

## *The Queen and Brexit*

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Written for *Limes - Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica*  
(June 2019)

“These are for you”, said Katie Jones, an eleven-year-old girl, as she handed the Queen a bouquet of flowers at the gates of Buckingham Palace. The date was 5<sup>th</sup> September 1997, five days after the death of Princess Diana, and the day before her funeral. Most unusually in her record-breaking reign, during those five days, the Queen found herself on the wrong side of public opinion. The distance from the British public was both literal and symbolic. The Queen decided that her, and the Royal Family’s priority, should be looking after Princes William and Harry, and continued to stay Balmoral Castle in Scotland, over 500 miles away from Buckingham Place. This did not satisfy the public.

Amid scenes of mass public mourning, newspaper headlines screamed, “SHOW US YOU CARE”; “YOUR PEOPLE ARE SUFFERING: SPEAK TO US MA’AM” and “WHERE IS OUR QUEEN?”.<sup>1</sup> The monarchy was caught off guard, and public anger filled the void. In what now looks like a fit of pique, the public did not understand why the Royal Family was not better off in London with them, rather than in Scotland. Only when the Queen returned to London did the anger subside. In a televised address to the nation, she admitted that “lessons will be learned”. The monarchy could no longer take anything for granted.

Three months previously, Tony Blair, the fresh, vibrant, and assured leader of the Labour Party became Prime Minister, winning Labour’s largest ever majority. After 18 years of Conservative government, Blair created New Labour, and had a vision for a New Britain. Margaret Thatcher’s embrace of the market unleashed rapid social change which Blair shaped into a demand for the more fluid, less deferential politics that he stood for. The key change in Labour’s philosophy was to focus on the individual, enabling them to fulfil their potential, as facilitated by the state as citizens, not beneficiaries or clients.<sup>2</sup> The class structure was to be partially

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<sup>1</sup> The Daily Express, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1997; The Daily Mirror, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1997; The Sun, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Blair, *A Journey* (Hutchinson, 2010) 90.

dismantled with the abolition of most aristocratic hereditary peers from the House of Lords. Britain was to be a leader in Europe, seeking reforms to make the EU more citizen-focused, projecting Blair's vision for Britain onto a wider platform.

The place of the monarchy, a symbol of stability, continuity, and tradition, in this exciting new future was uncertain. Labour's manifesto merely stated that they had "no plans to replace the monarchy" - hardly a vote of confidence in the thousand-year-old institution.<sup>3</sup> In 1997 Britain, the abolition of the monarchy was arguably more likely than Brexit. As shown by the week that followed Diana's death, mere tradition was no longer a sufficient justification for an institution's continuing existence.

The response of the monarchy was to slowly, steadfastly, and almost surreptitiously rebuild its relationship with the British people. The result was a more open monarchy, granting better access to documentary makers, more walkabouts amongst the people, and a more diverse set of engagements. The Queen would go on "away days", a series of engagements with a theme, for example visiting a theatrical costume supplier, a drama school, before attending the theatre in the evening. Visits to investment banks better reflected the modern economy.

All small steps, but co-ordinated by an increasingly professional and sophisticated public relations team based at Buckingham Palace. Learning from New Labour, the Palace realised that in a world of twenty-four-hour news channels and the emergence of the internet, communicating with the public now meant constantly setting the agenda, with good news stories showing an active monarchy. To maintain media and public interest, gaps were left in the diary for topical or urgent visits.

At the same time, Blair and the New Labour government set about implementing their vision of a New Britain. Against the backdrop of a booming economy, increased spending on the National Health Service, broader public sector reform, the minimum wage, the devolution of power to the new Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, and Northern Irish Assembly, and the Human Rights Act, the individual became empowered both economically and politically. Diversity was lauded. Social mobility increased through a rapid expansion of higher education, with a target that 50% of all 18-year-olds should receive a university education. This also had the happy by-product of regenerating town and city centre outside of

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<sup>3</sup> Iain Dale (eds), *Labour Party General Election Manifestos, 1900-1997* (Routledge 2000).

