Monarchy and democracy

Essays on the Queen, Parliament and the people

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Requiem for a dignified institution?

What room is left for the monarchy in modern Britain? As in the Scandinavian nations, the British monarchy remains – despite its anachronisms and in opposition to modern criteria of legitimacy. Pertinently, this issue of British Politics Review turns towards the past to illuminate the puzzle of monarchical rule. Jeremy Corbyn MP takes a broad sweep across British constitutional history, where the slow, but forward march of democracy (if not republican ideas) is seen as the guideline. Carl-Henrik Grimstad points at some of the inherent paradoxes of monarchy in our time, looking back at Walter Bagehot’s classic account of the British Constitution.

Monarchy is also essentially about kings and queens. Trond Norén Isaksen tells the story of the young Princess, Maud of Wales, who became the first Queen of independent Norway in 1905. Kristin M. Haugevik sums up the influential reign of Queen Victoria and speculates on her political influence. Kari-Grete Alstad gives a personal account of the present Queen Elizabeth II and her relationship with her people and her epoch.

Claims for constitutional reform have been raised against the monarchy but also against other pre-democratic institutions in Britain. Øivind Bratberg gives a review of the problems involved in reforming the House of Lords, where the “dignified” and “efficient” parts of the Constitution meet. Finally, Dag Einar Thorsen gives a timely reminder of what debates over the monarchy may essentially be about. The editors of British Politics Review would like to thank all our members, readers and contributors over the last year. We look forward to further cooperation in 2008.

Three queens - and a shifting political role

Three of the longest-serving and arguably most famous and successful English/British monarchs were all women, but their respective reigns were marked by the very different role the monarch played in the government of the realm. Comparing them brings to light some essential contrasts.

Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) ruled in the early-modern period, when government was essentially monarchical, and when the role of Parliament was merely that of giving advice to the sovereign in her execution of government. Elizabeth was able to rule effectively, to a large extent because she called, and cooperated with, successive parliaments, but the final decision was hers by divine right.

Queen Victoria (1837-1901), by contrast, found herself in a middle position, at a time when the monarch could no longer determine the policies of the government (nor speak up against parliamentary rule: last use of the royal veto was in 1801, when George III refused to grant Catholic emancipation to Ireland), but had still not retreated to merely a head of state. Victoria was herself uncertain about her constitutional role - she expressed strong views on political issues (involving frequent consultation with the various prime ministers during her reign), but could she really demand to have direct influence? The gradual emergence of mass democracy in the Victorian age cannot have made this dilemma any less troublesome.

The current British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II (1952), exercises little or no direct and real influence over British politics. Formally speaking, the monarch still holds several powers, including the opportunity to refuse to grant the Royal Assent to new legislation, and the right to be regularly consulted by the prime minister.

But if the Queen were to exercise any of her formal powers in a manner that would be of political importance, a constitutional crisis would inevitably follow. In practice, therefore, her formal powers are largely reduced to ceremonial enactment of government policy, which again draws on the supremacy of Parliament. De facto, the British monarch is now a non-political head of state.

The virgin Queen. Elizabeth I, governing England through the difficult 16th century. © wikipedia/public domain

Grand old Lady. Queen Victoria in 1897: a monarch with personal views, but varying political powers during her sixty-three years on the throne. © wikipedia/public domain

Tradition in a modern age. Queen Elizabeth in 2007, in an era where ceremonial power is all that is left of the monarch’s political role. © wikipedia/public domain

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Are we a democracy?

By British Politics Review Guest Writer Jeremy Corbyn, MP for Islington North

Jeremy Corbyn has been a Member of Parliament since 1983. As one of the central spokesmen of the Labour left, he has been consistently involved in policy areas such as redistributive justice, social housing, trade unions and human rights at home and abroad. A member of a number of Commons backbench committees, Corbyn also sat in the House of Commons Select Committee on social security in 1991-97.

Britain is often presented around the world as an efficient and effective functioning democracy, and our parliament is often referred to as the "mother of parliaments". Whilst it is true that we have one of the oldest elected parliaments in the world, it is not correct to say that the whole constitution is an edifice based on demands for popular representation.

Unusually in the modern world, Britain does not have a written constitution, but it has a machinery based on all Acts of Parliament that have ever been passed and many Conventions and unwritten rules. The basis of modern British constitutional history stems from the Norman period, which began in 1066 when William I was crowned King of England and of Normandy. He and his successors ruled by personal power, and through patronage by the creation of Barons who were rewarded with land, local power, and influence at the Royal Court. Tensions came to a head in 1215 when King John was forced to agree to the Magna Carta, which for the first time controlled the unfettered power of the King. The Magna Carta is the basis of modern law in Britain.

This process developed to the extent that within 50 years (1265) the first elected parliament, an elected house, appeared which was meant to be a balance to the enormous power held by the King, and the power of the Barons who were hereditary.

The thirst for an elected parliament was part of the peasants revolt in 1381, which was brutally suppressed by the Monarch, and this demand never really went away. The elected House of Commons became steadily stronger and more influential, and part of the constitutional process. The crisis of 1642 occurred when the King, Charles I, demanded taxation from parliament for wars and imperial expansion. The elected House of Commons refused this and his attempt at closing down the elected arm of parliament led to the Civil War, and a declaration of autonomous independence by the House of Commons from the King.

