

Shakespearean Politics in Britain

by Michael Curtis



Brush up your Shakespeare if you really want to understand politics, especially possible future events in Britain. The imminent retirement at the age of 95 of Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, from public engagements has drawn attention to the inherent powers of the British monarch which have never been defined in complete definitive fashion. In a similar way, the election of Donald Trump as US President has raised awareness and discussion of the use and extent of executive power.

Sometimes, fiction anticipates possible future reality. In the present era of international phone hackings, concern about “fake news,” the question of the impartiality of a free press in democratic countries, a provocative and fascinating play, *Charles III* written by Mike Bartlett, discusses the issue of the exercise and extent of governmental power, and the controversy over the attempt to restrict freedom of an aggressive press.

By coincidence, recent events, in addition to the retirement of Prince Philip, have made the televised production of the play, to be aired by the BBC on May 10, 2017, particularly pertinent. One relates to a problem in the play of the relationship of the fictional Prince Harry with a non-royal woman. In reality it is the appearance of American actress Meghan Markle, well known for her role in the TV legal drama *Suits*, the girl friend and possible fiancée of Prince Harry, at a polo game in which Harry and his brother Prince William were playing. The game, in support of a charity fund, was an official society function which Markle attended in the royal box, an appearance tantamount to being accepted as an appropriate member of the royal family.

A second event was the publication of an article denying the rumors that James Hewitt, former cavalry officer and lover of Princess Diana from 1986 to 1991, was the real father of the red haired Prince Harry who was born in 1984. In the play, the fictional Harry has a romantic relationship, until it was broken, with a working class revolutionary art student who asks Harry, “Is Charles really your dad?” To complicate the issue, the play introduces Diana as a ghost, a kind of soothsayer reminiscent of Hamlet’s father or Banquo in Macbeth, who speaks neutrally about the ambitions of her former husband Charles and her son William. Diana’s ghost remarks, “Charles and William will be the greatest king.”

Charles III is a consciously Shakespearian drama borrowing images and themes from a number of Shakespeare’s plays, with

characters conversing in iambic pentameter, rhyming couplets, soliloquies, and allusions to those characters such as Richard II, Bolingbroke, Macbeth, and Prince Hal, friend of Falstaff, whose behavior parallels contemporary figures. The play is arresting with its portraits of conflicting ambitions, assertions and struggles for political power, filial betrayal, intrusion of the press, opportunistic politicians, and tension between moral principles and realistic politics.

At the core of the play is an important British political and constitutional issue, the rule that the constitutional monarch, representing the unity of the nation, is essentially limited in practice to non-partisan functions. Since 1708 the royal prerogative is presumed to be based on the automatic acceptance of bills passed by Parliament. The monarch has the right to be consulted but not to veto or refuse to give assent to proposed legislation. Powers, officially in the hands of the monarch, are always exercised by politicians.

But what if a maverick monarch plans to act contrary to this? *Charles III* brings up this issue in the contemporary world. In real life, Prince Charles has made known he has opinions on a number of questions, including grammar schools, climate change, medical issues, architecture. In the play, the fictional Charles, after the death and funeral of Queen Elizabeth II, who has waited a lifetime to become king and says "my life has been a lingering for the throne," ascends the throne. Will the new sovereign, intelligent and principled but opinionated, try to exercise the long dormant powers of the monarch, actions that might divide the country?

The play focuses on the refusal of fictional Charles to sign a bill presented to him by the prime minister. The bill is one that restricts freedom of the press and allows the government to censor the news. This feature is doubly ironic. One is that the real Charles has been hounded by the British press, especially about relations with the late Diana, and here fictional Charles is presented as a principled defender of a

free press. The other factor is that this defender of a free press, by breaking precedent of behavior and opposing the government, is subverting the democratic process.

Fictional King Charles asks the prime minister in his first official audience for changes in the bill, but the politician refuses. Similarly, the leader of the loyal opposition party, who has arrived for his weekly meeting with the king, an innovation of fictional Charles, agrees there are doubts about the bill, but says, as a political opportunist, there is no alternative but for Charles to sign the bill.

The impasse is further complicated both by protests in the streets, and by the prime minister threatening to introduce a bill into parliament to bypass the need to obtain the royal assent for legislation. Charles prevents this by using the royal prerogative to dissolve parliament. Thus ensues the political and constitutional crisis in which the fictional members of the royal family, as well as politicians on both sides, participate.

The fictional presentations are compelling versions of the different political points of view, though they may not resemble the real nature of the persons. Camilla is the solicitous if not astute supporter of husband Charles. Kate, Duchess of Cambridge and wife of Prince William, is surprisingly portrayed as a kind of mediator, a strong ambitious woman, a calculating plotter and strategist, aware of the power of the media in "a world of surprises." She, and William to a lesser degree, resemble Lord and Lady Macbeth in their quest for power.

The fictional Prince Harry most resembles the unorthodox real life Harry with allusions to Shakespeare's Prince Hal, raffish charm, hedonistic, fascinated by the life of common people, with a girl-friend a London working class art student who expresses revolutionary views. Finally, Harry who wanted a "life of normalcy" and has no appetite for politics,

acquiesces in a normal royal life style and gives up his girlfriend.

Charles III ends, as does *Richard II*, in poignant fashion, with the political isolation and abdication of the king. He is forced to recognize that his role is really that of a figure head, "It is not what I will, but what I must." The central issue of the play has been answered in this way. The monarch, an unelected figure, cannot oppose an elected parliament and government, even though the monarch may have a more acceptable and moral view of central issues. Yet, the issue means provocative. Should a monarch or a US President with democratic views, be a puppet in the face of undemocratic or opportunistic or unprincipled behavior by politicians?