

Labour and Republicanism

Making Citizens Sovereign

Ken Ritchie



Revised 2023

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This book has been published by 'Labour for a Republic', an organisation of Labour Party members who campaign for a constitution which asserts the equal rights and sovereignty of all citizens and the replacement of the monarchy with an elected head of state.

All proceeds from the sale of this book will be used to support the work of Labour for a Republic.

labourforarepublic@gmail.com

www.labourforarepublic.org.uk

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The Author

Dr Ken Ritchie was a founder member and the first Chair of Labour for a Republic. From 1997 to 2010 he was Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society, previously having worked in international development and on human rights and refugee issues. He fought the 1987, 1992 and 1997 general elections as a Labour candidate and has served for five years as a Labour councillor.

Preface and acknowledgements

Labour for a Republic was formed in 2012 as a result of an initiative by Labour members active in 'Republic', the cross-party campaign for a republicanism. It was recognized that, although there are reasons for all parties to support republicanism, it had a special relevance to Labour whose 'for the many, not the few' campaign slogan seemed to resonate with republican values. Moreover, there had been a thread of republicanism running through Labour since its creation: if it were to be revitalized then that job could only be done from within the Party by Labour members committed to the Party's aims and its electoral success.

Those who established Labour for a Republic were clear that their opposition to the monarchy was part of their quest for socialism, but it became apparent that there was a need for a statement on how republicanism relates to socialism, on why the monarchy is an obstacle to the achievement of Labour's broad objectives and on what actions we believe Labour should take. Hence this book.

The book was first published in 2021 when Queen Elizabeth was on the throne and the Conservatives were leading in the opinion polls. A lot has happened since then. We have a new king who does not enjoy the respect that was shown to his mother, who heads a royal family that often appears at war with itself, and whose lavish coronation saw the largest demonstrations against the monarchy that the country has seen. It does not mean that the monarchy is about to fall – centuries of history have firmly embedded it in the British psyche – but its support has become more fragile, more people question its purpose and relevance, and a majority of young people want a democratic alternative.

Since 2021 we have also seen trust in politics sink even further to a new low. One Prime Minister has resigned in disgrace, his successor has

been swiftly ousted amid accusations of incompetence, and her successor leads a divided party and a government mired in scandal.

Crises are opportunities for change and, with the tide running in Labour's favour, Keir Starmer has called for 'a new approach to politics and democracy' with more power devolved to communities. How far this new approach will go towards accepting the republican view that citizens must be sovereign is not yet clear, but if the aim is to create an engaged electorate, capable of holding politicians to account, then the reforms proposed in this book are entirely consistent with these objectives.

In writing the book, I have drawn on the knowledge, insights and analysis of colleagues within Labour for a Republic. While I have endeavoured to present the views and arguments of the organisation, the responsibility for contents is mine alone.

The book would not have been completed without the support of past and present members of the Labour for a Republic committee. In the first edition I acknowledged the help of Emma Dent Coad, Kes Evoy and Betty Ritchie in proof-reading, and of Nick Wall who designed the book's cover. Nick Wall's contribution, however, has gone far beyond design work – as Chair of Labour for a Republic during a period in which its membership has quadrupled, he has played a key role in developing the case for republicanism. Thanks are also due to Theo Morgan for his assistance with research, to Sonny McCourt for historical advice and to the many excellent investigative journalists who have used their skills in holding power to account.

Finally, both Labour for a Republic and I must again acknowledge the support of 'Republic' which helped with the birth of Labour for a Republic and has provided advice and support over the years of its existence. It was Republic's Chief Executive, Graham Smith, who first convinced me that there is no place for a monarchy in a modern democracy and that the future should be republican.

Ken Ritchie
September 2023

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

This small book argues that Labour can't make the changes it wants in British society without tackling the institutions which preserve a social order based on rank, status and hereditary privilege. It argues that all citizens should be equal in terms of their political voice, that all should be treated with the same respect, and that citizens collectively should be the ultimate source of authority in the country. If citizens were sovereign, however, there would be no place for a sovereign monarch.

Part 1 notes the difficulties this creates for Labour. The monarchy is incompatible with Labour's values of socialism and democracy, but challenging the position of a monarch who still has quite a lot of public and media support could be an electoral risk. Nevertheless, republicanism is not an alien concept in Britain – it has a long history from the Levellers to the present day. Many of those who formed the Labour Party, and most notably Keir Hardie, held republican views, and there have been republicans in the Labour Party throughout its existence.

Part 2 looks at the monarchy. It may no longer have executive powers, but it still has a lot of influence which is unlikely to be used in Labour's favour. The problems with the monarchy are not just in what it does, but in the sort of divided society which it underpins – one in which class, rank and titles are important and often determined by parentage. The image it creates of Britain is not one of a modern democracy.

Opposition to the monarchy should not be based on its costs alone and neither should it be based on the royals as people. However, the royals are big and extravagant spenders of taxpayers' money, and although the senior royals are often portrayed as people of great principle and

commitment to the public good, their ethical standards have often been found wanting.

Part 3 considers what a British Republic might look like. Its constitution would assert that citizens collectively are sovereign and it would uphold their rights. The head of state would be elected for a fixed term and with clearly defined responsibilities. Heads of state would not be ‘presidents’ with executive powers as in many other countries, and parliamentary democracy would continue more or less as at present. However, to ensure accountability to citizens, a better voting system would be needed and the House of Lords replaced with an elected second chamber. Policies would seek to reverse the growth of inequality and address land reform.

A move to republicanism could help to change the dominant mindset, making people more confident in their rights as citizens and more engaged in politics, thereby reversing a dangerous slide towards more people feeling alienated by mainstream politics with consequences for the health of our democracy.

Part 4 considers what Labour must do. Although the ground has not been prepared for the abolition of the monarchy, there are steps a Labour government could take to start reducing the monarchy’s influence and costs and at the same time improve the effectiveness of government.

In some other countries monarchies have ended in times of political turmoil, but Britain has an opportunity to make a smooth and dignified transition to a republic. It is argued, however, that, for change to happen, it must have public support, and that is more likely if the replacement of the monarchy is offered as part of a package of reforms which empowers citizens and leads towards popular sovereignty.

If Labour is to achieve its ambitions, it must prepare the way for change by starting a debate on how we create a society for the many and not just the few: Labour must embrace the values of republicanism.

PART 1

SOCIALISM AND REPUBLICANISM

1. CAN LABOUR CHANGE SOCIETY?

Socialism and democracy were the founding principles of the Labour Party. Since its creation in 1900, it has championed the rights and interests of working people and of those whose lives, for whatever reasons, have been blighted by poverty, and Labour has done this using the democratic provisions of the UK's constitution. Some have questioned the purity of its socialism and its commitment to democracy, but for over a century Labour has worked for a fairer society in which all people are treated with decency and respect.

Much has been achieved. We have a National Health Service, a welfare system which provides a safety net for those facing hardship, legislation to protect employees' rights and outlaw discrimination, a minimum wage, a democracy in which everyone over 18 has a right to vote and much more. Labour has been the main driver of these changes which have resulted in people today having much more financial security, being better housed and educated and having many more opportunities for self-fulfillment than was the case in the early decades of Labour's existence. How people live their lives would, of course, have evolved without the Labour Party, but Labour can take much credit for the pace and direction of social progress.

What Labour has not achieved, however, is a transformation of society to one based on socialist values. It has won power when it has persuaded people it can run the country better – and more fairly - than its opponents, but it has never won power with the promise of a different sort of society. It continues to face an electorate which appears to be intrinsically conservative (even if not always in the party sense): having avoided the social and political upheavals that come from revolutions and civil wars, Britain has retained elements of a social culture and institutions

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which are rooted in the past and are inimical to what Labour claims as its objectives. Labour may not like the existence of class, social status and hereditary privilege, but it cannot get rid of them without tackling those institutions and aspects of our constitution which make them acceptable.

Labour can aspire to running the economy effectively, providing better services, promoting fairness and reducing inequality, but if it wants to fundamentally change the nature of society it must go further and challenge what may be regarded as our constitutional status quo. It is at that point that questions need to be asked about who the country belongs to and who sets the rules – and that's where republicanism becomes relevant.

Republicanism is about where political power lies. A republican state is one in which citizens, collectively, are the ultimate authority: they are the owners of the constitution and the institutions of governance (something often referred to as 'popular sovereignty'). All have equal rights and status, and none have power or influence other than what is bestowed on them by their fellow citizens.

If, however, the people themselves are sovereign, there is no need for a sovereign monarch. For republicans, the idea that someone should be important and influential just because of their parentage is absurd and unacceptable. It does not matter to republicans that monarchs no longer have the dictatorial powers of their predecessors – the very existence of a monarch can still underpin a privileged establishment and a society in which rank and status are important. A monarchy is therefore incompatible with republican values and its replacement with an elected head of state is therefore a key, and for many the defining, objective of republicanism.

For the Labour Party, the monarchy presents a particular challenge. Labour describes itself as 'a democratic, socialist Party', but a monarchy of immense wealth, and with privileges that others can only dream about,

doesn't fit well with socialism, and having a hereditary head of state offends against most people's understanding of democracy.

Nevertheless, in spite of the monarchy symbolising the type of society that Labour was formed to overturn, at no time has the Labour Party ever challenged the monarchy's existence. Labour leaders have, in the main, always shown a respectful deference to their monarchs: when in power Labour has formed 'Her/His Majesty's Government' and when not in power it has been 'Her/His Majesty's Loyal Opposition'. Over the years there have been some in Labour who have questioned the powers and privileges of the monarchy – including a few who have proposed its replacement with a democratic alternative - but they have tended to be lone voices in a party which has at least seemed content with the constitutional status quo.

That Labour has taken a hands-off approach to the monarchy is, however, understandable. The royals are venerated by many as symbols of Britain's nationhood and, untainted by the messy business of political debate, some of them have popularity ratings that party leaders must envy. With austerity to fight, the NHS to defend and a housing shortage to tackle, many Labour politicians have taken the view that risking votes by opposing a popular institution, which they regard as relatively harmless, is not politically wise.

However, it is a mistake to view the monarchy as a quaint and largely irrelevant left-over from a bygone age. Monarchs no longer rule the country in the way their predecessors did (although, constitutionally, they still have considerable powers to do so), but their influence on governance and on society should not be underestimated. Too often that royal influence is used to prop up the powers of a right-leaning establishment, and acceptance of the monarchy's existence reinforces a social order that is inimical to Labour's values.

Abolishing the monarchy, however, will not be easy. It is an institution which pervades almost all aspects of our national affairs and the royal brand is everywhere to be found. Its character may have changed over

the years, but it remains an important influence on our society and our politics. As Paul Richards neatly summarised it:

‘There is nothing logical about Monarchy. The British Royal Family stirs emotions which transcend rational analysis, but appeal to mystical, ancient triggers deep in our collective psyche. But the Royal Family exists beyond the realms of fantasy. Its members exist in the real world too: they cost us real money, they have real political views, they possess real powers within our constitution, they profoundly influence the society in which we live.’¹

In a society in which too many of us have been conditioned to regard the royals with awe and reverence, building enough political and public support for removing the monarchy will take time. Nevertheless, even if its abolition is not an immediately achievable political objective, the monarchy is not something Labour cannot simply ignore. The issue is not about personalities but about an institution which stands between Labour and its goal of a society free from divisions of class, rank and status. This booklet therefore argues that in order to move towards socialism, Labour must embrace the principles of republicanism and start taking the steps it can to pave the way for the creation of a society in which citizens are sovereign.

2. SOCIALISM AND REPUBLICANISM'S COMMON HERITAGE

Socialism and republicanism are two closely related sets of ideas on how societies should be organised and states structured.

A republic is a state in which political authority is vested in its citizens. Power may be exercised through politicians as citizens' chosen representatives, but the ultimate power lies with the people. Consequently, republicanism is about the rights and responsibilities of citizens and, although there is no single definition of republicanism, it is generally associated with issues such as political equality, people's opportunities to participate in the affairs of the state, liberty and justice, 'civic virtue' and the pursuit of the 'common good'.

Socialism is concerned with how the resources of the state are used for the betterment of all citizens. It is about creating a society free from poverty and in which all have opportunities to live fulfilling lives. Issues of inequality and what support is provided to the less fortunate in society are consequently major parts of the socialist agenda.

