

# **Modernising the monarchy**

**Tim Hames and  
Mark Leonard**

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First published in  
September 1998

by

Demos  
9 Bridewell Place  
London EC4V 6AP  
Tel: 0171 353 4479  
Fax: 0171 353 4481

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ISBN 1 898309 74 4

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## Acknowledgements

We would like express our warmest thanks to David Cannadine, Ben Pimlott, Paul Richards, Anthony Smith, Robert Worcester and Simon Atkinson for inspiration, information and advice during our research for this pamphlet. The arguments and ideas are of course our own and we are solely responsible for interpreting and using the information we were given.

Tim Hames and Mark Leonard  
August 1998

## Introduction

All great institutions must change to keep in step with the values and aspirations of the people they serve. Political parties, courts of law and the police have all changed dramatically over the years. So too has the monarchy, reinventing itself each generation in order remain viable in a changing world. Today, there is a sense that we are on the eve of another major change in its role.

Over the past few years, the monarchy has adopted a series of measures to modernise itself: the Queen started paying taxes; Buckingham Palace was opened to the public; the Civil List has been slimmed; the Union Jack flies from Buckingham Palace; the royal yacht, *Britannia*, has been decommissioned; the rules of curtesy have been relaxed; and members of the royal family have even made appearances with the Spice Girls. These measures, it could be argued, show that the royal family has not lost its desire to keep up with public opinion, but they have been implemented in a random and scatter-gun manner. They have been responses to short-term problems such as the costs of Windsor Castle's repairs or the upsurge of popular emotions following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, rather than part of a coherent strategy for modernising the monarchy. Over the last year in particular, there has been much talk of a 'modernised monarchy' or a 'people's monarchy', but very little sense of what this might look like.

The Queen herself, on her golden wedding anniversary, made it clear that she is interested in bringing the monarchy closer to the people: 'Despite the huge constitutional difference between a hereditary monarchy and an elected government, in reality the gulf is not so wide. They are complementary institutions, each with its own role to play. Each, in its different way, exists only with the support and consent of the people. That consent, or the lack of it, is expressed for you, Prime Minister, through the ballot box. It is a tough, even brutal, system but at least the message is clear for all to read. For us, a royal family, however, the message is often harder to read, obscured as it can be by deference,

rhetoric or the conflicting attitudes of public opinion. But read it we must.’

This pamphlet starts from an understanding that a large majority of people in Britain want to live under a monarchy, but they want a monarchy that is suitably modernised and fit for the times. It is not an attack on the monarchy, but a sober attempt to go beyond the rhetoric about change and unpack what people mean by a ‘modernised monarchy’.

The problem is that despite an obvious will for change – from the public and the monarchy itself – there has yet to be an adequate debate about what this would mean in practice. The media debate has been notably superficial, focusing almost exclusively on the pros and cons of the royal family making effective use of bicycles or spin doctors to improve their public standing. Because of protocol and precedent, the House of Commons is unable to discuss it. And supporters of an unreconstructed monarchy tend to treat any innovation, no matter how minor, as a disguised call for republicanism.

This pamphlet is an attempt to move the debate beyond a sterile confrontation between those who want to abolish the monarchy and those who want to maintain the *status quo*. It examines what role we really want the monarchy to play in the next century. It seeks to identify the core problems of the British system of constitutional monarchy. It examines recent developments, and developments to come, that will put pressure on the monarchy’s traditional roles. It explores the ‘Diana effect’ and how this has been deliberately misrepresented by those determined to pursue minimal reform. It suggests a blueprint for a modernised and democratic monarchy based on what we call ‘active symbolism’. By this we mean an engagement with selected charitable causes and areas of public interest that goes beyond the formalities of opening buildings and lending one’s name as patron to particular organisations – an active and informal engagement such as that developed by Princesses Anne and Diana in recent years. It looks at how the monarchy could change its role and what measures it should undertake if it is to thrive in the next century.

## 1. Why does modernising the monarchy matter?

Many people are instinctively opposed to discussing the monarchy’s role. Some people think that it is best left to the royals themselves – it is not something mere commoners should be involved in. Others see it as a waste of time, given that the monarch does not exercise any real power.

In fact, the monarchy continues to enjoy a central role both in our constitutional and national life. In constitutional terms, the concept of the Crown in Parliament is the central doctrine around which the governance of Britain operates. The Crown is the essence of the executive, an element of the legislature, the spine of the judicial system and the employer of the bureaucracy. In this country, the terms ‘crown’ and ‘state’ are almost interchangeable. A government committed to constitutional reform but indifferent to questions concerning the Crown would have a very confused sense of priorities. This would be true regardless of the adverse publicity that the royal family has attracted in the last decade and without the life or death of the Princess of Wales. However, the combination of a government committed to constitutional renewal and these events should make the case for reform a compelling one. It has not yet done so.

However, the monarchy is much more than a part of the constitution, important though constitutional issues are. The Queen is not only head of state: she is, in some sense, head of society as well. In many ways, the most important part of the monarchy is what Ben Pimlott has called the ‘Queen in people’s heads’. The monarchy is a focus for a sense of national unity that permeates much of society. In fact, opinion polls even suggest that a large majority of British people claims to have dreamt of taking tea with the Queen at Buckingham Palace. In many ways this symbolic function, providing material for a national dream of unity and continuity, is the core role of the monarchy.

