

How to cite this paper:

Palade, B. (2024). Totem and Taboo: Religious Features of the British Public Support for Monarchy. *Perspective Politice*. Vol. XVII, no. 1-2. Pages 147-158.

<https://doi.org/10.25019/perspol/24.17.11>

Received: April 2024

Accepted: September 2024

Published: December 2024

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Article

Totem and Taboo: Religious Features of the British Public Support for Monarchy

Abstract: *As Christopher Hitchens remarked in his book about the British monarchy, the cult of the Windsor family, with its periodic rituals and the fetishizing of the most senior royals resembles a secular religion. The British monarchy is surrounded by secrecy, as many actions of the sovereign and senior royals, including those having a public or political impact are not transparent, nor are most records from the royal archives available to the public or to historians. This paper will first examine the religious features of the public support for the British monarchy. Then, it will advance a hypothetical explanation of the enduring nature of this institution through its mysterious/religious nature. It will also consider the fact that in recent decades the image of the Windsor family has been harmed by numerous*

scandals related to adultery, divorce, sexual abuse and even racism. Notwithstanding this ignominious behavior, the royal mystique has been preserved with the aid of a press that seems profitably interested in rousing public devotion to the monarch and in demonizing scapegoats. The pro-establishment media, including the tabloids that combine the sacred with the profane, is thus similar to a secular clergy. Republican dissenters who advocate the abolition of monarchy play the role of heretics. They are often persecuted, arrested and derided. There is also the “religiously indif-

ferent” population that is uninterested in the Royal Family. British “public religion” is thus a peculiar kind of pre-modern cult that strangely survived the Enlightenment and the challenges of liberal democracy. Such values are promoted within civil society especially by the British pressure group Republic, whose campaign for changing the form of government has gained more visibility and support in recent years.

Keywords: *inherited privilege; monarchy; royal mystery; secular religion; transparency*

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1. Introduction

In 1990, the well-known critic of religion Christopher Hitchens published a book that made an indirect plea for a British constitutional reform. Hitchens satirized the British monarchy, which he called “a fetish”, by attacking its “taboo”. He wrote this book during the popular reign of Elizabeth II, before the era of royal scandals in which most of her children divorced and the heir to the throne confessed his marital infidelity. Back then, Hitchens could confidently call the public love and support for the monarchy “a secular religion” (Hitchens, 1990, p.10). Interestingly enough, there is no mention of “royalism” in Tamas Nyirkos’s rather comprehensive introduction to modern belief systems seen as “secular religions” (Nyirkos, 2024, pp.1-10).

Decades after the publication of Hitchens’s book and after the royal scandals, such as the recent one regarding Prince Andrew and Jeffrey Epstein, have reached new infamous dimensions, it seems difficult to explain how the cult of the Windsor family has been kept alive and why a majority of British people still favor the monarchy.

During the 2024 royal health crisis involving both King Charles III and Catherine, Princess of Wales, there was even more public confusion regarding the future of the British monarchy. While not aiming to predict if this institution will endure, this paper attempts to explain the constant popularity of the British royal family by considering the religious nature of the belief in monarchy and the role that the media (the “secular clergy”) plays for enhancing royalist devotion.

2. The Religious Features of the British Public Support for Monarchy

In what follows, I will elaborate on the most striking elements by which the British support for the royal family and for the institution of monarchy resembles a religious cult, although a rather syncretic one. The methodology I am using here is that of *pattern* and *context identification*. My focus will be on identifying the main “religious” patterns in support of the idea that British monarchy is similar to a religious institution. I will also comment on the contexts that may allow us to claim that the popularity of the British royal family resembles a “mundane” religious cult.

2.1. The coronation Ritual

The Old Testament describes an episode in which Solomon is anointed king by Zadok the Priest at the bequest of his father, King David. Zadok is pouring oil “from the sacred tent” on Solomon’s head (The Holy Bible, Book of Kings, 1, pp.32-39). To enliven this old tradition and to make the ceremony more religiously significant, in May 2023 the Archbishop of Canterbury has anointed King Charles III with chrism oil consecrated in Jerusalem, a “holy”, perfumed olive oil.

