

The spectre of Diana returns to haunt Britain's royals

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Six years after her death in a car accident in August 1997, the cult of Princess Diana, once so assiduously built up by the royal family in its efforts to re-legitimise hereditary privilege, continues to plague the British monarchy and the political establishment alike.

A bitter row has broken out between the royal family and former butler Paul Burrell over the latter's publication of his book, *A Royal Duty*, which includes excerpts from the princess's personal correspondence.

Serialized by the *Daily Mirror*, the book contains insights into Diana and Prince Charles's marital breakdown, including claims that Prince Phillip told the princess he could not understand why his son would choose his mistress Camila Parker Bowles over her, and that Diana coded her numerous lovers as though they were race dogs.

Most sensationally, in one letter, published by the newspaper on Monday, October 20, Diana warned of a plot to kill her in a car crash just 10 months before her death.

In the letter to Burrell, Diana claimed that “[name omitted] is planning ‘an accident’ in my car, brake failure and serious head injury in order to make the path clear for Charles to marry.”

Burrell says that Diana had asked him to keep her letter as an insurance policy “just in case.” He claims that he would never have written his book if the royals had defended him from charges, instigated by Diana's family, the Spencers, that he had stolen items from the princess following her death. Burrell went on trial last year as the Spencers sought to recover items that they felt could be used to strengthen their position against the Windsors. The Spencers and Windsors had been feuding since the couple's divorce, when Diana had made clear that she believed the crown should skip Charles in favour of her eldest son William.

The family was said to be particularly keen to recover the so-called “crown jewels,” a box containing letters and a tape recorded by Diana in 1996, in which former valet George Smith claimed he had been raped by a royal aide.

As the trial unfolded, and Burrell was about to enter the witness box, however, the Queen interceded, having suddenly recalled a conversation with the butler in which she agreed he could keep hold of some of Diana's items for safekeeping. The trial collapsed, but Burrell complained that the damage had been done. “Just one call would have stopped it [the trial],” Burrell said recently.

Intencine feuding, treachery, jealousy and betrayal—such things are hardly new to Britain's royals. Nor are allegations of dark deeds in the dead of night.

Conspiracy theories have abounded over Diana's death for years, led most publicly by Dodi's father, Harrods owner Mohamed al Fayed, who has claimed that Diana and his son were murdered by the

British secret service. Diana was pregnant by Dodi, al Fayed claimed, and the establishment was desperate to prevent the mother of the future King of England marrying a Muslim.

What is extraordinary is that his claims are now so widely accepted that according to opinion polls, an overwhelming majority of the British population, in some instances 90 percent, believe Diana was murdered.

To no small degree, this testifies to the public's enduring memory of the scale of the crisis brought about by the divorce between Charles and Diana, which at the time threatened the very survival of the royal family, and the belief that someone decided she should be silenced.

After marrying Charles in 1981, Diana was fashioned as an instrument for reviving dwindling public affection for the royal family, which had come to be viewed with hostility as a symbol of unearned privilege by many working people and as irrelevant by some of Thatcherism's main beneficiaries amongst the nouveau riche.

She was packaged up for the “yuppies” as being “one of us”—a perfect role model for the aspiring middle classes despite her impeccable aristocratic lineage. And she later became a clothes horse for fashion designers and a glamorous symbol of the world of big money, elaborate parties and conspicuous consumption associated with the super-rich layers with whom she mixed. The message was simple—here was a Hollywood-style superstar to be admired by all in order to foster a more general worship of wealth and a deference to those who possess it.

But the royal family's greatest asset was to become its worst liability as Diana's marriage to Charles collapsed and her personal grievances and aspirations became the focus of a major political row between contending sections of the ruling elite.

A fabulously rich layer had emerged over the previous two decades whose wealth was associated with the development of globalisation. Writing in the *Sunday Times* on January 19, 2003, Robert Watts gave an example of this process and its outcome. Whereas in 1963, the chairmanships of companies in the FT30, the stock market index, had a certain homogeneity—most were long-established family names associated with the glory days of the British Empire and educated at Eton and other top-drawer public schools—from 1983 onwards, a dramatic change took place. Today, none of the current chairmen were educated at Eton, none are from aristocratic or military backgrounds, and a few aren't even British! Despite their relatively lowly beginnings, however, all have even greater power than their predecessors. Watts points out that “those who led the FT30 boards of 40 years ago rarely had more than one senior directorship. In 2003 multi-directorships are fairly common.”

