

British royal wedding: from fairy tale to fiasco

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It was the most ordinary of events. A couple in late middle-age went into the local town hall on a bright spring day with the grown-up children of their first marriages and other family members in attendance and emerged as man and wife. The groom's mother, reflecting the outlook of an earlier generation, avoided the civil ceremony, but attended the subsequent church blessing and reception. Even the bride's ex-husband put in an appearance and raised a glass to the newlyweds.

Similar scenes were being played out in other towns on Saturday April 9, since 70 percent of first marriages end in divorce. Yet this most ordinary of social events was at the same time the most extraordinary, because the groom was Prince Charles, heir to throne of the United Kingdom and prospective head of the Church of England.

What would otherwise have been a marriage like dozens of others had an inherent political significance and had been fraught with difficulties that turned the preparations into a farce, as the press made invidious comparisons between the prince's previous wife, Princess Diana, and his long-time mistress, Mrs. Camilla Parker-Bowles. In the weeks before the wedding, the prince's adulterous relationship and the popularity of the late Princess of Wales seemed to be the major impediment to public acceptance of Charles' second marriage.

In the event, the royal family and government overestimated the Diana-effect, but seriously underestimated the other dangers to which the monarchy was exposed. The spectre of Diana is very much diminished. Her fountain, which opened to a fanfare of publicity last year, had to be closed after paddlers slipped, and is now reduced to a muddy eyesore. The museum dedicated to her at Althorp is said to be losing money after visitor numbers failed to reach predicted levels. The cult of celebrity that surrounded the late princess had faded enough to ensure that there was no outpouring of hostility to the royal couple, as had been feared.

Nonetheless, the business of organising royal weddings has gone from fairy tale to fiasco in just over 20 years. Initially, Charles and Camilla had planned to marry in a civil ceremony at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle. This was dropped when it was realised that if the royal chapel was licensed for civil marriages, the general public could legally book their weddings in this sanctuary of kings. The alternative was for the marriage to be held in Windsor Guildhall like any other civil ceremony.

It was a decision that raised further controversy when the queen, who has never attended a civil wedding ceremony, let it be known that she would not be there. This immediately provoked speculation that she still disapproved of Camilla, whom she is said to have called "that wicked woman."

For weeks the tabloid press was full of leaks from "sources close to the queen" and "friends of Charles and Camilla," as the ruling elite edged closer to an event that might prove to be either a disaster or a reasonably satisfactory conclusion to a dangerous liaison. The collective sigh of relief as the couple drove out of Windsor in a car festooned with balloons and the words "Prince" and "Duchess" daubed on the windscreen was almost audible. A testing day for the institution of the monarchy had passed off

with barely a hitch.

Her Majesty's reported levity at the reception may have owed more to relief than maternal emotion. In her toast to the happy couple, she is said to have compared the difficulties the wedding encountered to the notoriously difficult fences in the Grand National horse race, being run that afternoon. Charles and Camilla were at last safe in the winner's enclosure. That may be less true than she thinks.

Part of the success of the day can be put down to the very indifference with which it was met. When the queen announced the name of the Grand National winner, even before she congratulated the newlyweds, a cheer went up among the assembled wedding guests, and that just about sums up the public mood. The wedding of two characters in the long-running soap "Coronation Street" the previous day caused a power surge on the national grid. No such national enthusiasm was monitored for the royal wedding. Monarchy can survive many things, but indifference is not one of them.

If the anxiety about Diana was misplaced, the tensions that the wedding preparations produced were very real. In the planning of Charles and Camilla's wedding the royal family were engaged in a delicate engineering operation that might undermine the foundations of a key bourgeois institution. No blueprints were available that would predict whether the magic of majesty could be perpetuated by a royal wedding that lacked yards of silk, had no page boys, in which no one wore a diamond tiara or rode in a horse-drawn carriage, and in which the household cavalry was in attendance only in the person of a cuckolded brigadier—Camilla's former husband.

Just how novel the situation was is demonstrated by the fact that there were no less than eleven objections to be considered by the registrar-general before the marriage licence was granted, and a special office was set up in Windsor to receive objections on the day. Legal objections centred on the Marriages Act of 1949, which updated the 1836 Marriage Act under which civil marriages were first allowed.