This traditional coronation ritual may raise more questions than answers in the modern era. First, the tradition in question follows the pre-modern doctrine of the legitimacy of a monarch by divine right. It means that the king rules by God’s mandation and is therefore unaccountable to any secular authority, such as the Parliament for example. That tradition predates the “Glorious Revolution” and is by no means compatible with its aftermath.

Another question refers to the “sacrality” of this ceremony. Is the British monarch “holy” after his religious anointment? What does the King’s “holiness” mean for British politics, for example?

Last but not least, the symbols used in this ceremony, the scepter and the orb, are inherited from the bygone era in which the monarch had actual political power and claimed to have a spiritual authority similar to that of the Pope. The first king that had used these symbols for his coronation was Henry VIII in 1509. Did Charles III, who has been invested with the same symbols at his coronation in 2023, want to suggest that he has retained a similar political power and competes with the Pope’s moral and spiritual authority?

2.2. The Head of the Anglican Church

During the coronation of a British monarch, he or she must swear to uphold the Protestant faith, which is effectively a sectarian mission that looks outdated in a Western pluralistic environment such as contemporary British society.

Besides defending only one religious creed as Supreme Governor of the Church of England, the monarch, who is also the head of state, implicitly negates by his or her oath the separation of Church and State, that is one of the greatest achievements of the Enlightenment.

The fact that, unlike his predecessor, Charles III has a predilection for finding common grounds of many religions, as he did in his Christmas speech on December 25, 2023, is also testament to the irrelevance of his governorship of one particular church.

2.3. Royal birthday festivities

Trooping the Colour is not a feast organized on the actual birthday of the monarch. The monarch has a ceremonial birthday that is conveniently set each year on a Saturday in June and is publicly celebrated with glamor, pageantry and military pomp.

Just like the birthday of the god of Sun Mithra (later Sol Invictus), the Egyptian god Horus and Jesus of Nazareth was celebrated around the winter solstice, the birthday of British monarchs is ritually commemorated around the summer solstice.

State ceremonies are part of the theater of politics in republics, as well as in monarchies. It is widely accepted that human beings have an ingrained need for ritual and ceremony in order to construct meaning.

British royal ceremonies are however more extravagant than in other European countries that have preserved the institution of monarchy. European royals celebrate “milestones” as well. For example, on October 15, 2023 Denmark honored the 18th birthday of Prince Christian, the current Crown Prince. The moment had constitutional implications because from that day on Prince Christian had the prerogative to take on regency responsibilities or even reign on his own (Royal Central, 2022).

Nevertheless, there are no annual festivities in Denmark or in other European monarchies apart from the UK for celebrating the monarch’s “official birthday”. No military skills, horsemanship and fanfare are regularly displayed to glorify the incumbent monarch in a similar fashion.

2.4. Royal Births, Weddings and Funerals

The rites of passage of senior royals, such as their births, weddings and funerals are usually occasions of public joy or national mourning in the UK and many Commonwealth countries. For example, in July 2013, a media frenzy began around the birth of a new member of the

Windsor dynasty. That particular royal baby was Prince George of Cambridge, currently George of Wales, the second in line to the throne after his father, Prince William. The collective joy inspired by his birth was only comparable to the public excitement elicited by his parents' magnificent royal wedding in April 2011. More recently, the passing of Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth II occasioned remembrance services and days of national mourning not just in the United Kingdom, but also in Commonwealth realms.

Such grand commemorations are only due to the privilege of being born or marrying into the royal family. Of course, funerals of heads of states are also public events in republics. Yet, celebrating with so much publicity and pomp important moments in the lives of other senior members of the House of Windsor (heirs and spares alike) is more akin to a cult-like behavior. We should add here the fact that the security for such grandiose public events is usually supported by taxpayer funds. These hidden costs of preserving the institution of monarchy are a major argument made by anti-monarchist voices in civil society, such as the British campaign group Republic.