Republicanism and socialism are therefore intertwined. Both are concerned with the dignity and well-being of the individual, but while the latter focuses on the policies needed to achieve socialist objectives, republicanism is more concerned with the constitutional structures needed to make citizens sovereign.

Republicanism is a very much older concept than socialism. Some see it having its origins in the city states of ancient Greece where decisions were taken by all citizens (except those who were women or slaves!) and the word 'Republic' comes from the Latin *res publica* used by the Romans to describe their state.

Although British history is full of challenges to the power and authority of monarchs (with most of these challenges ending in bloody

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failure), the first significant British republican stirrings did not happen until the middle of the 17th century. Following a prolonged conflict between the king and parliament, the two sides took to arms in 1642, eventually resulting in the defeat of the king's forces and his execution in 1649. In the decade that followed the country described itself as a 'Commonwealth' and Cromwell, whose 'New Model Army' had secured victory in the civil war, was given the title 'Lord Protector'. Although during this period Britain was a republic in the limited sense that it did not have a king, Cromwell was as much a tyrant as previous heads of state. Following his death, the monarchy was restored.

However, the civil war years saw the growth of a new popular movement – the Levellers. They wanted the removal of the king, but in place of the monarchy they wanted a government which would protect the rights and freedoms of all citizens. They called for religious tolerance, equality for all in law, freedom from conscription, an extension of the entitlement to vote and biennial parliaments which could pass no laws 'evidently destructive of the safety and well-being of the people'. In the aftermath of the civil war, they demanded an amnesty for all who had fought on either side.

The Levellers included many who had served in Cromwell's army as well as civilians who made their case and won considerable public support through their leaflets. The high point of their campaign was in 1647: representatives elected from within the army were given an opportunity to present their demands to the army's leadership and a series of meetings, now known as the Putney Debates, were held in a Putney church and chaired by Cromwell himself. Transcripts of the meetings show the remarkable eloquence with which ordinary soldiers argued for constitutional changes which, unfortunately, were not to be enacted until centuries later.²

Cromwell, however, was not going to accept the Levellers' challenge to his authority. In the years that followed, most of their leaders ended up shot or imprisoned.

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The Putney Debates took place two centuries before the Great Reform Acts of the 19th century, but their substance was much the same. It was long before the concept of socialism appeared, but in their demands for respect for the liberty and dignity of all people and in their opposition to tyrannical government, they were surely political ancestors of today's Labour Party and must count among 'our martyred dead'.

Although the Levellers were crushed as a movement, their ideas were not. About a century later, republicanism found a new champion in Thomas Paine.

Paine was probably the most successful pamphleteer of all times and, internationally, the most influential republican. Although born in Norfolk, it was in America where the revolt against British rule was beginning that he rose to prominence. His pamphlet, *Common Sense*, sold around half a million copies: in what was essentially a rallying call for the revolution, he attacked the British king (George III) as the principal source of American resentment, mocked the absurdity of hereditary rule and made the case for republicanism, making him in the eyes of some the Father of the American Revolution.

Back in Britain he wrote *The Rights of Man* in which he defended the French revolution and poured scorn on monarchies and organised religion. It sold nearly a million copies and inspired radical movements around the country, but the government reaction was such that he had to flee to France. There he was made a member of the National Convention (in spite of not speaking French): his opposition to the death penalty, including for Louis XVI, almost led to him losing his own head.

In his writings, Paine also opposed slavery, attacked land ownership which denied others a right to independent livelihoods, and advocated old-age pensions and a basic income payable by the state – ideas which were centuries ahead of their times. Thus, Paine was not just a republican but one who can be regarded as a forerunner of socialism.

Paine was not alone amongst republicans in his rejection of institutionalised religion, and he was not the only one to suffer as a

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consequence. There was clearly a philosophical overlap between those who opposed what they saw as the oppression of monarchs and those who rejected the orthodoxy and social control of the established church: both focused on the freedom of the individual from arbitrary power. Shelley was an atheist as well as a republican, and Charles Bradlaugh, who in the 1880s repeatedly refused to swear the religious oath required of MPs, was a republican as well as the first prominent leader of the National Secular Society. Republicanism and religion, however, were never seen as incompatible: the poet John Milton was a Christian and a republican, and the Rev Joseph Priestley, a theologian as well as a scientist and inventor, had to flee to America after his house was burnt down because of his republican sympathies with the French revolution.

The 19th century saw major demands for constitutional reform. A period of economic depression, exacerbated by the Corn Laws which increased food prices, provoked a large demonstration in support of parliamentary reform in Manchester in 1819. Troops stormed the crowd, resulting in the Peterloo Massacre – around 15 were killed and hundreds injured. The government's response was merely to pass a series of laws making political protest more difficult. Concerns that Britain, like other parts of Europe, might see popular uprisings, however, led to the 1832 Great Reform Act.

This did not go nearly as far as many people wanted: their response was the birth of the Chartist movement. This was the largest popular movement for reform the country has seen, with branches around the country. A petition submitted to government in 1839 had 1.3 million signatures: when the government took no heed of that, a second petition three years later had 3 million signatures (and that was long before petitions could be signed by a click of a computer mouse). Again the government ignored their demands and, with the difficulties and costs to working people of maintaining the protest, the movement withered.

Although Chartism as a movement had been defeated, its ideas lived on. Republicanism had not been one of its demands, but many of its

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leaders were republicans: Paine was venerated as one of their heroes and 'his birthday was celebrated with feasts and pie suppers'.³ In the decades that followed, republicanism had strong working-class support and Republican Clubs appeared, particularly around London, and the Paris Commune of 1871 provided food for thought.

It was also a time when the monarchy was going through a bad patch. Following the death of her husband, Prince Albert, in 1861, Victoria entered a long period of mourning, effectively withdrawing from public life. This led to mounting criticism of her inactivity: while the concerns were about her failure to perform the public duties expected of the monarch rather than about the monarchy as an institution, it was to the benefit of republicanism. However, the queen was persuaded to re-emerged from her years as 'the widow of Windsor' and, with the new title of Empress of India, support for the monarchy grew, helped along with golden and diamond jubilees, just like Elizabeth just over a century later.

From around 1880, however, the focus of radicalism started to change. With the writings of Marx and Engels, many who were sympathetic to republicanism started to see capitalism as the primary enemy rather than the monarchy and ruling elite. Although Marx and his followers acknowledged the inspiration that Paine, and later the Chartists, had provided, they saw the subjection of the working class as a consequence of the capitalist system and argued that nothing short of the inevitable collapse of that system would overcome its evils. Nevertheless, many recognised the need for a more egalitarian and democratic form of politics in which working people would have their own representatives. In 1881 the Democratic Federation was formed, with the support of many with republican views, as a political party to advance these ideas but by 1884, heavily influenced by Marx's philosophy, it embraced the new concept of socialism and became the Social Democratic Federation.⁴ In the same year, Fabian Society, which sought a more gradual transition to socialism, was born, also with some republican support. Debate continued, however, on whether it was more important to seek political reforms in order to create a democratic state which would address social

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problems, or to work towards a more radical change in the nature of society through class struggles.

The formation of the Labour Party at the start of the 20th century managed to unify most of those on the political left, although it did not bring these debates to an end – they have continued to the present day. However, Labour's creation was a further development of centuries of popular activism and the ideas of radical thinkers. Its debt to the Levellers, the Chartists and people such as Paine was considerable – it was born with republican DNA in its genes.

3. LABOUR'S REPUBLICANS

The Labour Party was created to fight against poverty, low wages and unemployment – not to challenge the monarchy. Its early leaders were people who knew what poverty meant – Keir Hardie had started work in the mines at the age of ten, Bevan became a miner when he was only 14 and Ramsey MacDonald grew up in rural poverty in Scotland. The industries they worked in were supporting what was then the world's richest country with an empire that spanned the globe, but they, and those they represented, had to struggle to feed and house their families. It is not therefore surprising that they were outraged at the wealth and lifestyle of their king and his entourage.

At that time, although monarchs had surrendered many of the executive powers of their predecessors, they still exercised a much more direct influence on government than is the case today. Class divisions were at their strongest, and the king was clearly on the side of those who ran the major industries and owned the land. Nevertheless, while many early Labour members expressed anti-monarchical sentiments, most appear to have accepted the monarchy as part of a social order which they had no hope of overturning and republicanism was not therefore on their agenda.

Keir Hardie, however, was fully aware of the incompatibility of the monarchy with the sort of society he strove to achieve – the monarchy was undemocratic and at odds with his sense of social justice.⁵ He maintained he was 'a believer in Republican principles' who could not 'see any use for a Royal Family'.⁶ His most famous republican outburst was at the birth of Edward VII: in Wales 250 miners had just lost their lives in a major disaster, but parliament was more concerned with welcoming the arrival of a new heir to the throne than expressing sympathy for the miners and their families. He told the Commons:

'We are asked to rejoice because this child has been born, and that one day he will be called upon to rule over this great Empire ... From his childhood onward this boy will be surrounded by sycophants and flatterers by the score and will be taught to believe himself as of a superior creation. A line will be drawn between him and the people whom he is to be called upon some day to reign over.'

Hardie was, however, well aware that removing the monarch was not enough (something for today's republicans to remember):

'In this country loyalty to the Queen is used by profitmongers to blind the eyes of the people until the system of wealth and production be changed, it is not worth changing a king for a president. The robbery of the poor would go on equally under one as under the other, the king [queen] will disappear when the exploitation of the people draws to a close.'

George Lansbury, the great socialist, Christian pacifist and advocate of women's rights, was denied a position in Labour's first cabinet in 1924 because he had upset the king by, unwisely, suggesting he would like George V dealt with in the same way as Cromwell handled Charles I. Although he declared himself to be a republican, however, he recognised that Labour then faced the same dilemma as it does today and opposed two motions from MPs (including Hardie's son-in-law, Emrys Hughes) calling for an end to the monarchy at Labour's conference in 1923. For Lansbury, they were distractions from the Party's main objectives.

Republicanism was not, however, a concern of Labour's first Prime Minister. Ramsey MacDonald enjoyed a good relationship with George V who, following the collapse of the government in the economic crisis of 1931, invited him to form a 'National' government. MacDonald's decision split the Labour Party, disastrously, but the perceived role of the king in the crisis was also denounced by leading socialists such as Harold Laski and Stafford Cripps.

Republican voices continued to be heard in the years that followed. In 1936, the militant socialist, James Maxton MP, moved a republican amendment to the Abdication Bill but it received little support, and at the

time of the coronation in 1952 some, including Barbara Castle, made it clear she was not a royal fan.

The first MP to make the end of the monarchy his mission was Willie Hamilton, an MP from 1950 to 1987. Hamilton had to endure much mockery because of his views, but he was also respected for his well-researched arguments which he presented in his book, 'My Queen and I'. He believed:

'... the Monarchy and its privileges to be immoral. I am a Democratic Socialist. A Christian Democratic Socialist. That means a belief in the equal dignity and worth of all human beings, whatever their birth or wealth.'⁷

Tony Benn gave Labour a heavier-weight champion of republicanism than it had had since its early years. Benn's father was a Viscount but, on inheriting the title, Benn successfully campaigned for the right to renounce his peerage, allowing him to continue to serve as an MP. He was a republican in a much broader sense than just being an opponent of the monarchy, and the Commonwealth of Britain Bill which he introduced in 1991 called not just for the replacement of the monarchy with an elected president, but a radical reform of Britain's institutions and democracy. He did not use the term 'popular sovereignty', but that was clearly what he meant. The Bill, of course, never stood a chance of being passed (it called, for example, for an end to British rule in Northern Ireland): some may regard it as having been a vanity project, but it nevertheless offered a vision of a very different sort of Britain.⁸

Five years later, Paul Flynn tabled a bill for the abolition of the monarchy but, like Benn's attempt, it had no chance of success. Throughout his 31 years as an MP, however, Flynn frequently challenged the costs and secrecy of the monarchy, as did many other Labour MPs.

Until that time, Labour politicians prepared to express republican sentiments were almost exclusively on the left of the Party. In 1996, however, the Fabians published 'Long to reign over us', a pamphlet written by its then Chair, Paul Richards.⁹ At last there was a challenge to

the monarchy from the Party's political centre. In keeping with Fabian gradualism, Richards did not quite call for abolition, but that was the clear drift of his arguments: he proposed regular referendums on whether people wanted a monarchy, the replacement of the complicated institutions which give the monarchy its income with a hypothecated tax to meet its actual costs, the disestablishment of the Church of England, measures to reduce the role of the monarch in political affairs, and much more. The pamphlet was of course controversial and it should have provoked a reasoned debate. However, Labour's leaders were focused on the coming election and the chance to end what became 18 years of Conservative government, and Richards' pamphlet was quietly ignored.

