

The "Diana" phenomenon re-examined

Julie Hyland
29 August 1998

In the wake of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in a Paris motorway tunnel on August 31 last year, more than a million people lined the route of the funeral cortège in central London, and 290,000 signed books of condolences.

Tony Blair proclaimed her the 'People's Princess' and a representative of 'New Britain'--alongside his newly elected Labour government. Sections of the middle class left joined in. The *Weekly Worker*, newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain, described the funeral crowds as a movement of 'the oppressed'. Recently, feminist writer Beatrix Campbell, formerly of *Marxism Today*, wrote that Diana had joined the 'constituency of the rejected ... the survivors of harm and horror, from the Holocaust, from world wars and pogroms, from Vietnam and the civil wars of South America and South Africa, from torture and child abuse.'

One year on, a chill wind is blowing around the 'Diana' phenomenon. Last Sunday, the North London Walking Club hosted a sponsored walk along the route of the funeral procession. Upwards of 15,000 participants had been expected for the walk that was to kick off a week of events surrounding the anniversary of Diana's death. Just 200 people turned up, leaving the Club £25,000 out of pocket.

Dissenters have even appeared among the clergy. Last September they enthusiastically claimed that a 'religious awakening' was sweeping the country. Now Lord Coggan, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, describes Diana as 'a false goddess' with 'pretty loose morals', 'certainly loose sexual morals'. Days earlier two Sunday school preachers in the West Midlands were the subject of complaints after telling their young flock that Diana had probably 'gone to hell' because she had not repented her un-Christian life-style.

Naturally, there are those who are anxious to maintain the image of the 'People's Princess'--foremost amongst them the countless souvenir and anniversary programme manufacturers. The Memorial Fund, established just five days after the crash, has received £370 million in

donations. Some £80 million of this comes from sponsorship deals with companies keen to use the special 'Diana' signature logo on their products. The fund is, moreover, in a constant battle to retain copyright over Diana's 'intellectual property rights' against others desperate for a stake in the multi-million-pound souvenir industry. It has issued 50 'desist' notices to companies using the Princess's name without authorisation. In the United States, the Illinois-based Bradford Exchange filed a complaint against the Memorial Fund demanding that it recognise the company's legal right to produce Diana memorabilia. The Bradford Exchange is promoting a musical plate that 'exquisitely plays the original melody of 'Candle in the Wind', with the slogan: 'Keep her light alive'. Sir Elton John has been alerted to a possible breach of his music copyright.

The fund was criticised for its 'tasteless' decision to allow the *Flora* margarine brand to use the Diana logo. Thus far it has only officially approved a souvenir candleholder, candle, stamp collection, compact disc compilation, two enamel boxes and a Beanie Bear called Princess. Those products it has refused to endorse include a toilet seat cover, a 'Bye-bye Di' car bumper sticker and a colonic irrigation kit.

Despite this attempt to preserve a modicum of 'good-taste', Diana has become Britain's equivalent of Elvis, complete with her own 'Graceland'. The stables at the Spencer family's estate in Althorp have been converted into a museum. For £9.50, visitors can watch home videos of the young future princess, examine her school reports, and admire a selection of her dresses and gaze across the lake to her island grave.

The elements of farce notwithstanding, important issues are raised by these events.

For 17 years the comings and goings of the Royal couple were subjected to minute and exhaustive coverage by the world's media. A small army of paparazzi followed Diana around the world serving up a daily glorification of the rich and famous. The advantage of Ms Spencer was that, in her, the allure of royalty met up with an opulent

show-biz life-style that could be vicariously shared and even aspired to.

Her subsequent divorce only added the vital ingredients of any soap opera--sex, intrigue and betrayal. All of Diana's riches did not stop her suffering from an uncaring husband, family breakdown and psychiatric problems. According to the media this was all the more reason to identify with her. This was the main theme struck up after Diana's death, even by those who were previously critical of her.

Like everything else surrounding the Princess, money was a major factor in the public relations offensive. The media had found Diana tremendously useful for boosting their circulation whilst alive, and utilised her death as yet another opportunity to exploit the Royal milch cow. But it also served a more fundamental purpose.

Millions of people's lives are characterised by hardship, insecurity and a lack of purpose. Encouraging them to identify with a spoilt aristocrat serves to deaden critical faculties and ensure that social frustrations remain within safe channels.

Claims that concern for the personal fate of a princess would lead to a growth in republican sentiment seem all the more ludicrous in hindsight. It is certainly the case that sections of the ruling class employed Diana as a vehicle through which to press their demands for constitutional reform. A fabulously rich layer has emerged over the last two decades who believe it is they who should determine the political life of the nation and not the ossified establishment that the monarchy epitomises. Diana allied herself with these layers in the hope this would enable her son William, rather than Charles, to become the next King.

In the immediate aftermath of her death, it appeared that these layers had gained the upper hand. The Labour government itself was promising 'radical reforms' of the monarchy. Newspapers voiced fears that the Queen would be booed at Diana's funeral. Earl Spencer, Diana's brother, used his oration to threaten the Royal Family with the watchful eye of her 'blood family' and was warmly applauded by the crowds waiting outside. Mohamed Al-Fayed, the father of Diana's playboy lover, was emboldened to speak of a conspiracy by 'shadowy forces'--presumably gathered around the monarchy--to stop his son from marrying the mother of the future King of England.

How do things stand today? Glorifying these sordid conflicts, and even encouraging workers to identify with one or other of the protagonists, has allowed the ruling

class to conduct their internal feud without undue interference.

Those taken in by Diana's 'caring persona' and 'common touch' have proven equally gullible when the same claim is made of the Royals. The Queen has since appointed a public relations adviser and has been photographed chatting in a pub and laughing with a pink-haired pop singer. Meanwhile, the press has presented Charles as the dutiful father, who forfeited his true love for the sake of the nation. According to recent polls, public backing for the monarchy has climbed back over the past year and Charles's popularity has increased.

Blair will spend the anniversary of Diana's death in Balmoral with the Queen. He has announced his unspecified reforms will be put on hold. Earl Spencer has been slapped down by media reports of his own messy divorce case, in which he was accused of being an adulterous and cruel drunk, who had driven his own wife to bulimia. Al-Fayed's 12-year sponsorship of the Windsor Horse Show has been terminated and Harrods, which he owns, is to lose its Royal warrants. Some of the press have charged him with responsibility for Diana's death because his hotel, the Ritz, employed a drunken chauffeur.

Even at its height, many refused to be swept along by the media-mania surrounding Diana's death. Viewer protest forced BBC 2 to return to normal programming schedules within a week of the crash. A survey by the British Film Institute has found that 50 percent of respondents were not 'profoundly affected' by Diana's death. Many of those interviewed this week said they now believed Britain passed through a bizarre period of collective madness last September. In the cold light of day, it is to be hoped that this will be the starting point for a more serious questioning of how this state of affairs could ever have developed.



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