2.5. The Mystery

Many actions of the sovereign and senior royals, including those that may have had a serious political impact, like the monarch's support of some key Privy Council decisions, are not transparent to the public. For example, there are no public records available to historians of Elizabeth II's contribution to her imperial government's decisions about the British colonial repression of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya. That brutal crush of a national rebellion by an occupying power, that has later led to the building of what some historians call "a Gulag" in Kenya (Elkins, 2005, pp. 5-24), began in 1952, just a few months after her accession.

Given the secrecy around her own involvement in colonial oppression, Elizabeth II could later pass for a genteel champion of the Commonwealth project that would replace imperial power relations with a brotherhood of equal nations.

In the same vein, the former Prince of Wales, now King Charles III, was known to be lobbying British politicians through personal letters. The content of those letters is widely unknown, nor was the British public ever informed about their political impact.

There is also a lack of transparency with regard to obscure donations to Charles' charities, such as a £1 million donation from a half-brother of Osama bin Laden, £2.6 million paid in cash by a former prime minister of Qatar to the Charitable Fund of the then Prince of Wales and a cash-for-honors donation from a Saudi billionaire in return for British citizenship and a knighthood (Ward, 2023).

Keeping such controversial donations low profile or even hidden from the public is nothing short of unfair if we recall the 2006-2007 scandal around political donations given in exchange for life peerages, because it means that royals are not judged according to the same standards as British politicians. The same legal clemency doesn't apply to other European royals, as it was clear from the corruption investigations on former King Juan Carlos I's dealings with the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia.

History, too, can be selectively concealed in order to preserve the magic of the Windsor cult. Christopher Hitchens recalls, for example, the 1988 tercenary of the "Glorious Revolution" that was officially commemorated in London while drawing a small velvet curtain across the plaque that recorded, in Westminster Hall, the trial of Charles I in which the Stuart king was convicted. The trial led to his execution in January 1649.

“The Crown in Parliament” is ritually celebrated each year. For example, in November 2023 King Charles III opened the Parliament dressed in full regalia, with Queen Camilla in similar traditional clothes by his side. In order to uphold this theatrical solemnity, the inconvenient chunk of history that records how Oliver Cromwell advocated the execution of King Charles I is totally ignored (Hitchens, 1990, p. 11).

Some authors, such as Victorian constitutional essayist Walter Bagehot, claimed in *The English Constitution* (1867) that the strategy of secrecy is essential to keep alive the magic and fairy tale of the monarchy. Daylight must not be allowed to break the spell, since “royalty is to be revered”, not poked about (Bagehot, 1867 cited in Hitchens, 1990, p.14).

The magic of royalty seems to be perceived as being of a beneficial kind, like the white magic by which Shakespeare’s good magician Prospero restores the order (Shakespeare, 1995, p. 96). By claiming that the values of “stability”, “order” and “unity” are generated by their most cherished institution, royalists basically suggest that “the chaos” of politics could only be counteracted through the good magic of monarchy.

However, a more realistic approach to the royal mystery considers the fact that the royal family has flaws, but the “subjects” need not be aware of them in order to keep worshipping the Windsors. The faults of the royals are a distraction that would prevent the efficacy of the monarchy as a kind of “opiate of the people” (Hitchens, 1990, p. 15).

Likewise, pressurizing the royals to be more “relatable”, according to the current trend in regard to political leaders and celebrities, may again dilute the magic of royalty. A lack of transparency and a stiff upper lip are still welcome by hardcore royalists belonging to older, more conservative generations.

Younger generations that grew up with celebrities who over shared details about their own life, demand, on the contrary, more transparency from the royal family. This was clear by the online pressure on Catherine, Princess of Wales to reveal the state of her health during her medical leave in early 2024.

2.6. The Clergy

The Palace press office’s collusion with the most profane quarters of the media reportedly began from the early years of Fleet Street (Hitchens, 1990, p. 13). To this day, there is a propaganda machine around the most important British royals that is mostly spread by tabloids such as *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror* and *The Times*, and by the right-wing, populist news channel GBNews, that is the media trumpet of the Reform UK party. British tabloids are typically saturated with profane gossip and scandalous stories written for entertainment purposes. Their huge contribution to the royal propaganda consists in frequent reports of what the royals do or wear and in apologetic columns.

