

Kate Middleton's cancer diagnosis, the crisis of the British monarchy and the politics of diversion

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The blanket media coverage and public fascination over the absence of Kate Middleton, Princess of Wales, from public duties since she underwent abdominal surgery in January has barely abated after the March 22 video announcement that she is undergoing “preventive” chemotherapy treatment for cancer.

Her two-minute address, watched by millions, dominated news, online and print media in Britain for days.

Since January 17, when Kensington Palace issued a statement revealing the princess had been admitted to hospital for surgery and would be absent from royal duties until after Easter, media speculation had mounted. Gastrointestinal surgeons were invited by news anchors to offer possible diagnoses, while conspiracy theories on X, Tik Tok and Facebook exploded.

Buckingham Palace's January 17 announcement that King Charles was seeking treatment for an enlarged prostate, followed by news just weeks later that the 75-year-old monarch has cancer, plunged Britain's monarchy into a full-blown crisis.

So tenuous has the connection between the Royal Family and that manufactured entity known as “the British public” become that when Prince William hastily withdrew from a memorial service for his Godfather, King Constantine of Greece, citing “personal reasons”, few believed statements from the palace that there was nothing to see.

Social media posts linking William's absence to the death of Thomas Kingston—the son-in-law of Prince Michael of Kent, formerly involved with Kate's sister Pippa Middleton—were widely discussed (the 45-year-old financier was found dead with a gunshot wound on February 25). Rumours of an affair, a royal divorce and even domestic violence circulated.

When Kensington Palace acted to quell rumours, releasing a photograph on Mothers' Day of the princess with her children, it backfired spectacularly. Social media commentators showed how the image had been altered, and news agencies withdrew the photo from circulation, with Middleton forced to issue an apology.

After Middleton's video last Friday, the wilder conspiracy theories have been laid to rest but her illness alongside that of the king has underscored a sense of crisis for Britain's slimmed-down monarchy following the death of Queen Elizabeth II.

Since mid-January, Charles's public ceremonial duties have been performed by Queen Camilla. But the consort, not known for her work ethic, announced she would be taking a week-long break

at the start of March, with scrutiny falling on the few remaining royals able legally to act in place of the king: his sister Anne the princess royal, aged 73, and their younger brother Prince Edward Duke of Edinburgh—who is being hailed, desperately, as “the Royals' leading man” (*Time Magazine, Tatler, Telegraph*).

Commentary in the British press has underscored the nervousness of the ruling class. The *New Statesman's* March 22 headline, “Kate Middleton and the sickness of a nation” described “locust years at the House of Windsor”, observing, “Royalty truly is a mirror of the nation. Part-collapsed, sickened, dragged through the mud... Not a consecrated symbol any longer. But an accurate one.”

Political commentator Andrew Marr described a “smaller and frailer royal family than Britain is used to,” noting, “The late Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh produced a decades-long outward show of imperturbability and stability. How quickly it has collapsed.”

Politico identified “Britain's royal vacuum”, describing how the absence of senior royals was causing headaches for the Sunak government in an election year, and citing a former government aide that “Particularly for Tory voters, part of feeling good about the country, and the direction of the country, is having stability in the royal household.”

The royal family is currently bracing for next week's Netflix drama *Scoop*, depicting Prince Andrew's toe-curling *Newsnight* interview about his connections to Jeffrey Epstein. So toxic are relations within this divided family that Prince Harry and his wife Meghan reportedly found out about Middleton's diagnosis at the same time as the public, via the princess's video release.

Of the coronation of King Charles III in May 2023, the *World Socialist Web Site* commented, “Far from offering the chance for a renewal of the monarchy, restoring its popularity, the coronation will confirm the decline in support for this rotten institution, especially among the younger generation, marking its terminal crisis.”

After the Queen's death on September 8, 2022, the WSWs noted, “the earnest hope of the ruling class is that Charles' time on the throne is short so that the carefully groomed and prepared Prince William can have a chance to restore a much-reduced monarchy's public standing.”

Even this hope has been battered by what the *New* described as “reputation-shredding social media rumours” that have altered perceptions of the prince, especially after the embarrassing revelations about his character in Harry’s tell-tale memoir *Spare*.

