The Crown Season 5: Exhausting itself in defence of the monarchy

Paul Bond
27 December 2022

Peter Morgan's lengthy Netflix drama about the British monarchy, *The Crown*, has now completed its fifth and penultimate season. It has strengths, but the further it progresses the more glaring its weaknesses—and its less than socially uplifting intentions—become.

The show has fictionalised real events, many of them controversial and difficult for Britain's ruling elite. Some of the earlier open sores—the Suez Crisis, the Profumo Affair—remain controversial, but were far enough removed to be tolerable and for a reasonably honest though limited depiction. The closer he comes to the present day, however, and to his real purpose, the greater Morgan's problems.

Most of these are self-inflicted. Morgan has long held an unhealthy fascination with the House of Windsor and its travails. His willingness to present the corrosive effects of this toxic institution on those inside it has been welcome enough, but it is ultimately friendly criticism. Morgan's concern, as recent seasons of *The Crown* confirm, is how to re-ground the monarchy on more "modern" foundations.

He shares here former Labour Party prime minister Tony Blair's monarchical fascinations. After the death of Princess Diana in August 1997, Blair came to the rescue of a monarchy seen as aloof and out of touch. Brought to power that year by an electoral landslide after 18 years of Tory rule, Blair was sensitive to a simmering hostility that the bourgeoisie needed New Labour to control. With poll results showing one in four supporting abolition of the monarchy, he sought to give the institution a makeover.

The vehicle was the tragic death of Princess Diana. His presentation of her as the "people's princess" echoed her own stated desire to become the "queen of hearts." Seeking a quasi-populist veneer as a means of downplaying the vast distance between the British ruling elite and ordinary people, Blair encouraged the monarchy to put on a public display of mourning that would make them look more attentive to popular sentiment.

Morgan, who bought into the Blairite myth of a meritocracy bypassing class antagonisms, has since 2006 been trying to give an artistic version of this. His film *The Queen* dealt with the aftermath of Diana's death, presenting a flawed institution that needed not abolition but reform. It had weathered the worst storm, but all came good in the end thanks to Blair. Morgan has called *The Crown* "a love letter" to Elizabeth II.

Season 5 runs from 1991 and the stage-managed "second honeymoon" of Charles (Dominic West) and Diana (Elizabeth Debicki), to their 1997 divorce and the election of Blair (Bertie Carvel). It is a long set-up for Morgan's return to what he earlier presented as the monarchy's most explosive crisis.

Much has changed since 2006, and few would argue that the worst is over for the Windsors. Blair is even more discredited now than he was in 2006. Morgan has to tread carefully. When Blair arrives in the last episode, his commitment to decommissioning the royal yacht Britannia is undermined by seeing its grandeur up close. We see the seeds of his conversion to modernising the monarchy.

Where *The Queen* did not tackle Diana as a character, Morgan has here put flesh on the bones, and she is the main attraction in his intended moderniser's tribute at the end of a long reign. But having to deal with an accelerating decay of the entire institution has thrown him into contortions, and even his supportive criticism has come under fire for disloyalty.

Characterizations and sympathies shift unsteadily from season to season, even from episode to episode. This is not cleverly orchestrated dramatic tension, but more often improvised reactions to new developments in the crisis of the monarchy. The showrunner is reduced to a spin doctor trying to firefight the defence of an institution springing leaks faster than he can plug them.

Since the last season was filmed, the monarchy has been wracked by the exit of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, the sex scandal involving Prince Andrew, the death of Prince Philip and, shortly before it was due to air, the death of the queen herself. This event provoked a barrage of shrill denunciations and fawning hysteria, such as Dame Judi Dench's (disgraceful) call for Netflix to present a disclaimer at the start of each episode "as a mark of respect."

Even the most insignificant portrayal is blowing up in Morgan's face. In one episode, we see loyal lady-in-waiting Lady Susan Hussey (Haydn Gwynne) suggesting supportive royal BBC coverage. Within weeks of broadcast, the real Hussey had to resign from duties over her racist treatment of a visitor to an event hosted by Queen Camilla.

Morgan is retreading earlier work in more difficult circumstances. Clumsy metaphors, already present in *The Queen*, proliferate. One sympathises when the queen (Imelda Staunton), discussing broadcasters, grumbles, "Even the televisions are metaphors in this place."

Morgan's fictionalisations have been attacked for historical

inaccuracy. Former Tory Prime Minister John Major has dismissed Charles' discussion of a possible ouster of the Queen as "malicious nonsense." Morgan's Major (a brilliantly nuanced Jonny Lee Miller) certainly has little enough to do with the man best seen as a political nonentity smoothing the way from Thatcher to Blair.