The journalists-priests that celebrate the liturgical propaganda are the so-called “royal experts”. Many of them appear to have taken a pledge to defend senior members of the royal family against every criticism or trolling. They occasionally move from a defensive style to a more assertive propaganda and a rhetoric of praise. In difficult or uncertain times, however, as during the recent health crises of Charles III and Catherine, Princess of Wales, royal experts may deliver more guarded messages.

The tabloids are also known for their dirty campaigns against the rivals of senior royals or against more minor royals whose image can be sacrificed in order to elevate the profile of the highest in rank. At the beginning of her royal career, the same Catherine, then Duchess of

Cambridge, was often the topic of salacious, yet moralistic columns that dwelt on her wardrobe malfunctions. The authors of those articles usually highlighted how dignified and wise was by contrast the main royal idol of the time, Queen Elizabeth II.

The tabloids and the television channels that dedicate sycophantic shows to the royal family thus play the role of the clergy in the secular worship of the Windsors. Their craft is to write or speak about profane aspects of the Windsors' activities and appearance in ways that enhance the public devotion to the "sacred" institution they represent.

2.7. The Scapegoats

The notion of "scapegoat" was originally used in *The Old Testament* (The Holy Bible, Book of Leviticus, 16). According to the biblical account, a goat has taken on the sins of the Israelites and was sent into the wilderness. That was part of the preparation for the Jewish feast Yom Kippur. The Israelites were left "clean" after the animal that was ritually burdened with their sins was dispatched to an uninhabited place.

Finding royal scapegoats has a tradition, if we recall how the negative image of the former King Edward VIII and his wife Wallis Simpson, later known as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, was used to enhance the moral authority of other British senior royals.

In his provocative 2023 memoir, Prince Harry exposed private aspects of the life of his family, which was evidently a breach of confidentiality (Prince Harry, 2023). He depicted his brother, Prince William, and his sister-in-law, Catherine, as cold and arrogant. His step-mother, Camilla, was portrayed as a malicious opportunist who plotted with the press against him and his brother in order to mend her own public reputation¹.

Even if those confessions about other members of the royal family came from a bitter place, they cannot be seen as more morally outrageous than Prince Andrew's friendship with sex offenders Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell or Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of the former Libyan dictator Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Prince Harry and his wife Meghan are however blamed for so many real or imaginary sins by the pro-establishment media (the "secular clergy"), that other members of the royal family, including Prince Andrew, almost pale by comparison. The negative campaign against the Duke and Duchess of Sussex has been relentless ever since they left royal duties, which speaks volumes about the need to vilify scapegoats.

If Prince Harry's approval ratings in the UK were high before he abdicated his public duties in 2020, in the meantime both his and his wife's have plummeted, while his brother's and his sister-in-law's popularity remained relatively steady.

In January 2023, after he revealed in *Spare* that his brother had physically assaulted him, Prince William's approval rating declined, too. So, if in December 2022, 77% in the UK had a positive opinion of Prince William, in January 2023, after the release of *Spare*, his popularity went down to 69%. Over the following year, it grew again, until it reached 77% in February 2024 (Statista, 2024b).

In November 2019, before the announcement that Prince Harry and his wife Meghan were about to step back from royal duties, 72% in the UK had a positive opinion about the Prince. Since then, his positive rating has steadily declined. In February 2024, only 33% still had a favorable opinion of him. There was a drop in numbers after each moment in which the former senior royal couple aired their dissatisfaction with the "Firm": the 2021 Oprah interview, the 2022 Netflix documentary and the release of *Spare* in 2023 (Statista, 2024c).

The fact that the Sussex couple had benefited financially from voicing their grievances didn't help, either. British conservatives who cherish the Windsor mystique were annoyed that not only did they breach the royal taboo, but they have also profited from it. Their selective "recollections" about their royal experiences have further irritated the monarchists. For example, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex omitted to recall their costly, magnificent royal wedding at Windsor Castle in May 2018, for which the policing and security bill paid by taxpayers was £3.4m, other costs being supported by the then Charles, Prince of Wales (Davies, 2018).

