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Making it Political: the Challenge to the Monarchy

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EMILY ROBINSON, JUL 8 2011

The history of the modern British monarchy has been one of increasing personalisation: the walk-abouts, the smiles, the clothes. This is why the newlyweds' tour of Canada appears to have been such a success. With Catherine's hint at the possibility of a future baby and the 'magical' night alone on Eagle Island, there has been just enough human interest to keep the onlookers happy.

By all the standards on which the royals are judged, the first half of 2011 has been a great success. By most other standards, they have fared rather less well, facing allegations of corruption, extravagance and political meddling.

The Prince Andrew affair should have been particularly damaging. The combination of extremely ill-judged friendships, allegations of a conflict of interest between public influence and personal profit and of 'rude' and 'boorish' behaviour would have finished the career of any other public servant. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine expenses of £17,248 for a train from London to Crewe or £29,786 for a private mini-break in Scotland by any other public body being received with so little comment. Even plans to grant the royals 15% of the income of the *publicly-owned* Crown Estates (currently worth £7bn and rising rapidly) at a time of severe public service cuts have generated very little attention – let alone outrage.

This so-called 'sovereign support grant' is indicative of the way in which the monarchy is protected by the state, shielded from both public scrutiny and economic cut-backs. The exemption of the royals from Freedom of Information legalisation, granted last year, is another striking example. This exemption is absolute – *even if* the requested information is judged to be in the public interest. It has already proved useful, limiting the information available on Charles' extensive lobbying of Government ministers.

So why doesn't any of this seem to matter? Why are the royals judged solely on questions of appearance and personality rather than probity, accountability and competence?

The answer is because they are believed to be non-political. They are a family and are judged as a family. This is why the media fawn over them when they are getting married and having babies and turn nasty when they start arguing and divorcing. This is why the royal wedding was so important for the royals. And why it was promoted so heavily: the public holiday, the VAT exemption on merchandise, the waiving of red tape for street parties.

The way in which the royals' family image is privileged over their public duties can be seen in the adjournment debate requested by Paul Flynn MP on the conduct of Prince Andrew. Flynn had tried to raise questions about Andrew in March but had been prevented by the Speaker, on the grounds that references to the royal family should be 'very rare, very sparing and very respectful'. Even during the eventual debate, Flynn was restricted to oblique references to the conduct of 'individuals'. Despite this, Lib Dem Minister, Ed Davey, described these comments as 'inappropriate', particularly on account of their 'timing', so close to the royal wedding.

The continuing stream of royal births, marriages and deaths is of course deeply political. It is the hereditary principle itself, manifested in a series of shiny photo shoots. But the monarchy also has more direct political implications for our system of governance and particularly for the power of the Prime Minister. Unlike an elected head of state, the monarch is unable to act as an effective check on the executive. Instead the Prime Minister gains considerable power

from the Royal Prerogatives.

Moreover, the monarchy is a public body, consuming public finances and representing us at home and abroad. It should therefore be subject to the same levels of scrutiny and debate as any other state institution. There are a number of simple things that could be done to enable this. The exemption from Freedom of Information and the ban on criticising the royals in Parliament should both be lifted and the royal accounts should be subject to proper scrutiny. Beyond this, I would like to see the monarchy classified as a 'controversial issue' by the BBC. This would mean that its reporting of the monarchy and the royal family would need to be balanced and impartial, rather than celebratory as at present.

This matters because all the goodwill generated by the Duchess of Cambridge's well-chosen headgear can easily be undone by 'boorish' behaviour and 'rude' comments from her in-laws. That we have no right to information on the royals and that our elected representatives may not even openly discuss them in Parliament tells you all you need to know. It's not about the interests of Britain and its citizens; it's about the interests of the royals themselves. This situation does a great disservice to the talented, enterprising, creative people of this nation – and indeed those of the other nations which remain subject to the Crown, including, of course, Canada.

This is hardly a marginal opinion. Opinion polls in Britain consistently put support for a republic around 20% and the majority of the remainder are apathetic rather than monarchist. Even at the height of royal wedding fever, 26% of those polled by ICM said that Britain would be better off without the monarchy – rising to 39% among 19-24 year olds. More importantly, 36% said that the monarchy was a divisive force. While the Queen's visit to Ireland was generally regarded as a sensitive and well-handled gesture of goodwill, it should be remembered that it was *because* she is a British monarch, with all the unhappy history that goes along with that, that such a gesture was necessary. British politicians have long been on good terms with their Irish counterparts.

In the Commonwealth countries where the Queen remains sovereign, the monarchy is also divisive and contentious. It is not surprising that opposition to the monarchy is particularly marked among Maori in New Zealand and among French Canadians. Overall, more than 50% of Canadians support re-opening the constitutional debate on the monarchy – and only a third say that they would prefer Canada to retain the monarchy. And while a recent Australian poll showed that support for a republic had fallen slightly, this 'low' was still 41%, compared with 39% support for the monarchy.

This year has been dominated by the royal wedding, which naturally lent itself to the 'happy families' narrative. It was also marketed to an international audience as a charming British romance. Next year will be the Queen's diamond jubilee. Similarly lavish public celebrations are planned. But this time we will be asked to 'celebrate' the fact that the Queen has been an unelected Head of State for sixty years. Republicans should seize this chance to challenge the dominant narrative of the monarchy. It's not personal. It's political.

Dr Emily Robinson *is Chair of Republic, the campaign for an elected Head of State. She is also an Advance Research Fellow in Politics at the University of Nottingham and the author of History, Heritage and Tradition in Contemporary British Politics: Past Politics and Present Histories (Manchester University Press, forthcoming January 2012).*

About the author:

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