Even at the end of the republican period, the power of the House of Commons remained intact, and from that period on there is a continuum of increasing power of the elected chamber, at the expense of the unelected House of Lords and the monarch. Industrialisation and migration from rural to urban life in the 18th and 19th centuries brought huge political changes with a series of reform acts beginning in 1832, and culminating 90 years later, in 1922 and 1949, for the House of Commons, and strictly limited powers for the House of Lords.

The current power structure is that the elected House of Commons, in keeping with the traditions of the English Civil War, has the last word on all legislation. Any bill proposed by government goes through three stages in the House of Commons, and is then sent to the House of Lords for re-examination and possible amendment. Any change inserted in a proposed law by the House of Lords has to be approved in finality by the House of Commons, before it is sent to the Queen for her Royal Assent (these days, a purely administrative act).

Demands for reform of the House of Lords have been made for many years, and the current situation is that 95% of the House of Lords are appointed as life peers by the Queen, on the advice of the prime minister and leader of the opposition. This latest reform occurred after the Labour election victory in 1997 and the House of Commons, not the Lords, has now voted that there should be a fully elected upper chamber. This legislation has not yet been finalised.

Accompanying the hereditary power of the monarchy has been a minority republican movement in Britain. Most people see the issue in terms of democratic control and democracy in our society. The monarch does have some residual powers, such as dissolving parliament, inviting the Leader of the largest grouping in Parliament to form a government after a general election and appointing members of the Privy Council. Many believe that these powers should be entirely removed. Some of us believe there should be an elected head of state.

The composition of a government whose ministers must be either a member of the House of Commons or the Lords means that there is perpetual confusion between the role of parliament in holding the executive to account and the fact that the executive comes from Parliament itself. Whilst this does mean that day to day contact and accountability can be very great, it also means that prime ministers effectively control Parliament through a system of patronage, where they reward loyal supporters with ministerial office. This influences the behavior of Members of Parliament, and is designed to buy loyalty.

Having been a Member of Parliament since 1983 I have observed the way in which patronage operates, and the way in which Parliament can, on some occasions, do the opposite of what the public wants, out of loyalty to a prime minister rather than to a set of beliefs. Two very glaring examples of this were the Poll Tax, introduced by Margaret Thatcher in 1989, and the decision to send British forces to Iraq, under Tony Blair in 2003.

Our democracy has developed on the basis of demands from ordinary people for proper representation to address injustice and their grievances. From this view, the history of the British Constitution is a study of progress that has yet to reach its ultimate goal.
Bagehot revisited: the advent of British unconstitutional monarchy  

By Carl-Erik Grimstad

Constitution - and illusion. This year marks the 140th anniversary of Walter Bagehot’s *The English Constitution*, designing what is probably the most influential theoretical account of the role and function of a parliamentary monarchy.

Originally an unpopular man at the Victorian court, Bagehot’s path-breaking book would yet appear on the syllabus of every British king and queen since George V. Today, finally, it is time to state the obvious – *The English Constitution* (in a double sense) is an antiquated piece of work.

The essential part of Bagehot’s claim is that the English (instead of British, regarded as a less patriotic name - I will revert to this) Constitution is divided into two parts, one efficient and one dignified. The efficiency (which of course may be argued) relates to the government and the House of Commons, the dignity (which may unquestionably be argued) is linked to the monarchy, with the House of Lords in a sort of middle position, though the future of the upper house is currently up for grabs for the sake of efficiency.

The idea is that monarchy conceals the real working of politics; it wins allegiance to the men who really run the nation. It is an august exterior “with the Gothic grandeur of a more imposing age”. We are witnessing a frightened, undemocratic sovereign, it left it to Parliament to rule. The argument is worth quoting at length:

“A royal family sweetens politics by the seasonal addition of nice and pretty events. It introduces irrelevant fact into the business of government, but they are facts which speaks to ‘men’s bosoms’ and employ their thoughts (…) Royalty is a government in which the attention of the nation is concentrated on one person doing interesting actions. A republic is a government in which that attention is divided between many, who are all doing uninteresting actions”.

The dignified residence. Buckingham Palace as it presents itself to the public. © wikipedia/public domain

In addition to making politics intelligible to the uneducated many, monarchy also strengthens government by the force of religion (rule by the grace of God). The family is of flesh and blood but at the same time the apex of morality. Thus it combines the effect of head of society with head of state by making the queen centre of gravity in all national pageantry.

From the monarch’s point of view there are three tasks that assure the constitutional link, according to Bagehot: The right to be consulted, the right to advice and the right to warn. The first of these rights is one of the stranger ones constructed by a constitutional theorist. Is Bagehot’s phrase merely a paraphrase of a right to be informed? One will easily enter into conceptual confusion on such issues, as rights must normally be followed by another man’s duty. Should we then regard the right to be consulted as the prime minister’s duty to consult the queen? Obviously not, for if this was the case it would involve an extension of monarchical influence in the affairs of state. On the other hand – if one has the right to warn and the right to advise, it follows logically that there already exists a forum for consultation.

Conceptual debates notwithstanding, the point to make in relation to the situation in Britain today is that once the chain between politics (morality) and royalty is broken, the constitutional monarchy becomes an unconstitutional monarchy.

In other words, the monarchy is an integral part of the working of government, it incorporates feelings and emotions into politics in a way only fundamentalist regimes have been able to since. It arouses the masses but directs their released energy into support for the Establishment.

52 seats in parliament were redistributed, mostly from small agricultural areas to new industrial centres. The Reform Act “ended the classical age of parliamentary government” wrote Richard Crossman in the introduction to the 1963 edition of *The English Constitution*. The struggle for women’s suffrage was also underway.

