

There are no sources in the current document. **European Monarchies: Guardians of Democracy?**

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Abstract

How is it possible to account for the continuing presence of monarchy in advanced social democracies? There is a lazy tendency to assume that monarchies inevitably transform into republics as a higher form of governance. This comparative study of the eight main European monarchies maintains otherwise: monarchy is perfectly compatible with democracy, and can help strengthen citizens' loyalty to the system of government. Provided it delivers a politically impartial head of state, monarchy can endure indefinitely with government and popular support. In practice, the countries studied are *de facto* republics but with hereditary heads of state who occupy social roles beyond the reach of quotidian politics. Monarchy's principal danger is not republicanism, but the pressures of conflicting expectations on what is required of royal families, and the relentless intrusions of modern media in an age where royalty and celebrity are in danger of being conflated. Responses to Covid-19 show how monarchs can speak to and for their nations in ways no partisan politician can.

Key words: Monarchy, European social democracy, legitimacy, Republicanism, head of state.

Introduction

At first sight, the survival of monarchy in some of the world's most advanced democracies seems puzzling. Isn't monarchy the very antithesis of democracy and its persistence somehow an irregularity which needs to be explained away? As Robert Blackburn has put it: 'Monarchy is essentially a creature of the past and at some point in the future is very likely to collapse'.¹ But in western Europe there are eight monarchies which are flourishing democracies and show no sign of collapsing. They form the subject of our book *The Role of Monarchy in Modern Democracy*, in which we explore how constitutional monarchy and democracy can be complementary rather than conflicting notions.²

Monarchy has a long history in Europe, being the predominant form of government from the Middle Ages until the French Revolution. The abolition of the monarchy in most European countries came during the twentieth century, mainly as a result of defeat in war, sometimes accompanied by a revolution. That has led to a teleological assumption that in time most democracies will become republics, as the highest form of democratic government. But there is a stubborn group of very advanced democracies in Western Europe which defy that assumption. According to the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, in their 2018 survey four out of the top five democracies in the world were monarchies, and nine out of the top 15. They include six European monarchies: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and the UK. These six countries were the focus of our comparative study, plus Belgium and Spain.

We decided to embark on our study to fill a serious gap in the literature. Lots of popular books are written about the monarchy; and lots of history books, both popular and academic. But in the academic discipline of politics, monarchy is non-existent as a subject. Our book attempts to explain the paradox that an ancient, hereditary institution has survived into the modern age, and identify the political mechanisms responsible. We began by asking about modern monarchy's constitutional and political role; how much autonomy monarchs enjoy in the exercise of their different functions; how the monarchy is defined and regulated; and the limits to the size of the royal family, and its finances. We then examined the legitimacy of the monarchy, its unique characteristics and value, and the risks and threats it faces in the future.

Regulation of the Monarchy

The most striking thing in most of these countries is how powerful the monarch appears to be, in the formal text of the constitution. Any stranger reading the Danish, or Norwegian constitutional text would gain the impression that the King runs the country. But in Denmark and Norway, as in the UK, the text has become heavily overlaid with conventions which constrain the monarch. Reduction of royal power has been achieved by formal changes to the constitution, or legislation, as well as by changing political conventions. Sweden has gone the furthest, in reducing the monarch to a purely ceremonial role in the 1974 Instrument of Government. But erosion of power has continued in the other countries. In the Netherlands the Queen was removed from deciding who should become prime minister; in Luxembourg the Grand Duke lost the power to assent to the laws made by parliament; in the UK the Queen has lost the prerogative power to dissolve parliament.

All the monarchies are tightly regulated by law: monarchy is subject to democracy, not the other way round. There is a common core of matters which are regulated in all countries: the laws of succession, royal marriages, the royal finances. But there is variation between the different countries with regards to who makes the rules about lesser matters. For instance, in Sweden as in the UK, titles are decided by the King, and in 2019 King Carl XVI Gustaf, in response to growing political pressure, reduced the size of the royal house by removing five of his grandchildren. There are also important formal and informal constraints on royal behaviour. The monarch and close members of the royal family are severely constrained in terms of life choices: their freedom of speech is restricted, some lack freedom to travel, they are not free to marry whom they want, they lack freedom of religion (in Scandinavia and the UK), free choice of career, and the right to privacy and family life which ordinary citizens take for granted. Marrying, or being born into a royal family thus involves big sacrifices: they lead very privileged lives, but within a gilded cage. In 2020 Prince Harry and Meghan decided the constraints and loss of privacy were too great, and opted out: an outcome forecast by the PQ in 2003 as a likely consequence of conflating royalty with celebrity.³

Yet the monarch still remains the ultimate guardian of the constitution. The most dramatic illustration of that was in Spain in 1981, when King Juan Carlos helped to foil an attempted coup d'état by the *Guardia Civil*. There was a similar episode in wartime Norway, when King Haakon VII told his Cabinet that he would rather abdicate than appoint Quisling as head of government in response to German demands. But the exercise of the monarch's reserve powers ultimately depends on popular support. If the monarch loses the support of the government or his people, he puts his throne at risk. There have been four examples of this over the last century: in the abdication of Grand Duchess Marie-Adélaïde of Luxembourg in 1919, of the British King Edward VIII in 1936, the Belgian King Leopold III in 1951, and the Spanish King Juan Carlos in 2014.