There is no constitutional reason why Britain should retain the monarchy. Much of the case made by supporters of the institution reflects an instinctive distaste for change of any kind and often an

excessive respect for antiquity. There is a perfectly rational case for simple abolition. The alleged complications of creating a republic sound disturbingly similar to the objections raised to reform of the House of Lords. They are essentially bogus. There is, however, one overwhelmingly powerful argument against abolition: the fact that a large majority of people wants to retain the monarchy.

Anthropologists tell us that societies look for a figure that can act as a focal point for the community: to live out their hopes and fears and to represent them. In Britain, this is fulfilled by the monarchy. Republicans often make their case by reference to democratic language and principle. But it would be perversely inconsistent to demand that the Crown ceased to exist despite the democratic preferences of the country. In spite of the traumas of the last decade, popular support for the monarchy remains remarkably secure, even if it is not at the levels reached earlier in the Queen's reign. According to opinion data provided by MORI, only 20 per cent of the British public claims to favour the introduction of a republic and a mere 8 per cent could be described as consistent, committed republicans. Even in the heady week of incoherent dissatisfaction with the royal family before the funeral of the Princess of Wales, the proportion claiming to be republican never rose to one in four British citizens. Although support for abolition is stronger among younger people, it comes nowhere close to majority status in any age cohort. It is also a predominantly middle class tendency. Unless public opinion shifts dramatically, the case for republicanism will remain one based not on democratic impulse but on elite instinct. That is not a secure basis for such a radical change.

To state that the monarchy cannot be abolished without popular assent may seem like a statement of the obvious. To claim that it could be removed tomorrow if the people so decided might seem equally straightforward. In fact there is no constitutional or legal basis for either assertion. This only serves to illustrate the false dichotomy between the *status quo* and outright abolition that has long dogged this subject. *The real issue is how the*

*monarchy can be reconstituted to accentuate and develop the most relevant parts of its role and eliminate or soften the worst aspects of the status quo.* The same MORI data that demonstrate the thin terrain on which republicanism is based also reveal the shallowness of support for an unreconstructed monarchy. When the public were asked 'If you had to choose between the way in which the royal family have conducted themselves in the past and the way Princess Diana conducted herself, which do you think would be right for the royal family in the future?', the 'Spencer' model beat the 'Windsor' model by 66 to 13 per cent. Even allowing for the emotional atmosphere in which that question was asked, the strength of feeling favouring modernisation is powerful. Moreover, in a Guardian/ICM poll in August 1998, despite an improved level of public support for Prince Charles as future king, over two thirds of those surveyed felt that the royal family is out of touch with ordinary people. And only 52 per cent – compared with 70 per cent in 1994 – felt that Britain would be worse off without a royal family. There would appear to be as few devotees of the *status quo* as there are advocates of a republic.

The argument about what kind of monarchy we have is – in a sense – an argument about what kind of society we want to live in. The strength of all institutions depends on their ability to reflect and embody the values and priorities of their citizens. Institutions in crisis are those that have become detached from the people they are intended to serve. In the past, the strength of the monarchy has been its ability to keep abreast of these changes and to redefine its role appropriately. We are at a crossroads once again.

In a mature democracy, it is both right and inevitable that the public will come to seek not a monarchy based on magic or mystery but one that is held accountable – in terms of its actions, attitudes and expense – to the standards of ordinary citizens. Democracy is not about deference or respectful distance. This was recognised by the Queen herself in her golden wedding anniversary speech. Equally, in a society that is becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural, it should be right that the

monarchy stands for and promotes values that resonate in such a society. Finally, if we believe in creating a 'classless' society where merit is the prime criterion for promotion, we need a monarchy that does not stand at the apex of a strict class hierarchy.

These are all reasons why it is right and proper that we should discuss the role of the monarchy, and why – far from being a distraction from serious issues – the status of the monarchy and what we do about it are questions that are central to the future of this country.

## 2. The core problem for the British monarchy

To understand the tensions in the role of the monarchy in Britain at the moment, it is useful to look around the world and examine the functions of monarchies in other countries. There are broadly three categories of monarchy in the world today, and they tend to be found in distinct geographical clusters.

First, there are monarchies that in every practical sense are the state. The monarch is *de facto* head of government as well *de jure* head of state. They are intensely involved in day-to-day politics. These monarchies tend to be located in the Middle East and include Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the various assorted Gulf nations. Until relatively recently they were also in place in similar states such as Egypt, Libya and Iraq until unseated by popular revolutions.

Second, there are monarchies that can be described as above the state. These rely on a quasi-religious authority for their standing. This religious role necessitates a formal and highly ritualistic mode of conduct. Monarchs of this form tend to be distant from both domestic politics (except perhaps in dire national circumstances) and also from popular engagement with their publics (except for rare and highly scripted outings). Examples of this form are mostly found in East Asia. They include the monarchies of Bhutan, Nepal, Japan and Thailand.

Third, there are monarchies that symbolise the secular state. Monarchs of this form once exercised considerable domestic political power but rarely directly engaged the public. In the course of this century that balance has been reversed completely. These monarchies tend to have little or no political role of even theoretical consequence. They occupy no religious position of real power or significance. They instead focus exclusively on being symbols of national unity and catalysts for civic activities. These are found in the liberal democracies of Northern Europe, notably the Benelux nations and Scandinavian states.