In 1836 it was specifically stated that the provisions of the Act did not apply to royal marriages. The 1949 Act was less specific, but three previous royals were told that the Act did not permit them to marry in a civil ceremony—most famously Princess Margaret, the present queen's late sister. The queen's cousin, Prince Michael of Kent, married in a civil ceremony in Vienna, but no member of the royal family has ever contracted a civil marriage in Britain.

On this occasion, the lord chancellor, Lord Falconer, overturned all precedent and declared that it was legal for Charles to marry in a civil ceremony under the 1949 Marriage Act. When this was challenged by leading constitutional lawyers, family law experts and former Attorney General Sir Nicholas Lyell, Falconer appealed to the recently enacted Human Rights Act which guarantees all British citizens the right to a family life.

Ironically, it is a law that Charles, in a letter to the previous lord chancellor, denounced as "a threat to sane, civilised and ordered

existence,” and which the government itself has set aside when the rights of asylum seekers and terror suspects were concerned.

It was a messy solution to a problem that demanded some finesse, but it is typical of the cavalier way in which the Blair government has treated all aspects of the constitution. Howard Brooks-Baker of *Burke's Peerage* condemned the government's handling of the marriage. “It is a definite humiliation, it is an outrage,” he said, “This has got to stop, otherwise they will ruin the whole fabric of the monarchy.”

The problem of what is permitted to members of the royal family is one of long standing. Walter Bagehot, who is often cited as an authority on the British monarchy, thought that some “good lawyer” ought to write a book detailing exactly what a monarch could and could not do. Over a century later, no such comprehensive manual exists. Precedent is the great guide, but under conditions of rapid social change, it is a poor one.

In the post-war period, three royals—Princess Margaret, the Earl of Harewood and Prince Michael of Kent—have been told they could not marry divorced people. The House of Windsor has painted itself into a corner on the question of divorce, having established a precedent that may destabilise the monarchy if they attempt to move with the times. Negotiating this socio-political minefield makes the obstacles of the Grand National look easy.

Before the Second World War, divorce was unusual in the UK and often led to social ostracism in upper-class circles. The social upheavals concomitant on the war and the class struggles that followed it tended to undermine such social conventions. Divorce became easier, cheaper and more socially acceptable.

The royal family was not free to embrace this social change, because hanging over the post-war cases was the dominating instance of Edward VIII and Mrs. Simpson. The present queen was 10 years old when the abdication took place, and has lived with its consequences for the rest of her life.

The British establishment does not readily admit that there was any other reason for Edward VIII's abdication than Wallis Simpson's divorced status. Even in 2003, when FBI files were released under the Freedom of Information Act that detailed Mrs. Simpson's links with leading Nazis, the BBC circumspectly added quotation marks to the suggestion that she had a Nazi past.

Having created the myth that it was this much-married lady's moral character rather than her fascist sympathies that were unacceptable, the British political elite created a stumbling block for every other royal marriage. Their family relations have become ossified in a past period because the family is part of the machinery of state.

There was nothing accidental about the abdication. It emerged from the great power rivalries of the twentieth century and the class conflicts within Britain, which would have made it highly dangerous for the royal family to admit their political sympathies. But it has left the heir to the throne in the peculiar position that, while any of his subjects over the age of 18 has the right to marry between the hours of 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. in the church that serves the parish in which he lives, he does not.

In deciding to take a stand on divorce rather than admit the real political impediments to Edward VIII's marriage, the British political elite fed the most conservative elements in society, including the Church, and produced a situation in which Charles may become head of the same institution that refused to re-marry him.

“Above all things our royalty is to be revered and if you begin to poke about it you cannot reverence it,” as Bagehot so perceptively noted.

Prime Minister Tony Blair thinks nothing of “poking about” with any aspect of the constitution, including the monarchy. But in giving the go-ahead for a civil wedding, his government has further destabilised an institution that is already suffering strain from the rapidly changing social and political conditions of the time. This careless handling has exposed the heir to the throne to ridicule and has created a situation in which his

marriage might be challenged in the future.

