



The Monarchy: A Critique of Britain's Favourite Fetish (Counterblasts #10)

Christopher Hitchens

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'Why, when the subject of royalty or monarchy is mentioned, do the British bid adieu to every vestige of proportion, modesty, humour and restraint? '

This is not a call for the monarchy's abolition by fiat; illusions cannot be abolished. This is an invitation to think. In this scathing essay, Christopher Hitchens looks at the relationship of the press and the public to the royal family, unpacking the tautology and contradictory arguments that prop it up. In his inimitable style, Hitchens argues that our desire not to profane or disturb the monarchy is a failure of reason and a confusion of reality. Fealty to the magic of monarchy stops us looking objectively at our own history and hinders open-minded criticism of our present. It is time we outgrew it.

With the Queen's Diamond Jubilee upon us, during a time of recession, high unemployment and national debt, Hitchens' 10,000-word critique is even more relevant today than when it was first published in 1990. Part of the Brain Shots series, the pre-eminent source for high quality, short-form digital non-fiction.

'Christopher is one of the most terrifying rhetoricians that the world has yet seen.' Martin Amis

The Monarchy: A Critique of Britain's Favourite Fetish (Counterblasts #10) Details

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Author : Christopher Hitchens

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Bettie? says

~~to look into/hunt down the goods~~ Sorted!

Description: *'Why, when the subject of royalty or monarchy is mentioned, do the British bid adieu to every vestige of proportion, modesty, humour and restraint? '*

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I was late coming to the Hitchens party. Three or four years ago I found that Dawkins had gone daft and spent some time looking around for someone who spoke to me, for me, and that is when I teamed up with Hitch.

Christopher Hitchens on the Death of Diana, Princess of Wales (1997)

Christopher Hitchens - Diana The Mourning After [1998] Loved how he summed this up by intimating that the golden boy, William, will grow stale (he has!) by waiting for his inheritance, and admonishes him to 'get a life'...

Our Abiko says

As Our Man started this last night and finished it this afternoon, he couldn't help but think how dated this argument is. Not that anything Hitchens said is not still true, it is, it's just that why are we still having this debate now? Weren't these questions settled in the 18th Century?

Then as Our Man saw on Twitter today on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee, apparently not. The monarchists are out in force with their asinine excuses for servility: well, the monarchy doesn't have any real power; it's not really political, it's harmless, it's a force for good; it's better than an elected president, it's British... STOP.

If you entertain any of those thoughts, please allow Hitchens a few moments of your time to appreciate his eloquence, and accept a chance to set the record straight. Our Man supposes that only the converted will read Hitchens, but he'd like to think a wavering monarchist or two might read this polemic and get up from their

knees and join with the 18th Century traditionalists and repeat after Our Man:

We are citizens, not subjects.

Our Man can dream.

Mitchell says

"Illusions, of course, cannot be abolished, but they can and must be outgrown."

The Monarchy is a brilliant essay-length piece by Hitchens, who successfully makes the case for abolition of the Royal Family. As a supporter of the movement to establish a republican form of government in Australia, I found this piece particularly interesting and of course entertaining.

Those who remain in support of the Royal Family and thus challenge the abolitionist position tend to raise the following five points to formulate their argument, as Hitchens notes:

- "1. The Royal Family provides continuity and stability.
2. The Royal Family provides glamour and pageantry.
3. The Royal Family does not interfere in politics, but lends tone to it.
4. The Royal Family is preferable to the caprices of presidential government.
5. The Royal Family is a guarantee of the national 'identity.'"

I need not, and should not, reiterate the critique presented by Hitchens, but the contradictions and falsehoods contained within the above points are quite obvious and are systematically pulled-apart by Hitchens.

I found particularly amusing the reference to Wilde's imperishable play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, as Hitchens notes that a blind acceptance of the "magic" surrounding the "cult of Windsor" comes perilously close to "Lady Bracknell's recommendation of the beauty of ignorance - 'Like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it, and the bloom is gone.'"