In Britain, we have a monarchy that is a strange hybrid of the three models, and this, perhaps, is the core of its problems.

In many ways, the system in Britain resembles those monarchies that effectively constitute the state. Although the monarch is obviously not a figure of absolute, or even relative, power he or she retains considerable political authority. These powers, held in theory by the queen or king, are in practice exercised by politicians but still combine to make the notion of the Crown in Parliament the central doctrine of the British constitution. These formal powers include the nomination of the prime minister and all other ministers of the Crown, the calling and dissolution of Parliament, the requirement for Royal Assent to all legislation, the appointment of all members of the judiciary and the loyalty of all civil servants. The use of the Royal Prerogative and Orders in Council permit actions of a substantial and political nature to be taken without reference to the Cabinet or Parliament. These functions explain the continued strength of a large royal household that resides outside ordinary Civil Service arrangements. They justify the retention of a contemporary court. This also leads to the curious and incoherent co-existence of two contradictory constitutional principles, namely that there is something called the ‘constitutional independence of the sovereign’ while at the same time the sovereign ‘rules through the consent of Parliament’ – a dictum that implies a dependent relationship. It is only a mild overstatement to claim that in formal terms the Queen of the United Kingdom runs the state in the same fashion in which the King of Jordan determines the course of that country, except that in Britain the monarch acts according to the advice of ministers. She is not, though, a cipher. As Vernon Bogdanor has put it, ‘The sovereign is an active rather than passive element of the constitution’.

The British monarch also retains a religious role that places it, at least in part, above the state. The Act of Settlement of 1559 makes the monarch the Supreme-Governor of the Church of England. This echoes the Thirty-Seventh Article of the Church that describes the sovereign as the ‘chief power’ of the Church of England. Any ambiguity in this matter was settled three centuries ago. The Coronation Oath Act 1689 requires the monarch to

swear to maintain Protestantism in England. The Bill of Rights of 1689 excluded Roman Catholics and those married to Roman Catholics from the succession. This was confirmed again in the Act of Settlement of 1701. The Act of Union of 1707 demands that the sovereign promise to uphold the Presbyterian faith in Scotland. All of this was reaffirmed in the Accession Declaration Act of 1910. The Archbishop of Canterbury is, after the monarch, the most significant figure at the coronation. The monarch in turn is formally responsible for all ecclesiastical appointments. In theory, the roles of Elizabeth I and Elizabeth II within the established Church are almost identical. This is a function for which there is no equivalent in the truly symbolic monarchies of Northern Europe.

Finally, and rather belatedly, the British monarchy has added a more popular aspect to its traditional duties. The notion of a symbolic monarchy emerged during the reign of Queen Victoria. It was adopted at the behest of Sir Henry Ponsonby, the Queen’s private secretary, who acted to appease a rising tide of republican sentiment. His highly effective ally was Benjamin Disraeli. The Tory prime minister linked the popular cause of Empire to the Crown when he had Parliament proclaim the Queen as Empress of India. The Queen’s golden and diamond jubilees became state occasions. The notion of a royal family that engaged in practical activities as well as constitutional ceremony has slowly evolved ever since. It was entrenched during the Second World War, when the circumstances of the London blitz led to a more outgoing style of monarchy. This has been the pattern followed by the reigning Queen.

The problem is that many of the aspects of this symbolic role have become obsolescent, or changed beyond recognition over the years. The imperial role disappeared with Empire and has been replaced by the Commonwealth. The monarch’s patriotic role as head of the armed forces has become less important in an extended period of peace. The idea of the monarch as the apex of a hierarchical society runs counter to the values of most British people. The monarchy’s role as model family, developed from



about the 1870s and cultivated especially in the current monarch's reign, has been blown apart by a worldwide media obsession with the personal problems of the royal family's younger members. Finally, the Queen's role as 'fount of honour' is less important and many official honours (Order of the British Empire and so forth) seem anachronistic.

In a sense, the core problem for the monarchy is its schizophrenic identity. In its current position it is trying to embody three radically different models that are often in conflict with each other: part Morocco, part Nepal and part Norway. It is difficult to see how a monarch can be, in theory, at the centre of the administration of Britain and still be sufficiently detached to play a full symbolic role. This will be particularly acute after devolution takes effect, because the Scottish first minister will have a duty to give the monarch advice in the same way as the UK prime minister does. Should the monarch be given conflicting advice, he or she would be at risk of having to take sides and risk alienating many people. Furthermore, if proportional representation were to be adopted for UK elections, the position could become even more complicated. In the event of a hung Parliament, which could be a regular occurrence under such a voting system, the monarch would have to nominate both the governing party and the prime minister and could face accusations of partisanship.

There is also an obvious tension between the notion of the monarch as personification of national unity and the reality of a monarchy that is associated with a single variant of Protestantism. This tension will be heightened as Britain becomes more multicultural and more secular, as recent history and demographic studies predict. This suggests that, in many ways, the monarchy is trying to do too much, while neglecting the aspects of royal culture that are most likely to endear it to its citizens.