In 2002 the Fabian Society looked again at the monarchy, setting up a commission to consider its future. The commission's report appeared to attempt to accommodate the different views of its members – it made many good recommendations on how the monarchy could be improved, but there was no discussion on how the monarchy could be made consistent with Labour's egalitarian objectives. It was assumed that the monarchy had a future just because a lot of people seemed to want it.

Nevertheless, there were some, like Paul Flynn, who kept the flame of republicanism alive in the Parliamentary Labour Party and, even in the Lords there was a secret group of at least 20 Labour republicans led by the Labour peer, Jack Dormand.¹⁰

Tony Banks always kept his fingers crossed when taking the oath of allegiance to the monarch, and by 2017 there were several who added words to the oath to indicate that their real allegiance was to their constituents. The general election in 2017 also saw the election of Emma Dent Coad, a former board member of the campaign group, Republic.

By then, Labour, for the first time since Keir Hardie, had in Jeremy Corbyn a leader who had been openly critical of the monarchy (at least as an institution), but the Party's position did not change. When Corbyn's republican views were challenged by Jeremy Paxman in a televised interview before the 2017 general election, the reply was clear and

concise: 'We're not going to do it – it's not in our manifesto'. It was the best response Corbyn could have given: he did not disown his own views, but he recognised the dilemma which Labour's republicans face.

Corbyn's spell as leader came to an end with the disaster of the 2019 general election. Although the leadership election that followed appeared to be a victory for more moderate elements in the party, the candidates' campaigns produced some surprises. Keir Starmer, who won the contest convincingly, declared that he would like to 'downsize' the monarchy (although it later emerged that, in an interview in 2006, he had claimed to be a republican); the runner-up, Lisa Nandy said she would vote to get rid of it; and Clive Lewis, who at one stage was a serious contender, announced that he would like a referendum on its abolition.

Three years later, attitudes to the monarchy were put to the test when the queen died. It was understandable that all politicians would offer condolences and pay tribute to the late queen's seven decades in the job and, in a special two-day Commons sitting, Labour MPs from all parts of the party queued up to praise her wit and wisdom. It was left to Clive Lewis MP to give a more reasoned view: in a Guardian article he questioned why people 'show such deference to an institution that is the very embodiment of the inequalities of wealth and power that permeate our country'.¹¹

A few days after the official mourning period was over, Labour members began their 2022 annual conference by singing God Save the King. This, however, was much more about political positioning – a signal that Labour had returned to the centre ground - than a display of enthusiasm for the new king: in the hall there were probably more republicans than believers in God.

In the months that followed, the Conservative government struggled from one crisis to another and opinion polls gave Labour a commanding lead. Even if Starmer was still the republican he claimed to be in 2006, this was not a time at which he was going to take risks: in his 2023 New Year message, he looked forward to the coronation 'with hope' and,

when the coronation arrived, he declared that 'With King Charles at the helm, Britain is on course to a brighter, fairer future'.¹² This may well have been the most pro-monarchy statement that a Labour leader has ever made: ironically, it came at a time when polls were showing that about as many Labour voters wanted a republic as supported the King.

Labour has now co-existed with the monarchy for more than a century, and it has done so by pragmatically accepting the constitutional status quo and not subjecting the monarchy to any serious scrutiny. In spite of Labour's quest for 'a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many not the few',¹³ it has never taken a position on the power and wealth of the monarchy, has never advocated any radical reform of the monarchy, and has never had a serious debate on republican alternatives.

Although Labour has always had its republican voices, it has needed to practise its politics in a society conditioned to think that the monarchy stands for what is good about being British and that support for it is a patriotic duty. Opposing it could be seen as an attack on the essence of Britishness: as one pro-republican MP has noted, a 'Local MP Savages Queen' headline in a local paper could be electorally disastrous.¹⁴ Thus, in spite of the obvious incompatibility of hereditary privilege and socialist values, the need to win elections has resulted in very few Labour politicians having ever publicly challenged the monarchy or been openly critical of senior royals. Even those who are staunch republicans at heart may, like George Lansbury a century earlier, fear that opposing the monarch would be a vote-loser and a distraction from other objectives.

However, although few Labour politicians are yet willing to raise their heads above the parapet and expose themselves as republicans, that does not mean that most are fans of the monarchy. There are, of course, some who accept the arguments for monarchism (or who seem comfortable with a monarchy which maintains the establishment to which they have

been co-opted), but they are probably quite a small minority. In 2023, Clive Lewis maintained that even on Labour's front bench:

'there are lots of members ... who have no love for the monarchy... They don't hate it, but they are not enthusiastic royals by any stretch of the imagination'.¹⁵

In 2002, a BBC survey found that 35 of 101 Labour MPs who responded favoured a move to a republic and only 7 felt that no changes were needed, and there is no reason to believe that the events of the past 20 years have made closet republicanism any weaker.¹⁶

Republicanism has also been growing amongst Labour members. They, like the rest of society, have become less deferential and more open to debate: they see a monarchy that has been damaged by royal scandals and the death of the late queen has removed one of its supporting pillars. As a consequence, attitudes have been shifting and some opinion polls have even shown a majority of Labour voters in favour of abolishing the monarchy.¹⁷ Republicanism in Labour thus appears to be at least as strong as it was a century ago, even if it simmers rather than boils.

In the past, most expressions of republican sentiments have been individual initiatives – there was no co-ordinated campaign to promote republican values within Labour. That began to change in 2012 when Labour for a Republic was born. Its founders recognised that, if Britain were to ever move towards republicanism, it would need action by politicians, and Labour was the only party that might ever have both the power and inclination to take the first steps. They recognised that persuading the Labour Party to recognise the merits of republicanism was more likely to be achieved through a campaign within the Party than through pressure from external groups which might not share Labour's wider aims.

The new organisation soon found that there were lots of Labour republicans, but getting the issue on to the Party's agenda was more difficult. From the outset, the fear that even discussing republicanism might provoke a media backlash and cost votes was clear, and Labour for

a Republic therefore had to be cautious in its approach. When it held its first Party Conference meeting in 2014, a journalist mischievously reported that it was the only organisation that didn't want to achieve its objectives: he was, however, right in the sense that Labour for a Republic knew that moves towards republicanism needed a Labour government but, until a lot more work had been done, a manifesto commitment to abolish the monarchy was not going to increase the chances of a Labour victory.

The events surrounding King Charles's accession and coronation have started to change the environment for Labour's republicans. Public support has begun to move away from the monarchy, albeit slowly, and anger at royal profligacy during a period of austerity has been growing. Although polls still find a clear majority supporting the monarchy over republicanism, the strength of that support has been weakening and arguments for change have been gaining ground. It may therefore become increasingly difficult for the Labour leadership to simply ignore republicanism, both within its own ranks and amongst the voters whose electoral support is needed.

Kenneth Morgan, the eminent historian and Labour academic, has described republicanism in Labour as a 'dog that did not bark'.¹⁸ That may have been a fair comment, but now the dog is at least starting to growl.

PART 2

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE MONARCHY

4. THE ROYALS AND THEIR POLITICS

It's a long time since a British monarch sent anyone to the Tower; the taxes we pay are determined by the governments we elect (even if collected by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs); and on the few occasions we've gone to war in recent times, it has been (at least in theory) for country rather than 'queen and country'. It might therefore seem that there is no reason for Labour to fuss about an institution which appears to have lost its teeth, but this chapter argues that the role and influence of the monarchy make it a force that any reformer must reckon with.

The nature of the monarchy has changed much over the centuries – in the past they not just reigned but ruled, but nowadays the business of running the country is in the hands of politicians. What people now see are royals who open hospitals, attend garden parties, award medals, host banquets and play leading roles in state ceremonies. Above the fray of party politics, they can smile benignly and appear inoffensive.

British monarchs still, however, have powers which must make all despots envious – they can dissolve parliament, appoint ministers, declare a state of emergency and much more. If, however, they were to use any of these powers without the consent of parliament, it would create a crisis which surely would bring the monarchy to an abrupt end. Nevertheless, even if monarchs aren't what they used to be, it does not mean that they are no longer political players. They might not have executive powers, but they have loads of influence and they use it.

The late queen must be given credit for having played her hand carefully. Until a few years ago the monarch's website claimed she had 'a right and a duty to comment on the affairs of government', and we can only assume that her meetings with prime ministers provided her with

opportunities for doing that. Lobbyists would pay many thousands for just one opportunity to meet the Prime Minister and they would need to disclose the nature of their business, but the monarch meets the Prime Minister every week and what they discuss is shrouded in secrecy. Past prime ministers have told us the meetings are of substance, but we're not allowed to know what substance. If these meetings influence policy (John Major has revealed that policy on occasions changed as a result of them) then we should know at least what was on the agenda – if they have no influence, we should question why Prime Ministers must spend time on them.

If Labour were to win power with a commitment to ending hereditary privilege, why should a Labour Prime Minister need to discuss policies with the monarch? It is possible, as some argue, that there is value in Prime Ministers having regular discussions with an experienced person outside party politics, but surely that person should not be someone with no experience whatsoever of the lives that most people must live and whose views are likely to have been shaped by the elite circles they move in.

The king, when Prince of Wales, was not as reticent as his mother about expressing his opinions. For example, he supported hunting with hounds, lobbied for grammar schools, intervened in major planning decisions and secured the diversion of NHS funds to complimentary medicine against all expert advice. When the Guardian was taking legal action to secure the release of some of his 'spider letters' (so-called because of his hand writing) to ministers, Dominic Grieve, then Attorney General, argued against their disclosure on the grounds that they would compromise the political neutrality of the heir to the throne, effectively conceding that the letters were far from politically neutral.

It is inevitable that a monarch will have no views, but almost inevitable that these views will be shaped by the company he keeps and the circles he moves in – public schools with fees around £50,000 a year are not the best places to learn about social deprivation, and at Royal Ascot there will

few who can speak with experience about homelessness. The Prince's Foundation may do some good work, but some of its big donors donate equally generously to the Conservative Party.¹⁹

Ben Elliot, a nephew of the king's wife, was a Co-Chair of the Conservative Party until shortly before the late queen's death. Elliot ran a business providing services to the ultra-rich, and in 2021 it was disclosed that he had arranged access to Charles, then Prince of Wales, for a particularly wealthy client: whether access was bought, or merely facilitated, by a large amount of money is unclear but, at best, it raises questions about the king's political judgement.

Ben Elliot is not Queen Camilla's only link with the Conservative Party. When she became queen, she appointed 'Companions' rather than 'Ladies in Waiting', claiming it to be a modernizing change, but half of those appointed had Conservative Party connections, and the others were from aristocratic families. If the monarchy was serious about wanting to be 'above politics' and to represent the nation, it would have taken more political care in choosing its associates.

Although monarchs are no longer in the driving seat of the nation, they can still finger the levers of power through what is called the Monarch's and Prince's Consent. Under this little-known protocol, no legislation which might affect the private interests of the monarch or Prince of Wales can even be debated in parliament without their consent. In February 2021, The Guardian reported on research by Dr Adam Tucker and their own investigators which had found that at least 1062 parliamentary bills, covering issues from pensions to parking charges and race relations to traffic rules in the royal estates, had been subjected to this procedure: Adam Tucker commented:

'This degree of involvement in the legislative process is unjustifiable ... There is no place for this process in the working of a 21st century democracy.'²⁰

Only in a small number of cases is there evidence that the late queen pressed for changes in proposed bills, but these cases included revisions

to allow her to conceal her personal wealth and, astonishingly, to exempt the monarchy from laws on race and sex discrimination. What we don't know is how often her interventions led to changes being made in bills at the drafting stage.

In Scotland, similar research found 67 cases in which the queen had vetted bills in the Scottish Parliament and that, at a time of acute concern about the dangers of climate change, she had gained exemption from the provisions of a law aimed at reducing carbon emissions. Calls for the disclosure of correspondence between the monarchy and the Scottish Government were met with the same argument that had been used by Gove on the 'spider letters' – details would not be published as it might undermine the 'the appearance of political neutrality'.²¹

Constitutionally, the monarch is sovereign and has wide powers, although they are effectively restricted by many of the protocols which make up our constitution. It is very unlikely that the present monarch would ever act independently on any major issue without the approval of parliament, but the 'royal prerogative' allows ministers to do just that. By claiming they are acting in the name of the monarch, they can bypass, or even over-ride, the Commons. Royal prerogative powers are used by governments to enter into foreign treaties with little or no opportunity for Parliament to comment on them (and with the need to negotiate new trade agreements following Brexit, this puts a large chunk of government business beyond parliamentary scrutiny).

