Britain: The shattering of the Royal illusion

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"The use of the Queen, in a dignified capacity, is incalculable. Without her in England, the present English government would fail and pass away."

So wrote Walter Bagehot in his seminal work, *The English Constitution*, in 1867 on the role occupied by the monarch at the very apex of the state.

What then will be the political impact of the sordid revelations surrounding the royal family in the wake of the collapse of the trial of former butler, Paul Burrell?

Of dignity there is not a trace. Lurid stories have surfaced of the late Princess Diana's midnight trips to meet lovers dressed only in her fur and pearls, gay orgies on the royal yacht Britannia, kinky sex involving at least one royal and, more seriously, that Prince Charles covered up the homosexual rape of one of his staff by another.

This heady brew has been added to by charges of major constitutional significance—that the Queen intervened to collapse the Burrell trial in an attempt to cover up damaging disclosures by the former butler.. The monarch has placed herself above the law, the press and media have complained, abused royal privilege and must be made to "come clean" or cause irreparable damage to the House of Windsor.

In an attempt to stem the tide of damaging claims and counter-claims, Prince Charles announced last week that an inquiry would be held into the allegations of homosexual rape and of servants selling on unwanted royal gifts. Far from drawing a line under events, the internal inquiry by Sir Michael Peat, Charles's private secretary, has been denounced as a whitewash.

What is involved in the most damaging scandal to hit the royal family in decades?

Although its immediate source lies in the decision to charge Burrell with stealing items from his late employer, Princess Diana, the attempted prosecution is the outcome of an internecine dynastic conflict that has reached fever pitch.

Relations between Charles and Diana—and by extension the Windsors and the Spencers—were already poisoned before her death in a car accident in Paris in August 1997. In the run-up to their divorce, each had appeared separately on television to drum up public support for their respective cases.

The stakes were enormous. For Charles, questions over the constitutionality of a divorced king, much less the role of his former wife, threatened his succession to the throne. Diana, for her part, feared being stripped of royal patronage and cast adrift.

Determined this would not happen, Diana went for the jugular, telling the nation of her husband's emotional cruelty, his long-running affair with Camila Parker Bowles, and her own battle with bulimia and depression. In a calculated blow, Diana went on to suggest Charles was not fit to be king and that her son, Prince William, should carry on the succession after Queen Elizabeth II's death. As for herself, she wanted only to be the "Queen of hearts".

A bitter public feud ensued, in which Charles and Diana utilised their contacts in the media to settle scores, the latter provocatively counterposing her human and "down to earth" style to the remoteness of the Windsors.

Having built the princess up to mega-celebrity status as part of efforts to restore popular support to the monarchy, the Windsors were in no position to simply push her aside. Moreover, Diana found many willing to provide her with a platform to press her case. In the preceding years, globalisation and financial speculation had changed the balance of economic and social forces within Britain dramatically. Whilst the bottom half of the social spectrum was beset by economic insecurity, at the top of society a new fabulously wealthy layer had emerged which regarded the status quo, with its tradition of aristocratic privilege based on the hereditary principle, almost as a personal affront and a barrier to their own dominance.

The newly wealthy were often richer by far than their supposed betters and wanted this recognised. Some went so far as to flirt with the idea of republicanism, but a full frontal attack on the Windsors and hereditary privilege presented the danger of inflaming deeper feelings of class injustice amongst working people. Far better to go for Diana's option, and choose a different monarch.

A Machiavelian struggle for political influence began, with sections of the ruling class and the media stoking up the conflict between the Windsors and the Spencers to strengthen their own political standing. This had the advantage, they believed, of preventing any active political involvement by the majority of the population. But things almost got out of hand following Diana's death, when politically disoriented layers were encouraged to express their anger at her apparent tormentors to the point where the Queen feared to come out of her palace. Famously Diana's brother, Earl Spencer, used his funeral eulogy and his invocation of the Spencer "blood family" looking over the young princes to put the Windsors on notice.

For several days, it looked as if the royal house might not survive. It fell to newly elected Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair to avert a full-blown constitutional crisis. He seized on the princess's death to establish his own political prestige, as someone receptive to the sentiments represented by the cult of Diana—crowning her the "People's Princess"—but who could be relied upon as a bulwark against fundamental constitutional change.

Blair and the layers for which he spoke warned the monarchy that it must "modernise or die" and the Queen and Charles, desperate to secure the throne, did their best to oblige. For a while it appeared that a painful reconciliation had been established. The royal family adopted a more "touchy-feely" approach, hiring press officers to build up support for Charles and to rehabilitate his mistress in order to prepare the way for marriage after a suitable period of mourning.

Whilst Blair cut away many of the hereditary seats in the House of Lords, the principle remained intact. Above all, every effort was made to restore the public standing of the monarchy as an institution, and by virtue of this, the authority of the state itself. When it became apparent that the Queen's Golden Jubilee was attracting little support, the media went into overdrive to whip up public enthusiasm while all manner of former "anti-monarchists" proclaimed the error of their ways.

As the last firework faded in the sky over Buckingham Palace, it appeared that a constitutional crisis had been averted at the cost of a few cosmetic changes. Peace and stability reigned supreme once more.

Except, of course, it didn't. The feuding between the Windsors and the

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Spencers, driven underground, became more putrid. Now it has erupted into the open once again, to be played out in salacious detail before a bemused public.

It appears that the Burrell trial resulted from a complaint to the police by Lady Sarah McCorquodale, Diana's elder sister, that the former butler had stolen items from his former employer. A police search of Burrell's home on January 18, 2001 turned up some 300 items belonging to Diana, which Burrell claimed to be safeguarding (from her family). He was arrested, questioned and released on bail pending further enquiries.

