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THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE OF THE BRITISH MONARCHY AND THE ROYAL FAMILY

Abstract

The article examines the causes and characteristics of change that have affected the British Royal Family and Institutions over the centuries. In particular it outlines what changes arose from within the family itself and how external events or behavioural and social norms – and even technological developments – could force reforms. The claim that the Monarchy depends upon an appearance of stability and tradition to survive whilst the “family” itself has to adapt to the emotional stresses that affect almost everybody is put under consideration as well.

Key words: change, British Monarchy, Royal Family

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje przyczyny i cechy zmian, które na przestrzeni wieków wpłynęły na brytyjską rodzinę królewską i instytucje. W szczególności opisuje jakie zmiany powstały w samej rodzinie i jak wydarzenia zewnętrzne lub normy behawioralne i społeczne, a nawet rozwój technologiczny, mogły wymuszać reformy. Rozpatrywane jest również twierdzenie, że monarchia zależy od pozorów stabilności i tradycji, aby przetrwać, podczas gdy sama „rodzina” musi dostosować się do emocjonalnych stresów, które dotyczą prawie wszystkich.

Słowa kluczowe: zmiana, monarchia brytyjska, rodzina królewska

1. Introduction

“Change” according to the Compact Oxford English dictionary means “an act or process through which something becomes different” (Soanes, 2008). Yet although the British Monarchy has undoubtedly changed radically over the centuries, it still remains as an identifiable and useful institution, which is central to the British Constitution. Nature dictates that human beings are mortal. It is also inevitable that the Monarchy will be changed and adapted to suit the needs and characteristics of those who serve as Monarchs, known more generally these days as the Royal Family. “Change is a constant,” said Elizabeth II as she addressed Parliament during her Golden Jubilee in 2002, “managing it has become an expanding discipline. The way we embrace it defines our future” (Gordon-Carter, 2003). The aim of this

work is to investigate the dynamics of change that have an impact on the British Monarchy and the Royal Family.

2. The British Monarchy

2.1. The definition of monarchy

Monarchy is a form of government where the sovereign power fully or partially belongs to monarch (king/tsar/emperor/sheik/sultan, etc), who usually inherits it and either passes it as an inheritance or nominates a person who will become their successor (Kelsen, 2009). Out of one hundred and ninety five states in the world only forty three of them are monarchies. Of these seven are absolute monarchies (e.g. Vatican, Oman, UAE, Saudi Arabia), sixteen are Commonwealth realms and the remaining twenty one are constitutional monarchies. In the absolute monarchy legislature is formed and exercised by a sovereign, who has supreme power and is not amenable to any sanction. Commonwealth realms are united in their voluntary connection with the institution of the monarchy, the succession, and the sovereign (e.g. Elisabeth II). In the constitutional monarchy the power of a sovereign is limited and the separation of powers is present with a parliament in legislative branch, the courts in adjudicative branch and ministers in the field of administration (Learning with the...).

2.2. From absolute to constitutional monarchy in the UK

The shaping of the political system in Britain is a story of change. The history of British monarchy starts in the eleventh century with the emergence of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex. It represented a powerful institution with a monarch acting as a sovereign whose power was unlimited. In the thirteenth century King John encountered a number of conflicts which resulted in losing British territories in France. These events led to the subscription of Magna Carta, a document which placed legislature above the monarchy and implemented limitations on its power and is nowadays considered as one of the first steps taken in England towards establishing parliamentary democracy (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2015; Higham, 2015).

Since that time a significant number of laws have been passed that limited the monarchy to an even greater degree. The Bill of Rights of 1689, which was accepted after the Glorious Revolution, imposed more restrictions on the monarchy and secured the position of the Parliament. The Bill created a constitutional monarchy in England, meaning the king or queen acts as head of state but his or her powers are limited by law. It deprived the monarch of such rights as suspending laws, levying taxes and forming a regular army. Under this system, the monarchy could not rule without the consent of Parliament, and the people were given individual rights (English Bill...)

In the modern-day British constitutional monarchy, the king or queen plays a largely ceremonial role. Her Majesty performs ceremonial duties which have significant cultural role in modern English society. The Queen takes part in annual ceremony of the Parliament opening, meets the Prime Minister every week, receives foreign ambassadors and delegates, and makes official visits to countries in order to maintain diplomatic and economic relations. This way, the real government has more time to get on with the actual job of running the country (O'Driscoll, 2009).