If you are a supporter of the monarchy, you must ask yourself if you are allied to state-sponsored superstition, invented tradition, and sanitised history. Furthermore, how can one jeer at the cult of personality surrounding many dictators (take Emperor Hirohito, for instance) when one also believes in a demi-divine family, whose establishment and power is like that of a dictatorship, "exercised for the 'common good'?"

Angus McKeogh says

Points out the obvious ridiculousness and wastefulness of having a family effectively "living on the dole" and at the same time supposedly running a country. What an antiquated and moronic concept. Fraught with danger, nepotism, and an unbelievable caste system which is supported by the very people from whom it strips inalienable rights. Hitchens challenges the national consciousness which supports this institution.

Moreover he points out how ludicrous the situation has become when subjects try to sugarcoat the dubious, violent, and corrupt history of the institution which has managed to maintain a free lunch in the country for hundreds of years. Oust that collection of freeloaders.

CaldoHendo says

A hereditary head of state, as Thomas Paine once said, is as absurd a proposition as a hereditary physician or a hereditary astronomer. Christopher Hitchens does not quote the author of Rights of Man (one of his favourite thinkers) in this little pamphlet on the British monarchy, although he is not exactly short of arguments for scrapping the House of Windsor himself. The Paine quote instead comes in a funny essay he wrote twenty years after this book was published, which examined the terrifying possibility of Prince Charles, 'a morose, bat-eared and chinless man', one day becoming the King of Britain. It will not be long until the 'the stout heart of Queen Elizabeth II ceases to beat', and after a predictably drawn-out period of mourning we can certainly expect that quite a few people in this country, now lumbered with old Charlie boy on the throne, will begin to question the future of the monarchy.

They should look no further than this short book by Christopher Hitchens, one of my favourite authors, which perfectly states what an absurd, archaic and profoundly unfair arrangement a hereditary head of state really is. Hitchens goes through all the tepid arguments in support for maintaining the status quo – e.g. the Royals are a stable, continuous and benign alternative to a dangerously egocentric ruler – and beautifully eviscerating them one by one. A monarchy, he concludes, "inculcates unthinking credulity and servility. It forms a heavy layer on the general incrustation of our unreformed political institutions. It is the gilded peg from which our unlovely system of social distinction and hierarchy dependents...it is neither dignified nor efficient".

Despite what Hitchens makes clear (and despite the clarity with which he says it) I think the Republican movement in Britain will continue to have trouble igniting a debate over the issue, perhaps even after the Liz shuffles off. Even when (and if) Charles is crowned, the support for the rotten Royals will linger on, largely due to the stability of Elizabeth II's long reign, which has left a lot of people happy to see the royals remain in Buckingham Palace. But the chance for a debate should never be ignored, and I think 'Republic' – the official UK campaign for a democratic alternative to the monarchy – should adopt Hitchens' book as their manifesto as soon as possible, taking special care to highlight the sober passage in which he reminds us that this country isn't really 'a family' that can all rally round a royal one. He's damn right when he says it's never a good idea to encourage such a falsehood. Illusions cannot be abolished, says Hitchens defiantly, but they can be outgrown. It's time we took his advice.

Patrick Sherriff says

As I started this last night and finished it this afternoon, I couldn't help but think how dated this argument is. Not that anything Hitchens said is not still true, it is, it's just that why are we still having this debate now? Weren't these questions settled in the 18th Century?

Then as I saw on Twitter today on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee, apparently not. The monarchists are out in force with their asinine excuses for servility: well, the monarchy doesn't have any real power; it's not

really political, it's harmless, it's a force for good; it's better than an elected president, it's British... STOP.

If you entertain any of those thoughts, please allow Hitchens a few moments of your time to appreciate his eloquence, and accept a chance to set the record straight. I suppose that only the converted will read Hitchens, but I'd like to think a wavering monarchist or two might read this polemic and get up from their knees and join with the 18th Century traditionalists and repeat after me:

We are citizens, not subjects.