London, especially in the North of England, the region worst hit by the de-industrialisation of the 1980s. Monarchy and country both appeared to be travelling in the same direction. This was shown in the Queen's 2004 Christmas Message, (in which she speaks without any formal ministerial advice), when she raised the issue of immigration, invoking the parallel of the Good Samaritan, stating that:

*Everyone is our neighbour, no matter what race, creed or colour...There is certainly much more to be done and many challenges to be overcome. Discrimination still exists. Some people feel that their own beliefs are being threatened. Some are unhappy about unfamiliar cultures. They all need to be reassured that there is so much to be gained by reaching out to others; that diversity is indeed a strength and not a threat.<sup>4</sup>*

New Labour had reached its zenith; it successfully retained its large majority at the 2001 General Election, and an historic third term in office was on the horizon. New Labour had gone from challenging the establishment, to becoming it. One of Blair's legacies was government support for the London 2012 Olympic Games, with the Opening Ceremony projecting to the world an open, vibrant and at times, quirky, Britain. The NHS was celebrated in front a global television audience of 900 million. The unforgettable centrepiece of this political and sporting mixture was the Queen, "parachuting" into the new Olympic Stadium with James Bond. No one envisaged this in 1997. The image and standing of the monarchy amongst the British public had been totally restored.

Yet, beneath the surface, the previous decade had eroded confidence in politics. Blair was responsible for the UK's controversial involvement in the Iraq War; the MPs expenses scandal saw four MPs go to jail; and the aftermath of the 2007-8 financial crisis questioned the prevailing economic certainties. During a briefing on the economic crash, the Queen captured the public mood and a lack of confidence in institutions by asking, why did no one see it coming? Blair's successor, Gordon Brown's tenure as Prime Minister was railroaded by these events.

This was the prime ministerial inheritance bequeathed to David Cameron on taking office in 2010. The Conservative Prime Minister of a coalition government, his response was a series of harsh austerity measures, contracting the state so vividly

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<sup>4</sup> BBC News, 'In full: Queen's Speech' (25 December 2004) [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4125229.stm>].

celebrated at the Olympic Opening Ceremony. In 2011, the Scottish National Party took advantage of disillusion with Westminster, winning an overall majority at the Scottish Parliament elections. The path was set for the 2014 Scottish independence referendum which was only narrowly defeated. England, by contrast, lacked, and still does, a similar outlet to express such disillusion. Even though Wales also voted to leave the EU, fundamentally, Brexit was 'Made in England'. For some, the 2016 referendum on EU membership effectively became England's independence vote, which was why the leave campaign's slogan: "Take Back Control" appealed to so many. Cameron's failure to understand his inheritance caused him to lose the referendum. He thought he would win, halting the rise of United Kingdom Independence Party, which campaigned to leave the EU.

The referendum results showed a divided country. Those voting leave tended to live in smaller towns and cities, who were concerned about the pace of change, the negative effects of immigration, and many leave areas had been left behind by the economic growth of previous decades. Remain areas tended to be the more prosperous centres of large cities, the university towns and London. Essentially, the parts of the country that benefited most from New Labour, and (to some extent) insulated against the worst effects of austerity.<sup>5</sup> John Lanchester summed up the divide stating, "to be born in many places in Britain is to suffer an irreversible lifelong defeat – a truncation of opportunity, of education, of access to power, of life expectancy".<sup>6</sup> Between elections, the leave areas of country saw more visits from members of the Royal Family than leading politicians.

If Cameron didn't understand his prime ministerial inheritance, Theresa May found hers overwhelming. May has failed to bridge the divides in her cabinet, the Conservative Party, and the country. A difficult task was made harder by losing the government's majority in the snap 2017 election. Divisions over Brexit became more entrenched. Brexiteers have morphed into claiming that anything less than leaving with 'No Deal' - trading with the EU and the world on 'WTO Terms' - would be a betrayal of the referendum result. By contrast, many remainers refuse to accept the referendum result, seeking a second referendum, sometimes called a 'People's Vote',

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<sup>5</sup> David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (C Hurst & Co, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> John Lanchester, 'Brexit Blues' (2016) 38 (15) *London Review of Books* 3-6.

or a 'confirmatory vote'. Remaining in the EU would be an option on the ballot paper.