A great number of the Queen's official duties is only executed after a consultation with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet who are accountable to the House of Commons. While monarch has the right to appoint the Prime Minister, in reality the person she chooses is the leader of the strongest party in the Parliament (ibid.). In case none of the parties gained the majority, the Queen appoints the Minister herself. She used this prerogative only once in 1974 when she chose Harold Wilson to be the Prime Minister (Thomson, 1980).

The monarch remains constitutionally empowered to exercise the royal prerogative against the advice of the Prime Minister or the Cabinet, but in practice would likely only do so in emergencies or where existing precedent does not adequately apply to the circumstances in question. For example, the reigning monarch is a head of Royal military forces and has a prerogative to declare wars and make peace, sign and ratify international agreements, but in fact all this can be done when in agreement with the voice of the Parliament (McDowall, 2002). Actual legislature implies that the Queen summons and dissolves the Parliament, but this process is controlled by the Parliament Act of 1911, which states that the Parliament is elected for a five-year period and is automatically dissolved afterwards. Furthermore, when the Prime Minister "requests" a dissolution of Parliament to hold an election, it would normally be impossible for the monarch to refuse this "request". Similarly, while the Queen could refuse the royal assent to a bill passed by Parliament – and so stop it becoming a law – no monarch has actually done so since the year 1708 (O'Driscoll, 2009).

2.3. The royal family issues

A monarchy consists of distinct but interdependent institutions – a government and a state administration on the one hand, and a court and a variety of ceremonies on the other – that provide for the social life of the members of the dynasty, their friends, and the associated elite. Monarchy thus entails not only a political-administrative organization but also a "court society" that is various groups of nobility that are linked to the monarchical dynasty (or "royal" house) through a web of personal bonds (Kostiner, 2020).

2.3.1. Recent changes in the law of succession

The Royal Family are individuals who stand in the line of succession to the throne determined by The Act of Union in 1800. According to the Act, the throne is inherited by a first child with male priority. The Act of Settlement of 1701 not only prevented Roman Catholics from becoming monarchs, but it also prohibited Anglicans whose spouse is a Catholic to reign in the country. However, on the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 2011, David Cameron suggested reforming the existing rules of succession in order to eliminate sex and religious discrimination. Nowadays the line of succession is defined by the Succession to the Crown Act of 2013 which offers three substantial changes: 1) succession is determined by seniority ending the system of male preference primogeniture under which a younger son displaces an elder daughter in the line of succession, 2) the members of the Royal Family who are married to Roman Catholics are not excluded from succession, 3) the Act repeals the Royal Marriages Act 1772, which (with some exceptions) makes void the marriage of any of the descendants of George II who fails to obtain the Sovereign's permission prior to their marriage (Succession to...).

The British line of succession delineates who will inherit the throne and become the king or queen of Great Britain. Queen Elizabeth II is the current monarch, having reigned for nearly seven decades. Her husband, Prince Philip, who died in April at 99, was steadily by her side through the years, but he was not in line to succeed her. Instead, after the queen, her firstborn, Charles, Prince of Wales, will rule, followed by his firstborn, Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, and then his firstborn, Prince George (Sanchez, 2021).

2.3.2. The alteration of the dynasty name and rebranding of the monarchy

Windsor is the family name of the contemporary royal family. The press sometimes refers to its members as 'the Windsors'. Queen Elisabeth is only the fourth monarch with this name. This is not because a 'new' royal family took over the throne of Britain four reigns ago. It is because George V, Elisabeth II's grandfather, changed the family name. It was Saxe-Coburg-Gotha after Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert, but during the First World War it was thought better for the king not to have a German-sounding name (O'Driscoll, 2009) especially after the German bomber planes named Gotha destroyed much of London (Ridley, 2021). The task of renaming the dynasty was neither easy nor obvious as it required trawling through history books in a struggle to find a name untouched by the monarchy's own bloody history – passing over Tudor, Stuart and Plantagenet families. The inspiration came from Windsor Castle with the assumption that the Queen Victoria shall

be regarded as having founded the House of Windsor. The name caught on as the place symbolizes safeness, cosiness with lovely, luscious green rolling landscapes, tea and cakes. It at once says exactly what George wants the British family to be (Linning, 2017).