I can dream.

Ben says

"Humans should not worship other humans at all, but if they must do so it is better than the worshipped ones do not occupy any positions of political power."

The Monarchy is an essay which, as the title suggests, focuses on the fetishisation of the Royal Family, continually prompting the question that many regard as taboo: is the Royal Family needed?

Personally, I'm indifferent towards the Royal Family because to hold a strong opinion on them is futile: If I was to call for the abolition of the redundant dynasty, I would inevitably be ignored, as I'm nothing more than a *pleb* to these "blue-bloods". If I was to stand in support, I would still be ignored. There is so little that we, the people, can do about something that has been entrenched in our foundation as far back at the 17th century. It's something that was deemed unassailable before we were born, and it's most likely something that will be still be active once we are dead. Thankfully, we have a parliament that, in most instances, does a reasonable job of running the country - of course, they're led by the prime minister, but democracy is a wonderful thing (sometimes).

John Jr. says

Working at a magazine that frequently banks on a fascination with British royals among the American reading public, I'm frequently provoked to ask myself two questions. Why haven't they gone away yet? Given that they haven't, why does the fascination persist? We in the U.S. dethroned the monarchy in our political system, for very good reasons that have been honored to greater or lesser degree in many other countries of the world, yet a large crowd among us later put it back on a pedestal from which, apparently, no revolution can topple it. Certainly, reasoned argument doesn't touch it. Nor do embarrassments do anything but add to its appeal. As for why Britain hasn't finished the job it began in the 17th century, the same responses seem to apply. One is tempted to conclude, on a dim and cloudy morning at any rate, that idolatry never dies.

More can be said against the monarchy from a British perspective than Christopher Hitchens says here. The cost, for instance. And many side notes could be added, especially if he were to revise this work now. One wonders, for instance, how Hitchens would have regarded the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics, which included, in its presentation of Britain to the world, the current monarch but coupled her with the fantastic and fictional figure of James Bond. Harder to reckon is whether he would still write that

America had seen no president quite as bad as King George III. The rewrite will never come, but as I said he could've written at greater length. Back in 1990, for whatever reason, Hitchens must've decided to toss off a relatively short critique in a few mornings. Nonetheless, he makes the case well.

I won't recount his arguments or borrow any of the quotable lines, from other writers (John Locke, for instance) as well as from the master polemicist himself. But I don't mind admitting that I was pretty ignorant on one issue, that of what power the crown possesses and uses. Hitchens cleared that up, and anyone who thinks the monarchy is purely ceremonial would do well to spend a few hours learning otherwise.

Idolatry may never die, but its critics can and do. Hitch, as he was known to friends and colleagues, is no longer with us. In an effort to transcend the mood of the morning, I choose to order two final notes in a positive way: the magazine where I work does indeed bank on the royal fetish, but it also published, until the end of his life, Christopher Hitchens.

Ana says

The caustic tone of Hitchens still reaches the reader, 28 years after this particular work was published. In here, the author critiques the affinity of Brits for their Royal overlords, and questions the motives behind and the necessity of it.

John says

Let's face it: the British monarchy makes for a pretty easy target. You don't need someone like Hitchens to tell you it's an inherently flawed concept. That's not to say this isn't an enjoyable read...just a rather frivolous one.

John Champneys says

One day early in the morning I was feeling ever more broody as I mooned around the landscape of my Kindle. I'd been clicking and sniffing between books I could read next, in that horrible in-betweeny mood in which I found myself. I'd just finished reading the second volume of an excellent trilogy and I needed a break, a breather, a period of recuperation and recharge before plunging into the explosive third volume and it was in this 'need a short, sharp break' frame of mind that I browsed my 5-way button to *The Monarchy ~ A Critique* by Christopher Hitchens, for no particular reason apart from the need for a total change. By the time I'd reached the end of the free sample I was chortling away as I hadn't done for many a merry month and rarely have I clicked that 'buy' button with such eagerness. 'After all,' I reasoned to myself, '£1.49's just over what I paid for a pint of IPA draught at the local when I moved to this village 30 years ago.'