But the monarchy in turmoil still plays a critical role. At a time of acute political crisis for the British bourgeoisie, with mass demonstrations against the Tory government and Labour’s backing for the Gaza genocide, the royal family has again proved its usefulness in distracting and degrading political and cultural life.

As far as the British media is concerned, Israel’s genocide in Gaza and NATO’s war against Russia that threatens the nuclear annihilation of humanity pales beside the personal woes and misfortunes of the royal family. Media obsession with Middleton’s whereabouts and her cancer scare served to push aside (and last week obliterate) virtually everything beyond the bounds of Clarence House and Windsor Estate.

Middleton and King Charles III are among 393,000 people diagnosed with cancer in the UK every year—one every 90 seconds. While the royals are receiving the best treatment money can buy, tens of thousands are forced to take their chances in a National Health Service starved of resources through decades of budget cuts and outright looting by the financial oligarchy.

Cancer survival rates in Britain are lagging 15 years behind other major nations, with thousands of patients denied life-saving chemotherapy and radiation treatment, according to research by University of College London published February. 167,000 people die from cancer in the UK each year, 460 people on average every day.

In 2023, waiting times for cancer treatment were the worst on record, with just 64.1 percent of patients starting treatment within 62 days of cancer being suspected, according to NHS data analysed by the BBC. Macmillan Cancer Support CEO Gemma Peters called the figures “shocking”, saying they highlighted “the desperate situation for people living with cancer”.

Meanwhile in Gaza, cancer patients are being bombed in their hospital beds by Israel’s genocidal military assault, backed by the British government and the British military, headed by its Commander-in-Chief King Charles III.

Public preoccupation with the royals reveals unhealthy aspects of contemporary cultural and political life in Britain that are not easily brushed aside: an accepting attitude toward hereditary privilege, national insularity, and the role of social media platforms including X/Twitter in promoting right-wing conspiracy theories while censoring and suppressing socialist and left-wing views. But while deliberately sidelined, opposition to the monarchy and all it stands for is real.

By Sunday, “senior Whitehall figures” were blaming Russia, China and Iran for social media rumours targeting the royal family, accusations faithfully retailed by every section of British press. “Part of the modus operandi of hostile states is to destabilise things—whether that is undermining the legitimacy of our elections or other institutions,” a senior government official told the *Telegraph*.

The crisis of British institutions has little to do with Russian,

Chinese, or Iranian interference. ~~Situations~~ the shattering of the economic, political and moral legitimacy of British and world capitalism.

In November 1992, Queen Elizabeth II marked the 40th anniversary of her accession to the throne with a speech at London’s Guildhall that described an “Annus Horribilis” for the monarchy. Press headlines have used the phrase often in recent weeks (as a journalistic flourish) to describe the royal family’s current predicament.

The queen’s speech to the London guilds in 1992 was unusually strained as she alluded to scandals which had rocked the family that year, including the separation of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson, Princess Anne’s divorce from Mark Phillips, and the release of Princess Diana’s biography exposing details of her unhappy marriage to Prince Charles, including his affair with Camilla Parker-Bowles. Windsor Castle was gutted by fire just days before the speech.

The queen referenced “months of worldwide turmoil and uncertainty”, appealing for understanding and seeking to connect with broader feelings of unease. While the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 had been hailed as the “death of socialism” and “triumph of capitalism”, the post-war order was unravelling. The queen spoke at the height of a global recession (unemployment in Britain reached 12.1 percent in November) and just two months after Black Wednesday’s collapse of the pound sterling. War erupted in the Balkans, stoked by the NATO powers, aimed at reducing the territories of the former Yugoslavia to the status of neo-colonial protectorates.

The royal family’s troubles of the early 1990s appear a veritable golden age of stability compared to now. In her 1992 speech, Elizabeth appealed to the power of tradition, insisting that change could be “incorporated into the stability and continuity of a great institution,” but since then the monarchy’s crisis has deepened. Historically speaking it is terminal. The monarchy and its leading figures are overwhelmed by processes beyond their control. Their retreat inwards, behind the secluded walls of their estates, speaks to a deeper political and ideological impasse. As BBC royal correspondent Michael Cole told *Politico* this month, the events of recent months have revealed just “how bare the royal cupboard now is.”



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