As editor of the *Economist*, Bagehot opposed extension of the franchise; it could lead to political unrest and economic instability, which would both be disastrous. Having inherited the periodical from his father-in-law who died in 1860, he immediately started to report from politics in The United States. There, women acquired right to vote in two states at the end of the 1860s (Wyoming (1869) Utah (1870). He must have viewed the extension of the franchise to women as a highly negative aspect of republican rule.

In this sense the dignified part of the constitution was by Bagehot regarded as a means to make government comprehensible to the great masses of people, to enhance the real working of the government, it introduces irrelevant fact into the business of government, but they are facts which speaks to ‘men’s bosoms’ and employ their thoughts (…) Royalty is a government in which the attention of the nation is concentrated on one person doing interesting actions. A republic is a government in which that attention is divided between many, who are all doing uninteresting actions”.

Carl-Erik Grimstad is a journalist and author in his own capacity. Holding a degree in political science, he has published numerous books on the monarchy and constitutional issues.

Bagehot, here. As he was writing *The English Constitution* Britain faced a fierce political battle over the extension of the franchise to working class males. The battle ended with the Conservative Prime Minister Disraeli virtually doubling the number of voters through the Reform Act of 1867. In 1952, 25 per cent of the British still believed that the queen actually ruled by the grace of God, in other words that she was God’s representative on earth (today opinion polls wouldn’t dream of asking the question, unless it was done in Nepal where the king is regarded as the reincarnation of the god Vishnu).
Religion and morality is therefore our main focal point. In 1952, 25 per cent of the British still believed that the queen actually ruled by the grace of God, in other words that she was God’s representative on earth (today opinion polls wouldn’t dream of asking the question, unless it was done in Nepal where the king is regarded as the reincarnation of the god Vishnu).

That so many Britons lived under the impression that there was some kind of religious connection between the monarch and the supernatural, is no great wonder. Great Britain had experienced more than a century of successful monarchy filled with mystery, in Bagehot’s words there had hardly been any daylight upon its magic. After the death of Prince Albert in 1861, Queen Victoria had reobtained her virginity and reigned the rest of her life on virtually a wave of an anglicised cult of Mary. Edward VII’s adultery as well as his gambling was grimly unreported in the press, King George V and VI had their reputations saved by two world wars, the latter after having cleaned up the mess created by Edward VIII by sending him into exile.

Thus, when Queen Elisabeth entered Westminster Abbey on her coronation day, 2 June 1953, everything was on the right track for Britain’s monarchy. The new monarch had already become a cult figure, helped on the way by television. However, it was on that very same day that daylight began to shine on the disguised republic of Great Britain. For outside the Abbey Princess Margaret happened to brush a fluff off the uniform of Group Captain Peter Townsend, equerry to the queen. Everywhere, except in Britain, the story was headline news the next day. Twelve days later British media opened the windows and the sun shone brightly on the royal family, never to set again.

Today it seems strange that a harsh public debate would precede the coronation ceremony on the question of TV coverage. In 1953 no cameras were allowed to take close ups of the queen. Meanwhile, the event itself was orchestrated by the Royal Palace comparable to the preparations of a Hollywood movie. In fact horse carriages had to be rented from a film company in order to supply the amount required for the splendid occasion.

Since Margaret “the first royal rebel”, Royal Britain has been on a slippery slope towards an unconstitutional monarchy: adultery, multiple divorces, numerous court battles, accusations of greed (the tax battles). The Diana saga was a disaster from A to Z, ending with a humiliating retreat by the Queen in the Burrell case (withdrawn accusations of theft). Rumours of Prince Philip ordering the murder of the mother of his grandchildren was of course a terrible and undocumented accusation, but it was nevertheless widely accepted by the public. In the media, lack of deference towards the royals has been answered with hatred (Prince Philip: “The rat pack”, Prince Charles on open microphone: “I really hate these people”) and several adjudications in the Press Complaints Commission (with limited long term effect).

Obviously this has triggered the press into committing severe assaults on royal privacy, all with the effect of changing the rationale of monarchical rule from dignity to identity: So the previous republican Jeremy Paxman writes in his well researched book On Royalty: “One of the reasons 80% of people in this country are in favour of the royal family is because they have had terrible family problems - just like the rest of us.”

As has been suggested, constitutional reform could - and should - clean up the mess created by centuries of misinterpreted parliamentarianism. Laws are sooner or later to be enforced releasing the British monarch from her institutional ties with the Church of England (leaving prince Charles to take his seat as defender of the faiths, a favourite dream of his), Codification and reform of the monarch’s constitutional duties (dissolution of parliament etc.) are surely underway.

This all goes to show that the queen and her family really is “one of us”. The Royal Palace has tried, mostly in vain, to replace dignity with variety performances of various kinds, but has ended up replacing ethical rule with aesthetical, which fits magnificently with the homosexual wave as the backbone of monarchy these days. The triad matriarchy of the queen of hearts (Diana), the queen of pops (Elton John) and the queen of fashion (Versace) used to be an unbeatable alliance in the field of post modernistic political correctness coupled with celebrity culture. With symbolically only one third of it remaining (the entertainment part), the mythical battle continues in attaching Diana’s legacy to whatever good cause comes in the way of her sons. No turning back now; there is little room in society for royals who refuse to behave like angels (sorry Harry!).

