

Netflix: *The Crown* Season Two—Apologetics for the monarchy as sun sets on British Empire

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“*Second rate, dilapidated and sad, like a provincial hotel... a tired institution without a place in the modern world... A middle aged woman, so incurious, unintelligent and unremarkable... Britain’s reduced place in the world was not a surprise but an inevitability*”. Jacqueline Kennedy, wife of US President John F. Kennedy, following their meeting with Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace in 1961.

Although Jackie Kennedy (Jodi Balfour) later apologised for her remarks, Elizabeth’s attempts to prove her wrong lie at the heart of Peter Morgan’s Netflix series *The Crown*, now on Season Two.

The season begins with the Suez crisis in 1956, which was brewing at the end of Season One and ends in 1963 with the Soviet spy scare centred on War Minister John Profumo.

Morgan tells the tale of a seemingly unremarkable ruler surviving against all odds as the Empire she inherits crumbles under her feet. The shy, retiring princess Elizabeth, wonderfully portrayed by Claire Foy, ascends to the throne and single-handedly drags Britain into the future. “The world has changed. Society in Britain has changed” and so must the monarchy!

Elizabeth triumphs over a dysfunctional family, fusty courtiers and feeble politicians every time. In the process there are casualties. Humanity has to be expunged, betrayal abounds and individuals are tossed aside.

Marital infidelity consumes much of Season Two. Episode one opens with Elizabeth pleading with husband Philip, Duke of Edinburgh (Matt Smith) to stop his “incessant complaining” and “talk frankly, for once, about what needs to change to make this marriage work”. She reveals that she “has never felt so alone”. Philip replies that he lives in a prison and is treated as a spare part.

Subsequent episodes are sprinkled with Palace attempts to prevent what Elizabeth accepts is Philip’s “need to let off steam” reaching the press. At one point she declares, “The monarchy is too fragile. Another scandal and it will be over”. To prove all is well in the Royal marital department Elizabeth is advised to produce a third child, ten years after the second.

Elizabeth’s self-centred sister Margaret (Vanessa Kirby) tries to escape her own prison by marrying a “free spirit”—photographer Antony Armstrong-Jones (Matthew Goode). But even as they announce their engagement, “Tony”, Elizabeth is informed, is having affairs with three women, about to father a child with a fourth and has “a taste for his own sex”. The marriage was to end in divorce 16 years later, with Margaret beset by alcohol problems.

Then there is Elizabeth’s first-born son, Charles. Told the “uncommonly shy” and “delicate” heir to the throne is being treated “cruelly” by other boys at his school, Elizabeth suggests he transfer to nearby Eton. Philip demands he be sent to the spartan Gordonstoun boarding school he attended in the wilds of Scotland, declaring, “It made a man of me”. Not so for poor Charles, who later described his five years

at the school as “a prison sentence” and “absolute hell”.

All this inter-personal intrigue makes *The Crown* often spellbinding and revealing. As a piece of television theatre, it displays the technical mastery that the British generally bring to “period pieces”. The acting is first rate, and in some case exceptional. When it comes to portraying monarchs, which British writers, directors and actors have been doing since the days of Marlowe and Shakespeare, they are real masters.

The great challenge, however, is to present a real portrait of the people who inhabit this strange world, to show them as human beings without crossing over—ever so imperceptibly—into the realm of maudlin sentimentality or hagiography. *The Crown*, for all its technical finesse, fails to avoid this critical pitfall.

It is not wrong to show the quite terrible position in which the royals—to the extent that one considers them only as individuals—are placed. But this becomes apologetics when their personalities and actions are totally abstracted from their social and political function. Living in this shut-up world of endless privilege, based on the accident of birth, placed at the summit of the political system and its state power, they are not only victims but also perpetrators. Their personalities acquire characteristics that, to a significant extent, epitomise the indifference to human suffering and even cruelty that characterise the ruling class.

Novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald captured this critical element of the ruling class personality most famously in *The Great Gatsby*, in his devastating indictment of Tom and Daisy Buchanan: “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made”. *The Crown* offers no such penetrating insight into those who inhabit the monarchy and its environment. Perhaps the character who comes closest to being an exception is Elizabeth’s private secretary Tommy Lascelles—played so brilliantly by Pip Torrens. His every word is intended to maim or to kill.

Aside from Lascelles, Morgan fails to make the social function of a character the true and visible element of their dramatic personality. As a result, all sorts of people, above all the queen herself, are let off the hook. There are simply too many cases in which he airbrushes and falsifies history.

Morgan’s treatment of the Profumo affair is a travesty. The tawdry scandal had such an impact—leading to the election of a Labour government—because it cast a devastating light on the doings of the ruling class. Moreover, it was widely recognised that the unfortunate Dr. Stephen Ward was made a scapegoat and driven to suicide so that far more important and powerful personalities (including Philip) could escape relatively unscathed. Key documents relating to the scandal are to remain locked up for another 50 years.

Morgan also perpetuates the myth that the pro-Nazi views of Edward VIII, the Duke of Windsor (Alex Jennings)—who abdicated in 1936—were the musings of a “black sheep” in the Windsor dynasty.

We are shown Elizabeth, 20 years later, tormented by thoughts of “forgiving” her “Uncle David” and giving him a useful job—ambassador to France is suggested—and then deciding otherwise. We are meant to believe she is suddenly shocked to find out there are suppressed Nazi documents about to be released in the US revealing the true extent of Edward’s relationship with the Hitler regime—including plans to reinstate him as king in return for which the German military would be given “full rein” across Europe. To this day, most political archives post-1918 relating to the monarchy remain sealed and exempt from freedom of information requests.

Prince Philip’s fascist links are also given a snow job. The series concocts a scene where he is shown hesitating (and having to be forced on) during the funeral procession of his sister Cecile—one of three who joined the Nazi party—during her Nazi state funeral (for real picture see here). Philip has been forced to admit his family found Hitler’s regime “attractive” and had “inhibitions about the Jews”, but where his sympathies lie are shown by anti-democratic, anti-working class, racist comments such as hoping to be “reincarnated as a deadly virus” to help solve the “population problem” and telling Paraguayan dictator Alfredo Stroessner that, “It’s a pleasant change to be in a country that isn’t ruled by its people”.

Elsewhere, Morgan reduces huge political events to a backdrop for his family drama. People on the international stage become caricatures. At times it is excruciating.

The Suez Crisis, sparked off by the nationalisation of the 120-mile Suez Canal, a waterway critical to British economic and military interests, is portrayed as the product of a personal vendetta by Prime Minister Anthony Eden (Jeremy Northam) against Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (Amir Boutrous).

Eden launches a military invasion with the help of Israel and France to seize the Canal, overthrow Nasser, and install a more pliant regime. Elizabeth, after quizzing Eden and being lied to, drops her reservations and reluctantly backs the doomed adventure. Neither Parliament nor the US are informed. President Dwight D. Eisenhower threatens all three nations with economic sanctions if they persist and forces through a United Nations resolution calling for a cease-fire. The threats work. Troops are withdrawn. Britain is humiliated and Eden hands in his resignation to Elizabeth, who chastises him for embroiling her in a lie.

All exchanges between Eden and Elizabeth are a dramatic imagining, based on later assertions by Philip and a courtier that she was opposed to the invasion. However, Eden and his government were in reality desperately attempting to combat Britain’s decline as an imperial power and its eclipse by the US, which was determined to replace Britain in the strategically vital oil-producing Middle East and elsewhere.

From watching *The Crown* you would also have little understanding of the Cold War that raged between the US and the Soviet Union. Even as the last British troops left Egypt, the US Congress in March 1957 passed what became known as the “Eisenhower Doctrine” labelling “international communism” as the greatest threat to the region and promising financial and military help to any country that tried to resist “communist aggression”.