While they have many critics and trolls who align themselves with the British tabloids, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex also have their supporters. Part of their followers are grouped into a fringe online movement called the "Sussex Squad" that claims to fight against racist prejudices. Its members worship the Sussex couple by aggrandizing their royal rank, vilify Prince William and his wife Catherine, ridicule Queen Consort Camilla and harass journalists who have criticized their idols. Therefore, even anti-Windsor groups that pretend to be more progressive in nature mimic the cult-like, hagiographic behavior of conservative royalists and need scapegoats to ritually "clean" their idols.

2.8. The Heretics

King Charles III's coronation in May 2023 wasn't an uneventful ceremony in terms of preventing anti-monarchist protests. The Metropolitan Police preemptively arrested Graham Smith, the leader of the anti-monarchist group Republic, and other 63 people. Six of the people arrested were republican activists. These people are "the heretics" of the public religion of Britain.

True religious heretics usually challenge the orthodoxy. In 2023, Graham Smith published a book, *Abolish the Monarchy: Why We Should and How We Will*, in which he rebuked with arguments relying on facts the most important myths cited by royalists in defense of their precious institution. He claims that the British royal household is involved in corruption, racial prejudice, feudal exploitation of property and avoidance of corporate taxes (Smith, G., 2023, pp. 58-86).

Perhaps his strongest argument that relies on principles is the need for a British Constitution that would guarantee the rights and liberties of *citizens*. Another striking point is that a society that encourages the inherited privilege of both the Windsor dynasty and the aristocracy cannot be a true democracy that promotes meritocracy and higher moral standards for politicians, beginning with the head of state.

During World War II, Britain had a close call to become a Nazi country due to the notorious keenness for Hitler of King Edward VIII. The government only managed to push him out by invoking high moral principles in regard to his relationship with American divorcee Wallis Simpson (Smith, G., 2023, pp. 43-44). But it is legally and constitutionally harder to remove a dangerous king than a dangerous president. And, after the moral standards required of the sovereign have been significantly relaxed, especially after the accession of Charles III, it would be even more difficult in the future to banish an inconvenient successor to the throne.

2.9. The Religiously Indifferent

According to a survey made by British pollster YouGov one year after Charles III's accession, 62% of Britons still supported the monarchy, while only 26% wanted the country to have an elected head of state. A further 11% were unsure (Smith, M., 2023). Another survey from the

National Centre for Social Research that collected data from 2022 and 2023 showed an even more interesting result: while 55% still considered the monarchy to be important, only 29% said that it was “very important” (National Centre for Social Research, 2023). That is the lowest percentage of staunch British royalists on record and it suggests a widespread degree of indifference towards the royal family.

Every religion has its ardent followers, its tepid believers and a religiously indifferent, usually purely nominal fold. Apparently, after the passing of Queen Elizabeth II, who was a highly respected royal figure that enjoyed very good approval ratings, her less remarkable successors are not able to inspire the same reverence.

The “heretical” group Republic waits for the support for the monarchy to drop, as people become more critical to the cost of the institution, especially in harsher economic times. Republican activists hope that the religiously indifferent could in time turn into sympathizers of their own cause after a more honest public debate on the costs and value of the monarchy.

3. A Hypothesis about the Popularity of Monarchy in Britain

In light of this analysis, what could explain the enduring popularity of the Windsor family, regardless of the flaws of some of its members, is successful propaganda and manipulation (the work of “the clergy”). The lack of transparency that has so far protected the “royal mystery” can also be a factor.

The modus operandi of the British press is to combine the “sacred” with the “profane” in order to uphold the monarchy. British tabloids provide constant entertainment by commenting on the royal drama, and thus boost loyalty to the Windsors.

If the financial affairs of the Windsor family were more critically examined, the public conversation about this institution would have been more honest, and the general opinion about it would probably have reached the point of disenchantment or even trust erosion.

The magic of the monarchy has survived not only by covering in mystery the personality, opinions and political impact of key royal figures like Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, who followed the policy “never complain, never explain”, but also by finding scapegoats when less enigmatic and more discredited royals needed the protection of the media.

