From Duty to Decadence

Queen Elizabeth to Prince Harry—what a falling-off was there!

by Theodore Dalrymple

For more than 70 years, I lived under the same head of state: not a despot, of the kind who clings to power for fear of ending up like Mussolini, suspended by the ankles from a gibbet; but a mild, glamorous, modest, dutiful, humorous woman who understood and performed her role to perfection and never, in all that time, made a faux pas.

After so long a period, she came to seem almost immortal, her presence taken for granted, as one takes a phenomenon of

nature for granted. Toward the end of her life, however, when it became clear that she must die in the not-distant future, a number of people I know—my neighbors and others—expressed anxiety at the thought of her death: for when we have lived for so long with a seemingly fixed point, its removal, even if it is distant from us, is unsettling. For those grown old during her reign, change seemed unlikely to be for the better and chaos more than possible, given that so little goes uncontested these days.

Nothing captures the changes that have occurred in—some would say, afflicted—Britain during the long reign of Queen Elizabeth II more than the contrast between her and her grandson Prince Harry. Of course, they are only two people, and two people don't make a population, let alone a culture; nevertheless, it is hard to believe that the great difference in their conduct and outlook on life has merely individual significance. For me, at any rate, it makes a painful contrast.

The thread that ran through the late queen's life was that of duty. Her conditions of work were, of course, excellent: among other things, she lived with the greatest collection of Western art in the world that is not in public possession. (Not that she ever showed much interest in art; her interests ran more to dogs and horses than to painting.)

From an early age, she swore, in public, that she would dedicate herself to doing her duty, and irrespective of whatever one might think of the duties that she was called upon to perform, no one could say that she ever betrayed this promise. She kept it for three-quarters of a century.

One could say that she was born not with a silver, but a gold, spoon in her mouth. This is only partly true, however. During the war, for example, from the age of 13, she was separated from her parents, who remained in London and whose home was bombed seven times. This is not an ideal start in life; but

she quietly venerated the memory of her father, an unassuming and dutiful man, to the end of her days, in a way both uncommon and touching.

Great good fortune (if being born heiress to a constitutional monarchy is to be considered such) is as much a test of character as ill fortune, and one that at least as high a proportion of people fail. To be a constitutional monarch entails, among other duties, the meeting of many detestable people while displaying no detestation whatever; never being disagreeable in public; never saying anything that could embarrass the government of the day, however incompetent; never expressing one's true feelings; never canceling engagements; reading piles of documents, many of them uninteresting; and, in short, always being on one's best behavior. Most of us, I suspect, couldn't keep it up for 70 minutes, let alone for 70 years: nor would we want to, for we think far too much of ourselves. We would experience the self-control necessary for its accomplishment as a terrible burden and an assault on, or even denial of, our personal freedom.

Only an iron sense of obligation to something larger than herself can explain how the queen did it. It required a willingness to subordinate her ego to a duty, the demands of which were overwhelming. She understood that the intense interest that her every public appearance aroused owed almost nothing to her personality—which she realized, from the first, to be ordinary—and everything to her inherited and symbolic function. And strangely enough, her awareness of her own ordinariness, in circumstances in which she was treated as an exalted personage, made her extraordinary. Only someone of fine character could have been deferred to as she was for most of her life, surrounded by bowing and scraping, and not have become insufferably self-important.

Two photographs from late in her life capture poignantly her sense of duty. The first was during the funeral of her husband of more than 70 years, Prince Philip. He was not a perfect

husband from the point of view of fidelity. But even here, whatever her private feelings must have been, she kept her dignity, revealed nothing in public, and suppressed her natural reactions, whatever they may have been.

Her husband died during the Covid lockdown, and we see her, dressed in mourning, with a jet-black mask, alone in the chapel at the funeral service. The justification (or otherwise) of the restrictions was, for her, beside the point: it was not her place to challenge them, which would have been unconstitutional. By contrast, the nation's democratically elected representatives, such as Boris Johnson, who actually made and enforced the restrictions, proved incapable of abiding by them. Unlike the queen, the representatives thought that, or behaved as if, there was one law for everyone else and another for themselves. In a sense, then, they were less egalitarian, certainly less modest, and more self-important than she, albeit that her position itself was the very embodiment of non-egalitarianism.

The second photograph shows her receiving the new prime minister, as the monarch always does when someone accedes to the position. Queen Elizabeth was 96, two days from her death; she is alert and wears a captivating smile. At such an age, one might have thought that she could be excused from her duty; but she did not excuse herself from it.

