

A LIBERTARIAN CASE FOR MONARCHY*

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Clear thought and discussion suffer when all sorts of good things, like liberty, equality, fraternity, rights, majority rule, and general welfare – some in tension with others – are marketed together under the portmanteau label «democracy.»

Democracy's core meaning is a particular method of choosing, replacing, and influencing government officials (Schumpeter 1950). It is not a doctrine of what government should and should not do. Nor is it the same thing as personal freedom or a free society or an egalitarian social ethos. True enough, some classical liberals, like Thomas Paine (1791) and Ludwig von Mises (1919), did scorn hereditary monarchy and did express touching faith that representative democracy would choose excellent leaders and adopt policies truly serving the common interest. Experience has taught us better, as the American founders already knew when constructing a government of separated and limited powers and of only filtered democracy.

As an exercise, and without claiming that my arguments are decisive, I'll contend that constitutional monarchy can better

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preserve people's freedom and opportunities than democracy as it has turned out in practice.¹

My case holds only for countries where maintaining or restoring (or conceivably installing) monarchy is a live option.² We Americans have sounder hope of reviving respect for the philosophy of our Founders. Our traditions could serve some of the functions of monarchy in other countries.

An unelected absolute ruler could conceivably be a thoroughgoing classical liberal. Although a wise, benevolent, and liberal-minded dictatorship would not be a contradiction in terms, no way is actually available to assure such a regime and its continuity, including frictionless succession.

Some element of democracy is therefore necessary; totally replacing it would be dangerous. Democracy allows people some influence on who their rulers are and what policies they pursue. Elections, if not subverted, can oust bad rulers peacefully. Citizens who care about such things can enjoy a sense of participation in public affairs.

Anyone who believes in limiting government power for the sake of personal freedom should value also having some non-democratic element of government besides courts respectful of their own narrow authority. While some monarchists are reactionaries or mystics, others (like Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik-von-Kuehnelt-Leddihn>> and Sean Gabb, cited below) do come across as genuine classical liberals.

¹ I do not know how to test my case econometrically. The control variables to be included in equations regressing a measure of liberty or stability or prosperity or whatever on presence or absence of monarchy of some type or other are too ineffable and too many. We would have to devise variables for such conditions as history and traditions, geography, climate, natural resources, type of economic system, past forms of government, ethnicity and ethnic homogeneity or diversity, education, religion, and so on. Plausible historical data points are too few. Someone cleverer than I might devise some sort of econometric test after all. Meanwhile, we must weigh the pros and cons of monarchy and democracy against one another qualitatively as best we can.

² Monarchist organizations exist in surprisingly many countries; a few of their Web sites appear in the references. Even Argentina has a small monarchist movement, described in the September 1994 issue of *Monarchy* at the site of the International Monarchist League.

I SHORTCOMINGS OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy has glaring defects.³ As various paradoxes of voting illustrate, there is no such thing as any coherent «will of the people.» Government itself is more likely to supply the content of any supposed general will (Constant 1814, p. 179). Winston Churchill reputedly said, «The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.» The ordinary voter knows that his vote will not be decisive and has little reason to waste time and effort becoming well informed anyway.

This «rational ignorance,» so called in the public-choice literature, leaves corresponding influence to other-than-ordinary voters (Campbell 1999). Politics becomes a squabble among rival special interests. Coalitions form to gain special privileges. Legislators engage in logrolling and enact omnibus spending bills. Politics itself becomes the chief weapon in a Hobbesian war of all against all (Gray 1993, pp. 211-12). The diffusion of costs, while benefits are concentrated, reinforces apathy among ordinary voters.

Politicians themselves count among the special-interest groups. People who drift into politics tend to have relatively slighter qualifications for other work. They are entrepreneurs pursuing the advantages of office. These are not material advantages alone, for some politicians seek power to do good as they understand it. Gratifying their need to act and to feel important, legislators multiply laws to deal with discovered or contrived problems – and fears. Being able to raise vast sums by taxes and borrowing enhances their sense of power, and moral responsibility wanes (as Constant 1814, pp. 194-96, 271-72, already recognized almost two centuries ago).

Democratic politicians have notoriously short time horizons. (Hoppe 2001 blames not just politicians in particular but democracy in general for high time preference – indifference to the

³ Barry (2003) partially summarizes them. Hayek (1979) describes the defects at length and proposes an elaborate reform of the system of representation, not discussing monarchy. James Buchanan and the public-choice school analyze democracy in many writings.

long run – which contributes to crime, wasted lives, and a general decline of morality and culture.) Why worry if popular policies will cause crises only when one is no longer running for reelection?

