

Prince Philip was a royal consort like no other

by Conrad Black



As a person in my 70s I cannot remember when Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, was not a prominent public figure well known in this country and much of the world. It does not seem like 70 years ago when my mother took my brother and me to see Princess Elizabeth and her almost new husband pass by on their way to look at E.P. Taylor's racehorses at Windfields Farm, now the Toronto community of Don Mills. What an astonishing life was his. Because his ancestors were in the tangled web of European monarchy, he was a Greek and a Danish prince before becoming a member of the British Royal Family. His father and many of his in-laws and some of his siblings were Nazi sympathizers or adherents even as his mother, an estranged wife and eccentric woman, was deemed a righteous gentile and

is honoured at Yad Vashem for her protection of victims of the Nazi occupation of Greece. While he served with distinction throughout World War II in the Royal Navy, two of Philip's brothers-in-law served in the navy of the Third Reich. He came often to Canada in his many capacities as a supporter of benevolent and military organizations for all of which he worked tirelessly and effectively, and in the normal course of events I met him fairly often and generally in gradually smaller groups, and after I moved to the United Kingdom as principal shareholder of one of its large newspaper companies I had occasion to meet him often and frequently alone or in very small groups. I have been asked for a recollection of him and apologize for bringing myself into it so much – these are recollections of the Prince, not of me.

In my experience, those who hold high public offices, whether elected or not, are generally quite convivial and must be so to discharge their positions successfully. The Duke of Edinburgh sometimes got a bad press but knowing the press as I did I generally thought that that was an argument in his favour, and as I knew him, he was always courteous, thoughtful, and interested in everybody and everything. He did more than anyone can reasonably ask to represent the institution of the monarchy as one vitally interested in practically every aspect of the life of the nations that he and the Queen served. He was sometimes disparaged as a man with too many and too quick opinions, but I found his opinions were always carefully thought through and he was always a good listener. When he learned from a Canadian high commissioner in London that I had written a book about Maurice Duplessis, he asked to see it. About six months after I sent him a copy he wrote me quite a learned letter about the evolution of Québec and said that while he recognized Duplessis's great political skill and force of personality and intelligence he thought he had, and as is a widely held view, waited too long before secularizing much of the school system and public health service of Québec. When I wrote back enclosing a few

supportive materials that this enabled him to keep a tight lid on government wage costs, while he built all the universities in Québec except McGill, 3,000 schools, the autoroute system as well as scores of hospitals and other instances of the modernization and urbanization of Québec, he most graciously modified his opinions. He was always very interested in Canada and knew a great deal about it.

It always seemed to me that he did not entirely agree with the Queen and others who placed a great emphasis on the Commonwealth; although he never quite said this in my hearing I had the impression that he thought it was to some degree a fantasy, an imagined consolation prize for an empire that had vanished. But he always showed an interest in proposals that I made from time to time that the more economically advanced countries of the Commonwealth, the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore could coalesce more amicably and productively than other available combinations. With his extensive European background he was wary of too complete an immersion in that continent, and while he had adjusted better than most upper-class Englishmen to the rise of the United States, he did not wish Britain to be swamped or stifled by too intimate an association with it either: "We don't want to be the 51st state." And more than most people I've known who have themselves known a huge number of the great personalities of the past 70 years, his reflections on prominent contemporaries were always interesting and usually somewhat generous. He always had that fine royal combination of self-confidence without pomposity. He did have some peculiar advisers at times – I never understood his regard for Solly Zuckerman, a virtual unilateral disarmament adviser, although the Prince's own opinions were never extreme.

I once asked him how he rated the American presidents that he had known. "We were all in awe of Roosevelt but I didn't know him; my uncle (Lord Mountbatten) and the King did. We admired

Eisenhower during the war but when I got to know him as president it all seemed to be getting a bit too much for him. The most intelligent although it ended badly, was Nixon, and I thought he got a raw deal. Reagan saw it clearly even if he over-simplified a bit and he had this wonderful personality and eloquence and was perhaps the most successful of the ones I've known. Mr. Truman was a delightfully unpretentious and brave man. They've been a pretty good lot all in all, had to be in such an important country." He, like the other people in that institution, had a confidence of permanence; they see everyone come and almost everyone go. To me the most remarkable intellectual accomplishment of the late Prince was his ability to be so interested in so many things and contribute so constructively to them. He never lost the ability to be delighted by new insight. He evinced a great interest in seeing a collection of World War II battleship models I have to the same scale and wished to see them when he came to Toronto in 2002. When I said I believed he was on this ship at the Battle of Cape Matapan where the Italians were taken completely by surprise when the British fleet suddenly turned their searchlights on, he said, "I was in charge of the searchlights." And I said, "Then you facilitated the sinking of the Zara; I'll bet you never thought you would have a granddaughter by that name (Zara Tindall, the daughter of the Princess Royal)." He stared wide-eyed for a moment and exclaimed, "Why have I never thought of that?"

He always did what he could to keep an even balance within the Royal Family and in its external relations. At the worst of the revelations about the breakdown of the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales, with News Corporation clearly hacking 'phones of the estranged couple and publishing serious indiscretions, yet the Prince of Wales and others were continually giving preferential interviews to News Corporation newspapers, we at Telegraph Newspapers always treated the royals fairly and with respect and many times the Prince's office would phone and ask if we would like an exclusive

interview on such and such matter. It was his way of expressing appreciation for the fairness and professionalism of our titles and we were all grateful for it. The Prince was also very punctilious and thoughtful, and went to some trouble to send me a message of encouragement during my legal travails in the U.S. years ago.

I cannot say that this is the strong suit of all the royals I have met, but Prince Philip had an excellent sense of humour. On a blistering hot day in 1997, when I was the honorary colonel of the Governor General's Foot Guards, the Queen came as colonel-in-chief with Prince Philip to present the colours and when I told the Prince that he was the first person I had ever seen take a military salute with a Panama hat except for news film of president Roosevelt at Casablanca, he replied instantly, "Don't expect a cracking good movie out of this one." I remember Prince Philip as a talented, dedicated, highly intelligent and very admirable man. He revolutionized his role, which had previously been modelled on Victoria's husband Prince Albert, an intelligent and progressive, but stolid Germanic figure. I believe that almost everyone who knew Prince Philip will remember him in the same positive light that I do and having worked with him in a number of his causes I know how deeply missed he will be by those he served in his approximately 700 affiliated institutions, and especially in the complicated institution of the British monarchy.

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