Add to this cocktail around twenty people performing the noble art of public relations at Buckingham Palace and Marlborough House (PoW’s residence) for the effect of strengthening the ties between the royal family and the queens’ so called subjects, and we might well be in for a number of decades of continued royal “reign”. Popular flirtations and entertainment may prove itself to be more viable than constitutional guarantees. After all – in 2010 the soap opera Coronation Street has been broadcast for fifty years.

**Literature:**
The Queen of hearts and minds?

By Kari-Grete Alstad

The Queen and her people. For a foreign observer living in the UK, trying to figure out the relationship between the British people and their Sovereign can be exceedingly confusing. Hardly a day goes by without stories appearing in the media about the Queen and her family, stories which can be intrusive to the point of hostility in detailing the royals' comings and goings and personal relationships. Since the British legal system offers scant protection for personal privacy in advance of publication - and the Royal family are loath to appear in court actions unless provoked to the extreme - the Royals are scrutinised and satirised in a manner that would not be possible in many other countries.

Over the last three years, as a foreign correspondent based in London, I have seen the Queen depicted by the media in remarkably conflicting ways: from that of a cold remote monarch who put duty before normal human feelings even to the detriment of her own children who were deprived of maternal affection; to the warm embodiment of the whole nation. An extraordinary swing in her public persona came just over a decade ago after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, when the public outcry for the monarch to come out and show her feelings and be with her people at this crucial moment, led to her change of mind and sudden understanding of what was at stake.

For a day or two the popularity of the monarchy had hung in the balance and the Queen was spurred into action. Her position was eventually restored as the memory of Diana - and the unprecedented outburst of emotion in London at the time of her death - faded away.

But that was ten years ago. What I remember most of my time in the UK were those terrible days in July 2005 when the whole of British society was shaken by terror attacks on the London transport system which killed some 50 people and maimed many more.

Exactly one week after the attack commemoration ceremonies were held all over Britain. At noon on the 14th of July millions of people stopped what they were doing and stood in silence for two minutes outside their homes and workplaces in homage to the dead and injured. The Queen stood outside Buckingham Palace, surrounded by her staff and Court, as a symbolic act of solidarity with her people in defying terrorism.

In the afternoon of that same day the Queen was due to give one of her traditional garden parties at Buckingham Palace. Invitations had gone out well in advance and a royal envelope had landed in my letterbox. I was not alone for a similar invitation had gone to seven thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine other guests. Nevertheless, I was determined to make the most of it. I bought a lovely afternoon dress, and an equally lovely hat, as required for the occasion by the invitation. I was ready to take tea with the Queen – a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity - unless of course the whole thing was going to be called off because of the special security situation.

But the show must go on.

In between the nationwide observance of a two-minute silence and a highly emotional ceremony in Trafalgar Square in the evening, there was an interval of laughter and elegant pleasanties on the lawns at the back of Buckingham Palace.

And there we were - all eight thousand of us - lined up to meet the Queen as she stepped out of the Palace's garden rooms and down the wide stairs to walk among us, nodding and smiling to all and speaking to a chosen few who were later invited into the Royal tent for tea and conversation. The Queen, 79 years old at the time, in a flowery dress and sensible shoes, looked relaxed and rested as she passed through the crowd of bishops and book-keepers, lords and lieutenants, royal heralds and housewives, worthy representatives from all walks of life, carefully selected to give the illusion of the Queen being equal of all her people.

Which of course is not true. Britain remains a highly class-divided society. The differences have been likened to glass walls: you can see through them and even think that they are not there. But the glass is still unbreakable.

"Britain remains a highly class-divided society. The differences have been likened to glass walls: you can see through them and even think that they are not there. But the glass is still unbreakable."

A huge majority is still certain that their social standing determines the way they are judged in society.

The Queen and her - according to some newspapers - somewhat dysfunctional family is still the centre of attention and her popularity is regularly monitored in opinion polls. These remain remarkably stable when the ultimate question is asked: should Britain remain a monarchy or become a republic?

With remarkable consistency in polling over the last forty years only 18 per cent have opted for the UK becoming a republic while close to 80 per cent back the monarchy even in a modern Britain.

Earlier this year, when the death of Princess Diana was commemorated, there seemed to be a ground swell of renewed sympathy for the Royals. However, at the same time, new opinion polls registered that respect for the monarchy is steadily falling and that half the population do not think that the royal family has changed for the better in the aftermath of the death of Princess Diana – "The People's Princess".

Still the Queen, now 82, seems set to follow her mother who lived to be over 100 and was the most popular figure in the Royal family. The British have always had a special affection for the aged and even the reclusive and disregarded Victoria became much-loved in her latter years. With Queen Elizabeth on the throne the monarchy seems stable and secure. What will happen when she dies and Charles succeeds her is another matter.

For a long time Charles was less popular than his eldest son, Prince William. At the time of his wedding to Camilla Parker Bowles voices were raised for the Crown to be passed directly to Prince William when the Queen dies. An interesting idea but highly unlikely. Now, with the passing of a few years, the hostility to Camilla Parker Bowles has abated and there even seems to be some warmth to her and Charles.

And while Prince Charles, now close to sixty, waits on the demise of his seemingly indestructible mother to ascend the throne, we can at least follow his activities as a producer of organic food and his many strong opinions on environmental issues. Meanwhile the British people debate whether his second wife, Camilla, would be worthy of being called his Queen – and theirs.
Queen Victoria and British politics in the Victorian era

By Kristin M. Haugevik

A symbol of British grandeur. The incumbent British Monarch, Elizabeth II, will soon commence on her impressive 56th year in Buckingham Palace. Yet, the treasured Queen of Britain and fifteen other Commonwealth states still has some years to go before breaking her great-great-grandmother’s record. Indeed, Queen Victoria I (1819-1901) occupied the throne for as long as 63 years, 7 months, and 3 days, making her the longest serving monarch in British history thus far.