The above example illustrates how external factors may condition a historical change. Namely the outbreak of the war with anti-German rioting in Britain as well as the fall of the tsar and the Russian revolution led to several important decisions concerning the survival of the British monarchy. Firstly, in 1917 on the advice of his private secretary Lord Stamfordham, who was anxious about anti-royalist feelings in Britain, George V chose to withdraw the offer of asylum to his cousin, overthrown ex-tsar, and his family (Ridley, 2021). Secondly, the King decided it was time to lose the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha name and tasked his private secretary Lord Stamfordham with the job (Linning, 2017). Thirdly, the king agreed on a new Stamfordham's strategy for the future of the monarchy that is to "endeavour to induce the thinking working classes, socialist and others to regard the Crown not as mere figurehead, but as a living power for good, affecting the interests and social wellbeing of all classes" (Lacey, 2017).

Stamfordham encouraged the King and his wife to do something the British monarch had rarely done before, namely to go out and meet the people. George was the first monarch who was prepared to not just go round in a big car waving at people, but to get out of the car and visit factories, go down even coalmines, go into peoples' homes, talk to people, get out there, be seen (Ridley, 2021). That is how George V attended the first football cup at Wembley and made use of the radio to become a popular monarch (McDowall, 2002). Furthermore, king's secretary ensured that it was not just the king and queen who appeared in the newsreels, but also Prince of Wales, the future king Edward VIII who was serving as a staff officer and enjoyed a celebrity status. With the end of the war on 18 November 1918, across Europe no less than nine monarchies had lost their thrones, including King George V's cousins in Germany and Russia. But in London, the king and queen were cheered to the echo (Ridley, 2021).

George VI and his consort, Elisabeth (known as the Queen Mother), made the monarchy yet more popular into the Second World War. By their refusal to leave Buckingham Palace after it had been bombed, and by tours of badly bombed parts of London and other cities, they became the two most loved people. When she came to the throne in 1952, Queen Elisabeth II sought to continue in the same tradition and to give the various elements of society a sense of belonging, unity and purpose beyond material well-being (McDowall, 2002).

3. Major changes in monarchy during Elizabeth II's reign

3.1. Marital aspects in the royal family and schooling of young royals

All families have their ups and downs, but Elizabeth's family always tried to keep its scandals and conflicts under wraps. Raised in an atmosphere of almost stifling secrecy, Elizabeth witnessed her parents' horrified reaction to the public affair and subsequent abdication of her uncle in 1936. When she took the throne, divorce was a royal taboo and the family did its best to cover up scandals like Princess Margaret's tempestuous love life. But over the years, the royal family learned it is not immune to public criticism. Princess Margaret divorced in 1978 (Blakemore, 2018). This was the first senior royal divorce since Princess Victoria Melita of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha in 1901 (Novice, 2015). Princess Anne was also the first British Royal since Henry VIII in the sixteenth century, to divorce and re-marry. It was also Princess Anne, who decided at start of her children's lives not to burden them with titles, which means that Peter Philips is the first grandson of a monarch not to have a title (Novice, 2015).

Then, in 1992 Prince Charles and Princess Diana separated, turning the family's business into a worldwide obsession fuelled by tabloid speculation and paparazzi photographs. In a break with the past, Elizabeth urged them to divorce, which they did in 1996. Today, divorce is no longer taboo and the family's ups and downs, from Diana's tragic death in 1997 to the well-publicized weddings of Princes William and Harry, are no longer under wraps (Blakemore, 2018). However, if the Royal family might want to keep something secret, the public demand for knowledge about scandals and the interests of the media cannot be suppressed. As the Queen mother said: "Nowadays one feels that the press, radio and television are sadly lacking any respect for one's institutions and traditions" (Vickers, 2005).

Royal marriage to a commoner, which was not officially possible in the past, is now acceptable and glamourized. For example: Prince William is married to Kate Middleton, who was not born a Royal and Prince Harry is married to a divorcee, Meghan Markle an American actress. By degrees the Royal family has been turned into entertainment by the media. Harry and Meghan made it clear they no longer wanted to be part of the Royal circle and created their new lives for themselves abroad (Marr, 2021).

