

Review: The monarchy – reserve weapon of the ruling class?



BBC Radio 4's The Moral Maze programme recently dealt with the monarchy against a background of the circus surrounding the wedding of Wills and Kate. The question posed was: Is the monarchy compatible with a truly meritocratic society?

The panel included former Tory minister Michael Portillo and right-wing columnist Clifford Longley. Socialist Party member TONY MULHEARN, one of the Liverpool 47 councillors who fought Thatcher's cuts in the 1980s and former president of the Liverpool district Labour Party, appeared as a 'witness'. Here is Tony's account of the debate:

The main thrust was that the monarchy was a force for good. Portillo maintained that the monarchy brought 'colour and interest' to people's lives. Longley argued that my 'round-head' values would provide for a colourless, miserable existence for the masses, as well as maintaining that the monarchy was above class, and above the squalid manoeuvring of politics.

I said that to describe the monarchy as 'above class' was frankly ludicrous; explaining that the queen herself possesses enormous wealth and is the biggest landowner on the planet.

I added that there is no place in a democratic society for an unelected institution which possesses inherited powers.

The UK does not have a written constitution which sets out the rights and duties of the Sovereign, they are established by conventions. These are non-statutory rules which

can be just as binding as formal constitutional rules. As a constitutional monarch, theoretically the Sovereign must remain politically neutral.

However, the Sovereign retains an important political role as head of state, formally appointing prime ministers, and approving certain legislation. She has other official roles to play, such as head of the armed forces and head of the police, and can be seen as having two roles: Head of State, and 'Head of the Nation'.

In circumstances of a fundamental conflict of interests between capital and labour it is not inconceivable that, under pressure from capitalism, the monarch could refuse to sign an Act which, for instance, nationalised the commanding heights of the economy under workers' control and management.

In November 1975 the Queen's representative Governor-General of Australia, Sir John Kerr, dismissed Labour's Gough Whitlam as prime minister and appointed right-wing Malcolm Fraser as a caretaker prime minister. Thus an unelected vice-regal representative had removed from office a government which commanded a majority in the House of Representatives.

It would be impossible to believe that this action was taken without the approval of the British monarchy. Portillo dismissed this example of Royal political action by first saying it was a civil servant's mistake, then later in the programme saying he didn't believe it. He maintained that societies were fairer in countries where monarchies existed.

If time allowed I could have given many other examples of the reactionary role of monarchies.

The Moral Maze did provide a limited platform to explain the class nature of the monarchy, but against the universal sycophancy of the media and the unrivalled ability of the British state to stage an extravagant event at considerable expense to the long-suffering tax payer, it was a peashooter opposing a hostile tank formation.

Great play was made of poll after poll indicating mass support among the population for the continuation of the monarchy. If the wording on such a poll was: 'Do you support an unelected institution having the power to frustrate the will of a democratically elected government' I think we would see a different outcome.

May Day in Kazakhstan marked by attacks on socialists

The ruling parties in the former Soviet countries usually use May Day, international workers' day, in a cynical manner, organising official events to which people are expected to turn up to wave balloons and listen to speeches and pop music.

Having been prevented from organising their own event, activists of the opposition 'Kazakhstan 2012' movement and Socialist Resistance Kazakhstan (the Socialist Party's counterpart in Kazakhstan), decided to participate in the official event.

However, once the red flags had been unfurled the police waded into their part of the demonstration to remove any opposition activists. Socialist activist Ainur Kurmanov received head wounds after being kicked by police whilst on the ground. The leader of the 'Leave People's Homes Alone' campaign, Bakhytgul Ukteshbaeva, was also hurt.

As the oppositionists chanted "shame" and "stop police repression", other participants began to shout out their disgust at the police actions. Later a section of workers who had joined the official parade

broke away in protest.

Through the night the KNB (political police) consistently harassed Ainur and his friends and comrades who had come to the hospital. Firstly they tried to pressure the doctor to change his diagnosis, to say he had not been hurt and then attempted to get Ainur to admit that he had organised an "unsanctioned protest".

Activists of Kazakhstan 2012 organised a round the clock presence at the hospital to protect Ainur. During the night prisoner rights activist Vadim Kuramshin was attacked by police. The authorities say they want to charge Ainur with organising an unsanctioned protest – he faces yet another 15 days in prison.

This attack comes against the background of an increase in strike action in the country, a new wave of prison disturbances and even more harassment of the opposition. On 2 May, the trial of Dmitry Tikhonov, charged with organising an "unsanctioned protest", began.

A video of the attack can be seen on: www.socialismkz.info/ For details of solidarity action and addresses for letters of protests, see www.socialistworld.net



The Swansea May Day march and rally (above) had around 300 demonstrating against the Con-Dem cuts with all the main unions represented. Socialist Party members Katrine Williams (PCS Wales chair), Les Woodward (GMB Remploy convener) and Ronnie Job (Trades Council secretary and TUSC candidate) received a good response at the rally.

In Llanelli, 60 trade unionists and political activists attended the 'Llanelli against the cuts' May Day rally, organised by Llanelli Trades Council.