This epoch has in history books and British history thus far. This period has been named the Victorian era, a period during which Britain experienced a remarkable growth in its economy, industry, culture as well as its influence on international politics. Not only was the country at the height of its industrial might and in the heyday of its empire, but the period was also marked by a long-standing peace in Europe, often ascribed to the dominant British position and therefore referred to as the Pax Britannica. Victoria was the proud sovereign of an empire “on which the sun never set” – a classical way of describing the impressive fact that she at a point reigned over almost a quarter of the world territory and population. Furthermore, she was the very first British monarch to hold the title Empress of India.

To many, therefore, Queen Victoria became and remains – the very symbol of the British Empire and the embodiment of British hegemony and grandeur. Yet, her influence on British and international politics in her times is contested by historians and analysts. While she certainly took a great interest in political issues, and reportedly remained in close dialogue with all her ten prime ministers throughout her reign, it was nevertheless in her times that the powers of the British monarch saw their greatest decline.

Up until then, British kings and queens had to a much larger degree enjoyed political influence. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, day-to-day political powers were gradually transferred from the royal sovereign to the British government and parliament, in the end establishing the constitutional monarchy that we know from today’s Britain. This transfer of powers was largely in accordance with the suggestions made by the influential Victorian writer Walter Bagehot (1826-1877), who in his standard work The English Constitution (1867) argued that the monarch under a constitutional monarchy should have “three rights - the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, the right to warn” (see also article by Carl-Erik Grimstad in this issue).

Bagehot’s key phrase arguably sums up the principal framework for the British monarch’s role as it developed during the Victorian era, and which has remained valid for British monarchs up until today. Unlike the incumbent Queen however, Queen Victoria did not appear to strive for political neutrality. On the contrary, history books report that she expressed strong opinions on issues ranging from women’s right to vote (which she opposed) to the Boer War in South Africa between the British Empire and two independent Boer republics (1899-1902). On the latter she has been quoted for having said that “We are not interested in the possibilities of defeat; they do not exist”, when presented with news that British forces had suffered losses.

Furthermore, she made little effort to hide her affection for some politicians and her dislike for others. Of her very first prime minister, Lord Melbourne (1779-1848), who represented the Whig party, she observed in one of her diaries that “I like him very much and feel confidence in him. He is a very straightforward, honest, clever and good man”. Her relationship with the Lord is in fact rumoured to have been so close that even the editor of the distinguished newspaper the Times questioned whether it was of a “commonly decent” nature. Similarly, the Queen’s friendship with the Conservative Party’s Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), also one of her prime ministers, was of solid character. When Disraeli passed away in 1881, Victoria announced in a letter that she was unable to stop crying.

In contrast, she was more effusive in her characterisation of Disraeli’s archrival, the Liberal Party’s multi-time prime minister, William Gladstone (1809-1898), whom she disliked among other reasons because he – in her own words – always addressed her “as if I was a public meeting”. Another prime minister she did not have particularly much liking for was the Whig Party’s Lord Palmerston (1784-1865). Upon his death, she confessed in her diary that although “he managed affairs at home well, and behaved to me well”, she had “never liked him”.

Hence, despite the fact that the monarch’s powers were formally in decline during Queen Victoria’s reign, she continuously managed to make herself relevant in political processes in Britain. Indeed, she seemed to be a monarch that people had differing, but rarely indifferent, opinions about. The altogether seven assassination attempts that she was exposed to throughout her lifetime suggest that she represented something far more than an insignificant figurehead. In the early days of her reign, she was disliked by certain groups in the British society, not least because she largely withdrew from the public following her beloved husband’s death in 1861. Towards the end of her life, however, she was a generally beloved sovereign. Perhaps because, as pointed out by the author Lynton Strachey, “the vast majority of her subjects had never known a time when Queen Victoria had not been reigning over them”.

The Queen also left her mark on British and European culture and society in other ways. With her nine children, forty grandchildren, and reportedly very happy marriage to her cousin Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg, she arguably became a symbol and model of the strict morality and family values that characterised the Victorian era. Towards the end of her life, she earned the nickname “the Grandmother of Europe”, largely due to the fact that a majority of her children and grandchildren married into royal families in Europe (including her granddaughter Maud who later became Queen of Norway, see article by Trond Norør Isaksen in this issue). Hence, to the extent that one recognizes that royal blood relationships can create political bonds between states, Victoria certainly did her part in connecting Britain to countries in Europe.

Following Victoria’s death in 1901, the London Times concluded that Britain largely owed its success “to the womanly sweetness, the gentle sagacity, the utter disinterestedness, and the unassailable rectitude of the Queen”. Symbolically, in the years that followed, Britain gradually lost its economic and industrial lead and dominant position in international politics. The grandeur that had characterized Britain under Queen Victoria’s reign was coming to an end.
A British Queen of Norway
By Trond Norén Isaksen

The strategic alliance. It was only toward the end of his reign that Oscar II, the last monarch of the Swedish-Norwegian union, came to see Britain as an interesting factor in international politics. King Oscar worried over what he saw as a Russian threat and considered Britain the best counterweight. Furthermore he may have considered Britain a possible supporter in the difficult issue of the union’s future.