Even more controversial is the use of prerogative powers to take military action: it was suggested that Tony Blair's decision to allow a vote on action in Iraq might have created a precedent for other decisions on military involvement, but in 2018 Theresa May's government decided to bomb Syria without parliamentary approval. While there is no evidence that such actions have been taken on the monarch's initiative, the powers of the monarchy make it possible for ministers to undermine democracy by circumventing parliamentary procedures (and, paradoxically, the weakness of the monarchy, resulting from its lack of a democratic

mandate, gives it little power to resist demands from government, however unreasonable they may be).

Similarly, the Privy Council takes decisions without the opportunity for parliamentary debate and scrutiny. It may be privy councillors – often ministers – who take the decisions, but it is the monarchy which allows them to be taken. Many Privy Council decisions are on matters that are not contentious, but some are – it was, for example, the Privy Council which removed the trade union rights of workers at GCHQ, and which ordered the eviction of 2000 people from their homes on the Chagos Islands to make way for a US-UK military base. It is the power vested in the monarchy which allows such things to happen without the consent of our elected representatives.

Thus, although our monarchy may no longer have a central role in determining national policies, it retains an influence over how we are governed. If royal interventions were aimed at producing a fairer and less divided society then they might be tolerated, but instead we appear to have a monarchy intent on the protection of privilege and the preservation of the institution.

5 THE MONARCHY AND THE SOCIAL ORDER

Even if it were possible to totally exclude the royals from political decision-making, they would remain a huge obstacle to the creation of the sort of society that republicans want to see. The problems with the monarchy lie more in what it is than what it does.

The monarchy is part of a social structure based on status, and hereditary status at that. Monarchs may no longer be supreme rulers, but the royals remain firmly at the peak of the social pyramid and all others are expected to show deference to them. Their wealth, extravagance and privilege puts them in a class above all others – indeed, it could even be described as an elite caste in that entry to it is determined by birth.

That the royals are different from the rest of us is made clear through a host of protocols to ensure they are addressed and treated with due reverence. Even amongst the royals there is an order of ranking which determines what they can or can't do and who must bow or curtsy to whom, even in private: this may appear to be the stuff of pantomime, but it is there to reinforce a royal pecking order. (It may also go some way towards explaining why the Windsors are a rather dysfunctional family and why Meghan Markle may prefer to be on the other side of the Atlantic from the higher-ranking Kate Middleton.) You don't need to be a devout republican to feel a sense of revulsion at this sort of calibrated snobbery.

As the monarchy's website has maintained, the monarch 'gives a sense of stability and continuity', but it is the stability and continuity of a social order that Labour was created to overturn. It perpetuates a form of society in which some are important and must be respected because of the deeds, and more often misdeeds, of their ancestors and because of their excessive wealth.

More audaciously, the website presents the monarch as the 'Head of Nation' who 'acts as a focus for national identity, unity and pride'. This

may be what the monarchy would like us to believe, and there is no doubt that, for many, having a monarch is part of what they regard as Britishness. However, it is absurd to suggest that the monarchy, an elitist and aristocratic institution, can be some sort of unifying force in a society badly divided by wealth, class and status and in which many struggle to make ends meet.

It is equally difficult to see how the monarchy unites society across racial divisions. We are a multi-racial society but, unless we can move towards republicanism, most of us will have a white man as monarch for the rest of our lives. That does not, of course, mean that the royals are necessarily racist, but the facts are disturbing. Revelations that, in the first decades of the late queen's reign, it was the royal household's policy not to employ black or Asian staff (other than in 'ordinary domestic posts') and that, as a result of a royal request, legislation on racial discrimination still does not apply to the monarchy, leave a perception that the monarchy is content with its whiteness. Accusations of racism towards Meghan Markle from within the royal household might be dismissed as family bickering if it were not for the long list of past incidences of royal racism,²² and the racist questioning in 2022 of a black woman by Susan Hussey, who was part of the royal family's inner circle, raised more questions about the royals' attitudes to race.

Similarly with religion: although we are a multi-faith/no-faith society, we have a monarch who heads the Church of England, a church with which only 2% of people aged under 24 identify. Although King Charles expressed a wish to be not just the 'Defender of the Faith' (a title bestowed on all British monarchs), but a defender of all faiths, in his coronation he was anointed with what was claimed to be 'sacred oil' which had been consecrated by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and he swore to do his utmost to 'maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion'. The coronation oath thus ensures that there is no prospect of us having an Islamic, Jewish, or even a Catholic, monarch without changing our constitution.

Much of the monarchy is therefore an embodiment of things Labour doesn't want. If it could be hidden away in a corner of society it might not be so damaging, but the Palace's powerful marketing team and its media friends pump out a picture of royals who are good and great and to whom the country must be grateful. We are conditioned almost from birth to be loyal, uncritical subjects - young children are taken to wave flags when royals come to town and fairy tales are about princes and princesses (always white) living in big castles and doing good deeds. Beauty's Beast turned into a prince – not vice versa – and Cinderella is a heroine because of her sudden rise to royal stardom, not because she campaigned for the rights of domestic servants.

Idolising the royalty helps to make hereditary privilege and vast unearned wealth seem normal and acceptable. The monarchy pervades a sense that the king's on his throne and all's well with the world - there is therefore no need to raise questions about social justice. By spreading a sense of contentment, it discourages challenges to the status quo, making it a strongly conservative force which can create a climate in which Labour's calls for progressive change are less likely to be heard.

Just as damaging as the monarchy's influence on how people perceive their own society is the image of Britain that the monarchy projects. All monarchies are grand, but the British one is much grander (and more expensive) than any other. A century ago, the British monarch was at the head of an empire which spanned the globe, but today's monarchy does not seem to have fully adjusted to the twenty-first century. It still awards British Empire Medals and its determination to remain at the head of the Commonwealth demonstrates it has not come to terms with a changed world and Britain's changed circumstances.²³ Britain can no longer claim to be a world power, and there is much about its colonial past which should cause embarrassment rather than pride, yet the monarchy has

offered no meaningful apology for the plunder and slavery on which the empire was built (when some Oxford students voted in 2021 to remove a photograph of the late queen from their common room, some justified their actions in terms similar to those who pushed the statue of the slave trader, Edward Colston, into Bristol harbour).

There is a danger that any delusions of grandeur created by the monarchy may distort our view of our role in the world. If people are given the impression that our past was entirely glorious and that the Commonwealth, at least in some ways, still belongs to us, then there is a risk that any sense of national pride may lead to dangerous assumptions of national superiority, and that may lead to racism. If our monarchs had projected a more realistic appreciation of our role in the world and how we came to have it, it is at least arguable that community relations in Britain would not have been so damaged by a sense of white-British superiority, and that not so many people would have put their faith in Britain achieving greatness outside the EU.

6. THE MONARCHY AND OUR MONEY

In 2019 Channel 5 produced a series of documentaries on 'The Secrets of the Royal Servants'. The episode on 'Spending' was an eye-opener even for those who already expected that the royals were big spenders. If happiness can be bought, the royals should be delirious.

According to the programme, the king (then Prince of Wales) is a big whisky drinker, but preferring Islay malts at over £100 a bottle, while the late queen mother was never far from an equally expensive bottle of champagne. The value of the royal wine cellar was estimated at around £2 million. The outfits worn by the queen and Duchess of Cambridge often cost well over £10,000 but are only worn once, and the queen's handbag collection is worth £370,000. Harry and Meghan's wedding cost £82 million (although that amount might not include £24 million on security): to put that into perspective, £82 million is roughly the total of what 60 people on the average salary would earn if they each worked 45 years (and without paying tax).

Travel is also a big item of royal expenditure – the Channel 5 programme estimated £ 4.7 million in the previous year. Much travel is, of course, required by the royals in doing their jobs, but they don't seem to worry about the costs when planning their trips. Norman Baker's excellent book, 'And what do you do?', gives numerous examples of outrageous spending, such as Harry taking a helicopter to Birmingham at the cost of £6,000, Andrew spending £3,000 on a helicopter trip to get to Oxford, and Charles flying 125 miles to Cambridge to make a speech about the need to lower aircraft emissions.²⁴ The royal train may be seldom used, but a trip on it costs about the same as a first-class ticket around the world. Although the cost of maintaining the old royal yacht was around £10 million p.a., it had provided good holidays for the royals and it's not surprising that the late queen was visibly upset at the decision to

decommission it (Boris Johnson, when PM, wanted to spend £250m in providing her with another, but his successor, Rishi Sunak, took a more realistic view of the value of the project and quickly abandoned it).

One of the many things that makes the royals different from the rest of us is that they live in palaces – or at least homes that are the equivalent of palaces. Some of them, including Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle and Kensington Palace, are ‘owned’ by the monarch by virtue of her or his position as monarch, a few are owned by the Duchy of Cornwall, and Balmoral and Sandringham are the private property of the king. The enormous costs of maintaining these huge buildings are paid from the money made available to the monarchy, but in 2016 the Government forked out an additional £369 million for an upgrade of Buckingham Place, just as it had agreed to pick up the bill when Windsor Castle went on fire in 1992. It is difficult to see how having so many royal residences can be good value for the tax-payer: magnificent stately homes should whenever possible be preserved in all their grandeur, but for the benefit of the whole country and not just of a single family.

Balmoral and Sandringham are, it is claimed, the personal property of the king, who inherited them from his mother (without, of course, the payment of any inheritance tax), and on his death the ownership will no doubt be passed to his son, William. Similarly, the king as an individual owns many works of art, jewels and other exceptionally valuable artefacts: this all raises difficult questions over what belongs to the monarch and what belongs to the monarchy and hence the state. Most of what the king owns has been given to him, or to his predecessors, on account of him being the monarch - whether that makes it personal property is debatable. (The issue arose when, in abdicating, Edward VIII decided to keep Balmoral and Sandringham – they were only transferred to his brother, the new king, as part of a financial settlement.)

In addition to what the monarchy actually spends, there are huge costs that arise because of it. The state must pay the security costs of the royal family, estimated to be over £100 million a year. When the royals

tour the country there are also extra costs that must be met by local authorities: these probably total over £20 million each year. Adding all the financial support and benefits which the royals receive, it appears that, in a normal year, the monarchy costs us over a third of a billion pounds.²⁵

Some years, however, are not normal. When the late queen died, the cost of her lying in state and funeral was over £160 million.²⁶ Charles became king promising a slimmed-down monarchy: there was no constitutional need for him to have a coronation – all other European monarchies gave up on them many decades ago – but instead he went ahead with one that cost the nation over £250 million.

The scale of royal spending is only possible because of the money they get from the state, although precisely what the monarchy costs the taxpayers is difficult to calculate. The official figure for 2021-2022 is £86 million, but that is only the Sovereign Grant, an annual payment introduced by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Government in 2011. By basing the grant on a percentage of the profits of the Crown Estate (a state-owned commercial enterprise with substantial investments in land and property) they put royal funding beyond the control of Parliament. Not only was the deal a generous one for the monarchy in 2011, but it was protected by arrangement through which the grant would increase when profits rise but would never fall: as the Financial Times commented, 'if the Crown Estate does well the Queen wins, if the Crown Estate does badly the taxpayer loses'. In the ten years that followed the grant's introduction, it almost tripled to £86 million (in part as a result of a change in its calculation to give the monarchy extra funds for the renovation of Buckingham Palace).

The Crown Estate owns nearly all of Britain's sea-bed. In the past, that might not have meant much, but the advent of off-shore wind farming has enabled it to charge hundreds of millions in licensing fees. Although the monarchy, no doubt conscious of the outcry that might follow if its income were more than doubled, agreed to accept a much smaller percentage of

the profits, it has nevertheless been forecast that by 2025 the grant will increase by a massive 45% from £86 to £125 million: whether that increase actually happens will test the sincerity of the King's claim to want a 'slimmed down' monarchy.

What the monarchy receives through the Sovereign Grant, however, is only a part of its income. The surplus of the Duchy of Lancaster, which holds assets of about £550 million, is also paid to the monarch – in 2021-2022 this was £21 million – and the Duchy of Cornwall similarly provided the heir to the throne with around £21 million. The Duchies are essentially investment companies, each with a portfolio of land and property which generates income.

Some may claim that the monarchy is therefore funded by the Crown Estate and the two duchies but in reality it is funded by taxpayers. There is no need for these archaic institutions – their histories go back many centuries to times when kings effectively owned the country and could create estates more or less as they pleased. The Crown Estate includes land that originally was regarded as belonging to the monarch but, in 1760, George III gave his lands to the government in exchange for financial support and there is no logical reason why the Sovereign Grant should be related to the fortunes of the Estate.

In creating the Crown Estate, the two duchies were excluded from the deal. The monarchy claims they are 'private estates' and has resisted demands that they pay corporation tax: as they exist to support successive monarchs and their heirs, however, there is no reason for not regarding them as national assets and treating them in the same way as other government investments.

What the duchies do and how they operate is often shrouded in secrecy²⁷ but they claim they are not bound by the provisions of Freedom of Information legislation. In 2017, however, the leak of the 'Panama Papers', a massive dossier of documents relating to off-shore investments revealed that the Duchy of Lancaster had invested millions in the Cayman Islands.²⁸ To make matters worse, it was discovered that some of the

funds had supported Bright House, a retailer which has been severely criticized by the Financial Conduct Authority for over-charging vulnerable customers and not being a 'responsible lender'. The Duchy of Cornwall was also found to have invested off-shore, including in a company owned by one of the then Prince Charles's friends. To many people it may seem astonishing that estates created to support our monarch, whose job it is to represent Britain and promote its interests, were investing in off-shore funds (where some of the world's dirtiest money is to be found) rather than in enterprises crying out for investment in the UK.

Whatever position Labour takes on republicanism, it needs to do something to sort out how the monarchy is funded. It is ludicrous that much of the royal family's income is related to the Crown Estate and the Duchies – investment companies largely based on lands seized by a foreign invader in 1066 - and nationally embarrassing that our head of state has been investing in the Cayman Islands. Royal efforts to prevent scrutiny of their financial affairs just add to wider concerns over how the monarchy does business and give an impression of an institution that is grubby and greedy.

Whether our head of state is elected or not, they are part of how the country is run and their office should be funded in the same way as any other government department. What we need is, as succinctly put in 2003 by the Fabian's Commission on the Future of the Monarchy,

'a single, transparent and accountable public revenue stream, subject to a vote in Parliament'.²⁹

You don't need to be a republican to recognise the duchies as historical left-overs which should have no place in the affairs of a modern state.

It's difficult to say just how rich the monarch really is – the late queen made use of the Monarch's Consent procedure to keep the extent of her wealth a secret. In 2023, The Guardian ran a series of articles on the 'Cost of the Crown': it looked at public funding, property ownership and the income derived from it, the value of collections of jewellery, art, stamps,

cars and even horses, and estimated King Charles's fortune to be about £1.8 billion.³⁰ Moreover, it doesn't include the state assets which are at the monarch's disposal.

The distinction between what is public property and what is the private property of royals as individuals is far from clear. Our king is fabulously rich, but nearly all of his wealth has been inherited from previous monarchs who got their money by virtue of being monarchs. Is it right that royal wealth so acquired should be regarded as belonging to an individual rather than the nation, and that it should be passed from one generation to the next without the payment of inheritance tax?

We do not need a head of state who is rich, and one with a modest lifestyle may be better able to act as a representative of the nation. The campaign group, Republic, has estimated that what is spent on the monarchy would be enough to recruit 15,000 new teachers, another 15,500 nurses or 17,000 extra police officers. It does not mean that abolishing the monarchy would allow all royal expenditure to be switched to providing jobs for key workers as any sort of head of state will incur costs, but the costs of a head of state need not be anything like what taxpayers pay for the monarchy at present.

There are monarchists who argue that the monarchy is nevertheless good value for money – it attracts tourists and makes people feel good. There is no evidence, however, that many tourists come to the UK to see the royals (and any who do come for that reason are likely to end up disappointed). Windsor Legoland is usually well above Windsor Castle when tourist attractions are listed by order of popularity and while royal palaces may be worth seeing, they don't need royals to make them attractive, as shown by the experiences of Versailles and the Kremlin. There will of course be some who feel good as a result of the monarchy, but there are probably many more who feel bad at a third of a billion pounds being used each year to support the lavish lifestyles of an extremely rich family.

7. ROYALS BUT NOT ROLE MODELS

Republican opposition to the monarchy has nothing to do with the royals as people, although few would argue that a good monarch is not better than a bad one. Support for the monarchy, however, generally takes the form of admiration for the late queen and others in her family - or at least for the images of the royals produced by their public relations teams and sycophantic sections of the media. It's not that all the royals are bad – some are quite good by the standards of their predecessors – but beneath their public personas they are people with strengths and weaknesses just like the rest of us.

In many respects, of course, they're not like the rest of us. They have needed to live in an extraordinary world, quite separated from normal society and governed by rules on what one does, what one does not do, and who is more important than whom, and which is constantly a focus of media attention. If the apparent rift between Harry and his brother suggests that the Windsors are a rather dysfunctional family, there are plenty of reasons to explain why this might be the case. Nevertheless, many support the royals on the basis of the images presented to them rather than the full pictures with all their less attractive truths.

Sometimes, however, ugliness cannot be concealed. We may never know if Prince Andrew had sex with an under-aged girl, but we do know that he has visited what were in effect exceptionally up-market brothels run by his billionaire friend, Jeffrey Epstein. There is an argument that, if no laws have been broken, Andrew should have a right to a private life, but his conduct completely undermines the concept of royals as providers of moral leadership.

Revelations about Andrew's contacts with Epstein, however, show just the tip of an iceberg of shady relationships – much of his globe-trotting, often at the taxpayers' expense, has been in the pursuit of money

for himself, offering the supposed benefits of contact with a prince to dodgy international financiers who are in need of a bit of respectability. In a journalistic sting, his ex-wife was caught on camera offering access to Andrew for a mere half million – it is difficult to image how, even for the super-rich, that could be a good deal.

Andrew is not the only royal who spends a lot of time with the super-rich and powerful and they seem to have no problems in accepting their gifts, their money and lavish hospitality on luxury yachts and Caribbean islands. As the rich rarely give away their money without expectation of something in return, questions arise over the extent to which the integrity of some royals has been compromised. For example, having received a new Aston Martin from the Emir of Bahrain, will Charles not find it more difficult to take a stand on the Emir's abuses of the rights of his subjects?

Andrew may be an embarrassment for the royals, but it would be unfair to paint him as the only bad egg in the royal basket. The late queen's uncle, Edward VIII, was of course in a class of his own as a baddy: his collusion with the Nazis would probably have taken him to the gallows if it were not for his royal status. By contrast, the late queen's mother was adored – although little mention was ever made of her alcoholic tendencies, guzzling champagne at £300 a bottle, and her apparent addiction to gambling (it has been claimed that on her death, her daughter had to pay off millions in gambling debts). From what is known of her views, she was racist (for example, favouring white supremacy in what was Rhodesia) and reactionary. Even more damning was her attitude to two nieces who in 1941 were sent to an institution for people with learning disabilities and were effectively written out of history. Although the queen mother was a patron of MENCAP, at no time did she offer help or even acknowledge the existence of daughters of her brother. It's unfortunate that her daughter, Queen Elizabeth, did nothing to right this wrong, and her cousins never had any contact with their royal relatives who never even sent them Christmas cards.³¹

Queen Elizabeth must be given credit for having done her job in a reasonably dignified way for about three-quarters of a century, but that doesn't qualify her for sainthood. On many of her anniversaries, tributes often showed photos of her as a happy young woman on the holiday in Kenya where she got the news of the death of her father, but it is seldom reported that a few years later, during her reign, British soldiers were murdering and torturing Kenyans who wanted their independence. The queen was not, of course, the author of the policies which led to atrocities in Kenya and other parts of the world, but what was done was done in the name of her government and by those who had sworn allegiance to her, and at no time did she even hint at having any regrets. It is only fair to assume that the queen had a personal concern for the welfare of people around the world, but that concern did not manifested itself in her choice of friends: her relationships with the rulers of places like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Brunei, who may know much about horses but have little interest in human rights, have been far more cordial than diplomacy would require. The Sultan of Brunei advocates stoning to death those who practice gay sex and adulterers – which is perhaps why Charles wasn't around during his last visit to Buckingham Palace.

Given the importance that the Queen Elizabeth attached to the Commonwealth, it is surprising that she did not do more to give the monarchy an international flavour. The Guardian's investigations³² found that, at least until the late 1960s, 'coloured immigrants and foreigners' were banned from working in clerical roles in the royal household, although they could work as domestic servants. That the monarchy used the Monarch's Consent procedure to exempt itself from the provisions of race and sex discrimination laws does not necessarily mean that the late queen was racist, but it raises serious questions, particularly following Harry and Meghan's allegations of racism within the royal family.

Concerns over whether the queen was committed to defending human rights and to promoting racial equality, however, did not appear to dent her popularity. The only occasion on which there was a serious wobble in her ratings was the death of Diana. Although Diana was 'the

people's princess', in the immediate aftermath of her death the queen remained at Balmoral and gave the impression of indifference. It was a serious misjudgement of the national mood, but suspicions that the queen might not be a caring godmother of the royal firm were soon forgotten.

The monarchy's media team did well in its presentation of the late queen as a wise and compassionate monarch that people would love and admire, but now that Charles is on the throne they have a much more difficult job. While married to Diana, although he was the heir to the throne, she was often seen as the bigger star, and he has started his reign with his own son, William, well ahead of him in the popularity ratings: many people may have preferred William's blandness to the king's unpredictability and country-squire manner. As he has spent most of his life waiting for his mother to die or abdicate, he may be excused for having been a more interventionist Prince of Wales than what is desirable but, the more that is known about someone's views, the more scope there is for disagreeing with them.

Moreover, some of the positions Charles has taken expose him to criticism and ridicule. His support for grammar schools and hunting with hounds may simply affirm his class status but, the more that is known about such views, the more his support in some parts of society will be undermined. The dangers of global warming and the need for action is one area where his stance could have enhanced his reputation, but his efforts have been undermined by flying to conferences to tell people to reduce their carbon footprints and by failing to respond to pleas for the re-wilding of the royal estates.

Charles could easily have used his royal position to project a more progressive and reformist monarchy. He could have countered claims of royal racism by having a coronation audience filled with the families of those who came in the Windrush to provide our services, Afghans who cannot return to their home country because of their British links and

people who risked their lives by coming to Britain in small boats. Instead, the coronation was about pomp rather than compassion.

In 2016, Charles was visited by a senior Qatari politician who gave him 3 million euros in cash, some of it in a Fortnum and Mason plastic shopping bag.³³ When the story emerged in 2022, a spokesperson argued that the money was for one of the then Prince's charities, as if that was a sufficient explanation. Why would someone pay so much money in cash if they did not have something they wanted to hide, and why would a Qatari politician want to give such a huge donation to a charity in the UK? It seems unlikely that motives for the 'gift' were purely altruistic (if the intention was just to help disadvantaged people, many of them could have been found in Qatar), and if it were part of a deal, what did Qatar get in return? Qatar's treatment of its migrant work force and its persecution of its LGBT community have been dreadful, but has Britain's ability to speak out on Qatari human rights issues been compromised by a bag of bank notes?

Other serious questions about the king's judgement have arisen from his friendship with the disgraced Jimmy Savile and his continued support for Peter Ball, a former Bishop of Lewes, even after Ball had admitted gross indecency, and he will always be vulnerable to what his son Harry may disclose about his role as a father.

The case for republicanism is about principles and not personalities. The public defence of the monarchy, however, rarely mentions constitutional and democratic matters and is more often based on the perception that the royals are nice and they work hard for the nation. In 2003, even the Fabian Society's 'Commission on the Future of the Monarchy' – a body that was not short of constitutional expertise – took the view that, because people seemed to like queen, there was no reason to even consider the case for a republic:

'If we had started with an entirely clean sheet, it is unlikely that we would have argued for a monarch as Head of State ... Although some

of the Commissioners are republicans and others are not, we have all been struck by the weight of continuing public support for the monarchy. This tends to make arguments for a republic somewhat academic, at least for the foreseeable future.³⁴

Thus the Commission found a way of ducking the issue – opinion poll results gave them an excuse for avoiding the real questions. Would they have decided that the arguments for socialism are academic because polls say most people don't want it?

