creates a head of state who is under the democratic control of Parliament but remains in power for a long time, giving stability and experience to the state. This was not the case in earlier times when factions fought over the monarchy. Modern constitutional monarchs, such as those in Denmark, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, have reigned for long periods and seen many Prime Ministers come and go.

(8) Discrimination

Republicans have argued that the existence of a monarchy or an aristocracy amounts to snobbery, and that a monarch should not inherit power without qualifications or merit. However, a monarchist might counter that the loss of a monarchy would do nothing to diminish discrimination, and point towards the presidency of George W. Bush in the United States or even Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan partly on the grounds that their fathers were noted politicians before them as testimony to the fact that a person can and will be placed in power on unfair grounds with or without the presence of a crown.

(9) No divisive elections

Constitutional Monarchists argue that where elections are not needed they are only divisive, and that the head of state need not be elected. This relates to the first argument that they are impartial and are figures of unity that people from all sides of the political spectrum can unite behind.

(10) The Royals are cost effective

The annual expenditure, since June 2005 has been a total of £36.7 Million or approximately 61 pence per person. When compared to the scope and number of duties that the Royal Family perform, this is significantly cost effective. Their only

duties are the meeting of foreign dignitaries, attending events and ceremonial events, to which they devote the majority of their time. In most states with a presidential system, the duties are divided between political and ceremonial responsibilities resulting in less time for both.

(11) Meritocracy vs aristocracy

Prince Charles, has been criticised for writing a private memo on ambition and opportunity. This memo was later leaked and widely understood to criticise meritocracy for creating a competitive society which republicans took as proof that the head aristocrat, and symbol of monarchy, was attacking meritocracy and the motivation of the ordinary person towards greater achievement.

In humorist Lynn Truss's critique of British manners entitled 'Talk to the Hand', Charles's memo is evaluated with respect to the putative impact of meritocracy on British boorishness. Truss came to the conclusion that the prince might have a point: that the positive motivational impact of meritocracy might be balanced against the negative impact of a competitive society.