This was the era when one still believed in dynastic influence in international politics. King Oscar’s new-found interest in Britain was manifested through the engagement of his eldest grandson Prince Gustaf Adolf, second in line to the two thrones, to Princess Margaret of Britain, a niece of King Edward VII, in February 1905. A French newspaper expressed the opinion that the alliance would also be valuable to Britain as a counterweight against Germany. The bride-to-be passed that French article in her scrapbook and underlined the words "Oncle a roulé le neveu". The uncle who "Oncle a roulé le neveu" seemed clear that the answer would in the end be negative, partly because of Norway’s self-interests in Norway, partly because of the Scandinavian iron ore mines. But the Norwegian government and the majority in Parliament did not dare to settle with these suppositions, the historian Roald Berg wrote: "The British self-interests in Norway were to be nailed down through King Edward’s daughter residing in the Kristiania Palace".

Historically there had "always" been close ties between Norway and the British Isles, with the notable exception of the early 19th century when Denmark-Norway and Britain found themselves on opposing sides during the Napoleonic Wars. With Princess Maud as Queen the Norwegians wished for an implicit guarantee from Britain, but as Norway was to remain strictly neutral this was not something one could talk loudly about.

Because Norwegian foreign policy was marked by a strong scepticism towards becoming closely connected with great powers and thereby involved in great power politics, advocates of Prince Carl’s candidate to the Norwegian throne could not make too much out of his being the British King’s son-in-law.

It is symptomatic that the Norwegian chief negotiator, Fritz Wedel Jarlsberg, after his first meeting with Prince Carl wrote: "My impression of this conversation was that Prince Carl and Princess Maud were as made to take over the throne and with England’s strong help prepare a bright future for Norway". The first time Prince Carl is mentioned in the diaries of the cabinet minister Harald Bothner he is described as “the Danish Prince Carl married to the English Princess Maud”.

Another leading politician, Jakob Schøning, wrote that by offering the throne to Prince Carl, Norway would “tie England to her and be better than Sweden, who will only get King Edward’s niece as queen”. Mr Hagerup Bull noted that it was a delight to the Cabinet to think of the Swedes’ vexation if Prince Carl accepted: “Princess Maud belongs to the senior branch in England, Princess Margaret to a junior branch!” He added that “a tight royal connection with England will in any case be an indisputable benefit”.

Some of those in favour of a republic argued that in case of an attack on Norway Britain would anyway come to the country’s assistance, partly because of Norway’s many North Sea harbours and partly because of the Scandinavian iron ore mines. But the Norwegian government and the majority in Parliament did not dare to settle with these suppositions, the historian Roald Berg wrote: “The British self-interests in Norway were to be nailed down through King Edward’s daughter residing in the Kristiania Palace”.

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As long as the war lasted Queen Maud had to refrain from her annual visits to England, partly because the journey across the North Sea would be hazardous, but probably also because it would be politically unfortunate if the Queen of a neutral country travelled to one of the belligerent countries.

Already before the election in 1905 King Haakon had made it clear that his wife would have to spend part of the year abroad due to health reasons. This he wanted to be made clear at an early stage so that her frequent absences from the country would not be interpreted as her not liking Norway. But the Queen’s long visits to England were nevertheless criticised and when the royal family in 1907 planned to celebrate Christmas in England strong protests led to their having to return to Norway earlier than planned.

It is difficult to say for sure what Queen Maud really thought about Norway. Norwegian books have frequently claimed that she loved Norway and everything that was Norwegian, while British sources tend to give a more negative view. The British historian Kenneth Rose, for example, claims that she thought the Norwegians “ungrateful and insatiable”.

Queen Maud was shy by nature and apparently had no strong sense of duty. It was often difficult to make her do what was expected of her and she played no independent role as queen. As her health problems increased she became less and less visible and eventually many of the duties of the nation’s first lady fell upon her daughter-in-law, Crown Princess Märtha.

Queen Maud died from cancer at a London hospital on 20 November 1938, less than two weeks after Munich and within days of her 69th birthday. Her coffin was taken back to Norway on a British battleship. Her Norwegian story ended as it had started: She arrived in the capital by sea on a grey and cold November day.

It might seem that her historical importance was limited to the establishment of the new Norwegian monarchy. But in reality her importance was felt much longer and to a certain extent still is. The illusion that Norway was unassailable was crushed on 9 April 1940 and the British “guarantee” came into force. But the military assistance from Britain came too late and after only two months the allied forces were withdrawn from Norway as they were more needed on the continent.

King Haakon was received with open arms by his nephew King George VI when he and Crown Prince Olav arrived in London to start their exile. Winston Churchill also had great respect for the Norwegian monarch and frequently brought his Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, for lunch with the King. Thus the Norwegian Government had the best possible connections with British authorities. The close relations between Norway and Britain were continued after the end of the war in 1945.

By dying before the war Queen Maud lost “the historical chance” to prove herself that the rest of the royal family were given, but she was nevertheless of a certain importance for Norway’s position and relations to the great powers. King Haakon returned to Norway on 7 June 1945. To return triumphantly to Norway on a British battleship after the victory over Germany would have been Queen Maud’s finest hour.

Further reading in English

Who will now rise to defend the House of Lords?

By Øivind Bratberg

Reforming the un-reformable: How do we justify the maintenance of unelected – or, indeed, inherited – authority in a modern democracy? The question is often posed in discussions on the rule of kings and queens. However, in Britain until the latter few years it could just as well have been evoked over the House of Lords as over the monarchy.