Evidence of fiscal irresponsibility in the United States includes chronic budget deficits, the explicit national debt, and the still huger excesses of future liabilities over future revenues on account of Medicare and Social Security. Yet politicians continue offering new plums. Conflict of interest like this far overshadows the petty kinds that nevertheless arouse more outrage.

Responsibility is diffused in democracy not only over time but also among participants. Voters can think that they are only exercising their right to mark their ballots, politicians that they are only responding to the wishes of their constituents. The individual legislator bears only a small share of responsibility fragmented among his colleagues and other government officials.

Democracy and liberty coexist in tension. Nowadays the US government restricts political speech. The professed purpose of campaign-finance reform is to limit the power of interest groups and of money in politics, but increased influence of the mass media and increased security of incumbent politicians are likelier results.

A broader kind of tension is that popular majorities can lend an air of legitimacy to highly illiberal measures. «By the sheer weight of numbers and by its ubiquity the rule of 99 per cent is more “hermetic” and more oppressive than the rule of 1 per cent» (Kuehnelt-Leddihn 1952, p. 88). When majority rule is thought good in its own right and the fiction prevails that «we» ordinary citizens are the government, an elected legislature and executive can get away with impositions that monarchs of the past would scarcely have ventured. Louis XIV of France, autocrat though he was, would hardly have dared prohibit alcoholic beverages, conscript soldiers, and levy an income tax (pp. 28081) – or, we might add, wage war on drugs. Not only constitutional limitations on a king’s powers, but also his⁴ *not* having an electoral mandate, is a restraint.

⁴ I hope that readers will allow me the stylistic convenience of using «king» to designate a reigning queen also, as the word *koning* does in the Dutch constitution, and also of using «he» or «him» or «his» to cover «she» or «her» as context requires.

At its worst, the democratic dogma can abet totalitarianism. History records totalitarian democracies or democratically supported dictatorships. Countries oppressed by communist regimes included words like «democratic» or «popular» in their official names. Totalitarian parties have portrayed their leaders as personifying the common man and the whole nation. German National Socialism, as Kuehnelt-Leddihn reminds us, was neither a conservative nor a reactionary movement but a synthesis of revolutionary ideas tracing to before 1789 (Kuehnelt-Leddihn 1952, pp. 131, 246-47, 268).

He suggests that antimonarchical sentiments in the background of the French Revolution, the Spanish Republic of 1931, and Germany's Weimar Republic paved the way for Robespierre and Napoleon, for Negrín and Franco, and for Hitler (p. 90). Winston Churchill reportedly judged that had the Kaiser remained German head of state, Hitler could not have gained power, or at least not have kept it (International Monarchist League). «Monarchists, conservatives, clerics and other "reactionaries" were always in bad grace with the Nazis» (p. 248).

II SEPARATION OF POWERS

A nonelected part of government contributes to the separation of powers. By retaining certain constitutional powers or denying them to others, it can be a safeguard against abuses.⁵ This is perhaps the main modern justification of hereditary monarchy – to put some restraint on politicians rather than let them pursue their own special interests complacent in the thought that their winning elections demonstrates popular approval.

When former president Theodore Roosevelt visited Emperor Franz Joseph in 1910 and asked him what he thought the role of monarchy was in the 20th century, the emperor reportedly replied,

⁵ «The first and indispensable condition for the exercise of responsibility is to separate executive power from supreme power. Constitutional monarchy attains this great aim. But this advantage would be lost if the two powers were confused» (Constant 1814, p. 191).

«To protect my peoples from their governments» (quoted in both *Thesen pro Monarchie* and Purcell 2003). Similarly, Lord Bernard Weatherill, former speaker of the House of Commons, said that the British monarchy exists not to exercise power but to keep other people from having the power; it is a great protection for British democracy (interview with Brian Lamb on C-SPAN, 26 November 1999).

The history of England shows progressive limitation of royal power in favor of parliament; but, in my view, a welcome trend went too far. Almost all power, limited only by traditions fortunately continuing as an unwritten constitution, came to be concentrated not only in parliament but even in the leader of the parliamentary majority. Democratization went rather too far, in my opinion, in the Continental monarchies also.

III CONTINUITY

A monarch, not dependent on being elected and reelected, embodies continuity, as do the dynasty and the biological process.

Constitutional monarchy offers us ... that neutral power so indispensable for all regular liberty. In a free country the king is a being apart, superior to differences of opinion, having no other interest than the maintenance of order and liberty. He can never return to the common condition, and is consequently inaccessible to all the passions that such a condition generates, and to all those that the perspective of finding oneself once again within it, necessarily creates in those agents who are invested with temporary power.