The series succeeds where it always has, in outstanding performances and evocative settings. The show has been recast continually to reflect ageing, and the latest iteration is again brilliant. But with portrayals shifting according to political expediency, there is only so much even a remarkable cast can do.

Jonathan Pryce is a somewhat alienated Prince Philip, pursuing female companionship with Penny Knatchbull (Natascha McElhone). Rather than the loyal and sometimes surprisingly perceptive moderniser of the previous season, we see—more convincingly—a hidebound traditionalist holding back any progress and change.

Implausibly, the forward-thinking mantle passes to none other than Prince Charles. Gone are the suggestions of privilege based on divine right seen in the last season, to be replaced by a frustrated but well-meaning man striving for the popular touch. An episode on the monarchy's internal reflections on modernisation finishes with captions promoting Charles's charity, The Prince's Trust. This is PR puff for Charles III, even while Morgan throws nods towards Prince William as the heir expected to rebalance the situation before too long.

West, and Lesley Manville as Princess Margaret, manage to dignify even these contemptible figures. It is an indication of the show's resources that performers of the calibre of Timothy Dalton (as Peter Townsend) and Alex Jennings (reprising his turn as the Nazi-sympathising Edward VIII/Duke of Windsor) are underused in powerful cameos.

Debicki gives one of the best portrayals of Diana yet, capturing the combination of anger and ego inside someone who was extremely shallow and limited. She wanted out of the toxic family—and to have revenge on them—while still playing her part as the queen of hearts for "the nation," and a global celebrity rubbing shoulders with the rich and powerful. Personal limitations made her susceptible to manipulation, brought out well here, and complicit in it.

The palace's paranoia in the face of a bitter external challenge make her easily presentable as a martyr, but the "Third Way" lesson for Blair—and Morgan—is only that the outsiders should be adopted and "change" welcomed to secure the future of the institution.

Morgan is relatively sympathetic to the Al-Fayeds. Businessman Mohamed (Salid Daw) wanted to use his millions to secure a place in British aristocratic circles and saw buying Harrods (the exclusive department store) and bankrolling upper class sporting events as the way to do it. This thuggish boss, who would roam Harrods randomly sacking staff, learns the customs of the British bourgeoisie from a former valet to the Duke of Windsor.

To the British aristocracy, he was never more than a "jumped-up Arab shopkeeper." But he represented the glittering financial world of the 1980s and '90s that was becoming richer and more significant than their "old money." This is the world to which Diana—and all of the younger royals—gravitated.

The only time we see a natural and unaffected Diana is when she is deputed to socialise with Mohamed at the Royal Windsor horse show, and they bond as outsiders. Mohamed recognises that he is not accepted, despite his money and the easy charm of his son Dodi (Khalid Abdalla). Dodi is also the product of a poisonous milieu of wealth. Mohamed dismisses the aspirant film producer as a playboy whose "sole talent" is attracting women, "where he might still hit the jackpot."

Everything is racing towards the Paris underpass next season.

The point, however, is what Morgan makes of that and why. The key lies in the central episode "Ipatiev House," focusing on the exhumation, identification and reburial of the bodies of the Tsar's family.

Morgan conveys accurately the character of the Stalinist functionaries who oversaw the restoration of capitalism. Lunching with the Queen, Boris Yeltsin (Anatoly Kotenev) declares, "in our heart of heart we are all still monarchists," proposing a toast, "To the good tsarist times."

As the Romanovs are identified using Philip's DNA, the British royals debate their deaths. The Bolsheviks pulled the triggers (in 1918), says Philip, but who has the blood on their hands?

The finger is pointed at then-Queen Mary, who advised against sending a ship to rescue them. The series' real concern emerges in the discussion of this by Penny Knatchbull and the queen. Knatchbull blames rivalry between Mary and her sister, Tsarina Alexandra, but Elizabeth disagrees. Mary, she says, was too busy protecting the monarchy against the threat of popular working-class revolt, and could not countenance the presence of the Romanovs rescued from revolution for fear of its radicalising impact.

Morgan's sympathies clearly lie with Elizabeth, and the Romanov dynasty, in the battle against the threat from below.

The series has rarely looked beyond the palace gates and is generally unconvincing when it does. But it is acutely conscious of what is out there. A crisis of the monarchy is the sharpest representation of a deepening crisis of bourgeois rule and all its institutions—not only the monarchy, but also parliament, discredited by their defence of obscene wealth at one pole of society amid the ever-worsening poverty at the other.

Charting a way through all this would have been complicated for anyone, and it would take a more substantial artistic figure than Morgan—and a somewhat different vehicle—to have any chance of success. The political and artistic compromises on display here promise only worse to come in his intended triumphant conclusion.