Polling evidence suggests that the aspects of the monarchy that are most important to British people are the symbolic ones. They want to be represented by the monarchy at home and abroad, they want the monarch to be head of society. Few people seem aware of the extent of the monarchy's political or religious powers, and

even fewer seem attached to them. On the contrary, people tend to feel uncomfortable about thinking of themselves as 'subjects' reigned over by a monarch – they feel that they elect a government to rule them. Unfortunately, the symbolism, in so far as it exists, is very much an afterthought. It is not the primary purpose of the monarchy and many of its elements are, as discussed above, looking rather dated.

The confused nature of the monarchy is reflected in its organisation. It affects the monarchy's performance in three major ways that are damaging to its standing with the public. Firstly, the political and religious roles are time-consuming and largely invisible, and therefore detract from the monarchy by limiting the time and energy the monarch can devote to symbolic roles. Secondly, there is the problem of the expense involved with running a hybrid monarchy. The formal political role justifies the retention of the current royal household which would be organised very differently if the functions of the monarchy were more narrowly focused on symbolism. Finally, there is a sense that the monarchy is out of touch with the British people. Because the household is staffed according to arrangements that are very different from those that pertain in the conventional civil service, the impression arises of an elite that has emerged through class networks rather than talent or meritocracy. This is compounded by the fact the British royal family interacts socially with people from very similar backgrounds to themselves, unlike continental royal families, which tend to mix with middle class professionals such as lawyers and accountants. The collection of quaint titles and unusual perks – grace and favour apartments, for example – again serve to place artificial distance between crown and country.

This shows that to thrive in the next century the monarchy will need to move away from the roles which prevent it from exercising symbolism, and its symbolic roles will need to be strengthened and updated. The debate about how to renew the symbolic role of the monarchy was given fresh impetus by the life and death of the Princess of Wales, and the debate about her legacy provides an interesting illustration of how symbolism could be

developed, as well as acting as a microcosm of the debate about the future of the monarchy.

There is no doubt that the Princess of Wales had a profound – probably unintentional – effect on public perceptions of the monarchy. She did so not only by effectively providing an alternative court but also by developing a radically different style of monarchy. She made little secret of her distaste for, and alienation from, the formal procedures and ingrained assumptions of the institution. As she developed an increasingly independent approach and became visibly alienated from much of the royal family, the Princess of Wales broke with tradition in two dramatic ways.

Firstly, she adopted the persona of a celebrity. She was not only charismatic and attractive as an individual, but she lived the lifestyle of a contemporary celebrity, wearing designer clothes, rubbing shoulders with film stars, musicians and fashion gurus. She appeared in countless magazines and had all the attributes of an international pin-up.

Secondly, and more importantly, were the changes to the symbolic aspects of her position. She realised that her status offered her the opportunity to do things to promote causes, rather than simply to open buildings or events and to personify the continuity of royal tradition. Her notion of a relationship with civil society led to a more activist approach on behalf of numerous and diverse causes. These included the suffering of AIDS victims, the plight of the homeless, the misfortune of those who had suffered domestic violence and the international trade in land mines. This was rather stronger stuff than, for example, the skyline of central London, the design of new model villages or the alleged impact of genetically altered carrots on the environment. In an unstructured and periodically wayward fashion, she outlined the shape of an alternative monarchy based on what could be called ‘active symbolism’. This powerful approach to symbolism was exemplified in her ambition to be the ‘Queen of people’s hearts’. What mattered to her was the symbolic role at the heart of the nation, not arcane constitutional niceties – or even a title. She clearly

wanted her sons to be influenced by her example.

The difference between the old and new concepts of the monarchy was powerfully highlighted in the week between her death and her funeral. The contrast between the spontaneous reaction of the public and the cool protocol initially associated with the royal family was stunning. It became the cause of much national and international comment. The monarchy was widely seen as being out of touch with national sentiment. An allegedly symbolic monarchy that could not symbolise national sentiment at the death of one of its own members did not seem a very effective institution. Under pressure of public opinion magnified and in part inflamed by a mass media obsessed with Diana, the Queen was obliged to return to Buckingham Palace, suspend ancient rules on the flying of flags and offer a live broadcast to the nation in which she said that the lessons of Diana’s life and death would be learned. The monarchy endured its worst week since the abdication crisis sixty years earlier.

The sincerity of the Queen’s offer to listen to public opinion and learn from Diana is not in question. The big debate is about how it is to be exercised and which aspects of the Diana legacy will be learned from. Unfortunately, the signs are that the monarchy has learned the lessons of Diana ‘the celebrity’, rather than the ‘Queen of hearts’. The Palace appears to have decided that the lesson of Diana’s life and death concerns the power of glamour rather than the power of her adoption of active symbolism as her key role. Over the past twelve months, the Palace has made some modest alterations in style, held a series of high profile events with the aim of associating the monarchy with the temporarily fashionable, and professionalised its handling of the media.

There is, unfortunately, little evidence that anything more profound is presently being contemplated. The primary forum of such planning seems to be the ‘Way Ahead’ group, a small committee of senior royals and their immediate advisors. The most significant item that has emerged into the public domain is the purported willingness of the Queen to consider reform of the rules of succession. This would mean that the first born, regard-

less of gender, secures the succession. This is an entirely appropriate reform to propose, but it is not one that will have an enormous impact on the monarchy as an institution. As the next three figures in line for the throne are male, the reform will have no practical impact until the middle of the next century at the earliest. It does nothing to deal with the core problems of the monarchy at the turn of the century.

In fact, the biggest lesson from Diana's experience is that it is the substance, not just the style, that needs to change. Diana showed how a monarchy, when freed from the limitations of its tradition-bound constitutional and religious roles, can become actively involved in the life of a nation and a powerful symbol both at home and abroad. In many ways this is the most important part of her legacy. In the following section, we outline how these lessons can be used to strengthen the monarchy for the next century, and how a modernised and symbolic monarchy might take shape.

### 3. Towards a modernised monarchy

The lesson of all this is that if the monarchy is going to reinforce its symbolic role it will have to change dramatically both in the roles it exercises and in the way it organises itself.

To be symbolic of the British people, the monarchy will have to promote and embody the values and attributes that people associate with Britain: tolerance, diversity, openness to the world, democracy, and creativity. It will have to base its existence on the people's will rather than constitutional formulae or parliamentary permission. For this to be possible, we will need to put provisions in place to prevent the monarch from being a divisive figure and to allow them to demonstrate that they have public support. The monarchy will need to reduce some of the distance between itself and the British people, by connecting itself more openly to their lives and priorities. In modern conditions, the mystery and remoteness deemed essential by Bagehot to secure the appeal of monarchy in the last century simply cannot be maintained. This will mean setting up structures to allow the monarchy to keep abreast of public opinion. But it also means making an effort to ensure that they take part in British life, rather than living in isolation, by using the same institutions as the rest of the population and, where possible, having similar experiences to them. The monarchy will also need to abandon roles which are divisive, such as its association with a single religion. Above all it will have to focus exclusively on these symbolic functions, and organise itself to exercise them in a more professional manner.

A modernised monarchy requires characteristics distinctly different from those that have been the traditional features of the British monarchy. Several functions currently exercised by the Crown would need to be eliminated entirely and other aspects to be expanded and extended.

The essential conditions of a modernised monarchy are:

- That the institution itself draws its legitimacy not from divine right, historical continuity, constitutional formula or parlia-

mentary permission but popular assent expressed in a public ballot.

- That the monarch should be head of state and thus symbol of the nation but have minimal connection with the executive, legislature, or judiciary.
- That the monarchy should be organised in a fashion that allows for full public accountability. The resources associated with the monarchy should be appropriate to the functions that a modernised monarchy should seek to undertake.
- That a symbol of unity cannot be exclusively associated with any one religion or organised religion at all.
- That the symbolic activities of the monarchy reflect the diversity of contemporary society.

All these objectives should be enjoined not by constitutional convention but by Act of Parliament. A comprehensive Monarchy Act would deal with the following areas: legitimacy; depoliticisation; accountability and organisation; disestablishment and symbolism. A blueprint for reform could be realised in a single piece of legislation. It could include the following provisions.

### **Legitimacy**

If the monarchy is to be truly symbolic, it is essential that the monarch should be a source of unity, rather than a divisive figure. It is also important, in a democracy, that the monarch should be able to prove that they command the support of the people, and that the succession depends on popular approval rather than constitutional norms or parliamentary permission.

A bold way to allow the monarch to claim this sort of legitimacy would be to establish an affirmative referendum to take place in the period between succession and coronation. In the event of a vacancy for head of state, the heir presumptive should exercise the functions of that office until an affirmative referendum on his or her succession is held. A majority in that ballot would be sufficient to confirm that person in their position. In the event of a negative outcome, there should be a referendum held

on the next in line to the throne. In the event of a further negative outcome, Parliament would be obliged to appoint an interim head of state and form alternative arrangements for the post in future. If this occurs, the issue in question would no longer be the person succeeding to the throne, but the continuation of the monarchy itself. Parliament should seek to establish whether people still supported a monarchy in principle and either establish a new dynasty or draw up plans to form a republic.

While some, for example Paul Richards in his Fabian Society pamphlet, *Long to Reign Over Us?*, have suggested regular referenda during a reign, for example every ten years, this seems a rather artificial exercise. It could encourage cyclical shifts of behaviour by the monarch much as there is an economic and political cycle. Moreover, if a head of state was deemed to be performing in an inappropriate fashion, it would not be desirable for the public to wait for a number of years to pass before removing that person from office. It would be better if the Monarchy Act simply stated that Parliament had the right to call a referendum on the monarch and the monarchy on any additional occasion it deemed appropriate.

If affirmative referenda are established, this shift towards confirmation by popular accord will revolutionise the constitutional standing of the sovereign. It would enhance their capacity to play a valued part in national life, based on the idea of active symbolism.

### **Depoliticisation**

The monarchy is at present an exceptionally political institution. The Crown in Parliament is the core principle upon which our uncodified constitution rests, and the monarch is responsible for various tasks including settling such issues as the selection of a prime minister, the dismissal of a parliament and the operation of the judicial system. The Queen is even required to be the ultimate political 'insider' in the UK system, with regular meetings with the prime minister. These roles are without equivalent in the constitutional and symbolic monarchies of northern Europe, such as

Denmark, Norway and Sweden, which have all devised their own arrangements for settling such issues without involving the monarchy.

This level of intimacy with our political system makes it very difficult for the monarchy to play a full symbolic role outside the political sphere. What is more, changes to the constitution are likely to exacerbate this situation. As discussed above, with the introduction of devolution in Scotland, the Scottish first minister will be obliged to advise the Queen in the same way as the UK prime minister. If they offer conflicting advice about what legislation to give assent to, the monarch could be forced to take sides, potentially alienating many people. Furthermore, if PR were to be adopted for UK elections, and it regularly produced hung parliaments, the monarchy would be forced to nominate the prime minister and governing party, and could face accusations of partisanship.

