Accepting the monarchy: The jubilee and conformity

Paul Bond, Julie Hyland
5 June 2012

At times of economic and social crisis, the British ruling class looks to the monarchy to provide a symbol of national unity. For this reason, the Diamond Jubilee festivities for Elizabeth Windsor, like last year's royal wedding, have highlighted the social and political conformity of many leading cultural figures.

Attendance at the queen's royal flotilla on the Thames was higher than for last year's wedding, but there can hardly be said to have been widespread enthusiasm nationally. Despite press reports trying to portray a country brimming with patriotic fever, they struggled to produce evidence of it. Street parties were relatively few in number and usually confined to the better off areas. Most people seem to have decided to take advantage of the enforced additional bank holiday and go away. Many will still lose out, as it is not included in statutory bank holiday pay entitlements.

At the time of the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977, the Sex Pistols anti-royal song "God Save the Queen" stormed to number one in the record charts, despite being banned by the BBC. If anything, antipathy to the royal family is more widespread today. But no trace of oppositional sentiment could be found at any level artistically on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee.

One of the most revealing events was an arts gala, to celebrate the occasion, at the Royal Academy. Alongside those long associated with the political establishment—Tom Stoppard, Ronald Harwood—were many who once gave the impression of being "anti-establishment". Some, like actor Robert Lindsay, are closely associated with the Labour Party. Others, like artist Tracey Emin and designer (Dame) Vivienne Westwood, have found their place some time ago in the highest echelons of society after an earlier appearance of being at odds with it.

Also present were artists who have at times expressed some form of social criticism. Potter Grayson Perry, for example, has offered limited observations of social conditions in a time of political crisis while film director Mike Leigh has described his films as "subversive" to the extent that they "tell the truth about things".

Playwright David Hare, who three years ago wrote a play about "How capitalism came to a grinding halt" in the banking crash of 2008, was not at the Royal Academy. But in an article in the *Guardian* he praised the monarchy as one of three enduring British institutions. "We are grateful", he wrote, "that there is one British citizen who is not at the mercy of market forces and shameless profiteering, nor of a government which lacks the philosophy, the intellectual equipment or the will to control them".

Comments such as these reveal the slender and timid character of the oppositional stance taken by many leading artistic figures. Hare expresses his conversion to the merits of the monarchy in terms of political despair, describing "the vestigial idealism which has recently settled on the Queen's shoulders" as having "God knows … few enough other places to go".

Westwood, who had agreed to repay a tax underpayment of £350,000 only three months before addressing anti-tax evasion campaigners at Occupy London last year, put it rather more bluntly.

"At one time I thought the Queen represented all the political hypocrisy of England", she said, but she now realised that the royal family are "above politics. I think they are a social cement and the job [the queen] does is incredible".

In other words, whatever critical noises you might make, when push comes to shove you take your stand for queen and country.

This obsequious response to the jubilee cannot be

© World Socialist Web Site

explained by personal foible or failings, but speaks to a broader phenomenon.

For many in Britain, social reality is one of brutal austerity dictated by the worst economic conditions since the 1930s. Conditions of rising unemployment, economic insecurity and poverty are replicated throughout the globe. There is no shortage of commentators drawing parallels between the period of the last breakdown of the capitalist profit system in the first part of the 20th century, and today.

Still there is no end to the rapacious demands of the financial oligarchy, who insist on even more bailouts for the banks and themselves while advocating ever greater penury for working people.

The ruling elite has made clear that it is using the royal anniversary to smother widespread disaffection at this state of affairs. Prime Minister David Cameron said, "As a country, I think we understand we are having difficult economic times but I don't think people see any difficulty in celebrating something as great as Her Majesty's contribution over 60 years at a time of economic difficulty."

The *Financial Times* editorialised, "At the Queen's coronation, Britain was in the grip of austerity. The occasion brought a flash of welcome pageantry to the everyday grimness. Today Britain is again facing hard times. This weekend offers another chance to forget the everyday but also to celebrate a monarch who has helped the UK stay a steady course."

Of course, there are many amongst Britain's artistic establishment who know nothing of "hard times" and are indifferent to them.

Hare, at least, did acknowledge that the royal festivities "coincide with the worst economic crisis for 80 years, brought about, we should remember, by the failure of the political class to offer the country even a modest degree of protection from a rampantly destructive City of London."

But he continued, "No event since the invasion of Iraq has so reinforced people's sense of powerlessness."

His remarks go to the central political feature of the current situation. It was the Labour government of Tony Blair that joined the US in its pre-emptive war against Iraq in the face of mass popular opposition. This was only the most grotesque expression of the utter rottenness of what passes for the so-called "labour movement". In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, it was the social democratic parties that went on to engineer a massive subvention of public funds to the super-rich in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse and inaugurate the policies of austerity, while the trade unions have worked to limit and sabotage popular hostility to these measures.

Similarly, the pseudo-left organisations that led the anti-war protests in 2003 have become the cheerleaders for military interventions in Libya, Syria and wherever else imperialist interests deem fit. Meanwhile their respective parties, such as SYRIZA in Greece and the United Left Alliance in Ireland, meet with representatives of the European Union and International Monetary Fund to discuss limited "adjustments" to austerity as part of their proposals for the rescue of European capitalism.

These shifts do not speak to people's powerlessness, as Hare suggests.

Rather they indicate the social and political chasm between the privileged petty-bourgeoisie and the mass of working people, while underscoring the bankruptcy of all critiques of the existing set-up that are not rooted in the fight for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and its institutions.

At a time when the conditions of life have become insupportable and demand an uncompromising response, these layers preach passivity, conformism and reconciliation with the ruling elite and—in Britain—with the living embodiment of the hereditary privileges enjoyed by the rich and of the subservience and servility demanded of working people.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site