

The Queen Mother's funeral and the campaign to save the British monarchy

Julie Hyland
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It has been said that no country does pomp and ceremony quite like Britain, and all the stops were certainly pulled out for the Queen Mother's funeral on April 9.

From the time of her death, aged 101 years, on March 30 to the final ceremony, no expense or effort was spared. Tens of thousands lined London's streets for the funeral, which was attended by 35 members of the British royal family and the monarchs of Spain, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece and Romania. The ranks of assembled dignitaries—which included UN Secretary Kofi Annan and US First Lady Laura Bush—listened in silence as the Queen Mother's list of official titles was read out—Lady of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, Lady of the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle, Lady of the Imperial Order of the Crown of India, etc. It hardly mattered that much of this made little sense to the majority of those watching. Above all, the titles are meant to signify imperial tradition and continuity, hence Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon's final accolade—Mother of Her Most Excellent Majesty Elizabeth The Second, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of her other Realms and Territories, Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith, Sovereign of the Most Noble Order of the Garter.

The funeral was the culmination of a carefully choreographed 10-day programme, in which the nation was force fed a constant diet of royal grandeur and militarism—canons, carriages, archers, trumpeters, bagpipes, royal beefeaters and all manner of archaic, ridiculous and generally concocted traditions. On at least two occasions, the Queen Mother's coffin had been drawn through the streets of London draped in the royal standard with the diamond-studded royal crown perched on top. In a mawkish 20-minute ceremony the evening before the funeral, the Queen Mother's four grandsons stood solemnly at either corner of the catafalque as it lay in state at Westminster Hall while a queue of tourists and royal watchers filed past to gawp.

There was something frankly disgusting about the wealth and splendour on display. Having proclaimed the end of the welfare state some two decades ago, the British ruling class has created a country characterised by vast social inequalities. The ceremony took place in the capital city of the world's fourth richest economy, where billions are traded every day. But in contrast the British working class is amongst the poorest in Western Europe—despite working the longest hours. More than one-third of all children are born into poverty. Many will leave school with

little or no meaningful qualifications, where they will swell the ranks of the more than six million adults already classified as functionally illiterate. How many teachers, nurses, or other vital services could have been brought with the money frittered away in this one royal event?

Ending the so-called “something for nothing” society has not applied to the ruling elite, however. The Labour government's pledge of “radical” constitutional reform has been a largely cosmetic exercise that has left hereditary privilege intact. Not for nothing did the *Mirror* feel bold enough to editorialise on the Queen Mother: “Yes, she was rich and privileged. Yes, she had palaces and servants. Yes, she had a great life at our expense. But she was more than that.”

The extended and lavish nature of the funeral-cum-celebration was not dictated by any public demand. Even amongst committed royalists, the Queen Mother's death could hardly be considered “tragic”. Not only had this extremely wealthy woman lived to almost 102 years old, the last years of her life had been relatively free from major illness or disease. Indeed, the death certificate recorded that she had died of “extreme old age”. What was mounted was more akin to a sustained marketing and public relations campaign on behalf of the institution of the monarchy. Globalisation and the processes associated with it—especially those of sharp social differentiation—have made it increasingly difficult for the powers that be to justify the survival of this feudal relic into the 21st century. Indeed, at the time of Princess Diana's death in August 1997, the monarchy had begun to feel its time might really be up.

With the end of the century approaching, the Princess's death had been used by sections of the bourgeoisie to press for what they insisted was a more meritocratic set up. Tony Blair and his New Labour government was chosen as the political representative of a fabulously wealthy layer which had made its money during the speculative boom of the 1980s, and which saw his calls for “modernisation” as a vehicle through which the aristocratic old guard of the British establishment could be pushed aside and their own political muscle made commensurate with their new-found economic clout. They demanded at least the reform and scaling down of the monarchy, if not the move to a republic. This met up with the powerful but politically undefined feelings of social discontent amongst broader layers of the population, which felt little sympathy any more for the House of Windsor.