When Britain withdrew in the late 1960s from all positions “East of Suez”, it was Israel that became the policeman of the Middle East on behalf of US imperialism.

In *The Crown*, Chancellor Harold Macmillan (Anton Lesser) is portrayed as a rotten scoundrel backstabbing Eden to become prime minister. But Macmillan was facing extraordinary difficulties as he sought to repair the ruling elite’s “special relationship” with the US.

As early as 1926, Leon Trotsky had already predicted the difficulties

British imperialism would experience in its relationship with the US. He explained that in the coming historical period, “The basic world antagonism occurs along the line of the conflict of interests between the United States and England. Why? Because England is still the wealthiest and most powerful country, second only to the United States. It is America’s chief rival, the main obstacle on its path.

“In the competition between England and the United States, only retreats are possible for England. At the price of these retreats English capitalism buys the right to participate in the deals of American capitalism. Thus a coalition Anglo-American capitalism seemingly arises. England saves face, and does so not unprofitably, for England derives substantial profits from it. But it receives them at the price of retreating and clearing the way for America. The US is strengthening her world positions; England’s are growing weaker”.

The result, Trotsky warns, is that England “will not escape the common lot of capitalist countries. America will place her on rations”.

In the post-war period, Britain was made painfully aware of this new reality. *The Crown*’s portrayal of the 1961 visit of the newly inaugurated John F. Kennedy and his wife captures this shift. But we are then led to believe that Elizabeth flies to Ghana, against the advice of all around her, to meet with President Kwame Nkrumah largely because she feels outshone by the youthful, cosmopolitan First Lady. By deciding to dance the foxtrot with him, Elizabeth supposedly convinces Nkrumah to sever ties with the USSR and realign Ghana with Britain.

This is an unnecessary slur on Nkrumah, the bourgeois nationalist under whose leadership Ghana became the first African colony to achieve independence in 1957 as part of a wave of popular liberation movements. By the end of the 1960s, no fewer than 27 former colonies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean were to secure political independence from Britain. Morgan ignores Macmillan’s 1960 African “Wind of Change” speech in which he declares that “whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it”.

Instead we are subjected to Elizabeth complaining to Macmillan, as he tenders his resignation in 1963 as leader of a factionally divided party that faced a general election one year later, “[I]n ten years of rule I have had three Prime Ministers—too old, too ill or too weak—a confederacy of elected quitters”. She turns her back on him and walks out—as if she had single-handedly preserved the Commonwealth and therefore British imperialism’s albeit diminished position in the world.

Back in 2006, with Morgan’s *The Queen* and its portrayal of the crisis provoked by the death of Princess Diana, we noted his “critical and intelligent attitude toward the institutions of state” and “healthy” lack of respect for authority figures. But we also noted his predilection for the queen and claims that, as an individual, she should be commended for having adapted to a “shift in values”.

Over 10 years have passed. Speaking recently, Morgan declared, “If you were going to choose a character, you wouldn’t choose a private, shy, middle-aged woman of limited intelligence... I don’t mean intelligence, I just mean, she’s not an intellectual. And yet, I find her... Well, I came at it as completely anti-monarchist and I’ve turned around utterly. I’m a royalist, now”.

If Morgan has become a monarchist and set himself the task of publicly cleansing it, it is because his excess of uncritical sympathy has made him forget that the lonely and unhappy people he portrays are the representatives and executors of a monstrously reactionary institution.

The monarchy in Britain is not simply the leftover of some archaic past. It is a potent symbol through which the ruling class seeks to legitimise its class power. It is rooted in the oppression and exploitation of the working population in the interests of a privileged elite. Its perpetuation embodies hereditary privilege, inequality, injustice and social backwardness in contemporary society.

What a terrible intellectual fate: to be seduced, like a second-rate Pygmalion, by one's own artistic creation and end up besotted by Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom, Canada and Her other Realms and Territories Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith.

The author also recommends:

Netflix series on Elizabeth II— *The Crown*: Sentenced to be queen



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