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An accountable monarchy? [1]

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It will be interesting to see how the decision to order government [3] to publish confidential letters between Prince Charles and seven Whitehall departments under freedom of information law pans out. A blanket ban [4] on all royal correspondence being disclosed in this way was imposed last year following pressure from the royal family meaning that this will be the last time such information will be publicly available. The monarchy and the Cabinet Office are also fighting the demand by the courts for Whitehall to publish guidance on when to consult the Queen or Prince on changes to the law that may affect their private interests. The secrecy surrounding royal involvement in political affairs does nothing to help a commonly held public perception that they are undeserving of their tax-funded benefits and power.

Let me start by saying that I have nothing against having a monarchy in this country. The burden on the taxpayer is minimal compared with the US Department of State and in return they placate a widespread desire for traditionalism and serve to promote relations both at home and abroad in a way that short-term, partisan politicians could not hope to replicate. Similarly, I have nothing against royal involvement in politics, which is in general a very passive role, but only on the condition that whatever involvement they do have is made public. The monarchy is heralded as being an essential part of limited government, holding back the self-interest of politicians from a non-partisan and impartial perspective. This does beg the question as to why their opinions are such closely guarded secrets. The protective veil over communication regarding policy rightly serves to generate a mistrust of the royal family and fuels the fires of anti-royalists who claim that they are an outdated relic, extravagantly funded by the taxpayer with no right to meddle in public affairs. This will only be ignited further if it is revealed that the Prince has been a significant influence within Whitehall. In order for the monarchy to be legitimised in the eyes of the people, they cannot conceal their influence on issues that are in the public interest.

One could counter by saying that being only two individuals representing the monarchy, the Queen?s and the Prince?s views will necessarily be constricted to a few areas of interest, making it impossible for them to be impartial. To protect limited government therefore, their views would have to kept secret. Yet, a democratic government must be accountable for its actions and this includes the head of state. If they are truly above politics, they should only get involved in order to protect the public from political corruption and damaging, election-seeking policies.

At the other end of the spectrum, it can be argued that the royals are not qualified to get involved in politics at all. The Queen has a wealth of experience, being the longest serving Head of State in the world, but there are some who would argue that she is nonetheless in a position of inherited power. Frank Gardner?s comments on the BBC [5]that the Queen had told him she ?couldn?t understand why [there was no way to arrest Abu Hamza]- surely there was some law that he had broken? reveals an emotional reaction as opposed to logical neutrality. Similarly, Prince Charles? dislike [6] of certain forms of architecture has lead him to intervene in a number of planning developments he has found distasteful, and has lobbied on issues such as the ?perceived evils of genetically modified crops? and foxhunting. This is fine and the royals have just as much right to voice their opinion as everyone else, but in return for their inflated influence above the rest of us, they must also be held accountable for their views.

The unique nature of an unelected head of state within a democratic system means that the royal family cannot hope to maintain their legitimacy without disclosing their political correspondence or details of their veto power within the legal process. They are in a privileged position of having the capacity to influence policy in a much more direct way than the electorate and in return should accept that their impartiality must remain accountable.

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