On August 3, 2001, a summit was held at Highgrove, Prince Charles's Gloucestershire estate, where he and his legal advisers were informed by police that they had evidence that Burrell was selling on Princess Diana's possessions. No such evidence was presented at trial, where police admitted giving "mistaken information" to the royals. Sources close to Charles claim he went along with the trial because the alternative was to become involved in a confrontation with the Spencers, who were pressing the action.

Burrell was committed for trial, but as it got under way earlier this month (delayed so as not to overshadow the Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations), it became clear police had been unable to recover the real object of their search—a wooden box and its contents. In court, Lady McCorquodale testified that she and Burrell had found the box following Diana's death. It contained a ring from Diana's lover James Hewitt, abusive letters from Prince Philip and a "tape by an employee". Burrell had taken the box and the tape "for safekeeping", Lady McCorquodale continued, but when she recovered the box later on its contents were missing.

It was just as Burrell was due to take the witness stand, for what his defence lawyer promised would be a "long, detailed and interesting" testimony, that the Queen suddenly recalled a conversation in which the butler had informed her he was taking certain items for "safekeeping". Having relayed the Queen's recollection, via Prince Charles, to the police, the trial collapsed. A jubilant Burrell emerged from court to announce "The Queen came through for me. I'm thrilled."

If the Queen's intervention was aimed at preventing information damaging to the monarchy from coming to light, it backfired spectacularly. In the midst of a furious bidding war between the major tabloids for Burrell's story, details of the missing tape emerged. It contained a secret recording Diana had made with George Smith, a former royal footman, who had accused a member of Charles palace staff of brutally raping him.

Why did Diana go to such lengths to record and then conceal the tape? Was it to strengthen her hand against Charles in any further negotiations over her status? Or did she regard it as some form of personal protection for herself? Burrell has claimed that the Queen warned him after Diana's death of "forces at work of which we have no knowledge".

Whether this statement is true or not, that Burrell can make such a claim speaks volumes on how poisonous things have become in ruling circles. Coming on top of the claims by Harrods owner Mohammed Al Fayed that Diana and her final lover, his son Dodi, were assassinated, it reinforces the public perception of a monarchy surrounded by sleaze, political intrigue and dark deeds in the dead of night.

Once again Blair has been forced to come forward to vouchsafe for the monarchy, insisting that the royals have no case to answer and that there is no reason to contemplate constitutional change.

Just how successful this latest rescue attempt will be is another matter. Public support for the monarchy has plunged to an historic low and Blair's standing is not what it was in 1997, particularly given his government's proven disregard for basic democratic rights. Moreover serious allegations have been made, including brutality against certain individuals and abuses of royal privilege.

Of course scandals are not without historical precedent. The emphasis on the "dignified" element of the monarchy in Bagehot's definition was always intended for public consumption. Royals could do what they liked, so long as it was kept quiet, but discretion was vital in order to preserve a hierarchical social structure, based on the myth that there are those whose innate nobility means they are born to rule and, therefore, those who are merely born to serve. Bagehot cautioned explicitly against doing anything that would undermine this essential class set-up. Otherwise, "A political combination of the lower classes ... is an evil of the first magnitude.... So long as they are not taught to act together there is a chance of this being averted, and it can only be averted by the greater wisdom and foresight in the higher classes."

Today, however, the "higher classes" can no longer agree amongst themselves, much less demonstrate their greater wisdom before the lower orders. As the *Guardian* pointed out on the Burrell trial, November 9, 2002, "Every simmering feud in and around the royal family for the past two generations has burst into noxious life this week. The Charles loyalists have slugged it out with the Diana loyalists. The Windsors have rolled in the mud with the Spencers. Buckingham Palace has traded toxic darts with St. James's Palace..... And so, painfully, poisonously, it goes on."

As is so often the case, Blair thought he could resolve conflicts through careful media manipulation of public opinion. He was wrong, for ultimately their source lies not only in matters of dynastic succession that can not be resolved amicably, in the interests of a "greater good".. It is no accident that the crisis surrounding the monarchy finds its echoes in the abject failure of the Conservative Party to reinvigorate itself as a political force, the growing unpopularity of New Labour and disaffection with official politics as a whole.

The cumulative result of the far-reaching economic and social changes that have taken place over the past two decades has been to remove the ground from underneath even the most revered national institutions. The Blair government's pro-big business agenda has further alienated working people from the political superstructure and polarised society even more sharply along class lines.

Consequently, every issue pertaining to Britain's future course of development is fought out—in ways usually designed to conceal rather than clarify the real dispute—amongst narrow social layers whose interests are so diverse and antagonistic that it is impossible to speak of a unified ruling class. In the absence of any genuine democratic outlet for expressing the popular will, a political pressure cooker is created that threatens to explode when the heat becomes too great.

The media fixes on the most sensational sexual aspects of the Burrell scandal in order to deaden popular consciousness and divert attention from what is fundamental. But the trial and its aftermath has nevertheless thrown the thoroughly undemocratic nature of Britain's monarchy into sharp relief. As Bagehot indicated, moreover, it is not only the monarchy that is imperilled should its authority be so dramatically undermined. To the extent that the Crown continues to represent the pinnacle of the constitutional and social order in Britain, its discrediting has a profoundly destabilising effect that will deepen the alienation of the broad mass of working people from the institutions of bourgeois rule.

There is no cause for political complacency, however. The erosion of all the institutions through which some form of popular control was exerted over the ruling elite, the narrow base of official politics, pose grave dangers to the democratic rights of the working class. The type of skullduggery exposed in the palace is the expression of a diseased social order. It should not be seen as the exception, but the rule. There is no reason to believe that the rest of Britain's ruling elite will prove any less willing than the Windsors and the Spencers to employ whatever means are deemed necessary in order to preserve their own privileged existence.

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