Modern Monarchs Have No Political Power

Constitutional monarchs have little or no discretion when it comes to matters of state; little choice but to approve every action or decision of the government. They are limited to Bagehot's trio of rights, the right to be consulted, to encourage and to warn. This may give them a small degree of influence, but it will be marginal at best: no one could claim, for example, that Queen Elizabeth changed British foreign policy through her strong attachment to the Commonwealth, a passion seldom shared by her ministers.

A different kind of influence might be psychological rather than political: the potential for the monarch to provide support to the prime minister through their weekly meetings. It may be fanciful to depict the monarch as mentor or coach, but political memoirs show that some UK prime ministers have valued the opportunity to talk things through with someone above the political fray.

The one sphere where monarchs still have considerable discretion is when it comes to organising the programme of visits within their own country, in terms of the regions and causes they are seen to support. They also have some limited scope for expressing their own views in their annual Christmas or New Year

message. And there is scope for the Crown Prince or Princess to support causes which might be deemed political, on the understanding that when they become monarch, their behaviour will need to become more restrained and strictly neutral.

So What is the Modern Monarchy For?

Formally, monarchs still play a central role bestowed upon them by the constitution; but in practice they have almost no discretion in state affairs, and no other choice but to follow the advice of their governments. So the question arises, if they have no real political power, what is the modern monarchy for?

Monarchies have survived because of the continuing support of government and the people. The most formal way of testing popular support is to hold a referendum. It is surprising how many referendums have been held in Europe on the future of the monarchy. Greece held six referendums on the subject in the twentieth century, but was not alone. Eight other European countries have held referendums since 1900, leading to a grand total of 18 referendums. In Italy and Greece the result went against the monarchy; in five of the countries in our study, starting with Norway in 1905, the result was in favour.

A less formal test of popular support is through opinion polls. These show that support for the monarchy remains high in all countries, with polls regularly showing that between 60 and 80 per cent of people wish to retain the monarchy. Support is highest in Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK, where it ranges between 70 and 80 per cent; and a little lower in Belgium, Spain and Sweden, at around 60 to 65 per cent. These are approval ratings which elected politicians would die for.

It may seem surprising that an ancient institution such as a hereditary monarchy can command such high levels of popular support. That brings us to the arguments which seek to justify a non-elected, hereditary head of state as part of government in a modern democracy. We consider first the reasons why governments support having a hereditary monarchy; and next the reasons why the people do.

Reasons for Governments to Support the Monarchy

There is a feedback loop between the two. Governments support a hereditary monarchy because it has widespread popular support. But there is a condition: governments support a hereditary monarchy so long as it remains politically neutral. To take just Luxembourg as an example, Grand Duchess Marie-Adélaïde lost the support of the socialists and liberals when she dissolved parliament in 1916, leading them later to propose abolition of the monarchy, and her abdication in 1919; in 2008, Grand Duke Henri was stripped of his legislative role after he refused to sign a euthanasia bill into law.

Modern monarchs have to remain above politics; and governments will ensure they are kept in their place. In so doing, governments are helping to safeguard monarchy as an institution. As Vernon Bogdanor has put it:

A constitutional monarchy settles beyond argument the crucial question of who is to be the head of state, and it places the position of the head of state beyond political competition. In doing so, it alone can represent the whole nation in an emotionally satisfying way; it alone is in a position to interpret the nation to itself.⁴

There are several other reasons why governments may want to support the monarchy. A respected monarchy can lend legitimacy to the other state institutions, and bolster the loyalty of citizens. And a monarch with no political mandate may be easier to deal with than a president with a political background. Busy prime ministers are able to despatch the monarch or lesser royals to ceremonial or sporting events, and on state visits and trade missions. And when negotiating trade deals with other monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia or Brunei, it helps to send a royal to seal the deal.

Reasons for the People to Support the Monarchy

We turn next to the reasons why the people might support a hereditary monarchy. For most members of the public the answer lies more in the ceremonial roles performed by the monarch rather than a monarch's constitutional and political functions. Prominent features of this dimension include the monarchy as a neutral focus of national loyalty at times of crisis and at times of celebration. Examples of the monarch speaking for the nation in times of crisis include broadcasts by all eight monarchs during the Coronavirus pandemic, or Queen Elizabeth's visits to the disasters of Aberfan and Grenfell Tower; and the visits and speeches after terrorist attacks made by the Kings of Norway and of Spain. Even the constitutionally powerless King of Sweden has an important role as symbol and representative of the nation, exemplified in a heartfelt speech he gave following the death of over 500 Swedes in the 2004 Asian tsunami, at a time when his government had remained silent.