In September 2022, immediately after his accession, Charles III’s popularity surged to 70%, an increase of 16% from May 2022, when the then Prince of Wales was only liked by 54% of Britons. Since then, his approval rating has slightly decreased. There has been a small increase before the 2023 coronation, when the King’s favorability rating reached 63%. In February 2024, after he made public his cancer diagnosis in an unprecedented move for a British sovereign, his popularity rose again to 66%, presumably due to the solidarity of the British public with the ailing, yet resilient King (Statista, 2024d). The increase is not very significant, however, and the monarch is still less popular now than he was after his accession.

If hardcore royalists still cultivate strong beliefs in the value of monarchy, the lukewarm believers and the apathetic “subjects” adhere to the cult of the royals mostly by custom.

Another reason why this secular cult endures is the failure of imagination about the future that comes from the habit of linking British identity to the monarchy. Why this connection can be problematic, especially in the light of the “Glorious Revolution”, is a different topic.

4. A Softened Royal Taboo?

The culture of secrecy around royal affairs used to be strongly protected in the UK. This means that many critical topics related to the interests, health or public image of the Windsor family were hidden from the public.

Some economic, legislative and political aspects of the monarchy touched by Graham Smith in his critical book *Abolish the Monarchy* are very seldom referred to in the British press. They are usually considered too irreverent to the royal family, whose senior members are often portrayed as royal “assets” or “resources”, especially for their charity work and their diplomacy (Smith, G., 2023, p. 4, 13), instead of a liability (like Prince Andrew) and a burden to the country’s budget (due to the huge security costs needed to protect them).

According to Smith, even some reasonable criticism of the effectiveness of royal patronages on charities is usually avoided by the British media. It is seldom examined for example if securing a royal patronage will guarantee a charity’s fundraising success (Smith, G., 2023, pp. 14-24).

As for diplomacy, while the late Queen Elizabeth II was usually regarded as a positive international player and was respected world-wide, the same cannot be said of her successors. To recall just a few examples, the scandal around dubious donations to the Prince of Wales’ Charitable Fund in which Charles was involved, Prince Andrew’s association with a Libyan dictator and a convicted pedophile and Prince William’s tone-deaf approach to diplomacy in the Commonwealth have compromised to some extent the royal family’s international prestige.

Elizabeth II was so widely appreciated due to an effective PR strategy to portray her as a champion of good causes. There was also a taboo against her most objectionable actions. In 1965, by using a secretive Order in the Privy Council, she decided that Chagos islands were to be turned into an US military depot. Between 1968 and 1973 the 1500-2000 islanders were banished from their homes and ended up living in slums in Mauritius and the Seychelles (Stone, 2023). Not only did her son Andrew behave like a “lord of war”, with his enthusiastic support for weapons trade, but apparently the Queen, too, was keen on the subject of ordnance and military bases.

And if the topic of the real carbon footprint of the current “green” monarch, Charles III, weren’t almost unmentionable (Crosbie, 2023), it would be exposed by the British press with exact figures after every new environmental speech (Smith, G., 2023, p. 102). The same goes for Prince William, another big emitter of fossil fuels who promotes environmental causes (Smith, G., 2023, p.105). The British tabloids mainly focus on Prince Harry and his wife’s motorcades and private jet flights, blaming “the eco-hypocrites”, but avoid inquiring into the environmental impact of their royal relatives who are even more vocal in their activism for the planet Earth (some cases in point being Charles III’ speech at COP28 in Dubai and William’s Earthshot prizes).

As I already mentioned, the culture of royal secrecy has also involved Catherine, Princess of Wales, during her medical leave. The initial lack of transparency in this case, coupled with Kensington Palace’s incautious release of a heavily edited photo of the Princess and her three children, only amplified the rumors around her “mysterious absence” and fueled conspiracy theories.

On the other hand, until a frail-looking Catherine revealed in a video, in late March 2024, that she too was undergoing preventative chemotherapy for cancer, many royalists shared a kind of religious belief in her survival, in spite of unclear evidence. During her public absence, various reports about “encounters” with the Princess around Windsor castle were given to British news-

papers by members of the public who claimed, usually without photographic evidence, to “have seen her again”, just like early Christians claimed to “have seen” the Risen Lord.