Although this new layer had eclipsed the old elite in certain respects,

they were nevertheless prevented from exercising their full political clout by constitutional imperatives, one of the cornerstones of which is the hereditary principle. They believed that they, rather than the tax-funded House of Windsor, should determine political life in Britain. Some even hinted at support for the abolition of the monarchy and a republican constitution, but they understood that such a full-frontal attack on hereditary privilege might be misunderstood by the masses and end up threatening their own wealth and power.

Instead, they backed Diana's tirade against the Windsors, calculating that it would serve to put the old school firmly in its place, while the princess and her son would be pliable instruments answerable to their express demands.

Even this political manoeuvre almost backfired. After Diana's death, the tensions whipped up against the royals became explosive. The mood amongst certain layers was hysterical, and this was exploited by Earl Spencer, Diana's brother, to all-but stake his family's claim to the throne in his funeral address.

It was left to the newly elected Labour government and Prime Minister Tony Blair to avert a full-blown crisis of rule. He rescued the Windsors from demands for major constitutional change, but only at a price. They were to heed the demands of their critics and take on the trappings of public concern and the "common touch" supposedly embodied in Diana. And above all this "New Monarchy" must know its place and defer to the real movers-and-shakers for whom "New Labour" acted as the political spokesman.

In return, 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.

But the dispute was only temporarily calmed and has left a lasting legacy of public mistrust that simply refuses to go away, focused on the belief that Diana was murdered.

Public suspicion has also been fuelled by the fact that so little has been done to established just how Diana died. A 6,000-page French investigative report into the crash has never been published, and no charges have been brought against any of the journalists arrested after the crash, despite many claiming that it was their pursuit that had caused the accident. There has still been no British inquest into Diana's death, with authorities claiming that a hearing has been delayed because of legal complications in France. In August, it was finally announced that an inquest would be held, but no date has been set.

Such an inquest would have to address incongruities in the official version of events, such as claims that a postmortem found the driver's blood to contain large levels of carbon monoxide; that the tunnel's cameras were turned to the wall (leaving no video evidence of the crash); and that the ambulance carrying Diana drove past two hospitals en route for aid.

There is nothing definitive in any of the material related by Burrell to back up claims that Diana was assassinated. Her letter is merely suggestive and is in tune with a mass of evidence that Diana had become increasingly paranoid following her divorce. Certainly, Diana's own family has rejected suggestions that her death was anything other than a tragic accident. Yet, suspicions still linger and none of the actors in the sordid drama appear capable of calling things to a halt.

At one time, it was unlikely that some one like Burrell would have wanted to dish the dirt. Even should loyalties have lapsed, there would have been other means of keeping his silence. In the first place, there are numerous accounts of various retainers being "looked after"

handsomely to keep quiet. If all else failed, there was always fear. To go against the royal family was to go up against the entire establishment, and to be ruined.

Not so today. In the first case, hush money payments can be dwarfed by the amounts that former employees can gain elsewhere. Burrell stands to make millions from his book, and newspapers and television stations have been queuing up to pay for any of his salacious tidbits.

More fundamentally, the ruling class itself remains as fragmented as it was at the time of Charles and Diana's divorce. The intractable character of these divisions has provided a platform for Burrell to parade his wares.

It is not only the monarchy, but the entire establishment that finds the old familiar ground torn from under it. In 1997, Blair had presented himself as the great "healer" and seized upon Diana's death to press the case. In hailing her as the "people's princess" and his New Labour government as the "people's party," Blair sought to build an image of a "Cool Britannia," far removed from the class-ridden hierarchical structure of the past.

Like everything else with New Labour, however, this was just repackaging. The monarchy in Britain is not simply the leftovers of some archaic past. It is a potent symbol through which the ruling class seeks to legitimise its class power. As the political representative of a financial oligarchy, Blair had no intention of doing anything that would undermine a constitutional setup rooted in the oppression and exploitation of the broad majority of the population in the interests of a privileged elite.

Even those constitutional reforms Labour enacted supposedly to "democratise" the traditional institutions—such as reform of the House of Lords—have led only to the replacement of various aristocrats by handpicked cronies, usually from big business.

Even so, the net result has been a series of half-measures that far from ameliorating tensions within ruling circles, have rendered them more explosive.

On every major issue—from Britain's role in the US-led war against Iraq, to its relations with the European Union and the fate of Northern Ireland—the slug fest between rival sections of the bourgeoisie has continued and threatens to destabilise the entire state apparatus.

At the same time, New Labour has proven incapable of overcoming the class divisions within society. Blair's big-business agenda has meant that social inequality has grown under his government, deepening the schism between working people and the traditional mechanisms of rule. Skepticism towards the official version of Diana's death is only the latest manifestation of the widespread cynicism towards, and alienation from, the powers that be.



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