Some have argued that the political functions of the crown are limited, highly theoretical and therefore not worthy of undue concern. Nonetheless, these activities are acknowledged by the royal family itself and in numerous biographies of the Queen as extremely time consuming. This offers a paradox – how can a role be purely nominal and yet obviously demanding? Even if our view that the continued political aspects of the crown inhibit its ability to embrace a fully symbolic role is not accepted universally, at the very least it should be acknowledged that the political dimension has an opportunity cost in terms of time that should be eliminated.

In fact, there is a historical precedent to this. In the late nineteenth century, the monarchy was deeply unpopular. In order to re-establish legitimacy, it relinquished many of political roles and reinvented itself as a more symbolic institution. The historian, David Cannadine, famously described this in the 1980s, saying that ‘the British monarchy hitherto inept, private and of limited appeal, became splendid, public and popular. To some extent this was facilitated by the gradual retirement of the monarch from active politics’. Today, yet again, there is evidence that the

monarchy’s political role is coming between it and its people.

The introduction of a formalised constitution would be one obvious opportunity to reform the current arrangements. However, it would be possible to remove the monarchy from the political arena through legislation that simply specified its powers. It would also be possible to plug the gaps left through piecemeal legislation. The perceived difficulties associated with the drafting of a single written constitution should not serve as the pretext for avoiding the depoliticisation of the monarchy. This is but another example of a false choice between the preservation of the *status quo* and the abolition of the monarchy. To achieve this, a new Monarchy Act would provide for a number of functions currently exercised by the monarch to be placed elsewhere. We make the following suggestions for the transfer of residual political powers from the monarchy.

- The speaker of the House of Commons should be responsible for the appointment of the prime minister and the formal dissolution of Parliament. This would replicate arrangements that have been in place in Sweden since the passage of the Instrument of Government Act in 1974.
- The Royal Assent would be abolished and replaced by an act of certification signed by the speaker of the House of Commons and the presiding officer of a reformed second chamber certifying that a bill had completed all those Parliamentary stages necessary for it to be deemed law.
- The head of state should have no role in the judicial process. All appointments should be initiated by a minister of justice and be subject to scrutiny and confirmation by Parliament.
- The Privy Council should be abolished. Its present business can be conducted through Cabinet committee and the issue of executive orders that may be countermanded through an adverse vote of the House of Commons (and/or a reformed second chamber). The Royal Prerogative would lapse in a similar fashion. This would produce a considerably more accountable system of public administration.

- Those who hold public positions would cease to be considered officers or agents of the Crown. Their official duty would be to uphold the law and faithfully execute their responsibilities.
- A reformed second chamber might involve appointed members. Those appointments should be made through a nominating commission independent of the head of state and head of government. The same principle should apply to the wider honours system though it would seem right and proper that the monarch should present such awards. (See *Symbolism* on page 30.)

The elimination of the crown in Parliament would enhance the transparency of political life and further anchor popular sovereignty as the cornerstone of the British constitution. The doctrine of the Crown in Parliament should not be replaced by an alternative involving either the government in Parliament or the prime minister in Parliament. The monarchy would be freed from its political roles and have the time and resources to devote itself to active symbolism.

### **Accountability and organisation**

The way the monarchy is organised and funded has had a negative impact on how it is seen. The continued existence of the crown in Parliament has perpetuated the notion of a separate royal household, an extensive private set of resources and facilities, and a complicated formula by which the monarch is funded. A modernised monarchy would entail radically different arrangements. This would be in line with public opinion.

According to the Sunday Times, confidential research carried out by MORI for the royal family reveals a host of problems with their image. They are seen as distant, wasteful, poor value for money, out of touch, not associated with compassion, badly advised and not genuine. Another opinion poll by MORI, conducted in 1995, also showed that almost two thirds of British people (62 per cent) believe that the monarchy should be slimmed down.

These negative perceptions are more closely related to a deep popular suspicion of the institutions of the monarchy – most notably the royal household – than the monarchy itself. If they are to be dispersed then the monarchy will require radical reorganisation. The objective should be a more professional organisation both in terms of meritocratic competence and of providing links to a wider cross-section of professionals. A smaller and more focused form of organisation, designed purely to administer the tasks in hand rather than maintain a certain form of social hierarchy, would do much for both the efficiency and image of the royal family.

The question of royal finance has also been a major source of controversy. The current system for financing the monarchy is cumbersome and complex. It is still based on the Civil List Act of 1697. It has been, quite deliberately, excluded from the normal machinery of parliamentary scrutiny. It consists of the civil list, grants-in-aid, the Privy Purse, direct expenditure from government departments, net income from visitor admissions to palaces and private income. Some aspects of these accounts have always been publicly available (the basic civil list). Other aspects have become public only recently. This year accounts for the royal travel budget were made available for the first time. This revealed expenditure of £17.3 million in 1997 and suggested that the Royal Train was an especially expensive and inefficient form of transport. Other aspects of the royal finances are difficult to estimate. Buckingham Palace officials estimated the annual cost of the monarchy at £45 million compared with £54 million in 1991. However, the most authoritative external examination of the cost of the monarchy, Philip Hall's *Royal Fortune* (1992), suggested that the true account for 1990-91 was £79 million. There has been no equivalent survey conducted since that date. It is an apt reflection of the secrecy with which the figures are shrouded that two such divergent estimates could be produced. It is not simply the large amounts spent on the royal train or the palaces but also the secrecy surrounding their arrangements that have damaged the monarchy's reputation. Nothing damages the reputation of the

royals more than having to go ‘cap in hand’ to Parliament as they did over the royal yacht and repairs to the fire-damaged Windsor Castle.