Just as the late Princess Diana, Catherine, the current Princess of Wales, is an important royal player, because of her supply of charisma that is much needed to reinforce “the cult of Windsorism” (Hitchens, 1990, p. 15). The dry, legal and traditional legitimacy of the Windsors is hardly impressive without the third Weberian element of authority, the appeal of charisma.

The group Republic has insistently demanded transparency with regard to the Princess of Wales’ real reasons for missing in action (Friel, 2024) and has launched a campaign on their website to end royal secrecy (Republic, 2024). Catherine’s absence has been compared with the potential medical leave of a prime-minister or another public servant who would be more accountable to the British public.

However, given the relative openness of Charles III and eventually of the Princess of Wales about their diagnoses and treatments, the royal taboo can be said to be less strict now than it used to be during the reign of Elizabeth II. It has been suggested that both Prince Philip and Elizabeth II had suffered from cancer, but at that time the royal prohibition against exposing serious health issues was more severe and the public didn’t want to know such details. Now, in the era of oversharing personal concerns through social media there is much more circumspection if someone, especially a charismatic public figure, demands privacy and is not seen for a while, as he or she is known to be ill.

It is difficult to predict with certainty if the British monarchy will reform its culture of secrecy, but there are signs that the antiquated PR policy of “never complain, never explain“ is no longer being followed as literally as in the past. Nevertheless, other “religious” elements of the cult of Windsors are still in place and may explain why the British monarchy is still supported by a majority.

5. Conclusions

It has often been acknowledged by republicans that both monarchy and aristocracy discourage meritocracy in Britain by allowing inherited privilege. The British class system that persists is basically a “crowned” feudal hierarchy. It is the sort of system that was abolished by the French Revolution, being strongly criticized back in 1788 by Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, in his *Essay on Privileges* (Sieyès, 2018). The idea that some people are born superior inhibits in principle objective assessments of individual merits and fair opportunities.

If sound arguments against monarchy are to be made, they should mainly rely on principles, rather than on *ad hominem* attacks on the current members of the royal family. The secret dealings of some British royals with dubious international figures, as well as the contribution of some late monarchs to the history of colonial oppression and slavery must be inquired into and acknowledged. But it is unfair to indiscriminately attack all members of the royal family, especially some who obviously had nothing to do with those injustices. The recent online hate campaign against the ailing Princess of Wales is a case in point. Republican criticism of monarchy need not be inhumane to be powerful (Desk, 2024). If republican activists align themselves with online trolls who spread harmful misinformation, especially when their royal targets are the most vulnerable, they may compromise their otherwise legitimate cause.

For example, a valid question asked by republicans is how compatible with modern democracy is to leave the decision about who will become a head of state to the hazard of nat-

ural reproduction within a family. The same goes for hereditary positions of aristocrats. Such a social system is based on the idolatrous reverence to those who are hereditary lucky, not only in a society, but also within a family.

That this system is unfair is sometimes admitted even by conservatives who in some cases resent primogeniture. For instance, an opinion that has gained some traction among conservatives was that the stoic, down-to-earth and strong-willed Princess Anne would have made a far better monarch than her moody, eccentric and out of touch elder brother. So, if birthright and feudal primogeniture can be at times inconvenient even for conservatives who support a social hierarchy, they are all the more inadequate for believers in liberal-democratic values such as meritocracy and rule of law.

However, the enduring religious fascination with the British royal family makes it difficult to predict if rational arguments for republic and an elected head of state will prevail at a future time. For now, despite some challenges, most cult-like elements of the British public support for monarchy don't seem essentially affected. If the monarchy will survive royal scandals and debilitating health issues, that would be proof of a strong religious attachment of the British public to the House of Windsor and a very effective propaganda machine.

Note

1. As a reality-check, Queen Camilla's significant growth in popularity was more recent and had to do with her role as a Queen Consort who either supported or represented the King. See Statista (2024a).

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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