

The adulation for Elizabeth II: The capitalist class celebrates the principle of monarchy

Joseph Scalice
16 September 2022

It has been more than a week since Queen Elizabeth II died at the age of 96, yet the ceremonies of her death still dominate media coverage as though they were some sort of world event.

The evening news programs give over a majority of their time to her body, lying in state, and all the theatrical rigamarole of royal death. The morning talk shows are filled with encomia and hagiography, presenting Elizabeth II as an icon for women, the steady hand on the rudder of the British state and a symbol of decency and civility in a heartless world.

Why the adulation? Elizabeth's sole contribution was to have lived so long. She was not a world-historic figure; it is difficult to imagine anyone of less historical significance. Endowed with incalculable wealth by the accident of birth, she lived for nearly a century and yet was sheltered from everything that that century actually entailed.

There is something troubling about the five-mile-long queue to view the queen's coffin that has formed along the south bank of the Thames. An estimated three-quarters of a million people will endure a 22-hour wait to walk past her remains. It speaks to the general emptiness and shallowness of public life over the course of several decades that the death of this woman who never contributed anything to anyone's life is seen as a meaningful event. Those who wait to view her corpse may believe that the queue will bring them into the presence of history, but at its end all they will find is the past.

Like her life, the entire spectacle surrounding her death—from the ponderous, creaking departure from Balmoral to the boys' choir benediction in Westminster—is unreal. Reality is hard-bitten and pregnant with crisis. The British working class confronts a staggering rise in prices; energy costs have

risen as much as ten-fold. Half the population may not be able to adequately heat their homes this winter.

The unreal spectacle has nothing to do with the passing of an elderly woman and everything to do with the royal institution that encrusted her and the monarchic principle she embodied.

The capitalist class buried the ghosts of its republican ancestors long ago. Confronting social and political crises of unprecedented magnitude, it turns to autocracy and authoritarianism as bulwarks in defense of its privileges, and recognizes in monarchy an institutional form of its class aspirations.

Monarchy is an institution of colossal stupidity, a barbarous vestige of the feudal past; its persistence is an embarrassment to humanity. Founded on heredity, shored up with inbreeding, intermarriage and claims of divine right, the monarchic principle enshrines inequality as the fundamental and unalterable lot of humanity and maintains this lot with the force of autocratic power.

The kings and queens enthroned by this principle are stunted by more than just hemophilia and the Habsburg jaw. Their social function distills in their lineage the most concentrated reaction. Elizabeth II was cousin to the Tsarist Romanovs; her Nazi-sympathizing uncle, King Edward VIII, abdicated in 1936 and headed off to Germany with his Nazi-sympathizing wife to salute Adolf Hitler.

The royal family is marked by the sorts of scandals that develop among those with a great deal of unearned money and unspent time. Her son, Prince Andrew, sold arms to autocratic regimes and paid £12 million to cover up his role in sex trafficking underage girls with Jeffrey Epstein. Her grandson, Prince Harry, used to dress up in full Nazi regalia.

It was in defiance of the monarchic principle that the

American Declaration of Independence stated, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

This conception fueled the American Revolution. Thomas Paine’s pamphlet, *Common Sense*, which historian Gordon Wood termed “the most incendiary and popular pamphlet of the entire revolutionary era,” directly attacked not just George III, but the very existence of monarchy, writing:

In England a king hath little more to do than to make war and give away places; which in plain terms, is to impoverish the nation and set it together by the ears. A pretty business indeed for a man to be allowed eight hundred thousand sterling a year for, and worshiped into the bargain! Of more worth is one honest man to society and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived.

Article I, Section 9, Clause 8 of the US Constitution codified this principle for the new nation: “No Title of Nobility shall be granted by the United States.”

Immense concentrated private wealth, founded on exploitation and inequality, and the unending expansion of empire have stamped out any trace of such democratic sentiments in the American ruling elite. They no longer, in the phrase of Milton, prefer “hard liberty before the easy yoke of servile pomp.” They seek to defend their interests through autocratic rule and look with welcome upon the principle of monarchy.

On the order of President Biden, US flags were deferentially lowered for the dead queen, placed at half-staff for 12 days. Elizabeth II is separated from George III by generations; Biden is separated from Jefferson by an unbridgeable historical chasm.

The essence of empire is autocracy; it is not susceptible to democratic governance. Washington launches wars, stages coups, bombs small countries into the Stone Age without any regard for human life or the opinion of the American people. Capitalism has produced unprecedented levels of inequality and social

misery around the globe, including at its very core in the United States. Imperialism is, in the words of Lenin, “reaction all down the line.” Even the pretenses of democracy can no longer hold.

Over the past six years we have witnessed a turn among the ruling elite around the globe to openly autocratic and dictatorial forms of rule as social and political crises have sharpened and turned deadly. It is this that fuels the unrestrained adulation in the American media for the dead queen and the crown she wore. An unprecedented political crisis grips the United States. The idea of a monarchical system, of an autocratic head of state who stands above the conflict, has a powerful appeal to the embattled bourgeoisie.

The media give voice to these longings and package them for popular consumption. The phrase of J.A. Hobson, writing of imperialism at the opening of the 20th century, is apt: “snobbish subservience, the admiration of wealth and rank, the corrupt survivals of the inequalities of feudalism.” The deferential and servile talking heads of television news cultivate these traits. Often dressed up as progressive by identity politics, the monarchic principle is everywhere glorified, from Wakanda to Beyoncé to Downton Abbey.

The relentless adulation for the dead queen is mind-numbing. It is tempting to hunker down and weather the storm of stupidity. It must, however, be taken seriously, for it is a warning.

Capitalism can play no progressive role whatsoever in human development, but its fecund rot is capable of breeding all forms of reaction. Looking desperately to secure its social position, the bourgeoisie is turning to autocratic forms of rule. In service to this end, it is rehabilitating one of the most backward conceptions in history, the principle of monarchy.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact