

# Britain's queen shields her “embarrassing” wealth from public scrutiny

Richard Tyler  
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*“The British monarchy, hypocritical British conservatism, religiosity, servility, sanctimoniousness—all this is old rags, rubbish, the refuse of centuries which we have no need for whatsoever.”—Leon Trotsky*

For decades, Queen Elizabeth has used a secretive procedure to ensure her personal interests are fully considered before legislation is voted on in the UK parliament.

Research by the *Guardian* reveals that the queen, one of Britain's wealthiest individuals, has been able to exploit privileges granted her by parliament to have draft laws changed to her financial advantage.

With a private fortune estimated by the *Sunday Times* at £350 million in 2020, likely an underestimate, and receiving a “Sovereign Grant” worth £85.9 million in 2020–21, she has exercised “Queen's Consent” over 1,000 times during her reign—her “right” to be consulted over impending legislation and seek changes.

Until the investigation by the *Guardian*, little was known about the exercise and extent of this prerogative. The most recent example cited by the paper is the Conservative government's Brexit trade deal with the European Union. Although parliament (via the House of Lords) is informed of the Queen's Consent to a particular piece of legislation, no explanation is ever given about what this might have involved. The whole business is kept shrouded in secrecy, jealously guarded by the monarch and those who serve her.

Documents in the National Archive uncovered by the *Guardian* show that such flagrant lobbying has often been used to conceal her private wealth from the public.

Correspondence between the queen's private lawyer and civil servants responsible to Edward Heath's Conservative government in 1973 documents how the monarch objected to anything that might reveal her private investments in listed companies. Such disclosure, her lawyer said, “would be embarrassing.”

Following this discrete pressure from the palace, government ministers inserted a clause into a bill supposedly introducing financial “transparency” to prevent the extent of her company shareholdings being exposed to public gaze.

Queen's or Prince's Consent—the arcane parliamentary procedure is also extended to the heir to the throne, Prince

Charles—requires the monarch's agreement is secured before parliamentary approval of any legislation that might affect the Crown's private interests or the royal prerogative. It is described by the House of Commons Library as “one of the most significant elements of the UK's constitution.”

Legally, if the queen's or prince's consent is not given, the bill to which it applies cannot be put to a vote in parliament.

The prerogative powers—such as the declaration of war, signing international treaties and conducting foreign affairs—which formally belong to the monarch, require no parliamentary approval and are mainly exercised by the government through its ministers.

The Crown Estate—lands and holdings in the territories of England, Wales and Northern Ireland within the UK—formally belongs to the queen as “the sovereign's public estate.” Since 1760, when George III surrendered control of the Estate's revenues to the Treasury, the monarch was paid a generous annual grant running into millions, known as the “Civil List.” This arrangement was altered in 2012, with the Civil List replaced by a “Sovereign Grant,” calculated as a percentage of the income of the Estate, making the maximisation of such revenues of direct financial interest to the monarch.

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, has sought to influence or change a multiplicity of legislation. This extends from agricultural and fisheries bills—the Crown Estate owns 793,000 hectares of agricultural and forest land, more than half of the UK's foreshore (beaches and coastline), as well as many offshore wind farms because the estate manages the seabed out to a limit of 12 nautical miles.

The Crown Estate also owns some of the capital's prime real estate. Its central London portfolio includes most of Regent Street and half the property in the St James's area, including retail, residential and office buildings. Outside London, it commands land containing 14 retail and shopping parks and three shopping centres. Consequently, legislation that has been most subject to Queen's Consent include various urban development, housing and leasehold reform bills.

The queen's private land holdings are extensive and include

the Duchy of Lancaster, which with £519 million in assets made a £19.2 million profit in 2020. Consisting of land in England and Wales, mostly as rural estates in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Cheshire, Staffordshire and Lincolnshire, the duchy comprises 45,550 hectares, making the queen one of the largest recipients of government farming subsidies in England—running to £936,000 last year. This gives her a vested interest in all legislative matters to do with agriculture. The Duchy also includes the Savoy Estate in London, upon which the prestigious Savoy Hotel stands.

Her private estates also contain 10 castles and extensive residences at Balmoral and Sandringham.

Prince's Consent, which has been exercised at least 275 times between 1970 and 2020, has been used to ensure Charles' £1 billion Duchy of Cornwall estate has retained full benefits from leasehold properties on the land it owns. As part of exercising his royal consent, specific clauses were introduced into draft legislation granting leaseholders a "right to buy" their homes, for example, denying this to the Prince's tenants. As a result, the value of their homes constantly diminishes, making resale virtually impossible.

A database of prospective legislation subject to such royal consent drawn up by the *Guardian* lists over 1,500 parliamentary bills between 1952 and 2020, affecting an average of 22 bills a year. By 2013, just over 3,000 bills had received royal assent, passing them into law.

Given the broad extent of the monarch's pecuniary interests, the scope for regal intervention in drafting legislation is also very wide.

This includes finance (the queen pays tax); as an employer, e.g., covering pensions and child support; animal welfare, the Crown Estate includes many farms; "justice, social security, race relations and food policy through to obscure rules for car parking charges and hovercraft," according to the *Guardian*.

The first invocation of Queen's/King's Consent was in 1728, when, given the monarch's extensive maritime interests, George II agreed parliament could debate the suppression of piracy bill.

The guidance for seeking Queen's Consent is laid out in a 26-page document published by the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. This stipulates that such consent is required in cases of the royal prerogative and when the hereditary revenues of the Duchy of Lancaster (belonging to the queen), the Duchy Cornwall (belonging to prince Charles) and the "personal property or personal interests of the Crown" are concerned.

The document states it is not possible to give a "comprehensive catalogue of such prerogatives" but cites over twenty such powers subject to the royal prerogative, including "the ownership of swans and whales," the "mining of precious metals" and the right to "bona vacantia" (vacant goods), the name given to ownerless property which by law passes to the Crown, among others.

The website of the Royal Family describes the procedure,

which gives the monarch and her heir access to draft legislation enjoyed by no other citizen, as a "long-established convention." It is one the palace would rather not have subjected to public scrutiny, refusing all approaches by the *Guardian* to shed light on the circumstances under which it has been employed.

When the executioner cut off King Charles I head in 1649, he finally ended absolute monarchy in Britain. Thereafter, power has resided in the hands of parliament, whose pre-eminence had been asserted by the blade of the axe.

This did not change following the brief interlude of the Commonwealth of England under Oliver Cromwell and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Since the reign of Charles II, the role of British kings and queens has been as *constitutional* monarchs, literally crowning a complex network of social and political relations based on overwhelmingly inherited class privilege.

This makes it virtually impossible to significantly reform such ancient royal privileges without running the risk of upsetting the delicate arrangement of "checks and balances" that rely on the pivotal position of the monarch.

Following its revelations, the *Guardian* has called for an "end [to] the flummery that enables a Queen's gambit and ministers making moves that suit the monarch." Its cry is not motivated by any democratic, let alone republican sympathies. Its humble petition is driven by a concern that the present arrangements give rise to a "conflict of interest" which "ultimately damages the standing of the monarchy."

The obeisance of the formerly "liberal" *Guardian* again reveals that in present society, there is no constituency within the ruling elite and its media that defends the democratic rights of the majority, the working class, against this feudal relic and the bourgeois order of hereditary privilege it now represents.



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