

The Royal Family Has Weathered Worse Crises Than Meghan and Harry

It's a sturdy institution that will survive the current controversies, as it always has.

by Conrad Black



The [Meghan Markle](#), has produced a division between those who assume that the British royal family is eminently capable of looking down its collective nose at an American, half African, nominally Roman Catholic divorcée, and those who believe that the British royal family is entitled to expect a higher level of discretion than Ms. Markle, now the Duchess of Sussex, has exercised. Examined rationally, it is the second view that must prevail. The most controversial assertion that she made in the interview was that one member of the royal family (which amounts to approximately 30 adults) – and it was specified that it was neither Queen Elizabeth nor her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh – made an obnoxious remark about the

potential pigmentation of Prince Harry and Ms. Markle's anticipated child. The couple made a number of comments about the burdens and restraints imposed by being in the royal family.

For this, President Biden commended Ms. Markle on her "courage." What courage? There are politics and abrasions in every family, and the traditions, prominence, and wealth of the British royal family would ensure that these complexities are more difficult than most families' internecine problems. But Prince Harry was born into this and navigated it very well; he served with distinction in the British Armed Forces in Afghanistan and was generally regarded as a likable, spontaneous, and pleasant young man, dashing and with a good sense of humor. Meghan certainly knew what she was getting into, and while it is gratuitous and probably unfair to point it out, people who live in palaces that they did not buy with money they earned themselves are not likely to be the subject of unlimited sympathy.

Often, and especially when their natures are not well suited to these positions, such people deserve great sympathy. The most prominent example of this in the recent history of the British royal family is the present Queen's father, King George VI, who never expected or wanted to become king. He was the second son of King George V and fought admirably through his twenties to overcome a speech impediment. Suddenly, in 1936, at the age of 41, he was thrust into the position of King of Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and a great many other entities around the world, and Emperor of India, at the approach of World War II, the greatest crisis of survival in British history. A shy man, self-conscious about his speech, which was in fact unexceptionable apart from occasional pauses, he entered upon a task he would have desperately wished to avoid. He served tirelessly and without pretension, visited bomb-damaged districts constantly, visited the armed forces in Africa and Western Europe, spoke to the Empire on

the radio, and was a heroic monarch, loved for his kindness, modesty, and dedication. When he died, aged only 56, from lung cancer caused by heavy smoking, the whole British Commonwealth mourned and millions stood in silence as his funeral caisson progressed through London to his mighty state funeral.

Being a member of the British royal family confers a comfortable life and an automatic level of deference, and it comports certain responsibilities. In general, with the modern British monarchy, which may be considered to have begun with Queen Victoria in 1837, practically everyone in that family has discharged those responsibilities. Victoria's son, King Edward VII, was a formidable womanizer and gambler in his 40 years as Prince of Wales waiting for the succession to open, but his activities never severely publicly embarrassed the crown, and he proved to be a stylish, effective, and widely respected monarch. There were problems with George VI's older brother, King Edward VIII, and he abdicated. There were problems with Diana, Princess of Wales, but her many admirers would claim that she was the victim of spousal infidelity. Whatever the facts, she was a great star and she died tragically and accidentally, and, like all legends, hers will be imperishable. Her husband, the Prince of Wales, has soldiered on admirably and is well suited to be the king when his turn comes.

In practice, members of the royal family enjoy a certain latitude in their behavior if they show some discretion, and those unlikely ever to succeed to the throne itself can generally live semi-normal lives in considerable luxury and can carve out time for their personal interests and friends. Prince Harry's uncle, Prince Andrew, Duke of York, was deemed to have embarrassed the royal family by his association with the late Jeffrey Epstein and has dropped out of sight of the public, but he committed no legal offense, merely a lapse of judgment, and after the proverbial decent interval, will doubtlessly be readmitted to normal participation in the royal

family's many benevolent and ceremonious duties.

At the head of it all reigns the deceptively ordinary but astonishingly admirable Queen Elizabeth II, who observed the 69th anniversary of her accession to the throne last week. She has ruled longer than Victoria's 64 years or the Habsburg emperor Franz Josef's 68 years. Apart from semi-mythical Egyptian pharaohs of fantastic longevity, she is surpassed only by Louis XIV and his 72 years, but of those, he was a minor not really in charge of the state for 17 years, until he was 22. In her very long reign, Queen Elizabeth II has never once drawn criticism for indignity, unseemliness, an inappropriate comment or oversight, or the slightest failing in any of her duties. She has been dutifully, massively informed on every relevant state matter and has fully exercised her right and obligation to advise 14 British prime ministers, from Winston Churchill to Boris Johnson, and many Commonwealth leaders as well. Not once in her 69 years has she embarrassed or in any way let down or disappointed the scores of millions of people whom she serves. It is an amazing record; few comparable chiefs of state in other countries, monarchies or republics where the president is a ceremonial and not a partisan figure, such as in Germany and Italy, can say the same for a period of service remotely as extended.

Queen Elizabeth is a devoted head of the Commonwealth, most of whose 54 member countries are overwhelmingly populated by non-whites. She famously danced with Ghanaian dictator Kwame Nkrumah in the 1960s to calm differences with that country, and Nelson Mandela was virtually an honorary member of the royal family. This is the context of Meghan Markle's assertion to Oprah Winfrey that there was a single quasi-racist in the royal family. In the circumstances this was an outrageous, petty, completely unsubstantiated, and implausible bit of imprecise gossip. Prince Harry and his wife deserve to live as they wish, within reason, and to be accepted for who they are, and Meghan Markle, a young woman in a challenging role, is

entitled to slip a few times. But let no one, least of all the chief of state and head of government of the United States (whose 13 direct predecessors in that office Queen Elizabeth has known), call it "courage."

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