Royal presence at national commemorations can focus national feeling in ways that remain unique. These occasions can often contain a religious element. In the Scandinavian countries and the UK, where the monarch is required to observe the state religion, it might be thought that would be narrow and excluding; but in fact the reverse is the case. Leaders of minority faiths in Britain are defenders of the religious character of the monarchy, as a way of keeping religion in the public sphere. In Denmark Queen Margrethe has said something very similar:

Under the constitution, as the Danish Queen I am bound to the Lutheran faith, but that does not exclude people of other faiths. On the contrary, I believe that the fact that I am religious brings me closer to anyone with a different faith.

Famously, Bagehot suggested that monarchy had survived and thrived by appealing to the heart rather than the head. It is ceremonial functions, and events like royal weddings, which have the greatest appeal. The wedding of Prince William to Kate Middleton attracted almost 40 million viewers in the UK. The journalist Emma Duncan, initially sceptical, found herself noting the professionalism and positive impact of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex on royal visits: 'No politician, no other celebs, would bring such undiluted pleasure... There's a lot to be said for an institution that both embodies national values and brings joy'.⁵

This is not to argue that these features cannot be seen in republics. After all, there is an important sense in which European monarchies *are* republics except for having hereditary heads of state. But republican heads of state lack some of the advantages of monarchs. They cannot bring the symbolism of the family to national life, nor can they bring the numbers of a family to the personal encounters that royal visiting can spread across the whole national community; nor can they bring the glamour and stardust of royalty.

Risks and Threats

The modern association of royalty – particularly the younger royals – with celebrity may help confer popularity, but these are shallow and fickle waters. The greatest threat to the monarchy is the loss of privacy. Harassment of the royal family in pursuit of stories about their private lives is worst in the UK, with the phone hacking scandal, but other countries have also seen flagrant intrusions into their private lives. Harassment is also rife on social media, with wild speculation about the sexual orientation of some of the younger royals, or rival support groups in the UK promoting vicious Kate versus Meghan stories.

A second threat to the monarchy is simply human frailty. Loyalty now is less to the institution, and more to each holder of the office; and it is conditional on good behaviour. Here one strength of monarchy – undisputed succession and the promise of personal continuity – is also potentially a weakness. The UK is not alone in having had kings who have been mad, bad or stupid. At a time when personality and behaviour are more than ever scrutinised, personal inadequacy can all too easily bring monarchy into disrepute.

Some of the investigative journalism is justified, in holding the monarchy to account. The monarchy is a public institution, which receives significant amounts of public funding, and proper scrutiny of how that money is spent is perfectly reasonable. Investigative journalism has helped to expose corruption scandals, most recently in Spain, where the son-in-law of King Juan Carlos is serving a six-year prison sentence for fraud and corruption. He is not alone: in 1976 Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, the husband of Queen Juliana, was forced to resign as Inspector General of the armed forces in the Lockheed arms scandal. Similar allegations have circulated in Spain about deals negotiated by King Juan Carlos with Arab countries, but have never been proved. It was not the only reason for his abdication, but it was one factor in his growing unpopularity.

The Future for Monarchy

European monarchy must be doing something right for it to remain so extraordinarily popular, with opinion poll rankings of 60 to 80 per cent. Its survival, on the other hand, cannot be taken for granted. For the time being, its powerlessness allows it to remain acceptable to governments and politicians; and at the same time popular with the citizenry for its symbolic national functions, impartial bearing, and the glamour it brings into their lives.

Its room for manoeuvre is, however, increasingly circumscribed by the demands put upon it. Many of these demands are contradictory. Monarchy has to be special, a living fairy tale and an endless source of glamorous images; but its members must also be accessible and ordinary as individuals. We expect them to be interesting and entertaining, to show an informed interest in modern life, to be an inspiration for charitable endeavour and yet always be unimpeachably neutral. Royal families should demonstrate impeccable family values, and yet they are just as human and fallible as the rest of us, with children who go astray, and marriages that break down, but all in the harsh spotlight of relentless publicity.

To conclude, monarchy may be ancient but it has also proved adaptable in response to enormous social and political change. It continues to possess features of great social value which should not be lightly set aside. Monarchy has weathered severe storms, and survived. Five of the eight monarchies in our study were occupied during World War II and came through even that experience. Many of the previous monarchies in Europe have disappeared following defeat in war, revolution or the collapse of the state. But for those eight monarchies that remain, there seems no reason why they should not continue for many years to come, so long as they retain the support of their governments, and the people.

Notes

¹ Robert Blackburn, *King and Country: Monarchy and the Future King Charles*, London, Politico's, 2006.

² Robert Hazell and Bob Morris, *The Role of Monarchy in Modern Democracy: European Monarchies Compared*, Hart Publishing, 2020.

³ Gamble A and Wright T (2003) 'Commentary: The Future of the Monarchy', *Political Quarterly*, Vol 24.1, pp 1-3.

⁴ Vernon Bogdanor, *The Monarchy and the Constitution*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1995.

⁵ Emma Duncan, 'I've learnt to love the magic of monarchy', *The Times*, April 30 2019; <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-ve-learnt-to-love-the-magic-of-monarchy-hdt2f2w6z> (accessed 27 April 2020).