What the Commission appeared to ignore is that what the public liked was not so much the monarchy but the then queen, or, more accurately, an image of a wise and compassionate queen who had not been sullied by political debate, who had an elegance that many envied, and who was concerned about the wellbeing of her subjects. This image, however, had rarely been subjected to public scrutiny. Replace sanitized views of the royals with more objective pictures and 'the weight of continuing public support' may become a lot lighter.

The argument for republicanism should not be based on the faults and failures of individuals, but neither should it be derailed by a rose-tinted view of those who make up our royal family. We should expect the highest of standards from those in positions of leadership or social prominence, but the best way of ensuring we get them is through a system that allows us to choose our leaders and representatives and hold them to account.

PART 3

A REPUBLICAN FUTURE

8 A BRITISH REPUBLIC

In past centuries, republican sentiment was fuelled mainly by opposition to what was seen as the abuse of royal power. However, although the discontent of early republicans was focused on their subjection to a monarch who could order their lives, tax them and even conscript them without their consent, they were also advocates of much wider political reforms. They wanted rid of their monarch so that they could create a new and more egalitarian society.

That should now be our objective. Abolishing the monarchy should not be seen as an end in itself but as the removal of an archaic institution which obstructs progress towards the sort of society we want. To make Britain republican rather than just monarchless will require much more and, in particular, a new constitution, a new position of head of state and measures to strengthen our democracy. Neal Ascherson, in arguing that you don't get a republic 'if you peel the monarch off and stick a president on', succinctly explains the job to be done:

'A proper republic is an elaborate piece of democratic architecture in which power grows up from the base of "popular" sovereignty – not the royal or parliamentary kind... Republican institutions and citizens have written rights, inscribed in a constitution that is made deliberately difficult to amend'³⁵

A written republican constitution

The principle of popular sovereignty should be enshrined in a written constitution. The American constitution begins "We the people": the British republican, Thomas Paine, played a major role in drafting it, and many other countries have followed with constitutions which begin with an affirmation of where sovereignty lies. There is much about American politics that Britain would not wish to emulate, but one of its strengths is

the extent to which its constitution makes people more aware of their citizenship and civic rights.³⁶

Britain, however, is one of only three countries which do not have written constitutions (Israel and New Zealand being the others).³⁷ There is, of course, a body of legislation and protocols which determine how power is exercised, but they do not amount to a constitution which gives strong protection from unreasonable acts by those who hold power: legislation considered to be inconvenient can be overturned by a simple majority in parliament, and protocols can be challenged.

Whether Britain should have written constitution has often been debated: the case was strongly put when Charter 88 was launched in 1988 with a declaration which began:

‘We have had less freedom than we believed. That which we have enjoyed has been too dependent on the benevolence of our rulers. Our freedoms have remained their possessions, rationed out to us as subjects rather than being our own inalienable possession as citizens.’³⁸

Although Charter 88 stopped short of calling for the end of the monarchy, its demand was effectively for popular sovereignty. Successive governments, however, have refused to address the case for a written constitution, often with politicians arguing that it would impinge on what they regard as the sovereignty of parliament.

These arguments and evasions, however, are further evidence of the need for a written constitution – and one that makes it clear that parliament is only sovereign in the sense that it is exercising the sovereignty of the citizens to whom it is accountable. Jonathan Freedland has described the importance that early Americans attached to a written constitution:

‘They believed they needed it in the same way a person who buys a house needs a set of deeds – as proof of ownership’.³⁹

Whatever else a written constitution might include, it must affirm that it is citizens who are ultimately sovereign, and it must be written in language that citizens can easily understand. If Labour is serious about wanting a

change in society which puts power into the hands of the many rather than the few, such a constitution must be on its agenda.

A modern head of state

Rather than a monarch we would have an elected head of state with defined constitutional and ceremonial roles. All citizens would have the right to stand and all would be entitled to vote.

In many countries the head of state is a president with executive powers and is effectively the head of the government. The concentration of power in the hands of one person, however, seems at odds with the principles of republicanism, even if that person has been elected. For the UK, a transition to a republic could be made without abandoning the present parliamentary structure, and there is therefore a case for avoiding the use of the title 'president' to avoid any misunderstanding over the nature of the position.

The head of state of a British Republic should be:

- A person who, when necessary, can represent and speak on behalf of the nation, but without taking sides in matters of party-political controversy.
- The person who, on behalf of the state, formally assents to decisions taken by parliament, and with the power to refer bills back to parliament or the courts only if they appear to contravene clauses of the constitution.
- A person who is the arbitrator of last resort in the event of a constitutional crisis which cannot be satisfactorily resolved by politicians (the occasions on which a head of state would need to act in this way would be very rare).
- Someone who may (like the present monarch) preside over national ceremonies and be involved in conferring honours on people who have given distinguished service to their country or communities (the existing honours system, however, would need

to be reformed to ensure those honoured have done something exceptional for the nation as a whole or for the well-being of their local communities).

- Subject to the law in the same way as all other citizens.

That people should be able to choose their own head of state is a central principle of republicanism. The election should be held using the Alternative Vote method, or some equivalent system, which ensures that the winner is indeed the most popular candidate (with AV, it would be difficult for someone to win without some degree of cross-party support). Whoever is elected should hold office for a fixed period – whether and when they would be eligible for re-election is a detail that would need to be resolved (the US, for example, allows two terms – so did Russia until Putin decided he wanted more). There should also be a mechanism for removing those who turn out to be seriously unsuitable for the job.

What sort of person might the head of state be? It is a question that often arises when republicanism is discussed, with many protesting that they don't want a President Blair or a President Boris Johnson. At one level the answer is simple: the head of state would be whoever citizens elect. However, if the head of state is not an executive president, they would not have a role in determining policies or in their implementation, and comparisons with ways in which some prime ministers have done their jobs are not relevant. Although the position will involve dealing with matters of constitutional law and parliamentary procedures, the head of state need not be short of advisers, and candidates are therefore likely to be assessed on whether they seem capable of making good judgement, whether they appear to understand the mood of the country and can empathise with its citizens, and whether they can communicate and inspire. Thus, a head of state could come from business, science, academia, the arts, and any other field of endeavour one might think of. It's even possible that a politician could be elected, but they would need to leave their party hat behind.

Nearly everyone in Britain will live the rest of their lives with a monarch who is white, male and Christian (the Church of England variety) – only those who out-live Prince George (born in 2013) have a chance of living under a queen (unless, of course, we change the system). By contrast, a republican head of state could be of any race, religion, gender or sexual orientation, and they would not take office as a family business with dukes and duchesses to be fed.

A modern democracy

Popular sovereignty would require a voting system that produces parliaments which reflect the spread of citizens' views. That, unfortunately, is not what we have at present. The Conservatives have been in power for 32 years of the last half century, yet in 12 of the 13 elections during that period there was a majority for parties to the left of the Conservatives.

Not since 1931 has a party won more than half of the votes (and even then the 'party' was a coalition which formed a 'National Government'), yet the norm has been government by a single party with a majority of the seats, on several occasions 'won' with less than 40% of the votes. Our voting system has given us governments which have been strong in their ability to do whatever they wanted in parliament, but which have been exceptionally weak in their democratic legitimacy.

In a republic all citizens should have an equal political voice and that should mean they all have the same power to influence elections with their votes. At present, however, most people live in constituencies which are 'safe' for one party or another where the chances of their votes having any effect are negligible. In our general elections around 70% of the votes are 'wasted' in the sense that if they had not been cast the outcome would have been no different. The focus of party campaigning is therefore on the marginal seats which can be won or lost, and elsewhere parties may take citizens' support (or the lack of it) for granted.

Republicanism therefore requires a change in our voting system. To make all votes of equal value will need a move towards a system of proportional representation, i.e. one in which each party's share of the seats is near to its share of the votes.

At the Labour Party Conference in 2022, a motion in favour of PR was passed by a large majority, and polls showed that 5 out of 6 Labour members were in favour of PR for general elections.⁴⁰ With strong support for it amongst the minor parties, this may be a reform that Labour can make relatively easily before dealing with the wider questions of the head of state and constitution.

PR would ensure that the party balance in the Commons reflects how people voted. PR, however, is not itself a voting system – it is a characteristic that voting systems may have to a greater or lesser extent, and we need to take some care in deciding what proportional system we want. Our aim is not just a parliament that represents the spread of public opinion, but one whose members are accountable in a meaningful way to those who elected them, and choosing a system will require making a sensible compromise between the pursuit of these two objectives.

The issues of representation and accountability are equally important in local politics. Whether or not we subscribe to the view that 'all politics is local', the issues that exercise people most are often those within their own communities, and a parliament elected by a system of PR will be little consolation for those living with a local council they regard as unrepresentative and unreasonable. Jonathan Freedland has argued that 'genuine popular sovereignty means placing power with the people – in their own backyard',⁴¹ and that makes it important that we get local democracy right. Scotland and Northern Ireland already have PR and accountability in their local elections through the Single Transferable Vote system, and Wales may well follow them. However, in England, which has over 80% of the UK population, the debate has hardly started: we need to ensure that the many enjoy the same standards of democracy as the few!

An elected upper house

In a republican democracy, there can be no place for the House of Lords. Although it is no longer a body of aristocrats, it remains a relic of an old order in which people of privilege can take decisions which affect us without our consent. The retention of the term ‘Lord’ suggests that many are not even embarrassed about their lack of democratic legitimacy, and the Lords have resisted any moves to transform their house into an elected chamber (resistance, however, has been easy as successive governments have been feeble in pushing for reforms).

There is a case for retaining a second chamber with a role in the passage of legislation, particularly when our voting system does not give us representative governments. Former PM, Gordon Brown, headed a commission which in 2022 recommended replacing the House of Lords with a Committee of the Nations and Regions to do a broadly similar job,⁴² and Labour spokespeople indicated that this was likely to feature in the Party’s next manifesto. The commission recommended that the Committee should have ‘electoral legitimacy’ but, if this is to be part of a structure ‘in which power grows up from the base of “popular” sovereignty’,⁴³ that legitimacy can only come from PR.

Popular sovereignty does not mean that all citizens should be directly involved in every decision, but it does mean that people should have a say in who legislates on their behalf. The second chamber, whatever other changes might be made in its name, role or functions, must therefore become one that is elected by citizens.

A more equal society

Republicanism is concerned with political equality, but that cannot be easily achieved in a society where wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small elite. Money creates power and influence.

Wealth inequality in the UK has been rising – the top 10% of households own 45% of the country’s wealth while the bottom 50% own

just 9%. Some top earning CEOs earn more in an hour than some of their staff earn in an entire year. The super-rich, through how they use and invest their money, have huge influence over the sort of society others must live in and the jobs available to them. The wealth that top earners accumulate creates a new economic aristocracy, providing huge privileges for descendants yet unborn.

Inequality of incomes can lead to 'inequality of respect'. Ferdinand Mount has noted that 'a sharpening inequality of income has been accompanied by a pervading contempt for those who are at the bottom of the ladder' - and Mount is not a radical socialist but a former head of Margaret Thatcher's Policy Unit.⁴⁴

How wealth is distributed cannot be radically changed without a revolution, and that is not something that many people would be prepared to contemplate. An acceptance of republican values, however, would point to the need for policies that limit the accumulation of wealth and the extent to which it can be passed from one generation to another. In the pursuit of greater equality, republicanism is no different from socialism, but what republicanism adds is the argument that excessive wealth creates power and influence, thereby impinging on the rights of other citizens and their power to exercise sovereignty.

Much wealth is based on land ownership, and here the traditional aristocracy is alive and well - they own about a third of the country's land. In many cases their estates go back nearly a thousand years to when their ancestors sided with William the Conqueror and were rewarded with huge tracts of land, often confiscated with brutality. The aristocracy and gentry own around a third of England's land – ordinary homeowners only about a twentieth (much of the land not owned by the crown or aristocrats is owned by large financial institutions, many of them based overseas).⁴⁵ Although landowners 'own' land as freeholders, or in some cases through tenancies, legally all land in the UK belongs to the monarch. If instead of this absurdity the country belonged to its citizens, while dismantling the pattern of land ownership would be difficult, citizens

should be in a position to share in the benefits of ownership, perhaps through land taxes and increased access to land. However, even if such a fundamental change in land ownership is not immediately achievable, there are things that could be done: Guy Shrubsole, in his excellent book on 'Who owns England? How we lost our green and pleasant land and how to take it back'⁴⁶ makes a number of proposals including the need for transparency on land holdings, environmental action and better stewardship of land, and increasing opportunities for people and communities to gain control of local land. Land reform should therefore be part of the republican agenda.

