

Britain's Royal birth: Media frenzy amid public indifference

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The birth this week of the son of Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge and wife of Britain's Prince William, occasioned a media frenzy.

Outside St Mary's hospital in west London, hundreds of reporters and photographers from the world's media gathered. The British media gave saturation and blanket coverage in all newspapers, radio and TV channels. Prime Minister David Cameron stated that the birth was, "an important moment in the life of our nation." The Royals "know that a proud nation is celebrating with a very proud and happy couple tonight," he added.

Given that the political and media establishment worked so hard to insist that the event was of monumental importance, it is remarkable that the birth aroused relatively little interest among working people.

There was a natural degree of curiosity, but for a generally disengaged public the event had little or no bearing on their lives, no matter how hard the media and political establishment tried to tell them otherwise.

In addition, many people were actively repulsed and expressed hostility to the wall-to-wall fawning over the birth. The BBC said it received hundreds of complaints from viewers "who feel there has been too much coverage of the royal baby story and also from some who feel that the coverage has been biased in favour of the monarchy."

The BBC was forced to defend its stance commenting, it was a "major historical event—the birth of a new heir to the throne."

The reason for the clamour to celebrate the birth was summed up by the *Guardian*, who used to occasion to proclaim that it meant the monarchy was now secure in the saddle for the foreseeable future. Its editorial, "Royal birth: welcome, Baby Cambridge," read, "The monarchy as an institution is as popular as it has been at any time since the war, an almost incredible recovery

from its dim decades at the end of the last century, when this level of support was almost unimaginable".

"The royals can rarely have seemed more secure", it opined.

Noting that "Baby Cambridge is unlikely to inherit for at least 50 years", the *Guardian* asked, "[W]ill Britain in 2065 still be a state that has at its apex one individual whose place is decided by birth?" It concluded, "Since the one thing that we have learned in the last 50 years is that monarchy has a logic-defying resilience, it looks as if the answer could be yes."

Is that so? In truth, anyone but the most ardent royalist would raise an eyebrow at such a self-satisfied and smug prediction regarding the future ascent to the throne of King George VII—particularly in a period where the gap between the super-rich financial aristocracy and the rest of society, as exemplified by the British monarchy, produces growing disquiet and anger among broad masses internationally.

That this event could fill newspapers and the broadcast media for days on end exposes the utter rottenness of official political discourse, with the nominally republican *Guardian* a leading purveyor of inanity. On its web site, the newspaper resorted to the gimmick of having a button in the top right hand corner with the single word "Republican?"

Clicking on the link removed all references to the Royal baby story. The fact remains that one had to opt out of such coverage, with the *Guardian's* default setting the "Royalist" page made up of one piece of journalistic twaddle after another.

The critical commentary, what little there was, was generally pitched at the lowest level. As a way of answering the view, satirised by the Sex Pistols in the 1977 Jubilee year as "God save the Queen, 'Cos tourists are money!" we had some daring to point out

that the monarchy doesn't in fact contribute very much to the economy—and not much else.

The *Guardian*'s Seamus Milne, fully 364 years after the head of Charles I was cut off and the monarchy first dispensed with following the English Civil War, proposed what he admitted to be “not a very radical demand” of “an elected head of state.” He described this as “a necessary step to democratise Britain and weaken the grip of deferential conservatism and anti-politics,” whatever that might mean.

“People could vote for Prince William or Kate Middleton if they wanted and the royals could carry on holding garden parties and travelling around in crowns and gold coaches,” he suggested.

A polite call for an elected head of state sums up a liberal establishment who would be happy with perhaps a few cosmetic changes—but nothing too radical, of course.

Why is the monarchy considered off limits from more serious criticism? The answer is because this all too ludicrous and antiquated institution is maintained in all its pomp and splendour for very contemporary reasons.

As seen with last year's Jubilee celebrations, there is the “bread and circuses” element. No one does pomp and ceremony like the British, the argument goes, and this brings a colour into lives of ordinary people that are otherwise cast in shades of grey. This ceremonial, traditional aspect holds an attraction for a certain layer, but more particularly for the tourists who gathered outside Buckingham Palace for news of the birth.

However, the main purpose of the millions squandered on the Royal household is that it continues to fulfill a dual political function.

The monarchy as representative of the nation is used in order to appeal to a shared “national identity”, functioning in this role as a form of social glue uniting disparate classes, as does every form of nationalism.

In addition, the monarchy acts as the human embodiment of a stratified social order based on (largely inherited) wealth, privilege and class oppression. For the ruling elite the reigning king or queen embodies the “right “of hundreds of other kings and queens of big business to wallow in even greater levels of luxury and opulence.

Both these essentially contradictory functions—of expressing national unity and embodying social difference—are now being tested to the breaking point

by the unprecedented escalation of social inequalities between the fabulously wealthy elite and an impoverished population.

When the present queen took the throne in 1953, the structures of Britain's post-war welfare state had just been implemented. Significant large-scale social reforms, including the world's first free and universal National Health Service, comprehensive education and social housing provision, were put into place by a ruling class fearful of a politically radicalised and militant working class determined not to return to the conditions of mass poverty of the 1930s.

Today this far more fundamental societal glue than the monarchy—which underpinned the entire post-war period—is being systematically torn apart. Alongside the privatisation of the NHS and public education and the ending of welfare provision, millions of working people are suffering deep wage cuts, productivity increases, and unemployment.

After all the media-generated brouhaha dies down, the thoughts and orientation of the overall population will be shaped by these more fundamental concerns.

This does not bode well for the family Windsor and its innumerable hangers-on. The BBC's Royal correspondent Nicholas Witchell, in a typically fawning piece on the royal progeny, mentions in passing how “Barring revolution in Britain, the shape and trajectory of his life is, in every real sense, inescapable.”

Yes indeed. But social revolution is in reality a far bigger threat to William and Kate's career plans for their son than Mr. Witchell and his journalistic colleagues can ever admit to.



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