She had both an instinctive and a theoretical understanding of her role, which was not one that could be justified by an appeal to indubitable first principles alone. From age 12, she was taught history by Sir Henry Marten, vice-provost of Eton; and, more importantly, he taught her Walter Bagehot's ideas about the English constitution, a subject to baffle the subtlest of intelligences, as it is roughly as logical and consistent as English spelling. As with that spelling, there are rules—English orthography is partly phonetic, after all—but no rule is altogether stronger than custom and practice. This seems absurd, until one remembers that no

written constitution can cover every eventuality, nor can it entirely constrain politicians determined to violate its spirit, especially when the population cares little for it, either.

Though Bagehot (1827–77) was sometimes a beguiling writer–editor for 16 years of *The Economist*, he wrote often-hilarious literary criticism that is incomparably superior to most of what exists in that genre today—one can hardly imagine a teenage girl picking up his book, *The English Constitution*, with a song in her heart. The chapter most important to Elizabeth's situation, of course, was titled "The Monarchy," which makes it clear, as Montesquieu made clear, that England is a republic, with a veneer of royalty.

But a veneer is not an unimportant feature of a piece of furniture; indeed, it may make the difference between what is beautiful and what is ugly. The monarchy is an aspect of what Bagehot called the dignified, as against the efficient, part of government. It has no utilitarian function, at least not in any obvious way, but it serves as a focus of loyalty for people of very different opinions. Bagehot says:

> *The nation is divided into parties, but the crown is of no party. Its apparent separation from business is that which removes it both from enmities and from desecration, which preserves its mystery, which enables it to combine the affection of conflicting parties—to be a visible symbol of unity to those still so imperfectly educated as to need a symbol.*

Everyone, it seems to me, is still imperfectly educated, which is why the term "Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition" continues to mean something, though less than it once did, because as formal education lengthens, instinctive understanding declines.

Reverence for the monarch is irrational; it partakes of magic

and the need for glamour, mystery, and quasi-religious ceremony. Contradictory things are demanded of the monarch. He or she must be both distant and human. The monarch is to be informed about public affairs and perhaps even sometimes consulted (as Bagehot notes, if the monarch remains on the throne for any length of time, he or she accumulates more experience than any politician) but cannot interfere directly with politics because this would destroy the mystique:

> *It should be evident that he [the monarch] does no wrong. He should not be brought too closely to real measurement. . . . [English royalty] seems to order, but it never seems to struggle. It is commonly hidden like a mystery, and sometimes paraded like a pageant, but in neither case is it contentious.*

Royalty must be visible and hidden at the same time. Writing in the time of Queen Victoria, Bagehot says: “Above all our royalty is to be reverenced, and if you begin to poke about it you cannot reverence it. . . . Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic.”

Whether or not because of her early reading of Bagehot, the late queen managed her difficult and contradictory role to perfection. She seamlessly combined quasi-divinity with approachability (she is said to have shaken hands with, and spoken with, more people than anyone else in the history of the world). Though regal, she had a self-deprecating and subtle wit.

But it is in the very perfection of Queen Elizabeth II’s performance—performance in more than one sense—that the danger to the monarchy as an institution lies. Comparison with perfection is always intimidating, for one cannot improve on it and can only fall short of it—and, as Bagehot pointed out, a hereditary line cannot be expected to continue producing remarkable people. Even in the best circumstances, a drift

toward the mean will occur, and one would have good reasons to expect, because of the upbringing that successors have received, a drift below the mean.

It is not only a natural drift that should be feared; it is also a change in circumstances—most importantly, in the culture. With the spread of education, people have become reluctant to accept anything that does not accord with supposedly rational first principles or that they have not thought out for themselves. For good or ill, deference to tradition has declined (and not only in Britain); philosophical self-sufficiency—or, at any rate, self-importance—has grown. That strange and seemingly contradictory combination that the late queen exemplified—grandeur because of her inherited position, self-effacement because of iron commitment to duty—is ever more incomprehensible to us. We have been educated out of our understanding.

The present king, head of state from the moment his mother ceased breath, is a transitional figure between her and her polar opposite, Prince Harry. Charles had a difficult role to fulfill: Crown Prince for nearly three-quarters of a century. Though he was much criticized and even derided, I think that he performed quite well. He could not spend all that time doing and saying nothing; but, on the other hand, he could not do or say anything that disqualified him from the political neutrality necessary for his accession to the throne. He chose subjects to discourse upon that, while of public importance, were not directly political. His views on so-called alternative medicine (I say “so-called” because a friend of mine performed research establishing that in most cases, it is additional rather than alternative) were eccentric; but his views on architecture were salutary, and one needs to see only a little of what architects have done to the townscapes of Britain since the end of the war to appreciate the wisdom of Charles’s strictures. He is a cultivated man.

