



A LIBERTARIAN DEFENCE OF THE MONARCHY

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I consider myself to be a libertarian. I believe that people should be allowed to live their own lives as they wish, not as a privilege but as a right, provided they pay their own way and don't restrict other people's freedom. I resent taxes, three quarters of which I believe are wasted or worse, and nine tenths of which I think are immoral. I believe that outside of enforcing contract law and defending us from foreign foes, the less the state does the better. In short I am as fierce a defender of personal freedom against the state as you could hope to find outside of a heavily armed Missouri survivalists camp. And yet I also count myself a Royalist. A libertarian who supports the Monarchy appears at first to be a contradiction, as sensible as a roller-skating haddock. And indeed in one sense it is contradictory — I would oppose a "pure" or "absolute" Monarchy as wholeheartedly as I would oppose any other form of tyranny. But I firmly believe that the constitutional Monarchy we have arrived at in Britain today is, as a result of happy historical accident, the best form of government currently in use on the planet (to paraphrase the classic observer of the British constitution, Walter Bagehot). Let me explain why.

THE COST OUTWEIGHED BY THE BENEFIT

The obvious reason for a libertarian to oppose a Monarchy is to avoid arbitrary interference with personal freedom by a powerful Monarch — to avoid the dangers inherent in concentrating power in the hands of one man (or woman). But although I would not claim that the British Monarch of today is completely powerless, no one can reasonably claim that the Queen interferes to any great extent in his or her personal life. Compared to the intrusive

nannying influence of the British government, the impact of the Queen upon my life, or any other private individual's, is clearly negligible.

There is however a good libertarian argument, which states that all taxation is not only theft, but that by restricting my ability to spend the fruits of my labour or my property, it is also a direct attack on my personal liberty. Therefore, insofar as the Monarchy is paid for from taxation, it is an assault on my freedom. If I am going to mount a libertarian defence of the Monarchy I must therefore show that the cost of the Monarchy is outweighed by a benefit, and not just any benefit, but one to my freedom.

It is not enough to show that the cost of the Monarchy is only a miniscule fraction of overall government expenditure. I would not accept that as a defence for "Gay and Lesbian Grieving Centres" at public expense; any waste of my hard-earned money is too much waste. It is more relevant to point out that, hard as it is to quantify, the tax revenue from the tourist trade the "living" Monarchy attracts almost certainly outweighs the costs. Tourism is Britain's third biggest industry and second biggest employer, and those American tourists aren't all coming to look at the dome. The Monarchy turns a profit for "UK PLC" (thereby at least potentially reducing the tax burden on me, and thus increasing my personal freedom — if nothing else I'd keep them as the only profit making nationalised industry).

It is also worth noting that almost all the royal expenses are paid either from the Civil List, or from the Queen's income from investments as a private citizen. Of course a socialist might argue that all such wealth should have been expropriated in the name of the people. But it ill becomes a libertarian to argue that the results of a perfectly legal contract, whereby the Crown Estates were handed over for the Civil List, should be altered at the whim of a later government. (And of course it is worth noting that the Revenue from the Crown Estates far exceeds the Civil List, but equally it is too late for the Crown to regret that now.)

NO NEED FOR PRESIDENT TONY

However, it is the practical functions the Monarchy fulfils that are the most valuable.

The first is that it provides us with a Head of State. Plenty of libertarians might argue that we don't need a Head of State, that this is simply an irrational hangover from our past. The fact that this is an arguably irrational need does not diminish the practical value of having it supplied, because the need itself is objectively real. It provides a national focus that every single nation state in the world has found the need for. If ever the nation state becomes unnecessary then I will happily concede there is no further need for the Monarchy; but in the meantime it is a fact that every nation has a Head of State, or a similar individual who provides the national focus. In some cases the existence of such a person is more important than the geographical integrity of the nation itself, as demonstrated by the examples of the Dalai Lama for the Tibetan people, and Yasser Arafat for the Palestinians. (And it cannot be often that those two are linked together to make the same political point.)

The inevitability of the need for a national head of the tribe can be seen from the example of two countries who famously repudiated their Monarchies. The Americans rejected a mad English (actually German) king, but are famous for their obsession with our Monarchy. In its place they have the Kennedy clan, who are every bit as remote from the average American as our Royalty, and who are a collection of political opportunists, drunkards, ruthless power seekers, hypocrites and in at least a few cases probably murderers, to make the Robber Barons of old England proud. It is not hard to prefer our royal family, whose worse fault in recent years has been adultery — which is at least a personal, rather than criminal offence. France even more famously rejected its Monarchy but its President lives in a palace. The modern French constitution was designed by De Gaulle, a man who, whether one likes or hates him one can't deny had a superb grasp of the psychology of the French people. After a series of weak

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and short lived Republics, De Gaulle designed the constitution that he thought would best suit the French and would be most stable — which in contrast to its predecessors it has proven to be. Yet this constitution, for all that it creates a Republic, is notably Monarchical, especially in the treatment of the Presidential Head of State as if he is above politics.

The fact is that, however much it may offend rational thinkers, there is an irrational need within human beings for a tribal leader, a semi-mythical totem pole. Human beings are programmed to expect a tribal hierarchy, we instinctively seek it within our society; whether it is logical to do so or not is in practical terms irrelevant, for it is a fact that we do. The question is how we fulfil that need. Practical assessments of political requirements must include people's objectively real, if "irrational", needs. A constitutional Monarchy, wherein the instinctive need for a figurehead is satisfied by someone with no real opportunity to abuse the power that brings, is the most libertarian way to satisfy those needs. We will have someone in that role. A thousand times better it be Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, with dignity but no real power, than President Tony, with the exact opposite.