The British Constitution, with its strong penchant towards continuity, has served to maintain a medieval construct ill-adapted to the modern age. The next few years may take the House through a reform process which could change fundamentally its character, composition and political role. That is, if only the MPs of the House of Commons can agree on how to reform the second chamber.

History shows that the Commons has rarely been able to build such a coherent vision of what role the Lords should perform. Although bold attempts have been made, actual reform has repeatedly been halted by parliamentary indecision. Consider the following quote from the preamble of the Parliament Act of 1911 (which restrained the power of the Lords but failed to address the existence of hereditary peers):

“It is intended to substitute for the House of Lords as it present exists a second chamber constituted on a popular instead of hereditary basis, but such substitution cannot immediately be brought into operation…”

That Parliament Act was the product of Liberal government. Nevertheless, when time has come for reform the debate has not necessarily followed a left/right or progressive/conservative dimension. Other factors have also played a role and have thus contributed to the lack of reform. In addition to short-term tactical interest, there have been deep concerns about the institutional balance of power. What happens if you create two Houses that are both elected by the people? Will the Commons still retain its superior role, or will an elected House of Lords entail a new democratic mandate?

Agreeing on these issues has proved intrinsically difficult during a century of debates over the proper role against the House of Lords. In the deep end of the quagmire lies an essential dilemma: while most MPs would agree that the House of Lords is undemocratic, many of them would consider this an advantage insofar as it ensures the constitutional superiority of the House of Commons. Since the Lords are not elected, they have no legitimate claim to equal political power.

Such strategic views notwithstanding, with Britian soon approaching its second century of mass franchise it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify the maintenance of unelected political institutions. Again, the discussion holds relevance to both the Queen and the aristocratic assembly at Westminster. The monarchy, however, could partly resolve the challenge by taking on a symbolic role and acting as the non-political figure head over and above political life. To the House of Lords there has been no such option. As part of the daily political life at Westminster, the Lords could not sit back and let the House of Commons do the work of legislation and governmental scrutiny alone. Seen as the essential chamber of revising and re-considering legislation, the House of Lords, if it was to exist, must take its role seriously.

Reform rather than abolition of the Lords then should be the centrepiece of debate. And here there are two distinct questions to be answered: first, should there be room for hereditary peers to sit and vote? Second, if Lords do not inherit their position in the House, should they be appointed (either by government, Parliament or an independent body), or directly elected?

When Labour entered government in 1997, it was with a distinct programme for constitutional reform. The House of Lords was an important element on that list, and the Labour government approached the two questions referred to above with at least an initial sense of direction. Hereditary peers (except 92 temporarily remaining ones) passed into the dustbin of history through the House of Lords Act in 1999.

With inheritance no longer an accepted principle, the issue turned to how recruitment to the House should then be composed. Since 1998, the room for naming so-called life peers has enabled each government to inject fresh life into the Lords, with former politicians, civil servants and other candidates of stature as candidates. This has served as point of departure for the present debate. Could stuffing the House of Lords with experienced personnel be a solution? If so, should these recruitments be political appointees, or could they be left to an independent body?

This is where the discussion is left at present. When reform has halted at step one of Labour’s programme, it is for a good reason. It could well be argued that removing the hereditary element was a more important issue for Labour than step two of the process, that is, who should replace the hereditary Lords. For historical and quite obvious reasons, the House of Lords has been biased towards the Conservative Party. With hereditary peers abolished, the House of Lords has turned its course towards political craftsmanship. Alliances are now built between and across the party groups, to the benefit of Labour but also, notably, of the Liberal Democrats. The House of Lords today contains three parties of distinguished size, in addition to, notably, a number of independent cross-benchers.

A new dynamic of what may be called enlightened party politics has thus been created. In fact, it could well be argued that the House of Lords in its present form in fact fulfils its role in a rather elegant fashion: pluralist in terms of political interest; thorough in its work; national in its interest and composition (however elitist it may be).
Despite this far from hopeless state of affairs, however, the reform process is not meant to stop there. Already in 1999 a Royal Commission under Lord Wakeham was set down to establish basic proposals for further debate. The Commission’s report, presented in 2000, was met with critique for its resistance to the creation of an elected House of Lords. This was blatantly unfair, as maintaining the democratic superiority of the House of Commons was part of the Commission’s mandate. Disagreement was however indicative of deeper splits within and between the parties. After alternatives had been discussed in a government white paper (2001) then by a joint committee of both Houses, a vote over the future House of Lords ended in stalemate in the Commons in 2003. It took the government another four years to present a new white paper on House of Lords reform, and it is towards these proposals that the present debate has turned.

According to the white paper of February 2007, “[t]he Lords should be neither a rival nor a replica of the Commons”. Meanwhile, it was admitted, “it is difficult, in a modern democracy, to justify a second chamber where there is no elected element”. The resulting “reformed House” would combine and balance competing sources of legitimacy: 50% elected representatives, to be combined with 30% party political and 20% independent appointees. All representatives, it was suggested, should serve 15-year non-renewable terms to restrain any democratic accountability (however strange that may seem).

According to this scheme, elections would be held along with those for the European Parliament, with a third of the elected representatives to be renewed every five years. While the Church of England is to maintain its representation, all hereditary peers would hereafter be history.