The Queen's political power to solve this is limited. As a hereditary monarch, she is constitutionally expected to act impartially and on the advice of the elected government of the day. In return she enjoys the right to 'consult, encourage and warn', her prime ministers.<sup>7</sup> It was these powers that allowed George VI to stop Churchill leading the D-Day landings during the Second World War. In practice, the Queen exercises restraint, and in her audiences with the Prime Minister, cites different points of view held by others, or previous occasions when similar issues were addressed. Prime ministers often state how they value her input, John Major recommended that Blair, his successor 'seeks her advice and heeds her response'.<sup>8</sup>

This political impotence means that publicly, the monarchy's focus is on its role as Head of Nation. In this capacity, the monarchy seeks to recognise and encourage voluntary service, community engagement, and excellence. It has been this side of the monarchy that has been professionalised since 1997. The political commentator Andrew Marr described it as "being in the happiness business".<sup>9</sup> Taking inspiration from *both* their parents, not just Diana, Princes William and Harry have developed this role into championing unheralded causes; challenging stigma around mental health, gun crime, and the effect of addiction and family breakdown on the early years of child's development. These are concerns have been overlooked by the ordinary political process, and by giving a voice to these issues, they bring issues to the public's attention. Meghan Markle's introduction into the family, adds new dimension to this aspect of the monarchy.

The paradox is that the monarchy's hereditary nature requires it to constantly seeks the broadest possible support, in contrast to politicians who seek just enough support to win elections. At a time when social media exaggerates divides and encourages the cannibalisation of political debate, broad-based national institutions play a greater role in binding together this more atomised society. Taking a political stance would undermine this aspect of the monarchy. For this reason, Buckingham Palace vociferously complained when *The Sun* newspaper published a story three

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (Oxford University Press, 2001, originally published 1867) 64.

<sup>8</sup> John Major, *The Autobiography* (HarperCollins, 1999) 508.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Marr, *The Diamond Queen* (BBC Television, 2012), Episode 1.

months before the 2016 referendum with the headline, “Queen Backs Brexit”. The Press Complaints Commission concluded that the story was ‘misleading’.

Political interventions by the Queen are fraught with difficulty. The Queen is known to prefer a consensual style of politics. One of her private secretaries, Lord Charteris suggested that the Queen finds polarised politics ‘very uncomfortable’.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, direct interventions are rare.

In the Queen Christmas message last December, she emphasised the need for understanding;

*“Even with the most deeply held differences, treating the other person with respect and as a fellow human being is always a good first step towards greater understanding”.*<sup>11</sup>

Although primarily discussing the value of the Commonwealth, the Queen was interpreted by some as making an elliptical statement about Brexit. Any such doubt was dispelled in January when, in the relatively informal surroundings of a village hall in rural Norfolk, the Queen said,

*“Of course, every generation faces fresh challenges and opportunities. As we look for new answers in the modern age, I for one prefer the tried and tested recipes, like speaking well of each other and respecting different points of view; coming together to seek out the common ground; and never losing sight of the bigger picture. To me, these approaches are timeless, and I commend them to everyone.”*<sup>12</sup>

In case the political intention was not hard to decipher, the statement was passed to several political journalists and columnists who usually leave royal reports well alone. Some interpreted these comments as encouraging a compromise between Leavers and Remainers, which has how Theresa May justified the terms of the draft Withdrawal Agreement she agreed with the EU.<sup>13</sup> Coming after the Withdrawal

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring: Unearthing the British Constitution* (Gollancz, 1995) 70-71.

<sup>11</sup> The Queen’s Christmas Broadcast 2018, (Royal.uk, 2018) [<https://www.royal.uk/queens-christmas-broadcast-2018>].

<sup>12</sup> BBC News, ‘Queen makes plea for Britons to find “common ground”’ (BBC News, 25 January 2019) [<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-46996180>].

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Parris, ‘The Queen is wrong to get involved in Brexit debate’ (The Times, 25 January 2019).

Agreement had been rejected twice by MPs and just before a third attempt, the Queen's intervention could have been the most significant of her reign. The intervention showed an unusual level of concern within Buckingham Palace. Yet, it had absolutely no effect. Suggestions that other members of the Royal Family would intervene lead to nothing, and the Queen has not returned to the issue since. At least she tried.

But the Queen's failure to unblock the political debate, indicates the success of the monarchy over the past twenty-odd years. This has been to develop its representative role to provide representation on a deeper level than that provided by day-to-day politics. As Head of Nation, the monarchy represents the country back to itself in a way that a politician rising through Britain's adversarial politics cannot. Viewed this way, instead of intervening in politics, monarchy puts politics in its place. The problem with Brexit is simple, politicians as a whole, do not know how to confront the choices before them. Not even the Queen can help with that. And nor should she.