It is a masterstroke to create a neutral power that can terminate some political danger by constitutional means (Constant 1814, pp. 186-87). In a settled monarchy – but no regime whatever can be guaranteed perpetual existence – the king need not worry about clinging to power. In a republic, «The very head of the state, having no title to his office save that which lies in the popular will, is forced to haggle and bargain like the lowliest office-seeker» (Mencken 1926, p. 181).

Dynastic continuity parallels the rule of law. The king symbolizes a state of affairs in which profound political change, though eventually possible, cannot occur without ample time for considering it. The king stands in contrast with legislators and bureaucrats, who are inclined to think, by the very nature of their jobs, that diligent performance means multiplying laws and regulations. Continuity in the constitutional and legal regime provides a stable framework favorable to personal and business planning and investment and to innovation in science, technology, enterprise, and culture. Continuity is neither rigidity nor conservatism.

The heir to the throne typically has many years of preparation and is not dazzled by personal advancement when he finally inherits the office. Before and while holding office he accumulates a fund of experience both different from and greater than what politicians, who come and go, can ordinarily acquire. Even when the king comes to the throne as a youth or, at the other extreme, as an old man with only a few active years remaining, he has the counsel of experienced family members and advisers. If the king is very young (Louis XV, Alfonso XIII) or insane (the elderly George III, Otto of Bavaria), a close relative serves as regent.⁶ The regent will have had some of the opportunities to perform ceremonial functions and to accumulate experience that an heir or reigning monarch has.

IV OBJECTIONS AND REBUTTALS

Some arguments occasionally employed for monarchy are questionable. If the monarch or his heir may marry only a member of a princely family (as Kuehnelt-Leddihn seems to recommend),

⁶ Otto von Habsburg blames the risk that an incompetent might occupy the throne on an inflexible legitimism – preoccupation with a particular dynasty – that displaced safeguards found in most classical monarchies. He recommends that the king be assisted by a body representing the highest judicial authority, a body that could if necessary replace the heir presumptive by the next in line of succession (1958, pp. 262, 264, 266–67).

chances are that he or she will marry a foreigner, providing international connections and a cosmopolitan way of thinking. Another dubious argument (also used by Kuehnelt-Leddihn) is that the monarch will have the blessing of and perhaps be the head of the state religion. Some arguments are downright absurd, for example: «Monarchy fosters art and culture. Austria was culturally much richer around 1780 than today! Just think of Mozart!» (*Thesen pro Monarchie.*)

But neither all arguments for nor all objections to monarchy are fallacious. The same is true of democracy. In the choice of political institutions, as in many decisions of life, all one can do is weigh the pros and cons of the options and choose what seems best or least bad on balance.

Some objections to monarchy apply to democracy also or otherwise invite comments that, while not actual refutations, do strengthen the case in its favor. Monarchy is charged with being government-from-above (Kuehnelt-Leddihn 1952, p. 276). But all governments, even popularly elected ones, except perhaps small direct democracies like ancient Athens, are ruled by a minority. (Robert Michels and others recognized an «iron law of oligarchy»; Jenkin 1968, p. 282.) Although democracy allows the people some influence over the government, they do not and cannot actually run it. Constitutional monarchy combines some strengths of democracy and authoritarian monarchy while partially neutralizing the defects of those polar options.

Another objection condemns monarchy as a divisive symbol of inequality; it bars «an ideal society in which everyone will be equal in status, and in which everyone will have the right, if not the ability, to rise to the highest position» (Gabb 2002, who replies that attempts to create such a society have usually ended in attacks on the wealthy and even the well-off).

Michael Prowse (2001), calling for periodic referenda on whether to keep the British monarchy, invokes what he considers the core idea of democracy: all persons equally deserve respect and consideration, and no one deserves to dominate others. The royal family and the aristocracy, with their titles, demeanor, and self-perpetuation, violate this democratic spirit. In a republican Britain, every child might aspire to every public position, even head of state.

So arguing, Prowse stretches the meaning of democracy from a particular method of choosing and influencing rulers to include an egalitarian social ethos. But monarchy need not obstruct easy relations among persons of different occupations and backgrounds; a suspicious egalitarianism is likelier to do that. In no society can all persons have the same status.

