

All political parties, but particularly Labour, should embrace the cause of republicanism

By Democratic Audit

*The Royal Family, we are frequently told, stand above party politics and remain neutral on the big issues of the day. But this seemingly benign state of affairs masks a system in which the unelected head of state has a right and a duty to be consulted on important policy areas. **Ken Ritchie** argues that the time has come for the all the main parties, but particularly Labour, to embrace the cause of republicanism.*

Republicanism is a cross-party issue, but if there is one party

that has reason to embrace it more than any other then that party is surely Labour. Yet the party that was created to stand up for the common person, to challenge privilege and to tackle the ills of an unequal society seem to have a blind spot when it comes to royalty. With a few honourable exceptions, Labour MPs seem quite prepared to swear their allegiance to their monarch, tolerate her extravagant expenditure and accept without questions or challenge the power vested in her. Many MPs who condemned hereditary privilege when discussing Lords reform seem content to tolerate a hereditary head of state.

That's not to say that many, and I expect most, Labour members privately accept that the monarchy is a bit of an anachronism, but they regard it as a harmless one. But it is not. Few are aware that the queen's consent was needed before Parliament could even consider issues as diverse as paternity pay, civil partnerships, national insurance contributions and Labour's Work and Families Bill. The queen has, of course, played her hand carefully, but why should a rich and privileged woman who sits at the apex of the aristocracy have the right to put obstacles in the way of legislation which a future Labour government might want to introduce?

Our monarch, some will argue, stands above politics, but that does not mean she is without political power and influence. When few campaigning organisations ever get an opportunity to discuss their concerns with the Prime Minister, why can the queen demand a weekly audience and what is discussed at these meetings? We're not allowed to know, but according to the queen's website, she has a right and a duty to comment on the affairs of government, but from what experience of the lives of ordinary people does she comment? Successive PMs have maintained these meetings are not just formalities but about matters of substance: Tony Blair has commented that monarchs "still have the power to keep us in our place".

Even if the queen has been careful in her use of power, Prince Charles has not. Since the 2010 election he has held 35 private meetings with ministers, and the Guardian is still trying to force disclosure of the 'spider letters' he sent to the last Labour government. The Attorney General has vetoed their publication, arguing the letters were 'particularly frank' and that disclosure 'would undermine his position of neutrality', which suggests that the letters were far from politically neutral. As monarch would he stop meddling in the affairs of government?

For Labour, an even bigger concern should be the insidious influence of the monarchy on nature of society. Its very existence makes the point that we are not a classless society, but some are born into positions of power and privilege and the rest of us should accept our status and show due deference. If Labour is serious about the equality of all citizens, then it needs to challenge this institution. Our aim should be a society in which the people, not the monarch, are sovereign.

The queen, some argue, unites the nation. But does she? We will not, at least in the foreseeable future, see a black monarch, and it is difficult to understand how a monarch who heads the Church of England and has sworn to uphold its doctrine can unify a multi-faith and no-faith society.

Much too has been made of her role in representing and speaking for the nation, but it is difficult to think of anything significant that she has ever said. Being represented by a hereditary head of state surely gives the impression that Britain is still living in the nineteenth century. If we want a representative of the nation, surely that person should be chosen by the nation.

Thus there is every reason for Labour to advocate an elected head of state, but it will not do so. In Britain we have never had a serious debate on the monarchy and the Palace's publicity machine, aided by the BBC, has ensured that popular opinion appears to be on its side. Challenging the monarchy is unlikely to be a vote winner.

When Labour London Assembly member, Tom Copley, recently blogged that politicians should be spending their time focusing on the 650,000 children in London who live in poverty rather than on the birth of a rich and privileged royal baby, his vilification at the hands of the Daily Mail was predictable. Perhaps it is a warning of the consequences of raising questions about the monarchy, but Copley was doing no more than Keir Hardie did on the birth of Edward VIII. Labour, however, needs more Copleys than politicians who prefer to remain silent and accept a society in which your parentage is more important than your worth.

Labour for a Republic has been created to start the debate. Even if calling for an immediate end to the monarchy is not presently a realistic objective, there are things Labour might be persuaded to do to keep the monarchy in check. The right of royals to veto consideration of legislation which might affect their financial interests should be abolished; the royals should be taxed (as should the Duchy of Cornwall which funds Charles's lavish lifestyle) and in times of austerity should be required to tighten their royal belts; their correspondence with government should be subject to FOI rules; MPs should be free to criticise the monarch in the Commons and the oath of allegiance which they swear should be to their constituent rather than to the queen. Such measure would move us nearer to a society in which we, the citizens, are sovereign.

The way ahead, however, will not be easy. A Labour government will have many things on which it wants to legislate and, even if it sympathetic to the changes we propose, persuading it to make time for discussion the role of the monarchy will be difficult. Some years ago an eminent baroness was asked if she was a republican: she replied "Yes – I am a democrat and you cannot be a true democrat and not be a republican", and she then added, "It's number 85 on my list of priorities". Labour for a Republic's job is to move republicanism up Labour's agenda.

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