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A cheer for constitutional monarchy's restraint on government [1]

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As the Queen?s Diamond Jubilee celebrations wind down, it may be well to reflect on an aspect of public choice theory which supports constitutional monarchy ? principally its rôle as a brake upon self-aggrandising politicians.

Public choice argues that, contrary to the myths propagated about the selfless motives of public servants, politicians and bureaucrats can be as self-interested in their public personas as they are as private citizens.

This is not the time to examine the unitive functions of the Crown, nor the acts of public service performed by the Royal Family [3] ? and how monarchy either refutes or conforms to the political landscape sketched out by public choice theory (though I personally believe the opportunities for gain are very few, while the burdens are many).

Neither is this an argument for constitutional monarchy as against republican forms of government; indeed, this may be one of the few areas where both forms, when modelled on justice, are equally serviceable according to the respective country?s traditions and national character ? quite in variance, by the way, with respect to economics, where all the arguments are in favour of classical liberal/Austrian theories and quite contrary to Keynesian prescriptions.

Moreover, let it be admitted that constitutional monarchy is rarely an active force in limiting the power of politicians (minority parliaments being one exception, where the Crown has legitimate avenues of intervention), but serves rather more as a passive agent in limiting the State.

First, the very hereditary nature of British constitutional monarchy ? i.e., non-elective ? disinclines government to aggrandise the Head of State. Governments are reluctant to invoke public criticism for expenditures which do not in some way flatter the ?heirs? of democracy (especially when the House of Windsor is itself exceptionally well-endowed financially): Witness the absence of a royal yacht when H.M.Y. Britannia was decommissioned.

Second, the constitutional role of the monarch in the Westminster parliamentary system means that the prime minister is a servant of the Crown and cannot therefore with impunity rise above his station. It is at best to be guilty of lèse-majesté, and at worse an affront to the parliamentary party which can always be relied upon to remember that the inhabitant of No. 10 is simply primus inter pares.

The theoretical ground of this public choice defence is laid out by Austrian economist Hans-Hermann Hoppe

[4] who, while he may not necessarily be a monarchist, sees the unrestrained growth of elective governments as far more destructive of personal liberty and economic freedom. When absolute monarchy reigned, Hoppe argues, the State and its appurtenances were held as private property, and husbanded wisely as a future inheritance; subjects were jealous of their rights and defended them tenaciously (arising from an awareness of ?class consciousness?), leaving the Crown on guard not to exceed its authority. Democracies, to the contrary, do not arouse a corresponding scepticism ? Why, one day I too may be leader of the country! ? but nor do they engender similar feelings of safeguarding wealth: Without the responsibility of bequeathing royal estates to one?s children, politicians become mere ?caretakers?, and the spoils of State become transitory gifts that must be enjoyed and shared with one?s cronies while the democratic gods shine (a form of present-orientedness that is reflected in citizens? consumption rather than investment).

Arthur Seldon called this ?the dilemma of democracy [5]?, noting four weaknesses in popular government: short-sighted with material resources; over-expansive with a tendency to ?grow?; liable to conspiratorial patronage; and uncritical of majoritarian electoral decisions.

All of which leads me to wonder why classical liberals are so often enamoured of the republican ideal. As Hoppe observes:

> *From the viewpoint of those who prefer less exploitation over more and who value farsightedness and individual responsibility above shortsightedness and irresponsibility, the historic transition from monarchy to democracy represents not progress but civilizational decline.*

One can understand their inability to appreciate a Tory reverence for tradition and continuity, yet why do they so cavalierly dismiss the public choice arguments that demonstrate that limited government in the age of the Welfare State is held hostage to democratic fortune?

?It is the highest impertinence and presumption, therefore, in kings and ministers, to pretend to watch over the ?conomy of private people, and to restrain their expence,? wrote Adam Smith in The Wealth of Nations. ?They are themselves always, and without any exception, the greatest spendthrifts in the society. Let them look well after their own expence, and they may safely trust private people with theirs. If their own extravagance does not ruin the state, that of their subjects never will (II.iii.36 [6]).?

Let not the irony be lost: Britain has gone from the time when a burgeoning representative democracy set in motion the end of the divine right of kings, transformed thus into constitutional monarchy ? which itself has become the most visible restraint on elected politicians who behave as if themselves graced with divine sanction. We may no longer fear kings, but their ministers remain a threat to our rights and freedoms. Elizabeth II embodies the limits we must impose upon the political classes; her Diamond Jubilee an occasion to remember the State is the servant of the people. God Save the Queen!

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