So without further ado let's take a look at the The 'News' presented as if it's set in stone. As Christopher Hitchens (1949—2011) writes: "We know that this strident, bombastic noise is a subliminal appeal to think of 'News' as part drama, part sensation and part entertainment". The beauty of this opiated numbing show is that you never know whether your trip is going to be good or bad. The same thrumming monumental brass rhythms will tell us either that the Queen Mother has got a fish bone lodged in her throat, or that we've just severed diplomatic relations with Iraq. YOU are left to decide which item carries the greater weight.

Chris (Yes, let's hob-nob for a bit!) invites us to look at absurdities like the 'Investiture' of Royalties which to most of us mean a lot if we don't think about them, but examined closely they amount to absolutely nothing. Just look at this on the myth of the 'Investiture': "The official guide to the ceremony dissolves in contradiction here, because it says of the sacral moment that it comes from Zadok the priest, who anointed Solomon as King of the Jews, and that the ceremony follows the old Saxon ritual, and that the moment is to be accompanied by the singing of Handel."

The more we bring our pet-theories into the light, the more threadbare, nay mendacious our propaganda seems. 'Invisible earnings' may indeed be comforting dummies to suck in times of crisis, but in these days of costing everything up why do the powers that be seem incapable of coming up with an estimate? And while we've revelling in contradictions, what exactly is this 'special relationship' which we apparently hold with the USA? — What does it amount to? In these days of costing everything up, listing and categorising every aspect of our lives, which boxes does it tick? And what exactly is the 'unseen hand' of the money market?

The End of This Post

Back-chatter :

End, what do you mean, 'End'? Monarchies and Dreams don't have an 'End'. They dissipate in the morning mist when the sun rises, only to re-form with the coming of the night. Monarchies keep folks dreamy, happy ready to chase the rainbow to its end.

Think Barbara Taylor Bradford, man, finish with all this *Woman of Substance* fantasy and begin to *Hold That Dream*. Never mind about subscribing to The Sun or Mail, just keep to the news for your daily fix. Suck the curate's egg of the ice-cream cone, starting with the sickly raspberry ripple and the tang of the lemon twist. Lick your way through the chilled artery-clogging fat of the ice cream and don't stop until you reach the sickly nugget of treacle at the end. Worry not, you're in the Ukay. Just keep taking the tablets and watching The News....

Hayden says

Certainly the preservation of the monarchy into the modern age of Britain must seem an inapt and incoherent one, yet if it was kept merely for symbolic purposes, with public consent, I would see little cause for concern. Hitchens however appears to present the most compelling case for its abolition in his response to the royal objection that it only "lends tone" to politics, rather than actively shaping it. Indeed, for advocates of an ever-endangered system of democracy, the spectre of the royal prerogative, amid less commonly appreciated modes of regal influence in the political sphere, looming over governmental proceedings must constitute a source of persistent unease.

Sam Quixote says

Christopher Hitchens invites you to think about the Monarchy in Britain, or the United Kingdom - emphasis on the Kingdom - and ask yourself: do we really need it? Shouldn't we, as modern peoples, abolish it? Why do Britons define themselves with the Monarchy and why does it play such a prominent role, especially today? This is Hitchens' persuasive and interesting essay on why he believes the Monarchy should be abolished and I for one enjoyed it.

Yes, I'm a Republican (though not as Americans define the term) and have long wondered at friends and family who feel so strongly about the Queen and her family. Hitchens' essay reinforces my views but goes far deeper into exploring them than I ever have. He talks about how we rely upon invented tradition and how history is sanitised to favour the Monarchy - that the unsavoury parts are "edited" out when convenience calls (you know, the madness, the murders, the endless wars, slavery, etc.). He claims the Monarchy is a "state-sponsored superstition" that everyone in government must take part in if they are to have a career in politics. I think the BBC is party to this as well, broadcasting pro-Monarchy programmes so that vast numbers of the British population are transformed into supporters of the Queen.

