Queen to be given £370 million to refurbish Buckingham Palace

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24 November 2016

Without even cursory public scrutiny, let alone debate, an unelected three-person committee has agreed to hand over nearly £370 million of additional public money to the queen.

The Royal Trustees—Prime Minister Theresa May, Chancellor of the Exchequer Phillip Hammond and The Keeper of the Privy Purse, Sir Alan Reid—decided the sum was necessary to renovate Buckingham Palace, and other royal properties.

Enough to build at least 2,500 average homes that could house 10,000 people, the £370 million will be spent on renewing wiring, plumbing and heating in her London residence.

To ensure that Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and of Her other Realms and Territories, Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith (to list just a few of her more than two dozen official titles) does not freeze, the palace's 33-year-old boilers, 100 miles of electric cabling and 20 miles of lead piping will be replaced, as well as extensive redecoration carried out.

The money is to be paid over in the form of an additional rebate from the profits derived from the Crown Estate, which flow to the Exchequer. Under the Sovereign Grant, which replaced the previous Civil List system, the queen is awarded a sum of money each year from public funds to cover her official expenditures, including upkeep of the various royal residences, staffing, travel and state visits, public engagements, and official entertainment, including a payment of 15 percent of the profits from the Crown Estate. The Crown Estate is worth a staggering £11.5 billion. It includes a large number of properties in central London, and controls 1,960,000 acres of agricultural land and forest in the UK and more than half of the country's foreshore.

In 2012-13, the Sovereign Grant amounted to some £31 million, rising to £40.1 million in 2015-16, an almost 30 percent increase. By means of a Statutory Instrument, a parliamentary order tabled by a minister that requires no debate, this is being further increased by 66 percent from 2017, to fund the remedial works over the following 10 years.

The Sovereign Grant is just a small fraction of the queen's wealth and overall income. The queen also receives annual net profits from the Duchy of Lancaster's Estate, which next April will be £17.8 million. In 2002, she inherited her mother's estate, thought to have been worth £70 million (£103 million today).

The total wealth of the monarch is not known but last year's *Sunday Times* Rich List (which does not have access to wealth held in bank accounts) estimated the queen's private wealth at £340 million, making her the UK's 302nd richest person. Sandringham House, on 20,000 acres of land, and Balmoral Castle, on an estate of approximately 50,000 acres, are privately owned by the queen.

The decision to fund the renovation work is seen as a strategic issue for the British ruling class, under conditions where the UK is set to leave the European Union. Speaking on "Peston on Sunday," Chancellor Philip Hammond defended the expenditure, saying the royal residence was "very important in supporting Britain's soft power projection across the world."

News of the proposed payment led to an online petition addressed to the chancellor, demanding that "the Crown and its estates should be made to fund its own renovations." Launched the following day, November 19, it had recorded close to 140,000 signatures as of this writing. This would make the petition eligible for submission to a non-binding debate in parliament.

Under conditions in which most workers have faced years of austerity and falling or stagnant wages, the comments of those signing the petition expressed bitter

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anger and disgust:

"The richest woman in the country should not be given, or take handouts from the government whilst there's kids living in poverty, pensioners freezing to death and the country is on its knees. Remember the Romanovs?"

"In a time of austerity and great struggle for many families, this is unacceptable."

"We have 1 in 4 children living in absolute poverty and families relying on foodbanks and to spend this amount of taxpayers' money to keep them in the lap of luxury is abhorrent and it should be the joe public who decide who pays for it!"

"This money should be spent on council housing and providing homes for the people sleeping on our streets."

While in London, the queen can enjoy her 775 rooms, including 19 state rooms, 52 royal and guest bedrooms, 92 offices and 78 bathrooms, but thousands have no home at all to call their own.

In the period, July to September 2016, there were 2,638 people recorded sleeping rough on the streets of London. Of these, some 30 percent were in the London Borough of Westminster, in which Buckingham Palace lies. Westminster has topped the national list for rough sleepers for the last six years.

There has been a doubling of those sleeping rough in England since 2010, with the rise in London exceeding that in all other regions.

Britain faces a mounting housing crisis. According to the National Housing Federation, 974,000 homes were needed between 2011 and 2014, but data from 326 councils showed only 457,490 were built. This follows decades in which virtually no new state-funded housing has been built. Starting under Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, the "right to buy" scheme has seen the selling off of some two million local authority-owned houses without any similar replacements being funded from the proceeds.

The housing crisis is expressed most acutely in the capital. A research paper from the University of the West of England found that the number of houses managed by London's councils had shrunk from 840,000 in 1984 to just over 500,000 by the end of the century.

According to a report commissioned by the Santander bank, the number of UK homes worth more than £1 million is "set to triple by 2030". In London, one in four homes will cost in excess of £1 million by 2030. Private homes in London are already far beyond the reach of most workers, with prices currently 11.5 times average incomes. This will soar to 16.5 times by 2030. The cost of a house at the bottom of the price range will be 17 times the income of those in the lowest quartile of earners by 2030.

At the same time, private landlords and those running bed and breakfast establishments have pocketed £3.5 billion over the last five years in money spent by local councils on temporary accommodation, enough to build 23,600 houses.

The Labour Party shares responsibility with the Tories for the current housing crisis. Following the election of Tony Blair as prime minister in 1997, his government enthusiastically pushed forward the right to buy scheme.

Asked about the fate of the palace, Labour's Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, declared that no government would allow the palace to fall into disrepair. "It's a national monument ... national heritage. It's going to be treated that way, in the same way as the House of Commons. When you have these old buildings they have to be looked after," he told LBC radio.

When asked if the queen should pay for the work, McDonnell replied with due deference, "She may well consider that. I am a republican, but when it comes to decisions like that I think they are left to her."

Thus speaks the voice of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. Like his party leader Jeremy Corbyn, the "republican" McDonnell never misses an opportunity to affirm his loyalty to the capitalist state apparatus—including to the queen, the living embodiment of imperialist rule and hereditary privilege.

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