Despite the attempts of New Labour and Plaid Cymru to try to use the event as a Welsh Assembly election platform, the rally heard local trade unionists call on the Welsh Assembly government and local councils to oppose all cuts. See www.socialistparty.org.uk for more May Day reports.

Coventry residents' victory over Academy land snatch

Campaigners and socialists in Coventry won a concession from the council in the battle to halt a private land-grab. On 27 April families protesting against public fields being handed over to a privatised Blue Coats academy school forced the cabinet to defer its decision on the land until after the local elections.

The Coventry Telegraph reported: "Angry residents ... brought a petition with 1,349 signatures – collected in just a fortnight. Campaigners insist the decision is just the beginning of the fight after [Socialist Party] councillor Dave Nellist submitted an application to have the land reclassified as Charterhouse Village Green on the morning of the meeting."

Dave Griffiths, chair of Charterhouse residents association, gave the following interview.

"The u-turn by the council represents a significant victory for our campaign. We have faced legalised robbery of our public fields through the device of the school becoming an academy.

We asked the council to secure

our rights of access but the council failed to act leaving us facing the loss of the fields and public access to them. In a densely crowded terraced housing area you cannot begin to realise how valuable the fields are to us residents.

Despite the u-turn, that threat to the fields still exists. So we'll continue to build our campaign and seek support from across the city and beyond.

We now want to secure the public's right to access land that is already ours. We want the council to stop acting like powerless administrators in the face of more powerful interests.

I've heard people talking about 'people power'. If you organise, you can change things. We also will continue to work for a council that fights for its citizens.

We're cautious. Left only in the hands of lawyers there is still a major threat to our fields. But we will go on and seek to win full and on-going access for Coventry citizens, and hopefully strike a blow for all the people."

Fast news

Smoke and mirrors

City of London fat cats saw their 2010-11 bonus pot shrink 8%, compared to a year earlier, to £6.7 billion. However the masters of the universe were handsomely compensated by an average 7% rise in their salaries. This inflation busting pay hike compares to an average of just 2% rise across the economy for mere mortals.

These financial swings and roundabouts make a mockery of the government's Project Merlin deal with the City which was meant to voluntarily deliver financial restraint from the fat cats. By continuing to stuff their pockets with wads of cash they add a further insult to ordinary workers, many of whom continue to suffer from employer-imposed pay cuts at the same time as tax increases and government cuts in public services.

Flat-lining economy

The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics showed that the UK economy continues to flat-line with zero growth over the last six months. Tory Chancellor George Osborne attempted to be upbeat about growth, despite the evidence that his multi-billion pound austerity programme of spending cuts was acting like a massive drag on the economy. As a spokesperson from the Institute for Public Policy Research think tank put it: "The UK has just come as close as it is possible to come to a recession without actually being in one."

Overdraft 1

Global capitalism has racked up a £3 trillion overdraft - the sum that the world's central banks pumped into the global economy to prevent a financial meltdown.

The £3 trillion figure (which includes a mere £200 billion, so far, from the Bank of England) represents a staggering 8% of the world economy. However, this massive stimulus appears to have had only a short-term effect. According to Fathom Consulting, who compiled the global 'quantitative easing' figure: "It remains unclear how much of the equity market rally has been 'genuine', rather than simply a 'mopping up' of that extraordinary injection of liquidity." Fathom warns: "As that stimulus is gradually withdrawn, further gains in equity markets will be harder to achieve."

Overdraft 2

Meanwhile, the US government will hit its \$14.3 trillion borrowing limit by 16 May.

The reasons for the multi-trillion debt is government bailouts to the banks and big business, funding costly overseas wars, capitalist recession, and a decade of tax cuts for the wealthy and big corporations.

Meanwhile real wages actually fell by 8% during the last decade and median household income in the US fell from over \$52,000 in 1999 to \$49,777 in 2010.

Despite recently pushing huge spending cuts through the House of Representatives (with Democrat agreement), the Republicans are demanding deeper cuts in welfare and social services and yet more tax cuts for the rich.

NHS: Stop the Connaught closure

Health workers, patients and anti-cuts campaigners took part in a protest on 28 April against the threatened closure of the Connaught day centre at Whipps Cross hospital in north east London.

The day hospital provides specialist health care for the elderly. One of the speakers at the demo was 87-year old Connaught patient Ena Abrahams who spoke of the importance of the NHS. Ena said closure was part of plans to merge Whipps Cross with two other hospital trusts.

Linda Taaffe from Waltham Forest Anti-Cuts Union (WFACU) said how saving NHS services was part of fighting all Con-Dem government and local Labour council cuts.

Whipps Cross Union joint branch secretary Len Hockey (personal capacity) spoke of the need to fight all

cuts and privatisation in the NHS. Cuts are going ahead despite the Con-Dems' three month pause to the health bill, which will hand over the NHS to private consortiums. Organising strike action by health workers should be an important part of the fightback.

While the hospital trust and GPs have said they want to keep the hospital open, this needs the agreement of commissioners. It was the same commissioners who notified the trust of withdrawing funding for the day hospital. The campaign continues.

•The next WFACU meeting is on 12 May, 7.30pm at the William Morris Community Centre, Greenleaf Road, London E17 6QQ.

Bob Severn