I found it a brilliant read and a thoughtful, well written, and eloquent essay on our "national fetish" (excellent observation). As always Hitchens has produced a work that deserves as wide an audience as possible to provoke much needed discourse in our public sphere. The very fact that this is still a national conversation that needs to be had in the 21st century is astonishing. I'll leave this review with the ending sentences of his essay:

"A people that began to think as citizens rather than subjects might transcend underdevelopment on their own... Only servility requires the realm (suggestive word) of illusion. Illusions, of course, cannot be abolished. But they can and must be outgrown."

C says

I wasn't terribly impressed by this, and am a bit ambivalent towards Hitchens in general. He was a great conversationalist and a brilliant showman who had mastered the art of polemical debate, but his actual arguments always struck me as a bit thin. I did like the way he pointed out that Edward the VIII was a great admirer of Hitler and would have been our king during the war if he had not abdicated, but as a critique of monarchism more generally this wasn't very deep. He does break down all of the defenses of monarchism systematically and makes a reasonable case against "Britain's favourite fetish", but nowadays I'm suspicious of anybody that exalts Paine over Burke.

Meg says

Hitchens. Applying his laser focus to the monarchy. Yes, of course it's going to be good.

Some favorite quotes from this one:

The only accurate nomenclature is the one that nobody employs - 'the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland'. The words express the hope of a political and historical compromise rather than the actuality of one. If it were to read 'The United *State* of great Britain and Northern Ireland' it would provoke unfeeling mirth. And the United *Republic* would sound positively grotesque.

The British also make more history than they can consume locally.

...the fabled inability of the new Princesses to keep any one thought in their heads for as long as a minute at a time.

Matthew Arnold: 'Everyone likes flattery; and when you come to Royalty you should lay it on with a trowel.'

...the number of times that a royal 'succession' has been peaceful or has resulted in 'stability' is relatively few. Between the execution of King Charles I outside the Banqueting House in January 1649, for example, and the extinction of the Jacobite cause at Culloden in 1746, not even Thomas HObbes himself could make complete sense of the monarchic principle. It kept having to be reinvented by force, and needed repeated infusions from already etiolated European mainland princelings. Even after the Hanoverians achieved grudging acceptance, which they did principally in the making of national and patriotic wars in the American colonies and against revolutionary and the Bonapartist France, and finally against their own Teutonic cousins, there were some shocks. It's not considered all that polite to dwell on the fact, but only an exercise of laughable moral absolutism in 1936 prevented (by accident admittedly, but then all things predicated on the hereditary principle are by accident) the accession of a young man with a pronounced sympathy for National Socialism.

The official guide to the ceremony dissolves in contradiction here, because it says of the sacral moment that it comes from Zadok the priest, who anointed Solomon as King of the Jews, *and* that the ceremony follows the old Saxon ritual, *and* that the moment is to be accompanied by the singing of Handel. The Saxons had no Handel, the British monarch must swear to uphold the Protestant faith, and so on and so on, but let it pass, lest the magic be unavailing. My point is that the word 'sacral' derives from the sacrum, the triangular bone that shields that back of the pelvis. Known to the ancients as the os sacrum or sacred bone it has a common root with 'sacrifice'. In other words, in this bit of preserved bone-worship, one is not exaggerating the use of the word 'fetishism.'

The United States, for example, has never had a President quite as bad as King George III, but neither has Britain had a king as admirable as George Washington. [clearly written before 2000, though Hitch would probably hold to this]

An incumbent in Washington knows he is in trouble on the day that cartoonists begin to represent him as a king.

The extraordinary Thomas Paine was to become the first general theorist of republicanism, transcending the rather narrowly Puritan anti-monarchists of the English Revolution and proposing a state where, as he put it with some warmth and emphasis: THE LAW IS KING.