9. A REPUBLICAN CULTURE

Political culture is not something on which we can legislate, but if we adopt a constitution which asserts that power comes from the bottom up and not the top down, if we rid ourselves of the monarchy and its status-laden symbolism and if we can give our democracy more strength, then we can expect people to start thinking differently about the state and their role in it. Culture is something that will only change gradually, but enacting reforms that make popular sovereignty at least a constitutional reality will surely start to move us from a form of politics which seems remote and distant from people to one that engages them.

It is a move that is sorely needed. During the first half of the last century, our democracy grew in strength with the extension of the franchise and the advent of Labour to represent working class interests. It reached its zenith with the election of the remarkable 1945-50 Labour government which delivered so much that people needed and wanted, but then democracy lost its momentum and began to slide into a decline towards what some have described as 'post democracy'.⁴⁷ Paul Foot has written about 'how the vote was won and then undermined' by a conservative establishment and business interests, increasingly of an international nature.⁴⁸ The statistics of that decline are striking:

- The turnout in the 1950 general election was 84% but, in spite of all the campaign technologies now available to us, in none of the elections since 2000 has it reached 70% (in 2005 it dropped below 60%);
- In the early 1950s, around 4 million people were members of a party – now the total is less than one million.

People have never had much trust in politicians and their parties, but we've now reached new lows – cynicism towards those who want our votes has for many been replaced by contempt. In 2015 nearly 4 million

people voted for UKIP through a sense of having been 'left behind' by the mainstream parties, and research on the Brexit referendum of 2016 showed that 'resentment of an elite political class' was one of the most decisive factors⁴⁹ - leaders of all the major parties supported 'remain', but large numbers who described themselves as having little interest in politics used the opportunity to vote against them. Similarly, in the Scottish independence referendum of 2014, 74% of those who voted for independence gave 'dissatisfaction at Westminster politics' as one of their main reasons for doing so.⁵⁰

We therefore face a divide between the political establishment and a large number of people who feel alienated from the political process, with the sense of having been abandoned by the mainstream parties being strongest amongst manual workers, the low paid and the unemployed. This is not just bad for democracy, but bad for Labour. These groups were once the bedrock of Labour's support they are people whom Labour aspires to represent.

The sense of alienation which people feel is not irrational – it is based on a fairly objective view of the way in which our society works. If they feel ignored it may be because those who take the decisions don't need to pay much attention to them and if they feel powerless it is because they have little power. No amount of political campaigning will change that unless there is a change in the nature of our society and politics which overcomes people's sense of impotence and makes them feel that they can make a difference.

It is difficult to see anything short of popular sovereignty fully resolving these problems. If people were sovereign, rather than them feeling outsiders with little role in deciding how society should work, it would put them centre-stage. Moreover, if they really understood that the government and its machinery belonged to them rather than to the distant politicians and faceless bureaucrats who seem to be in charge, their interest and involvement in how decisions are taken would surely

increase (and, with popular sovereignty, the faceless bureaucrats might turn out to be really nice people!).

A simple declaration of popular sovereignty, of course, is unlikely to be enough – a new car is of little use unless you have the keys and know how to drive it and, similarly, collective ownership means little unless there are mechanisms by which people can make it work. That is why voting systems that are likely to make more votes count and procedures for increasing the accountability of politicians are needed.

The culture and language of government would need to change: no longer would it be acceptable for local councils to refer to their citizens as merely ‘customers’, and our parliament needs to conduct its affairs in a way that makes it more understandable, and more responsive, to citizens. Although the use of the term ‘strangers’ members of the public in Westminster was ended in 2004, Westminster’s emblem is still a dropped portcullis – a device for keeping people out. Open doors would surely be more appropriate image.

Thus making people sovereign would surely lead to changes in the way people think about politics and the state. It should give them more opportunity to be involved in decision-making, and it would do so in a way that empowers them and enhances their sense of citizenship. It would not, of course, mean that everyone becoming a full-time politician discussing every issue that arises – good representative democracy does not require that – but it would lead to us being more conscious of our political rights and our collective responsibility for the affairs of the nation. Politics would become the business of everyone and not just of an elite group at Westminster.

As well as the constitutional changes, there are things that could be done to encourage this change in our national mindset. Our new constitution should not be just a dry text that sets out how the state should be run – it should be something that inspires people with a sense of common purpose, that affirms that we all have the same political rights, and that makes it clear that unmerited privileges, ranks and titles are

things of the past. The process of electing a head of state will help signal the beginning of a new social order, as will the introduction of an electoral system which will give everyone more reason for voting.

We will, however, need to shake off the mindset of the past. We are conditioned to being treated as subjects rather than active citizens and we are surrounded by reminders of the hierarchical nature of our state. Our letters are delivered by the Royal Mail, our money is produced by the Royal Mint, we are supposed to be protected by a Royal Airforce and a Royal Navy which consists of His Majesty's Ships. His Majesty's Government publishes papers through His Majesty's Stationery Offices and we pay our taxes to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Many of our most prestigious academies, colleges and professional societies are 'royal' and, although our health service is 'National', its nurses are represented by a Royal College. Many of our largest charities have royal branding, and even our favourite beans come with a royal coat of arms on the tin. As Jonathan Freedland has noted:

'It is tempting to brush aside these trappings of royal dominion as quaint leftovers of an earlier era. But they are, in fact, everyday illustrations of a profound fact: control over Britain and its institutions has never been handed over to the British people.'⁵¹

There is much about American politics that we would not wish to follow but we should not overlook what works in America. Its constitution, beginning 'We, the people', is the foundation of American political culture - it is something that many ordinary Americans treasure and accept as the basis of how their country is governed: Britain has no equivalent text that sets out rights and values in a manner that all can understand and unite around. Freedland quotes Newt Gingrich's comparison of the two polities:

'Under the European model, God endows power to the King who lends some of it to the people. The American model endows power to the people who lend some of it to the government.'

Although many of the claims made by Americans about the merits of their system are as hollow as the Statue of Liberty, the contention that power

should come from the bottom up rather than the top down is something that all democrats must accept.

Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, who when elected in 2018 was the youngest member of the US Congress, tells how her father took her to Washington when she was a child. He pointed to the Capitol building and told her

‘This belongs to us all – it belongs to you and it belongs to me’.

Although he may have chosen to ignore the realities of the power structure in the US, he was, constitutionally, right.

It is difficult, however, to image British parents taking their children to Westminster and making similar claims. We do not own our state. Too often we accept the role of being subjects, ruled by a remote and elite establishment that is partly hereditary, rather than seeing ourselves as citizens with an equal stake in the affairs of the nation. If we are to shake off the habits, ingrained over the centuries, of showing deference to those considered to be our social superiors, and if we are to cease being willing to accept a social order which is rooted in an inglorious past, we need a change that makes citizens sovereign.

Without such a change, we risk an increase in the numbers who, through a sense of alienation, will either turn their backs on politics or turn to the anti-politics of extremists. Make the change, however, and we have a chance of making politics what it should be – the way people work together to reach agreement on the sort of society and world they want to live in – and only then will it be possible for Labour to achieve a society for the many rather than the few.

PART 4

THE WAY AHEAD

8. FIRST STEPS FOR LABOUR

There cannot be much in the case for republicanism, presented in the previous chapter, that a huge majority of Labour members would not support. We all want more equality of political power and we want our politicians and state institutions to be more accountable to us. But what are we going to do about it? Are we willing to contemplate fundamental reforms in the way our state works, recognising that to do so means challenging the monarchy and the social system of which it is a foundation? Even if we are willing, have we prepared the ground for the challenge that will come, and what these challenge may look like?

Our monarchy may not have survived into the twenty-first century if it had not been so skillful in its public relations work. Despite its irrationality, Queen Elizabeth remained very popular and Labour's leaders were aware of the political dangers of being seen as anything other than loyal servants. Although her reign came to an end in 2022, a full-frontal attack on an institution revered by so many voters would clearly be unwise.

That, however, does not mean there is nothing that Labour could do. Although Labour cannot make changes through legislation while it is in opposition, it can start preparing the ground for reform. In an intelligent and respectful way, it can signal that there are issues that need to be discussed and that nothing is off-limits for debate. At this stage Labour need not offer a view on the case for abolishing the monarchy, and indeed it would be unwise to do so – it could result in the following election being dominated by what would be portrayed as Labour's unpatriotic disrespect for our wonderful royals. Moreover, it would seem odd for a political party to call for a national debate on matter on which it has already determined its policy. Labour should, however, make it clear that its mind is not closed

to fundamental constitutional reforms and that there are issues it wants debated. The position it takes could be along the following lines:

Labour recognises that many British people regard the monarchy with affection and it is grateful for the services the royal family has given to the country over many decades. Labour is therefore committed to maintaining the monarchy for the foreseeable future, although it recognises the need for a review of the role and functions of the monarchy and reforms aimed at adapting it to present day circumstances.

Labour believes that, with changes in society and in the conduct of our political affairs, and with a desire to enhance people's rights as citizens, a time may come when different constitutional arrangements may serve our national interests better.

When in opposition, even if launching a public debate might be difficult, Labour could at least make a start by getting its own members to discuss what popular sovereignty in Britain might look like and how it can be achieved.

However, when Labour wins a general election (or becomes part of the government with other like-minded coalition partners) it has power to act. Even if the electorate is not ready for anything as radical as abolishing the monarchy, there are many steps that could be taken to reduce its power and influence, to edge the country towards popular sovereignty and to make a transition to a republic more possible. These include:

Revising the Parliamentary Oath

Before taking their seats, MPs must swear an oath of allegiance to "her majesty, her heirs and successors". MPs' allegiances, however, should be to their constituents, the constitution and the nation, and there is surely a case for a revised oath to reflect that.

Norman Baker has pointed out that while all at Westminster as well as the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly are required to swear their loyalty to the monarch, the Northern Ireland Assembly has a much

more enlightened oath which refers to serving people with a commitment to non-violence and democracy and without discrimination. Although this different oath may have been needed to accommodate Sinn Fein, it provides a precedent to the use of alternative oaths.⁵²

In 1998 and again in 2000, the Labour MP Kevin McNamara sought permission to introduce a bill to change the oath and on both occasions was defeated by quite narrow margins. This suggests that a change in the oath could be low-hanging fruit for reformers, especially if some of the opposition to change could be circumvented by offering MPs a choice of oaths (which would no doubt produce some interest in the choices our MPs make).

Making the royals subject to Freedom of Information legislation

The royals' general exemption from FOI legislation, which was only introduced when The Guardian asked to see some of Charles's letters to government ministers, should be ended. While the royals have roles in our governance, there should be transparency over what they do when acting in their official capacities and the monarchy should be subjected to the same scrutiny as other parts of government. If royals are not doing anything of which they should be ashamed, what have they to fear from FOI requests? With greater transparency, Charles might not have been so vulnerable to claims that people could buy access to him.

Ending Prime Ministers' weekly audiences

The 'requirement' for prime ministers to have weekly meetings with the monarch should end. Prime ministers should have better things to do with their time, and if they need someone to confide in then they should choose their own advisors. There is no legislation requiring weekly audiences and, while a head of state must, of course, be well briefed on the general affairs of government, the pretence that this needs weekly meetings at which the monarch may 'advise and warn' the prime minister is quite ridiculous.

Abolishing the Monarchs' and Princes' consent'

This protocol, described in chapter 4, requires that any proposed legislation which may affect the position of the monarch or Prince of Wales (even if only as employers or landowners) must have royal approval before being laid before parliament. Dr Adam Tucker, commenting on a Guardian investigation into the 'Consent', described it as 'an archaic and mysterious part of the UK constitution' which 'should prompt grave concerns about the practice's continued existence'.⁵³ This unnecessary protocol should be revoked and our parliament allowed to legislate as it sees fit.

Removing the Royal Prerogative

The royal prerogative should be ended. As noted in chapter 4, it gives the monarch wide-ranging powers to act without the consent of parliament but, as these powers are only used on the advice of the prime minister, it effectively allows governments to by-pass parliament. While there may be a need for a constitutional provision that allows the Government to act in exceptional circumstances, there should be a general presumption that Government decisions require parliamentary approval.