A more realistic goal is that everyone have a chance to achieve distinction in some narrow niche important to him. Even in a republic, most people by far cannot realistically aspire to the highest position. No one need feel humbled or ashamed at not ascending to an office that simply was not available. A hereditary monarch can be like the Alps (*Thesen pro Monarchie*), something just «there.» Perhaps it is the king's good luck, perhaps his bad luck, to have inherited the privileges but also the limitations of his office; but any question of unfairness pales in comparison with advantages for the country.

Prowse complains of divisiveness. But what about an election? It produces losers as well as winners, disappointed voters as well as happy ones. A king, however, cannot symbolize defeat to supporters of other candidates, for there were none. «A monarch mounting the throne of his ancestors follows a path on which he has not embarked of his own will.» Unlike a usurper, he need not justify his elevation (Constant 1814, p. 88). He has no further political opportunities or ambitions except to do his job well and maintain the good name of his dynasty. Standing neutral above party politics, he has a better chance than an elected leader of becoming the personified symbol of his country, a focus of patriotism and even of affection.

The monarch and his family can assume ceremonial functions that elected rulers would otherwise perform as time permitted. Separating ceremonial functions from campaigning and policy making siphons off glamour or adulation that would otherwise accrue to politicians and especially to demagogues. The occasional Hitler does arouse popular enthusiasm, and his opponents must prudently keep a low profile. A monarch, whose power is preservative rather than active (pp. 191-92), is safer for people's freedom.

Prowse is irritated rather than impressed by the pomp and opulence surrounding the queen. Clinging to outmoded forms and

ascribing importance to unimportant things reeks of «collective bad faith» and «corrosive hypocrisy.» Yet a monarchy need not rest on pretense.

On the contrary, my case for monarchy is a utilitarian one, not appealing to divine right or any such fiction. Not all ritual is to be scorned. Even republics have Fourth of July parades and their counterparts. Ceremonial trappings that may have become functionless or comical can evolve or be reformed. Not all monarchies, as Prowse recognizes, share with the British the particular trappings that irritate him.

A case, admittedly inconclusive, can be made for titles of nobility (especially for close royal relatives) and for an upper house of parliament of limited powers whose members, or some of them, hold their seats by inheritance or royal appointment (e.g., Constant 1814, pp. 198-200). «The glory of a legitimate monarch is enhanced by the glory of those around him... He has no competition to fear... But where the monarch sees supporters, the usurper sees enemies» (p. 91; on the precarious position of a nonhereditary autocrat, compare Tullock 1987).

As long as the nobles are not exempt from the laws, they can serve as a kind of framework of the monarchy. They can be a further element of diversity in the social structure. They can provide an alternative to sheer wealth or notoriety as a source of distinction and so dilute the fawning over celebrities characteristic of modern democracies. Ordinary persons need no more feel humiliated by not being born into the nobility than by not being born heir to the throne. On balance, though, I am ambivalent about a nobility.

V

A KING'S POWERS

Michael Prowse's complaint about the pretended importance of unimportant things suggests a further reason why the monarch's role should go beyond the purely symbolic and ceremonial. The king should not be required (as the queen of England is required at the opening of Parliament) merely to read words written by

the cabinet. At least he should have the three rights that Walter Bagehot identified in the British monarchy: «the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, the right to warn. And a king of great sense and sagacity would want no others. He would find that his having no others would enable him to use these with singular effect» (Bagehot 1867, p. iii).

When Bagehot wrote, the prime minister was bound to keep the queen well informed about the passing politics of the nation. «She has by rigid usage a right to complain if she does not know of every great act of her Ministry, not only before it is done, but while there is yet time to consider it – while it is still possible that it may not be done.»

A sagacious king could warn his prime minister with possibly great effect. «He might not always turn his course, but he would always trouble his mind.» During a long reign he would acquire experience that few of his ministers could match. He could remind the prime minister of bad results some years earlier of a policy like one currently proposed.

The king would indeed have the advantage which a permanent under-secretary has over his superior the Parliamentary secretary – that of having shared in the proceedings of the previous Parliamentary secretaries... A pompous man easily sweeps away the suggestions of those beneath him. But though a minister may so deal with his subordinate, he cannot so deal with his king. (Bagehot 1867, pp. 111-12)

A prime minister would be disciplined, in short, by having to explain the objective (not merely the political) merits of his policies to a neutral authority.

The three rights that Bagehot listed should be interpreted broadly, in my view, or extended. Constant (1814, p. 301) recommends the right to grant pardons as a final protection of the innocent. The king should also have power: to make some appointments, especially of his own staff, not subject to veto by politicians; to consult with politicians of all parties to resolve an impasse over who might obtain the support or acquiescence of a parliamentary majority; and to dismiss and temporarily replace the cabinet or prime minister in extreme cases. (I assume a parliamentary system, which usually does accompany modern monarchy; but the

executive could be elected separately from the legislators and even subject to recall by special election.)