Amidst talk that the royal family would be booed at Diana's

funeral, there was such concern that a wave of republicanism might sweep the nation, out of all control, that the Queen Mother had reportedly queried of the crowds on the day of Diana's funeral, "What would they do if I keeled over now?" It was a visibly shaken Queen Elizabeth that appeared on television to tell of her upset on the death of her estranged daughter-in-law. The Blair government and its supporters were afraid that anything that undermined the monarchy as the ultimate symbol of inherited privilege might in the end call into question the entire system of class privilege. The claim that Britain was supposedly a meritocracy because Rupert Murdoch was a self-made man could hardly compensate for the loss of such a powerful symbol of traditional social structures based on deference to the British state and its supposedly natural rulers.

And so, ruling circles, their government and the media—having shown who was the real power in the land—set out to restore the monarchy's public standing. This has proved to be a difficult task. This year is the occasion of the Queen's Golden Jubilee, but there were fears that the lack of public support for the event could produce a major humiliation with serious political repercussions. In contrast to the thousands of street parties held during the Silver Jubilee in 1977, local authorities were reporting bookings of just five or ten. Even when the booking deadline was extended, the response remained desultory. In the end, the Queen announced that she would throw her own party in the grounds of the palace for which people could win tickets—a list of popular bands and musicians hopefully ensuring a respectable turnout.

The funeral of Princess Margaret, the Queen's sister, last month was also a non-event. No one quite knew how to summon up public sympathy for a pampered and spoilt woman, renowned only for her drinking and partying, and so it was all played low-key.

In the days following the Queen Mother's death, the anticipated crowds did not turn out. Reporters rushed out to the London parks to find the crowds in mourning, usually only turning up one man and his dog. Newspapers showed rows of queue barriers, set up for people to pay their last respects, virtually empty. The crowds at Buckingham Palace were reportedly "thin, consisting chiefly of tourists.... Books of condolence were opened, but the queues to sign them were brisk to non-existent." The BBC was attacked for showing disrespect—its newscaster having worn a purple, rather than a black tie when announcing the death. Its real crime was its inability to pretend that there was anything less than mild interest in the royal death.

Media, politicians and royal family alike mounted a concerted campaign to shift the public response. The Windsors went out of their way to prove that they had learned their lessons from Diana's death, and were prepared to "modernise"—Princess Anne in trousers for the funeral procession, flowers from the Queen to her mother, signed simply "Lilibet", Prince Charles perpetually, and publicly, on the verge of tears, in contrast to his stony face during the period of official mourning for the wife he detested, Diana.

The celebration of a "grand old lady's" life became a vehicle for celebrating *Great Britain*, with an emphasis on tradition and continuity. What better way to mark the advent of the "new imperialism" recently proclaimed by the Blair government and already being marked out in the Middle East and Africa, than with

a display of the pomp and ceremony of the old empire. One can only imagine Blair's delight on returning from his tête-à-tête with US President Bush, and their discussions on bombing Iraq, to such a display of imperial grandeur and naked militarism on the streets of London.

Monarchists expressed their hope that the Queen Mother's death has helped reinvigorate the monarchy just as in life she had saved the royal family during its "darkest hour"—an oblique reference to 1936 when King Edward VIII was forced to abdicate, not because of his love for an American divorcee but due to his very public pro-Nazi sympathies. Her husband, Albert, the Duke of York, was crowned as George VI on May 12, 1937, to lend an illusion of stability and continuity by making a direct association with the reign of his father, George V. Having preserved the monarchy once, her death might just save it again, they opined. A little nip and tuck here, and the status quo could be preserved—ensuring both stability and change.

Britain's media has pronounced itself satisfied with their campaign in this regard. The *Mirror* editorialised, "There has never been such respect and affection for the Royal Family. What the Monarchy gives Britain is stability, an increasingly important quality in an era of uncertainty. Yesterday we looked at Tony Blair and the other politicians and did not know what the future will bring for them. Yet when we looked at that small row of seats beside the coffin, we say the future of the Monarchy stretching ahead for close on a century. Elizabeth, Charles and William. Our Queen and our next two Kings."

To pin so much on such a discredited institution—particularly on such deeply flawed personalities as Charles and William—is a telling indication of political disorientation, even desperation. The media and the establishment circles it serves will find to its cost that it is one thing to stage-manage a funeral and quite another to build a viable base of social and political support for an outmoded system of rule. In the final analysis, all the pomp and ceremony, all the talk about "saving" the monarchy only underscores that it is precisely social and political support that is lacking.



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