Neither party to his first marriage, however, was able to put

their feelings second to the position into which they had been called, as the queen had done. In this, Prince Charles was a throwback to Edward VIII, his great-uncle and the only odious head of state that Britain has had (and then only briefly) in 190 years. Edward VIII proposed to marry a commoner, a divorcée and an American, and put his love above his position, though whether his love was greater than his sense of entitlement to live in some considerable grandeur was never tested. I hesitate to draw the obvious parallels with his great-great-nephew.

At any rate, Prince Charles survived the scandal of divorce because divorce was no longer a scandal for most people (as it still was in my childhood). But it nonetheless dented his popularity among the population, not because it was deeply attached to the principle of sexual fidelity—far from it, if the population's own conduct was anything to go by—but because the sentimental cult of the victim had spread among, some might say corrupted, that population, and his former wife knew how to exploit that sentimentality. Indeed, it was not uncommonly heard that the crown should skip a generation and be conferred on Prince William, who, so far at least, had not blotted his copybook and was more popular than his father.

Those thinking this way had regressed in their understanding of the constitution. Here is Bagehot again: "If a king is a useful public functionary who may be changed, and in whose place you may make another, you cannot regard him with mystic awe and wonder: and if you are bound to worship him, of course you cannot change him." This is not quite accurate: the principle of descent of the crown in strict order of precedence, come what may, has never been fully obeyed and has often been violated, though not in the name of public preference or an electoral vote of the people, formal or informal. In the strange world of the British constitution, there are acceptable and unacceptable inconsistencies.

The current Prince of Wales, though patently decent, skates on

thin ice in his public pronouncements, ice that could crack and through which he could easily fall, costing him his throne and indeed the very existence of that throne. To talk of the healing chakras of the earth is one thing; to claim, as William has done, that it is necessary to scale up efforts to address climate change is quite another, for this is to demand far-reaching economic and political policies that could backfire and become furiously unpopular. A king who lives by popular nostrums dies by them. William, if he continues down this path, could find himself living out the rest of his life in Cascais, Portugal, like ex-king Umberto of Italy; or in Switzerland, like ex-king Michael of Romania; or in Rome, like ex-king Zahir Shah of Afghanistan. He is in particular danger if he really believes what he says and is not cynically repeating what he thinks that people want to hear, for then he will find it harder to change course.

But it is the contrast between the late queen and Prince Harry that is most revealing—and dispiriting. The queen understood that her personal feelings, while important to her, were of little or no significance as far as her public duties were concerned. She once played hostess to the odious Ceaușescus, for example, not because she liked them or thought them great world figures but because it was her duty, as the government had laid it down, to do so.

For psychobabble-mad Prince Harry, even the war in Afghanistan was a mere backdrop to his self-absorption. (Photo by Wiktor Szymanowicz/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Prince Harry is blessed with no such sense of his own unimportance, and no sense of how shallow a man he is. In his book, *Spare* (admittedly, the ghostwritten book is "his" only in a loose sense), he is so self-pitying that he seemingly has no compassion left for either his father—"spare" for three-quarters of a century, after all—or the memory of his grandmother, whose nonagenarian feelings about his antics he considers not even for a second. He made no effort to imagine them because, in his egotism, he was unaware that he should have made the effort. He is the psychobabble-mad prince, with his endless self-indulgent talk of his own mental health, while being able to jet off to Botswana for a safari holiday whenever so inclined. He is both grandiose and vulgar, and in the most banal way.

In all this, Harry is a profoundly modern young person. For him, psychological trauma is an excuse for indulging in the pleasures of self-absorption, without taking the pains of

self-examination. His account of his time in the army in Afghanistan, whose verisimilitude his former comrades have denied, is self-centered to a degree amazing in one claiming to be concerned for the welfare of humanity. If he had to go public about his service, surely the least the public could have expected in return was some kind of reflection, in light of what has happened since, on the justification or otherwise of the Afghanistan war and what he did in it (he claims to have killed, or at least participated in the deaths of, 25 Taliban fighters). But for him, the war was but a backdrop to his own psychodrama.

The last time I looked, his book had 56,000 reviews on Amazon, 75 percent of them favorable. Harry succeeded, I suspect, in tapping the wells of self-pity that now exist near the surface of even many privileged people. And victimhood being the highest moral state, his book allows even them—indeed, anyone—to feel victimized.

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