Even dissolving parliament and calling new elections in an exceptional case is no insult to the rights of the people. «On the contrary, when elections are free, it is an appeal made to their rights in favor of their interests» (p. 197). The king should try to rally national support in a constitutional crisis (as when King Juan Carlos intervened to foil an attempted military coup in 1981).

VI KINGS AND POLITICIANS

What if the hereditary monarch is a child or is incompetent? Then, as already mentioned, a regency is available. What if the royal family, like some of the Windsors, flaunts unedifying personal behavior? Both dangers are just as real in a modern republic. Politicians have a systematic tendency to be incompetent or worse.⁷ For a democratic politician, understanding economics is a handicap.⁸ He either must take unpopular (because misunderstood) stands on issues or else speak and act dishonestly. The economically ignorant politician has the advantage of being able to take vote-catching stands with a more nearly clear conscience.

Particularly in these days of television and of fascination with celebrities, the personal characteristics necessary to win elections are quite different from those of a public-spirited statesman. History does record great statesmen in less democratized parliamentary regimes of the past. Nowadays a Gresham's Law operates: «the inferior human currency drives the better one out of circulation» (Kuehnelt-Leddihn, pp. 115, 120). Ideal democratic

⁷ Consider the one Republican and nine Democrats currently (October 2003) competing for the US presidency. The day after the televised debate among the Democrats in Detroit, Roger Hitchcock, substitute host on a radio talk show, asked, «Would you like to have dinner with any of those people? Would you hire any of them to manage your convenience store?»

⁸ «The first lesson of economics is scarcity: There is never enough of anything to satisfy all those who want it. The first lesson of politics is to disregard the first lesson of economics» (Sowell 1994).

government simply is not an available option. Our best hope is to limit the activities of government, a purpose to which monarchy can contribute.

Although some contemporary politicians are honorable and economically literate, even simple honesty can worsen one's electoral chances. H.L. Mencken wrote acidly and with characteristic exaggeration,

No educated man, stating plainly the elementary notions that every educated man holds about the matters that principally concern government, could be elected to office in a democratic state, save perhaps by a miracle. ... It has become a psychic impossibility for a gentleman to hold office under the Federal Union, save by a combination of miracles that must tax the resourcefulness even of God. – the man of native integrity is either barred from the public service altogether, or subjected to almost irresistible temptations after he gets in.» (Mencken 1926, pp. 103, 106, 110)

Under monarchy, the courtier need not «abase himself before swine,» «pretend that he is a worse man than he really is.» His sovereign has a certain respect for honor. «The courtier's sovereign ... is apt to be a man of honour himself» (Mencken 1926, p. 118, mentioning that the king of Prussia refused the German imperial crown offered him in 1849 by a mere popular parliament rather than by his fellow sovereign princes).

Mencken conceded that democracy has its charms: «The fraud of democracy ... is more amusing than any other – more amusing even, and by miles, than the fraud of religion... [The farce] greatly delights me. I enjoy democracy immensely. It is incomparably idiotic, and hence incomparably amusing» (pp. 209, 211).

VII CONCLUSION

One argument against institutions with a venerable history is a mindless slogan betraying temporal provincialism, as if newer necessarily meant better: «Don't turn back the clock.» Sounder advice is not to overthrow what exists because of abstract notions

of what might seem logically or ideologically neater. In the vernacular, «If it ain't broke, don't fix it.»

It is progress to learn from experience, including experience with inadequately filtered democracy. Where a monarchical element in government works well enough, the burden of proof lies against the republicans (cf. Gabb 2002). Kuehnelt-Leddihn, writing in 1952 (p. 104), noted that «the royal, non-democratic alloy» has supported the relative success of several representative governments in Europe. Only a few nontotalitarian republics there and overseas have exhibited a record of stability, notably Switzerland, Finland, and the United States.⁹

Constitutional monarchy cannot solve all problems of government; nothing can. But it can help. Besides lesser arguments, two main ones recommend it. First, its very existence is a reminder that democracy is not the sort of thing of which more is necessarily better; it can help promote balanced thinking.

Second, by contributing continuity, diluting democracy while supporting a healthy element of it, and furthering the separation of government powers, monarchy can help protect personal liberty.

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⁹ Compare Lewis and Woolsey (2003): «Of the nations that have been democracies for a very long time and show every sign that they will remain so, a substantial majority are constitutional monarchies (the U.S. and Switzerland being the principal exceptions).»

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