Another dynamic of change with the Royal family was sending the Royal children to boarding schools. Prince Charles was the first Royal to go to a conventional school, and his parents wanted him to be treated the same as any other pupil (Paterson, 2018). This is now normal procedure to educate the Royals alongside "ordinary people", unlike in the past when the children had private tuition. It is all part of the normalising process, which was famously

exhibited when the young Princess Elizabeth uniquely did military service during WWII (Marr, 2021).

3.2. From low-tech royalty to all-access monarchy

Elizabeth II's coronation on June 2, 1953 had all the pomp and circumstance of a major event. But there was a difference from the coronations of the many monarchs that preceded her: It was broadcast on television. The decision to televise the coronation was a controversial one; the elderly, tradition-bound commissioners who planned the event were horrified at the idea of allowing cameras into Westminster Abbey for such a solemn occasion, and Elizabeth herself was camera-shy. Today, the monarchy takes advantage of smartphones and social media to shape its public image. It uses platforms like Twitter and Instagram and employs a digital engagement planner to craft its online message. The monarchy may no longer be as private, but its message is still impeccably controlled (Blakemore, 2018).

3.3. From an off-limits monarch to the royal walkabout

When Elizabeth was crowned the monarchy was the most accessible it had ever been. Especially if compared to the days in which monarchs simply hid within their castles and rarely, if ever, came in contact with their public. But the early days of Elizabeth's reign were still relatively sheltered, and her subjects were more likely to get a glimpse of their queen from far away or on television than in person. Though she went on trips as Queen, she only interacted with dignitaries when she did so (Blakemore, 2018).

Today it seems the most natural thing in the world for any royal visit to be marked by an informal "meet and greet" with a crowd of well-wishers. However, when Elizabeth II first went "walkabout" in New Zealand in 1970, it signalled a radical break with centuries of tradition. "It did not happen by accident"- admitted William Heseltine, who had just been appointed the new press secretary to the Queen. "We were thinking how we can make this a bit different (...) out of our deliberations came an idea of a closer contact with the public at large – who'd mostly been recipients of little more than a wave or a smile – rather than just mayors, councillors and politicians (...) the most important thing of all was that it got a name 'the walkabout' ... it had a romantic aura" – said William Heseltine (Novice, 2015).

3.4. Elizabeth's long reign as a manifestation of stability and tradition

Churchill believed that the beginning of the Elizabethan era marked a moment when the British still impoverished after the war, could look ahead with fresh ambition. There would, he thought, be a more material wealth and new inventions (Marr, 2021).

Elizabeth was just 25 when she was crowned, and when she met foreign dignitaries, presidents and prime ministers. So she was often the new kid in the

room. World leaders and towering male figureheads who were in power at the time including Winston Churchill, Josef Stalin and Dwight David Eisenhower, couldn't have been more different than the young Queen. Yet, during her more than seven decades on the throne, Elizabeth has outlasted them all. She has become a potent symbol of continuity even as the world has changed around her. Today, she is a figure just as formidable as the old-school leaders who came before her. It is uncertain how many more years Elizabeth will reign, but for now she's the longest-lasting British monarch of all time (Blakemore, 2018).

4. The Future of the British Monarchy

Prince Charles, the heir to the throne, wants a slimmed-down, value-for-money monarchy, with no embarrassing hangers-on. The prince is reportedly set on reducing the number of working Royal Family members to a team of just eight, all senior working royals. The reasons for the move are believed to be linked to a bid to save the reputation of the institution, which has taken a hit in recent years with constant negative headlines. It could also be to save money, reducing the number of people paid by the tax-payer-funded Sovereign Grant (Kennedy, 2021).

This version of the royal family would exclude his own siblings' children. Princess Ann has accepted it, and so have the Wessexes. The sticking point seems to have been with the Duke of York. Prince Andrew with his poor reputation has been a liability to the royal family, from his ill-advised friendships with convicted paedophiles, to business deals with Kazakhstanis, to his relationship with his ex-wife. It all contributes together into something that is not very palatable (Nicholl, 2017). Andrew feared that his daughters, the princess Beatrice and Eugenie, were going to be side-lined. He wrote to the queen, insisting his girls must keep their royal status, but the queen was very unlikely to go against Charles. Eventually, Andrew had to admit defeat (Adedokun, 2021).