What this all points to is the need to re-organise the monarchy’s activities around a group of well-defined roles – acting as a focus for national unity at home and promoting Britain abroad – and to ensure that they are given the resources to carry out these tasks in an accountable and open way. A Monarchy Act could establish:

- An office of the monarchy, an agency of the Civil Service, which would replace the royal household. It would be composed of specialist civil servants; other civil servants brought in for temporary periods (as is the practice with the Cabinet Office) and a number of other figures seconded from outside the Civil Service entirely. The director of this office would be the equivalent of the monarch’s private secretary but would invariably be a civil servant and would, with the depoliticisation of the monarchy, operate across more limited territory.
- A small advisory council on the monarchy, drawn from all walks of life and all sections of the British public. This would ensure that the monarchy had advice and contact with people from across the community that the monarchy is meant to symbolise. It can reasonably be expected that it would be much smaller than the current royal household. There would be no justification for unusual packages of perks such as esoteric titles or subsidised accommodation. It would be responsible to Parliament through the prime minister and a House of Commons Select Committee on the monarchy established by the Monarchy Act.
- The current system for funding the monarchy should be replaced by a single government grant supplemented by whatever additional income results from access to official residences.
- There are over 100 royal properties. A suitably slimmed down monarchy would not need them all; those residences deemed unnecessary for the support of a modernised monarchy should

be transferred to the National Trust, English Heritage or Scottish Heritage or, if they remain independent, they should be designated as public buildings rather than commercial ventures.

- A House of Commons Select Committee on the Monarchy should oversee this simplified system for funding the monarchy. The level of expenditure on the head of state should be determined in the same fashion as all other items of public spending. An office of the monarchy would be legally obliged to publish full accounts on an annual basis.
- The monarch’s private income should not become entangled in public accounts and should be subject to standard taxation arrangements.

These innovations would allow the monarchy to be run in a competent and accountable fashion. They will protect the monarchy from many of the criticisms that have been levelled at the royal family in the past and allow them to fulfil a symbolic role more effectively. Taken together they seem radical, but in fact they are building on proposals which have been made over the years, such as a plan devised in 1971 by Douglas Houghton MP, which suggested that the royal household should be redesignated a department of state in order to permit closer parliamentary scrutiny.

### ***Disestablishment***

To be symbolic, the monarch cannot afford to have exclusive links with one part of the population, or one religion. The link between the state and the Church of England is detrimental to all parties. On the one hand, the notion of an established religion does not fit easily with liberal democracy. The principle that religious doctrine might ultimately rest with a legislature cannot make for persuasive theology. On the other, the position of the monarch as supreme-governor of the Church of England is especially invidious. It creates an artificial restriction on the head of state’s claim to represent the nation at large. The Prince of Wales conceded as much when he expressed a preference for the title of

‘Defender of Faiths’. These arrangements would be problematic even if the overwhelming majority of British citizens were fully practising members of the Church of England. In reality, best estimates of Church of England attendance suggest that barely a million people attend regularly on Sundays. A modernised monarchy would necessitate a severance of the links between church and state. This would be achieved through a set of parliamentary measures, as set out below.

- The repeal of the Act of Supremacy of 1559 and all other legislation bonding together state and church. One particular vehicle that could serve as a useful precedent is the Church of Scotland Act of 1921, which confirmed that church’s self-governing status.
- The repeal of all legislation requiring the sovereign to maintain the Protestant religion in England and the Presbyterian faith in Scotland. The Monarchy Act should state that the sovereign was entitled to membership of any religious order or none at all.
- The removal of those state functions attached to the post of Archbishop of Canterbury including his role at coronations.

These reforms would realign the monarchy with the reality of British society. This is a predominantly secular country, assuming that church attendance is a reasonable measure of religious inclination. The minority of British citizens who do attend acts of worship represent a diverse range of religions. There is no established church in Northern Ireland or Wales. The Church of Scotland is functionally independent of the state. It is difficult to see what damage would be done to either the church or state in England by disestablishment. It could only be of benefit to the role of head of state.

### **Symbolism**

The primary function of the monarchy should be the promotion of national unity and the cohesion of civil society through charitable

endeavours. The proportion of time spent on other official activities in Britain should therefore be reduced. Once the monarchy’s roles have been clarified, and the other measures outlined in this report have been implemented, it will be possible to revise and strengthen its symbolic roles. This will be the key to modernising the monarchy.

The monarchy has traditionally performed its official functions through one of a number of set channels. These include:

- attending events of national significance
- opening private and public buildings of consequence
- patronage of worthwhile organisations
- the delivery of official speeches
- commentary on issues of public but not partisan consequence
- representation of Britain abroad and the promotion of British economic interests overseas.

