

Britain's royal wedding: Recasting the monarchy in the age of identity politics

Paul Mitchell
19 May 2018

Today, US actress Rachel Meghan Markle marries His Royal Highness Henry Charles Albert David, Prince of Wales—otherwise known as Prince Harry. In what is being billed as a breakthrough for feminism, Markle will proceed unaccompanied down the aisle of St. George's chapel, Windsor Castle, where she will be met by Prince Charles, heir to the British throne.

No expense has been spared by the Treasury for the 600 guests, who have been issued seven pages of “critical guidance” on how to behave during the event, or the 200 close friends invited to an after-wedding party. The bill is expected to top £30 million. The guests will consume an estimated 16,000 glasses of champagne and 23,000 canapes.

No such consideration is being extended to the hundreds of members of the public, “from every corner of the United Kingdom,” who have been selected to attend and who will provide a backdrop to the proceedings. They have been told to bring a packed lunch as they stand in the full glare of the sun, as it will not be possible to buy food or drink on site. The same holds true for the hundreds of Royal Household and Crown Estate staff and local schoolchildren whose presence is meant to emphasise the “inclusive” character of proceedings.

Neither will the homeless of Windsor be shown consideration for their plight. While on a skiing holiday in Wyoming, the Conservative Party council leader, Simon Dudley, tweeted to Thames Valley police, urging them to take measures against “an epidemic of rough sleeping and vagrancy in Windsor” and “focus on dealing with this before the #RoyalWedding.”

As one would expect, the royal coupling has rarely been out of the national and international news since the two met in July 2016. The “fairy tale romance” ticks all the right boxes for the leader writers, royal correspondents, gossip columnists and magazine editors who flatter and fawn over all things Royal.

“The wedding of American actress Meghan Markle to Queen Elizabeth's grandson, Prince Harry, marks an important moment for Britain's black community,” Reuters

enthused. “The upcoming marriage of the British prince, sixth in line to the British throne, to Markle, whose father is white and mother is African-American, has been heralded as demonstrating how Britain has become more egalitarian and racially mixed.”

The pair, we are told, represents all that is great and good about modern, multiracial, cosmopolitan Britain. They are apparently “just like us!”

The reinvention of Harry is a testament to the palace PR machine and a sycophantic press. The “rabble-rousing youth” was “reformed” by ten years in the Army. His wearing a Nazi uniform to a “colonials and natives” fancy dress party and calling one of his fellow Sandhurst cadets “our little Paki friend” are minor indiscretions. Now he is a “global charity ambassador” who champions the Invictus Games for wounded and disabled soldiers, mentors young people fallen by the wayside and devotes himself to saving the wildlife of Africa.

But it is Markle who is supposed to embody the “new monarchy.”

Every royal wedding is orchestrated to maintain the House of Windsor's standing at the apex of the affairs of state, reinforcing the hereditary principle and the deference the ruling elite expects from the lower orders. Such events are meant to proclaim the permanence of the British state and the British “way of life,” thereby guarding against social instability.

The reinvention of this archaic institution has become increasingly necessary under conditions of an obscene growth of social inequality.

When Diana married Charles in 1981, she was portrayed as a cross between a film star and, in Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's characterisation following her death in 1997, the “People's Princess.” He cited her charity work with children, landmine victims and HIV sufferers to tell the Royals to buck up their ideas if they wanted the institution to survive in New Labour's supposedly more “meritocratic” take on Thatcherism.

Only so much recasting was possible, with the deeply

unsympathetic Charles, heir to the throne, intent on marrying his mistress Camilla. But his son, Prince William, whom the ruling elite want desperately to replace the ageing Queen Elizabeth as monarch, took the first vital step by wedding the “commoner” Kate Middleton in 2011.

Markle’s credentials are something else entirely—African-American, brought up as a Catholic, divorced from a Jewish man, but willing to be confirmed in the Church of England out of love for “her man.” She is not only a genuine celebrity, but also a self-proclaimed feminist with a record of charitable and humanitarian work for the United Nations—advocating menstrual health for poor women, opposing gender inequality and offering support to refugees.

Royal protocol dictates that she can’t comment on political issues, but Markle staked out her political credentials, declaring, “I think right now in the climate we are seeing so many campaigns, I mean #MeToo and Time’s Up, and there is no better time to really continue to shine a light on women feeling empowered, and people really helping to support them—men included... So, I guess we wait a couple of months and we can hit the ground running.”

Markle’s feminism and racial identity provide the basis for the ultimate post-modernist makeover of the monarchy in this new era of identity politics.

The media hail the “Meghan effect” on black Britons, wheeling out young black girls to naively proclaim that “anyone can be a princess.” But this appeal is directed above all to the privileged upper layers of the middle class, whose own obsession with identity politics is bound up with their desire for social advancement.

Gone like the morning mist are their previous declarations of republican sympathies. The *Guardian*’s Georgina Lawton confessed: “I usually disparage the royals, but Meghan Markle has changed that. Prince Harry’s partner is initiating real change in UK race relations. It was exciting to hear the royal family defend this mixed-race relationship.”

The *Observer* reported Cambridge University historian Ted Powell’s comment that “it is difficult to overstate how important it is to have a member of the royal family... who is mixed race and embracing her heritage and stating that is very much part of her... It is hugely positive for Britain, particularly in the wake of Brexit, the controversies of immigration policy and the Windrush scandal.”

The implication that Britain’s population, prior to their enlightenment by Harry’s choice of partner, has been a seething mass of racism is slanderous and condescending. Today, around one in 10 people living in Britain is married to or living with someone from outside his or her ethnic group.

If anything, the response of these same social layers across the Atlantic is more disgraceful still. Maya Rupert, for

example, took to the pages of the *New York Times* to pen a piece titled “How a Black Feminist Became a Fan of Princesses.”

“Ten-year-old me would be horrified by how excited I am about the royal wedding,” she begins. But Rupert now realises that the elevation of “white womanhood” as the cultural standard is no more: “And as I realized that, my anti-princess feminism began to give way to something more nuanced... Maybe instead of rejecting princess culture, wholesale, I could embrace different princesses.”

Within the US ruling elite, who live lives of obscene wealth amid growing social hardship, Britain’s ruling family, which America’s founding fathers waged a revolutionary war to rid themselves of, exercises a magnetic pull. Thus the *Times* writes: “Though the British royalty went through a rough patch in the 1990s,” Queen Elizabeth II today “presides over a curiously sympathetic and attractive mix of archaic tradition, fairy-tale titles and very modern lives.”

Poor Meghan and Harry, with so much riding on their shoulders! Markle will need to draw on all her acting skills to carry out the multitudinous tasks now assigned the pair—modernising the monarchy, transforming British attitudes on race, sorting out the post-Brexit crisis by resuscitating the Commonwealth, and bolstering the “special relationship” between the US and the UK.

So much of this is an airy political confection. Recent surveys by polling agency YouGov show that, despite the wall-to-wall coverage, about half of the UK’s 66 million people are wholly indifferent to today’s wedding. And many more would laugh at the notion that it represents a turning point in the life of a nation so rigidly divided along class, rather than racial, lines.



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