

The British Crown Survives

by Michael Curtis



Happy families, wrote Leo Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, are all alike: every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. He might have been thinking of the members of the family of the British monarchy in recent years if he were watching the BBC TV series, *The Crown*, and reading in the media about the controversial activities of some of the family, especially Prince Andrew, Duke of York, friend of the paedophile Jeffrey Epstein, and eighth in line of succession to the throne, as well as the antics of younger members of the family.

Besides the king of hearts, clubs, diamond, and spades, there are only 12 monarchies in Europe, ten of which are hereditary. The most fascinating and renowned is the British monarchical system, though critics have often seen it as privileged and rigid. More appropriate is the nickname *The Firm* applied to it by Prince Philip, though curiously the name of the family has changed. Before 1917 the family has no official last name, then King George V named it the House of Windsor, and

currently members, apart from those who are princes or princesses, answer to Mountbatten-Windsor. The Firm was expected to adhere to strict standards of behavior, but those standards are now subject to greater scrutiny.

The Crown is a historical drama TV series made by the BBC about the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, starting with her marriage to Philip, Duke of Edinburgh in 1947 and her accession to the throne at the age of 26 in 1952 and coming up to the near present. Art has often shaped our view of English history. Non-historians may tend to see the British regimes of the past through the eyes of Shakespeare. The TV series may do the same for the appraisal of the reign of Elizabeth II. The problem is that imaginary conversations conveying a historian's view of the past, especially an eloquent monologue by Princess Alice, the eccentric mother of Prince Philip, and who claimed to have been mistreated by Sigmund Freud may be taken for reality.

A mixture of fact and fiction, the episodes of the series are the supposed inside story of the personal history of the royal family, activity and intrigue within Buckingham Palace and the story of romantic liaisons on one hand, while interpreting selected events of the time. In the last TV series they portray the tragedy caused by the avalanche of coal at the village of Aberfan in Wales in October 1966 that killed 116 children and 28 adults, the coal strike in 1972 that led to a major dispute between the National Union of Mineworkers and the PM Edward Heath, the devaluation of the pound in 1967, the attempt at a coup in March 1968 by an elite group involving Lord Mountbatten, and Cecil King, chair of Daily Mirror newspapers, and the discovery of the KGB mole, Anthony Blunt, the Queen's art curator and advisor in Buckingham Palace, the very heart of the British establishment.

The story conveys subtle interesting parallels of personal lives of the Firm. A number are striking and poignant. The TV series presents an overly sympathetic view of King Edward

VIII, giving up the throne to marry Wallis Simpson. Edward, after 325 days on the throne, went on national radio on December 11, 1936 to renounce the throne "to marry the woman I love." He then married the twice divorced Wallis Simpson in June 1937 at a chateau near Tours.

More disagreeable for present day observers are the palace intrigues that prevented the heir to the throne, Prince Charles, from marrying his love Camilla Shand (later Parker Bowles), and the accounts of the unhappiness of Margaret, a curious mixture of frivolity and an active private life and formality, her complex relationship with the Queen and her unhappy marriage to the photographer Antony Armstrong-Jones who became Lord Snowden.

Perhaps the most saddest moments of the story are those between the two sisters, Elizabeth and Margaret, one destined to rule and the other relegated to a subordinate role while she always wanted a larger public one. There is a poignant contrast between the Queen's deliberate lack of emotion, and inability to express sentiment in public, and the heavy smoker Margaret who delighted in company and had an active social and sexual life. It is revealing that the main love of Elizabeth was for horses rather than as Head of State. It appears that breeding and racing horses is what Elizabeth most wanted to do while Margaret wanted to occupy her sister's position.

Daylight has now been shining on the royal family and privacy has been diminished as a result of the glamorous BBC production and the intense focus on it by the media. That focus has aroused greater interest in the role played by the British monarchy on both personal and political issues, and probably brought it closer in understanding to the mass of the population. However, it remains to be seen whether the daylight shone on the royal family will become more negative with more revelations about the life of Prince Andrew, and his lavish life style and relations with Jeffrey Epstein, and the apparent differences between younger members of the family,

William and Kate, the Cambridge family, and the Sussex household continue to come to light. Are scandals overshadowing the useful work of the royal family?

The activities of Prince Andrew, his alleged relationship with a then 17 year old woman, his lavish life style, his providing respectability for Epstein, his absurd BBC interview on November 16, 2019, and his callous lack of concern for victims of sexual abuse led the Queen to act. Andrew had asked the Queen on November 20 if "I may step back from public duties for the foreseeable future." In response, the Queen cancelled Andrew's 60th birthday party, and called for him to resign from his main business project Pitch and Palace, and all the 230 organizations, businesses like Barclays and BT, and charities and universities associated with him. He is stripped of his L 249,000 allowance that funds expenses for official duties, and is virtually retired from public life. His association with Epstein had become a "major disruption" not only for the royal family but also for the charities and organizations he supported,

Prince Harry and his wife Meghan Markle, a modern day celebrity princess akin to the late Diana, have been criticized for hypocrisy. As supposed advocates of climate control they took advantage of four private jets journeys in 11 days, one to give a lecture on climate change, and spent L 2-4 million pounds on house renovation.

In his magisterial book, *The English Constitution*, first published in 1867, Walter Bagehot, then editor of *The Economist*, drew a distinction between the *dignified* parts of the British system, those that excite and preserve the reverence of the population, and the *efficient* parts, by which in fact it works and rules. Bagehot remarked of the British monarchy, "Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic. We must not bring the Queen (Victoria) into the combat of politics, or she will cease to be

reverenced by all combatants.” The success of the monarchy in the 150 years since Bagehot’s book was largely due to the fact that the monarch, the head of state, not only abstained from direct rule but remained above the political fray as a respected person.

Life has changed and so have the resources to comment on life. Daylight has been let in on the doings of the royal family. Members of the British Parliament are banned by constitutional convention from discussing in the House of Commons the conduct of members of the royal family, There has not been a storming of the palace on 1917 Moscow lines but the media have scrutinized the actions of the royal family has been responsive to criticism. The family has responded. Queen Elizabeth, now 93, the longest reigning British monarch is now a more open person than previously. She not takes part in the usual dozens of engagements every year. She took part together with a performer as a parachute jumper into the Olympic stadium in London in 2012 in a James Bond movie.

Has the British monarchy outlived its usefulness? It still has an important role to play. The monarch is Head of State, the symbol of national unity and the embodiment of stability and continuity. The monarch does not rule or make law which is the function of Parliament, but has ceremonial, diplomatic, and representational functions. The monarch whose profile is on British currency, is politically neutral, though she or he can be familiar with political affairs, and continue to communicate with and give advice to ministers. The monarchy has helped sustain and strengthen democratic institutions and ensue the legitimacy of those who govern. In general, the modern monarchy, faults and all, has become one of public service, staying in touch with reality.