Reforming the Privy Council

Privy Councillors - mainly senior politicians – are appointed to advise the monarch on the exercise of royal prerogative powers. Ideally the Privy Council should be abolished, but a politically safer route may be to replace it with a body, unrelated to the monarchy, to deal with the less political matters handled by the Council. The work of any replacement body, however, should be quite transparent, and membership of it should not require the Privy Council's masonic-style initiation ceremonies.

Controlling royal expenditure

While we have a monarchy which is essentially part of our governance arrangements, there is no reason why it should not be treated as any

other part of government and why its budget should not be set in the same manner as that of other government departments. A Labour government should integrate the two Duchies with the Crown Estate and introduce a new funding mechanism for the monarchy, and one that allows tight control of royal expenditure.

All of these measures would improve the workings of our democracy and make government more efficient and effective and they can be introduced on that basis. However, they would all be first steps in chipping away at the power and influence of the monarchy. None of them would directly challenge its existence, but they would place limits on the extent to which the royals can meddle in governance and expose the monarchy as an expensive institution that has little purpose.

Similarly, the route to republicanism could be made easier by introducing much needed reforms which are not directly linked to the monarchy – there is no need to wait for an elected head of state before changing to a much more democratic electoral system and replacing the Lords with an elected ‘senate’.

While these proposals have been described as first steps for Labour, many of them would be better described as strides. Their completion may take years rather than months – not only would they require legislation to which there would inevitably be opposition but, if the aim is a more engaged society, it would be odd to move towards it without extensive public consultation. However, whatever the difficulties, they should not deter us – those who founded the Labour Party did not expect socialism would come quickly or easily. Making Britain republican would be the biggest reform in the country’s history and, although creating a republic may not be rocket science, it may be equally complex. Like Rome, a republic can’t be built in a day.

10 MAKING THE CHANGE

The reforms proposed in the previous chapter would certainly move Britain towards republicanism, but the two changes needed to complete the journey are firstly the adoption of a constitution that affirms that citizens are the paramount authority, and secondly the replacement of the monarch by an elected head of state. Whatever else a new constitution might include, what it would mean for the monarchy is likely to be the most contentious issue.

If the monarchy were to suddenly disappear there would be no immediate and dramatic change in our daily lives, but its abolition would be of huge significance. The monarchy has been a central part of our state structure for many centuries, and much of what is taught as British history is the history of monarchs. Any proposal to draw it to a close is likely to be met with stiff resistance from those who like society as it is at present, and it would be unwise to engage in battle until the prospects of victory seem good.

The monarchy still enjoys the support of a majority of the public, but it is not as safe and unchallengeable as it was only a decade or more ago. The late queen provided the monarchy with a lot of stability and her age and commitment to her duties made many reluctant to criticise the institution, but the respect she was shown has not all been transferred to her successor: polling has shown that the public view Princess Anne, the king's son William and even his brother Edward more favourably than the king himself. The extent of republican protests around the coronation and other royal events, coupled with a greater willingness at least in parts of the media to expose the true nature of the monarchy, demonstrate that we are entering a new era in which the monarchy is not automatically assumed to be a sacred, national treasure.

These changes may open the way for a new debate on the institution. As respect for the monarchy decreases, so will people's willingness to show allegiance to it, and a public that is less deferential is more likely to question whether the monarchy provides value for the vast amount it costs. Without the late queen at the head of the institution, the public is less likely to be tolerant when the royals fail to meet the standards expected of them, and royal scandals could easily provoke serious questioning around whether the monarchy has a future. It is such events, rather than lengthy constitutional discussions, that may trigger change, and Labour must prepare itself for taking opportunities that make change possible: whereas Blair's government helped the monarchy survive its wobble at the death of Princess Diana in 1997, Labour should be ready to take advantage, sensitively, of events that allow it to consider a republican future.

Ending the monarchy in the UK is more likely to be a process than a single act. Although the last century has seen the abolition of monarchies in several European countries, the changes have taken place during periods of great political turmoil. Britain could be the first to replace its monarchy in times of peace and stability, and that may allow quite a different sort of transition. Even amongst staunch republicans there are few who want to see the royals humiliated or exiled, or both: more acceptable would be a process through which the royals gradually cede their privileges and powers with their constitutional roles being passed to an elected head of state. Allowing the royals to continue using their titles and doing good works for the remainder of their lives, while living in relative luxury, might not be strictly in the spirit of republicanism, but it could be a price worth paying for a smooth transition.

The point at which a new head of state, and even one with a limited role, is elected would nevertheless be a very significant part of that process. Many argue that it would be a constitutional change of such importance that a referendum would be required: they may have a case.

Britain's recent experience of referendums, however, suggests they are so open to manipulation by the media and unprincipled propagandists that, if they cannot be avoided, they should only be held to ratify a clear public preference for reform.

An alternative route, which should at least be considered, would be through a Labour manifesto commitment to electing a head of state: by convention, the Lords should not block action on a manifesto pledge, but a proposal of this nature could take us into uncharted constitutional waters. This approach also runs the risk that a manifesto commitment to end the monarchy would dominate pre-election debates and could jeopardise Labour's electoral prospects.

A much better strategy would be to make the future of the monarchy a part of a wider package of constitutional changes – and, indeed, much of the case for removing the monarchy is about the constitutional reforms that could flow from it. Instead of asking people, through a referendum or an election, to oppose a monarchy on which they may not have a strong opinion, it would surely better to offer them something new – a written constitution which protects their rights, measures to make sure democracy works and politicians are held to account, the opportunity to have a say in who should be head of state, and a stake in the ownership of their country. However attractive the offer, there will be some who prefer privilege or are stuck in tradition who will make mischief: a campaign will therefore need clarity on what 'a head of state' means and what their role and powers would be – otherwise it might be easily derailed.

Whatever strategy is adopted, abolishing the monarchy will only be possible when public opinion is ready for it and the debate has been won: no political party – not even Labour – is likely to challenge the monarchy unless it is fairly sure the move would have public backing. At first sight the immediate prospects may not look promising – most polls which have been conducted since the accession of the King Charles show the

percentages favouring the monarchy to be about 60%. However, these figures do not give the full picture.

Until about 2015, most polls showed support for the monarchy to be around 75%. In the years that followed, during which the frictions within the royal family and the disgrace of Prince Andrew were big news stories, support dropped to around 60%. Many had anticipated that it would have been boosted by the huge amount of publicity the monarchy received around the coronation, but that did not happen. Instead, a poll just before the coronation found only 54% supporting the monarchy, and only 27% in favour of the monarchy continuing without reform.⁵⁴ Another survey found only 29% thought the monarchy ‘very important’ – the lowest level recorded in the 40 years that this statistic has been measured.⁵⁵

The numbers supporting the monarchy could change rapidly if there were more events that undermine its claims of moral leadership. This was demonstrated in 1997 when, in response to the misjudged response to the death of Princess Diana, support fell below 50% for the first time – although there was a recovery, even three years later a poll found 44% didn’t think the country would be worse off without a monarch.⁵⁶ While the misdemeanors of minor royals should not be part of the case against the monarchy, they nevertheless expose that the royals are far from perfect and start to raise questions over whether the monarchy is everything it pretends to be.

The change in the nature of both the monarchy and the media also makes the monarchy more exposed to public scrutiny and criticism. Without much obvious role in the affairs of state, the monarchy needs publicity to maintain its relevance and any sense of importance, but publicity could also be its undoing. The nineteenth century commentator, Walter Bagehot, wrote:

‘When there is a select committee on the Queen the charm of royalty will be gone. Its mystery is its life. We must not let daylight in upon magic’⁵⁷

In the twenty-first century, however, it's hard to escape from daylight. The lives of the royals are followed with the same interest as those of pop stars and television celebrities and royal rifts and indiscretions are more likely to be exposed to public view. The more that people know, the more there is to disagree with or to dislike.

In June 2021, the Oxford Union Debating Society voted in favour of abolition. No-one should have been surprised: the polls tell us that support for the monarchy is strongly correlated with age and that in the 18-24 age group there is a republican majority. If young republicans were to remain republicans with the passage of time, then future of the monarchy would look bleak!

In the week following the Oxford debate, students at Magdalen College caused a stir by voting to remove a photograph of the late queen from their common room. The reasoning of some of them was similar to that of those who pushed a statue of the slave trader, Edward Colston, into Bristol harbour: in past centuries the monarchy both promoted and profited from slavery and the institution, the students argued, should not therefore be glorified. No-one could hold the late queen responsible for slavery, but as society becomes more conscious of the past injustices which have shaped it through, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement, the less likely people will be happy singing an anthem about wanting to be long reigned over.

Several polls early in 2021 showed that 29% of us support abolition. It's not a majority, but it is the same level of support that Labour received in the 2010 general election! Moreover, while Labour's vote came at the end of a long election campaign, the debate on republicanism has hardly begun. What debate there has been has been a David and Goliath contest – the royals' large and well-resourced public relations teams and a largely sycophantic media against tiny groups of activists (no republican organisation in the UK can afford offices, and 'Republic' is the only one with paid staff). However, like the biblical David who, with some fairly unsophisticated equipment, came out on top, republicans, where there

have been opportunities to engage in debate, have often found that, with a few well-aimed shots, the case for the monarchy begins to crumble and opinions start to change.

For republicans there is therefore everything to play for. History shows us that centuries-old constitutional structures are not indestructible and there are times when politics can change dramatically over relatively short periods. Few at the start of 1989 would have predicted that Berlin Wall would have fallen by the end of the year, or in 2010 that the Arab world was about to see a succession of uprisings against oppressive rulers. Similarly, few could have foreseen that legislation for same-sex marriages would follow just 25 years after introduction of the homophobic 'clause 28' (prohibiting the promotion of gay relationships as an acceptable life style), or the speed at which environmental issues have become a central political issue in the space of a few years. A British republic may not therefore be such a far-off goal as many people think.

Socialism and republicanism must go hand-in-hand. A Labour government could do many good things without embracing republicanism, but it cannot transform society without challenging the centuries old notions of rank and status which make some more important and more influential than others. Unless it tackles the hereditary privilege and wealth which sets a small elite apart from the rest of us, there will be a limit on how far it can go in making society fairer.

This book has argued that the monarchy, the keystone of a structure which has endured since feudal times, must be replaced by an elected and accountable head of state, and that we need a modern constitution which affirms where power lies. Only by making these changes can we clear the way for allowing the development of a different sort of society – one that regards all citizens as being of equal worth and entitled to equal respect.

Such changes will not happen unless they are championed by Labour. The monarchy enjoys considerable public support and, however irrational

that support might be, it makes Labour's reticence in challenging the monarchy understandable – not even Labour-supporting republicans want to see manifesto commitments which might damage Labour's electoral prospects. Nevertheless, Labour cannot with any integrity just ignore an institution which is inimical to its values and even if Labour feels that the time is not right for it to openly declare itself republican, it must at least recognise that there is a need for a debate about the nature of our democracy, about where power lies and about the sort of society and state Labour wants to create.

The time is right for that debate. The monarchy is at a watershed moment - the late queen's reign is over and, with a new and less-respected king on the throne, public views on the monarchy may become more phlegmatic. We are also at a point where, with the experiences of the Brexit process, the COVID lockdown and more movements like Black Lives Matter raising more questions about the fairness of society, fundamental changes are needed to restore confidence in politics. The case for a national debate on how we are governed is therefore a strong one.

It must, however, be a debate about how we can create a society in which all are of equal worth and in which citizenship has real meaning. It must be about tackling powers and privileges that should have no place in a twenty-first century socialist democracy, about how we change our constitution to bring about popular sovereignty and about how we create a new culture of republicanism. It's a debate that should lead to a smooth transition from a United Kingdom to a United Republic, with the election of a new head of state ushering in a new era.


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Mention 'republicanism' to many people and their thoughts will turn to the atrocities of IRA bombers or Trump supporters in the US. Tell them it's about getting rid of the queen and many will react with horror, assuming it to be a treasonous attack on the epitome of British values and decency.

Even amongst many Labour members, any reference to republicanism arouses deep suspicion: it is too often perceived as an alien concept which has no place in a party determined to win power for the majority of people who simply want a government that delivers the jobs and services they need.


Republicanism, however, is about the dignity and equal worth of all citizens. It is about the quest for a society free from the divisions of status and privilege and for a state that belongs to its people.


This booklet presents the case for a modern, British republic and argues that Labour will not achieve its mission to transform British society unless it embraces the principles of republicanism.

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