We in Britain are therefore fortunate to have a non-political Head of State whose impartiality and permanence enables Her to command respect both at home and abroad. It is often forgotten in the United Kingdom (but not abroad) that one function of government is to achieve civil peace by legitimacy — to avoid struggles for power by creating a situation where even those who disagree can feel they lost fair and square. The existence of an apolitical constitutional Monarch means that Conservatives don't have to call Tony Blair Head of State, and socialists didn't have to look up to Thatcher as the representative of their nation. In a similar way the Queen's near universal respect abroad gives us useful oil to pour upon the wheels of diplomacy. The advantage this gives us may not be great enough to justify an absolute Monarchy, but it is worth the small price we pay for a constitutional one.

Speaking of prices it's worth noting in passing that we also have, in the Honours system which derives its force from the Monarchy, one of the cheapest methods of political patronage in the world. I would rather politicians paid off their supporters with Knighthoods than with my money.

A CONSTITUTIONAL BRAKE

There are numerous other minor benefits to the institution of the Monarchy that we may touch on briefly. One is that a result of the permanence it gives our Head of State we come as close as a democracy can get to a dictatorship's advantage of political permanence, without its countervailing weakness of political arrogance or insularity. The Queen, like the House of Lords, provides valuable political ballast. Regular audiences with the most experienced member of government, must be of some use to our leaders, if they choose to use it. Equally the need for the Queen to rubber stamp Acts is a brake, however weak, upon the more ridiculous or dictatorial ideas an overmighty Prime Minister may come up with (which may come in more useful as Parliament is increasingly emasculated). Like all such constitutional brakes this one derives its strength not from the likelihood that She would refuse, but from the embarrassment a party leader would suffer in asking Her to sign a ridiculous or overreaching Act. It forces the politicians to take account of a world outside their own.

The intrinsic nature of the Queen's authority, derived paradoxically purely from popular support, prevents its abuse but strengthens its potential to defend our freedoms. If she or a successor tried to force through a coup, She would have no hope of support — but She would have plenty to prevent one. And it is no bad thing that all of our Armed forces swear loyalty to the Monarch — not to a politician, or to an abstract and malleable idea of the people, but to a tangible person who embodies both nation and our instinctive tribal need for leader. This makes military takeover by government that much more difficult, a huge benefit even if one we ignore because it has helped to make the

threat itself virtually unthinkable. It is no coincidence that in Britain a military coup is laughable, and our British style of "separation of powers" between Monarch and parliament is at least part of the reason for that. In addition our government has added stability because in the final extremity of electoral or national crisis, there is a known default setting — the Queen's right to select a caretaker government. We can be confident that such a government will arrange a legitimate election as soon as circumstances permit, if only because if they don't She would appoint another, and they could not hope to win a fight against Her on the grounds of a refusal to allow another election. That these scenarios seem far fetched does not show that they are meaningless. After all, in most of the world, even in recent European history, they would not seem so very unlikely. Rather the fact that such crises seem so unlikely in the United Kingdom is proof of how blessedly stable our constitutional Monarchy is.

IT WORKS

A comparison can of course be made between the Monarchy and that other ancient element of the British Constitution, under fire for being undemocratic and irrelevant — the House of Lords. Certainly if one were creating a British constitution from scratch, one would not choose to invent the House of Lords in its present (or even previous) form. But far better a politically random House of hereditary peers, than the political sycophants it is now being packed with. Considered as a method of more or less random selection of non-party political peers, an hereditary Lords provides a wide range of experience, free from party pressure and permanent enough to build up experience. (A national service lottery would serve as well, somewhat similar to the old Athenian system). The point is that it works, and by libertarian standards is the only part that works well — i.e. defends our freedoms against executive tyranny, and effectively scrutinises the work of Commons, so as to improve it technically as well as morally. Like the Monarchy, regardless of political theory, the House of Lords works in practise. As I regard libertarianism as the most practical possible "ideology", I see that as a libertarian reason for keeping both institutions.

THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

But the most important, if least tangible benefit of a constitutional Monarchy, is that it forces Tony Blair to refer to himself as "Her Majesty's Prime Minister". He is Her Majesty's servant, and not just him but all politicians. The constant reminder that there is someone set above them, that they serve someone else, must have a salutary effect on the most arrogant mind. It is true that these are only symbolic words, and real power lies with the Prime Minister — as is perfectly proper, because we exert some control at least over his excesses. But anyone who doubts the importance of symbolic words in politics is ignoring the reality of what is, in favour of what they believe should be. Who can seriously doubt the political importance of the removal of Clause Four from the constitution of the Labour Party, or the removal of the Irish Republic's claim to the north from theirs? These are vivid demonstrations of the importance of symbols in politics. Politics after all is ultimately about the pursuit and use of power, and the roots of power over people have always been as much irrational as rational. The power of symbols over our irrational selves has been known since long before the work of Freud. Such symbols have influence even over politicians, who are if anything even more attuned to political symbols than the rest of us.

The fact is that, until the nation state withers away, we must have a Head of State. For our Head of State to be Queen Elizabeth the Second we pay a tiny fraction of our taxes, covered a hundred times over by the revenues of Royal tourism and the Crown Estates; some bowing and scraping, carried out by people who enjoy it and which I am not obliged to participate in; and virtually no infringement of my personal liberty. Better for my freedom, and yours, that our Head of State be a constitutional Monarch, able to rein in politicians but not to reign politically, than the alternative.