Although some effort has been made to vary the nature of royal engagements they currently favour the structured and well-established organisations and causes over those of a more decentralised and recent nature.

The challenge is to move from a situation where these activities form a minor part of the monarchy’s activities to one where they are focused and central to what the monarchy does and is. It is also about moving from static involvement – usually confined to various opening ceremonies – to a situation where the monarchy play an active part in national life. The monarchy’s role should be redefined in the following ways:

- To demonstrate their commitment to national life, the royal family should make a point of using public institutions wherever possible. For example, they should educate their children in state schools and use NHS hospitals. This proposal has three merits. Firstly, it means that members of the royal family will be more in touch with the reality of life for most British people. Secondly, it demonstrates their commitment to nation-



al life and national institutions in a more powerful and real way than opening hospitals or museums. Thirdly, it sends out a message to the British people that they don't feel they deserve special treatment because of their social class.

- The royal family should make a special commitment to schools and education. Just as the monarchy allied itself to Empire in the nineteenth century, when that was the biggest national priority (with Victoria becoming Empress of India), and to the promotion of exports in the 1960s, when they were deemed a priority, we suggest that today they should focus on education – considered by all political parties and the public to be the major national concern. The programme of school visits should be bolstered with a special focus on schools that are under-achieving and on schools with real innovations to their credit in the state sector. The monarchy should also consider establishing awards for educational innovations and achievements.
- There should be a review of the charitable work done by the royal family. The primary task of the advisory council would be to produce a diverse and balanced collection of charitable concerns. A particular emphasis should be placed on important but unfashionable organisations and those with constituencies that have not always attracted automatic sympathy. The head of state can serve as a catalyst for greater tolerance and understanding of such causes. The advisory council should be mindful of the other assistance that charitable organisations might already be receiving through the taxpayer or through the National Lottery. In doing so they should commit the head of state to short but intense fixed term patronage of such organisations. Over, say, a two-year period, the monarchy could adopt a relatively small number of causes that would receive special attention as well as particular events that deserve support in their own right.
- Monarchies in other countries have developed an important role as patrons of the arts. The British monarchy has one of the most valuable art collections in the world. Many individual

members of the royal family have, by all accounts, considerable personal expertise in the arts. This attention is currently rather more centred on the past than the present. The monarchy could play a useful role actively promoting Britain's strengths in contemporary arts and thus providing considerable (inexpensive) public attention for these efforts.

- One of the more important roles the monarchy has exercised has been that of 'Fount of Honour'; this should be continued in a new guise. The honours system should be modernised both in the names of the honours, but also in the things they reward. We should introduce a simplified system and rename honours to reflect the fact that we no longer live in an imperial age. We should also sever their link with the class system. Finally they should be used to reward outstanding public service, innovation in education and social entrepreneurship.
- A greater emphasis should be placed on international reconciliation when determining the monarch's overseas programme. There are numerous parts of the world where history has left behind somewhat fragile relationships between Britain and other countries. The monarch should formally be designated an ambassador-at-large for this purpose.
- The special relationship of the monarchy with the Commonwealth is an under-exploited asset. The Commonwealth's value to Britain and more generally in the international community as a multinational network for mutual assistance, knowledge transfer and the promotion of democratic values must surely rise as more attention is focused on issues of global governance to deal with the challenges of globalisation. The monarch has an important role in maintaining and enhancing the cohesion and activities of such a network.
- The monarchy should also promote British values and worthwhile international causes beyond its borders. The current emphasis on trade promotion, while not illegitimate, appears to be disproportionate. The monarchy should stand for the whole gamut of British values – our openness to the world, our

multiculturalism, our traditions of democracy and fair play, our creativity – and help to change perceptions of Britain where they are inaccurate.

To these could be added numerous other practical steps that could be taken to crystallise a new role for the monarchy. To work, they will need to be shaped and owned by the many different groups that make up contemporary Britain. Once the monarchy has freed itself from its onerous and anachronistic religious and political roles, it will have the space and time to develop this symbolic side effectively.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is right that the monarchy should modernise itself now, on the eve of a new millennium. The British people have changed, so have their values and identities, and it is fitting that the monarchy should evolve as well. The passing of the millennium gives us a unique opportunity to reflect on what to take with us and what to leave behind. It is essential that we have a wide-ranging debate in this country on the future of the monarchy, and that people feel part of its evolution, if the monarchy is to retain their support. However, it is equally important that monarchy engages with this process itself and comes forward with practical suggestions for modernisation. Nothing would be more damaging to them than the appearance that they were being dragged kicking and screaming into the next century.

The shift in style adopted by the royal family may have provided a breathing space from the controversies and crises of recent years. It does not represent any sort of solution. Opinion poll data consistently indicate that, while a clear majority of the British people supports the monarchy today, a plurality believes it will be gone in 50 years and a firm majority cannot imagine its existence in 100 years' time. The monarchy has the opportunity to rethink its role and prevent a slide into obscurity. This will not happen if the *status quo* is entrenched or simply supplemented by short-term public relations activities. More profound change is required for the Crown to endure. In truth, the British monarchy has proved exceptionally flexible in the past. It can be so again. There are real merits in a symbolic head of state, well beyond the political (or religious) fray, who can actively promote those aspects of national life which bind us together and which make us a distinctive and successful nation. If the monarchy can make such a transition over the next decade, then it will be as valued in the next century as it so often has been in the past.