Lawyers warned that it would be safer to pass legislation which put the matter beyond dispute, but the government dismissed any such idea. As always, it was working on the basis of expediency. Whatever serves the political needs of the moment will do, irrespective of the long-term consequences. The marriage of Charles and Camilla is unlikely to produce any offspring, but should the princes William or Harry need to remarry, the legal botch could put the legitimacy of an heir to the throne in jeopardy.

With hereditary monarchy, even a constitutional one, the character of a king, his wife, his mistresses and his courtiers can never be discounted as a factor in the political equation. The present queen is often credited with being the model of a constitutional sovereign and praised for having guided the monarchy through a period of great difficulties, thus ensuring its survival. But in its long history, the British monarchy has survived ignorant, incompetent, debauched and mad sovereigns as well as many ambitious mistresses.

Bagehot was well aware that a monarch must necessarily be a man “of inferior ability,” but was convinced that the constitutional system was structured to allow for that inevitability. Ever the Darwinian, he felt the political struggle for survival was bound to produce ministers that were “among the ablest men of their time,” since they must have passed through a “magnificent training” before rising to power. A minister had “to gain a seat in parliament; to gain the ear of parliament; to gain the confidence of parliament; to gain the confidence of his colleagues. “No one,” in Bagehot's view, “can achieve these—no one, still more, can both achieve them and retain them—without a singular ability, nicely trained in the varied detail of life.”

Bagehot did not allow for Blair and his present government, or the decay of the parliamentary system that has allowed a man of such mediocre abilities to push through legislation that fundamentally curtails the rights of UK citizens. At the height of Britain's economic powers in the mid-nineteenth century, Bagehot could be confident about the monarchy because he was confident about parliamentary democracy.

The kind of monarch Bagehot feared most was “an active and meddling fool, who always acts when he should not, who never acts when he should, who warns his ministers against their judicious measures, who encourages them in their injudicious measures. It is easy to imagine that such a king should be the tool of others; that favourites should guide him; that mistresses should corrupt him.”

George III had forced his ministers to fight a war against the American colonies, which he had caused and they did not believe in, and was the essence of such a monarch for Bagehot. Charles, who regularly fires off memos to ministers and airs intemperate views, may be such another. He does not have American colonies to lose, but Charles is not offset by the capable ministers that Bagehot assumed would be produced by the British parliamentary system.

In the past, the relationship between the queen and Labour prime ministers was good. She is said to have relied particularly on Harold Wilson and James Callaghan. It was a relationship that was vital to the entire political system, because the monarch is the social apex of British society.

In the period of class compromise that followed the Second World War, it was possible, with sufficient diligence on the part of monarch, ministers and media, to convey the impression that the richest woman in the land shared her humblest subjects' outlook and tastes. Like them, she enjoyed settling down of an evening to watch “Coronation Street” and having a flutter on the Grand National. The fact that she owned a string of race horses could be politely overlooked.

As the division between rich and poor has grown wider, it has become far more difficult to maintain that comfortable fiction. The new super-rich resent the precedence accorded the monarchy, and see no reason to avoid

ostentatious displays of wealth that are recognised as politically dangerous by a woman who came to the throne when rationing was still in force.

The present government has not maintained the close and supportive relationship with the monarchy that previous Labour administrations had. Not only is Blair's wife, Cherie, reported to refuse to curtsy to the queen, but Blair himself is said to have cancelled audiences with little notice. Even his decision to attend the Pope's funeral when it clashed with the wedding of his future sovereign has been interpreted by some as a discourtesy.

These matters of protocol have a certain political weight in a monarchical constitution, and what seems so illusory judged in common sense, pragmatic terms plays a real role in maintaining the present class relations and form of rule. The monarchy seems to be an unnecessary historical excrescence, but it is woven into the complex tracery of connections between the church, the family and the state. It is not an institution with which a prime minister can afford to take risks.

While media interest has focused on the coupling of Charles and Camilla, it is the pairing of Charles and Tony that is most problematical. By any one's reckoning, re-marriage after divorce is a delicate subject for the British royal family. But two egotistical men, who are used to getting their own way, have blundered into an area of exquisite sensitivity, as each attempts to mould a national constitution to meet his own interests.

The royal wedding may have passed off safely in so far as it was a private contract between two individuals, but as an act of state, the whole event is indicative of a deep malaise within the British parliamentary system and points to the existing form of rule decaying from the top down.



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