It can be argued that Charles makes the necessary sacrifice at the cost of the family to secure the longevity and future of the House of Windsor. Apparently, Charles is following the example of the founder of the House of Windsor. When anti-German feeling during the First World War was directed at the royal family, George V made all his German relatives living in Britain give up their royal titles and adopt British names. He changed his own name from a German one to the solidly British "Windsor." He slimmed-down the monarchy and made its core members work hard to show they provided value for money. There is streak of ruthlessness in George V but he is also being pragmatic and he thought that if he did not make the changes, the British monarchy might go down. George V's reforms saved the monarchy and established the popularity it enjoys today (Carter, 2017).

The monarchy is going to come under a lot of pressure in the decades ahead and Charles's willingness to intervene could, if he does not overstep the mark, take the monarchy into a new style, a new generation (Lacey, 2017). From the beginning the House of Windsor has been shrewd in adapting to changing times. Never ahead, but never too far behind. If he is wise, Charles will say as little as possible about anything outside the Overton Window of consensual views. So climate change, Ukraine and general social cohesion are OK, but not trans rights or food banks, nor human rights in China and the Middle East. British monarchs haven't led their troops into battle since the eighteenth century, and it would be unwise for this one to find himself suddenly in the middle of a culture war (O'Grady, 2022).

The monarchy appeals to the atavistic feelings in the public and for that reason it perhaps will survive. Overall, the pressure to undermine this great institution is not very great at the moment and in Britain's isolated and exposed position in the world, the British probably want no revolution for fear of something worse. However, the support for the monarchy is much more fragile in a very swiftly changing 21-st century environment. According to the survey by YouGov, 41% of those aged 18 to 24 thought there should now be an elected head of state compared to 31% who wanted a king or queen. That was a reversal of sentiment from two years ago, when 46% preferred the monarchy to 26% who wanted it replaced. Apparently, younger age groups are progressively more likely to oppose the monarchy. It is also worth noting that although the British monarchy is supported by a plurality of people across most age groups in Great Britain, it is among over 65 year-olds where the level of support is highest at 81 percent (Clark, 2022).

It seems that the royal family these days would not have to do much for suddenly the monarchy to find itself in a lot of trouble. The Queen's global reputation as an almost flawless monarch commanding the affection of the people goes before her, and anything the new King does will inevitably look inferior, even where it is not. Every decision, every utterance, every choice of word will, frankly, be weighed and parsed by the media and set against a sometimes idealised, not to say hypothetical, view of what his mother neither would have done or said (O'Grady, 2022).

So, smaller, cheaper, less flummery, more democratic and more reflective of modern Britain and the contemporary Commonwealth – both multicultural communities – would seem to be the future role of the British monarchy. It will also need to work even harder than ever in its diplomatic, trade and charitable roles to continue to command the support of the public in hard times. The secret of the longevity of the British monarchy over its 1,000-plus year existence, is its ability to adapt to changing times and to do what the people and the politicians demand of it (ibid.).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, since the times of WWI under George V and the abdication of Edward VIII in 1936 the changes in the Monarchy have been substantial and it is possible to witness the dynamic transition from a traditional and historic structure to one that is more suitable for present times, that is e.g. more open to the public with the royals contacting ordinary people face to face or via social media. Queen Elizabeth II's reign has developed within a cultural background that has been flexible enough to accommodate the fundamental constitutional reforms that have taken place. In fact, the monarchy survives in spite of a multitude of changes that are normalizing life for the Queen and her public. For example, the current British Monarchy is not absolute anymore and her powers are very limited. However, the Queen still retains the status as the Head of 54 Commonwealth countries across the globe.

The Platinum Jubilee which is due to take place in June this year will be a great celebration but at the same time it will remind us that the Queen will in the near future pass away and her son Prince Charles will be crowned. This act will bring yet more changes to the nature of the institution and practices of the Monarchy. Forging a new style of monarchy, with advancing years, the Queen has increasingly looked to Prince Charles to serve as a sort of co-monarch. He has moved centre stage in guiding royal strategy. Prince Charles himself promises to be a new style of monarch, outspoken and an activist (Novice, 2015). With the new ruler on the throne, and his plan to slim down the Monarchy, the British subjects are more than likely to face further changes of His Majesty's realm in the years to come.

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