Has British politics ever seen such a mix of contrasting ideas of legitimacy? Of course, it has. The present House of Lords may be an unusual type in an era of democratic politics but the evolution of Parliament in Britain is scattered with mixed mandates, rotten boroughs, royal prerogatives – in sum, a cocktail of historical residuals. Grand institutional reform has a chequered history in Britain, where late and seemingly irrational reforms have often given unexpected results. The messy reform process of the House of Lords thus fits with a long, if not so honourable, tradition.

Based on all the problems caused by the existence of the Lords, an outside observer would be excused for suggesting to simply abolish it. Such a proposal does not hold any better solution. There is, in fact, no good alternative to a two-chamber model in governing a state of Britain’s size. Historically, the House of Lords has been an important source of revision and scrutiny of governmental policy. Its role has been less hampered by party politics and more geared towards competence – and, in a system where the government has usually operated with huge majorities in the Commons the House of Lords has acted as a source of moderation and restraint.

It is precisely through non-partisan and capable scrutiny that the Lords have maintained their relevance in the British constitutional system. The sixty years since the War have seen ever stronger governments, ever more centralisation, and a House of Commons governed by strongly disciplined parties. In such a system the second chamber should and must have a role to play.”

Furthermore, in countries of comparable size and tradition as Britain, one has arrived at solutions which are certainly not characterised by reduction to a single legislative chamber. Canada and Australia have been geared towards strictly federal solutions, where the composition of the second chamber is drawn from a geographical principle. Here, the upper house represents the constituent states – a principle equally embedded in the Senate of the United States as well as the German Bundesrat. Even France, otherwise very far from federal ideas, has its Sénat based on a regional principle. These upper houses have a constitutionally different role from the lower legislative chamber (House of Representatives, Bundestag, Assemblée Nationale) and perform important tasks.

So, the House of Lords must remain - but in what form? Little of certainty can be said at this point. In his introduction to the aforementioned white paper of 2007, Jack Straw, the then Leader of the House of Commons, stated “The Lords is not a static institution. Like other key British institutions, it has changed and evolved through its history, and will continue to do so.” Surely, one must hope that future reform of the Lords may focus more on the efficient and less on the dignified elements of Britain’s Constitution. There is an important institutional balance to be re-established at Westminster.
Why we cannot, and will not, just get rid of it

By Dag Einar Thorsen

Abolition now? The monarchy, in Britain and elsewhere, is an institution which has outlived itself. The very idea of a genuine monarchy, that there should be a hereditary head of state exercising real power, is in our day an anachronism – a grotesque relic of a darker and less democratic period in human history.

A country which truly wants to be democratic cannot reconcile itself with being a monarchy. The two forms of government cannot exist together simultaneously, at least not for long. One of them must necessarily subside into pure ceremony. If one tries to maintain both, one will end up either with what is in effect a crowned republic, as in Britain, or with popularly elected bodies serving as a façade for a rule of the traditional strongman, as in many developing countries all around the world.

As such, the idea of a monarchy is hardly ever taken seriously these days, at least not outside the Islamic world. Even die-hard monarchists in Britain and the Commonwealth countries, such as the International Monarchist League, do not take the idea of monarchy, as a form of government, at all seriously.

All these monarchists want, it seems, is to maintain a certain amount of pageantry on a handful occasions of state, as symbols of so-called national unity, in order to bolster countrywide fellow-feeling. This, however, is at best an argument in favour of annual fancy dress parties, such as the one depicted on the front page of this issue of the British Politics Review, and not in itself an argument for keeping the last remnants of Britain’s pre-democratic constitution.

So, then, why not just get rid of it all? What keeps Britain and other so-called constitutional monarchies from substituting their royal, entirely de jure, heads of state with elected ones in their place?

One actually very good argument in favour of keeping the monarchy is that it does not matter all that much. There are, in all honesty, other, more important problems going on in the world, which should be dealt with before we concentrate our efforts on such purely peripheral issues. Put alongside the fight against poverty, oppression, hunger and environmental degradation, republicanism becomes an issue for superficially radical patrons of salons littéraires, more concerned with matters of principle than with real problems at hand.

There is probably not even a purely economic argument for evicting the royal family from their many lavish halls and palaces. As the Keeper of the Privy Purse famously announced a few years ago, during a small surge in republican sentiment, the monarchy only costs each Briton the equivalent of two pints of milk each year.

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“...as one of the truly exotic places of the world, charmingly and ever so slightly behind the times. Britain would basically no longer be, as the present Chancellor of Durham University once remarked, “crazy as fuck, but adorable to the tiniest degree”. It would become an ordinary, slightly dreary, and insufferably normal country. Is that really what we want?”

I say no. The conformity has to stop somewhere. Let us now unite against regularity, managerialism and tedious consistency. God Save the Queen.

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Forthcoming edition of British Politics Review

In January 2007 it will be thirty-five years since Britain entered the then European Communities. The next issue of British Politics Review marks the anniversary by taking a critical view of Britain in Europe. What consequences has European integration had on British politics? To what extent has Britain changed its role in the European Union (EU) during the course of its membership - and how should that role be defined today?

Britain’s approach to the EU has been described as that of an awkward partner, one which would never fully commit itself to Europe. Yet Britain has willingly implemented EU law, has consistently supported trade liberalisation and, under Tony Blair, taken the lead in developing the EU’s common foreign and security policy. In British Politics Review 1/2008 we will address some of these paradoxes. We will also look at the broad historical backdrop to the Britain in Europe of 2007.

Articles from readers are very welcome. Please get in touch with the editors for further details.

The winter edition of British Politics Review is due to arrive in February 2008.