

Democratizing Monarchy (Richard Forsyth)

Last September, as many, but by no means all, of my fellow Britons took a break from reality to mark the death of our longest-reigning queen, I couldn't help feeling that a great opportunity was being squandered. Another royal rigmarole awaits us in May this year. A great deal of effort and money is being expended to convince ourselves that we have an enviable system of government. We call that system democratic. But can a monarchy be truly democratic?

During my whole life the majority of the British population have approved of the monarch, and, only slightly less, the monarchy. For example, the website https://www.republic.org.uk/a_new_head_of_state has only weak support. Nevertheless, quite recently, there have been signs that this approval cannot be guaranteed. Opinion polls are beginning to show that, among young people, scepticism about the value of a monarchical system is starting to increase.

The pictures below show that the statue of Queen Victoria being moved from the centre of Leeds in 1937 to a peripheral location in a public park, a hundred years after her reign began. Now some can imagine something similar in relation to the real monarch. (In 2037 perhaps?)



Leeds, 1937. Photo: Wikimedia.



Figure 2: The statue of Queen Victoria 'in retirement' in a suburban Leeds park, 2021. Photo: Richard Forsyth.

If the British one day wish to get rid of their monarchical system, what will replace it? The usual answer is: a republic with a president elected by a national ballot. However, history is full of powerful rulers, often elected by a ballot, who caused great suffering for their people, and to other peoples. So the supporters of

that idea stipulate that the office be wholly or chiefly ceremonial; in short, that any president of a future British republic should have somewhat less power than the present king.

Well, fair enough. But I propose another idea -- based on the concept of *sortition*. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sortition>.

The word is still esoteric. The basic idea, however, is simple: elect people for posts by a random method. The ancient Greeks practised such a method in the earliest phase of democracy. After millennia of relative neglect, uses of this process have started to creep back into political practice, often with positive results: <https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/>

Firstly, we would need to compile a unified up-to-date register containing the names of everyone who has the right to vote in the country. I refer to these as permanent residents rather than citizens because, as with voting, it isn't necessary that they should officially be British citizens. (At present, according to constitutional experts, British voters are in any case subjects, not citizens.)

Secondly, one of those would be selected from the register, at random. There you have the new monarch! This person then will have to 'shadow' the incumbent monarch to learn how to fulfil the tasks of the office. This provisional phase, as heir presumptive, will last for three months. During this time some minimal background checks will be carried out, e.g. on past criminal convictions, to exclude the most egregiously unsuitable, but nothing more than would be appropriate to more everyday positions of responsibility, such as nurse or schoolteacher. Occasionally, that might require another random choice. Having passed through the provisional phase, the new monarch will take on the role fully, for a period of no longer than five years.

A third point: during those five years there would have to happen, every six months, an appraisal of the conduct of the current monarch. How to choose the appraisers? You guessed already: obviously, by random choice from the residents' register. With that aim, a group of twenty-five arbiters will be chosen. They will convene at a suitable central location for a weekend. (Face to face contact is important in such a task.)

Saturday:

On day one they will meet, introduce themselves and discuss in groups of five to consider suitable questions to be asked of the monarch. In the evening they will put these questions, as a group, to the monarch for approximately two hours. Then they eat, think, perhaps stroll in a garden, and sleep.

Sunday:

Again the appraisers will convene in the morning in small groups of five (assigned randomly, so almost certainly different from the previous day's groupings). They discuss their opinions of the conduct in office of the monarch, and the answers given during the previous evening's interview. After lunch they vote (by secret ballot, of course) on whether that person still has the right to continue as monarch. Their choice will be between two options: approval or disapproval. The number of approvals and disapprovals will be counted and the difference between these sums calculated. (Abstentions, which should be discouraged but cannot be ruled out, will count on neither side.) If the total of approvals exceeds the total of disapprovals, the monarch will remain in office; otherwise, a new selection will have to occur. After that, the appraisers deserve a good meal, and generous payment! Then they will return to ordinary life.

Another thing should be mentioned: it will be necessary to help judge the suitability of the monarch to have some sort of code of conduct. How to establish that? Yes, you predicted correctly: by random

selection of residents from the register. They will gather as an assembly to write a not-too-long list of desiderata concerning monarchical behaviour. In my view, the number of people in such an assembly should be between one hundred and two hundred. (This assembly should also propose guidelines about what to do when the monarch is unwell, and how to deal with other abnormal circumstances. How to organize this assembly is a theme for another article.) Probably we will also need a deputy monarch, to share some of the work and to cover contingencies like illness etc. Selection for this role could occur in the same way as for the monarch, although not at the same time.

There's a republican monarchy for you. Or should I say: a monarchical republic?

Would it be an improvement? One advantage is that the hereditary ruler, for example Prince William, could enjoy a short period as monarch to initiate the new system and guide his successor, thus allowing a fairly seamless transition.

A second advantage: it would be possible to get rid of a very unworthy or very incompetent monarch relatively rapidly, and without a violent upheaval.

A third advantage: it would be much less expensive to arrange such events than a full-scale ballot, or indeed the pomp and ceremony such as at the last monarch's passing. Moreover, this new system would be very much less costly than the former, even if one were to pay the randomly chosen king or queen very generously from the viewpoint of the vast majority of the country's inhabitants. (The present royal family could keep two of their estates, one in England, Sandringham, and one in Scotland, Balmoral. Don't worry: they would remain very rich, although the 'crown estate' really should not remain as a private family possession. It should be turned over to the nation as a whole, as the seed-stock of a national wealth fund which could be used to start, on a small scale at first, a universal basic income, or UBI; see: <https://basicincome.org/>. Incidentally, we wouldn't let professional politicians control this fund, would we? No, you guessed right again: it would have a rolling board of trustees chosen at random from the register, but not, of course, left in post long enough to be tempted by agreeable inducements from powerful vested interests.)

A fourth advantage: the monarch would be a genuine representative of the people of the country.

A fifth advantage: at last Britons would be citizens, not subjects.

A sixth advantage would be that it would introduce direct democracy to a wide public, representing a proof of concept in a situation of importance but not touching the highest levers of power. Thus it would provide an opportunity for ironing out glitches -- before applying the same basic concept to more contentious areas (such as the long-overdue reform of the House of Lords).

Perhaps you can think of disadvantages? Doubtless potential pitfalls may lurk in the details of the new system. Such things would need discussion leading up to the change-over, so that the assembly drafting the guidelines for monarchical rights and duties could put safeguards in place. Some provision for modifications along the way in light of experience would also be necessary, which would involve from time to time selecting ... by now, it should go without saying.

In any case, it is a mistake to succumb to the mystique of monarchy by believing that lineal descendants of George I or Queen Victoria possess some special qualities that enable them to preside over the nation better than commoners. One mustn't over-estimate the capabilities of our royal family or underestimate the ability of ordinary folk to raise their game when called upon. If princes, a whisker away from the

throne, whose misdemeanours provide salacious stories for gossip columns, can be considered potential monarchs, the great bulk of the nation could be as well.

Could it happen? Well, in Britain, we would need Prince William to start preparing almost at once, so that the next transition would be towards a democratic head of state. He could gather a panel of experts -- not to make the decisions but to present options, and discuss drawbacks and how to deal with them, to a randomly-chosen citizens' assembly who would make the decisions. He himself could eventually be the monarch for a fixed term, since his whole life has been focused on that role, and could be mentor to his first successor during an overlap period when he could pass on advice based on his and his family's experiences.

Obviously such a sequence of events is fantasy. It is barely imaginable that it could come to pass the foreseeable future. But if Britain isn't ready to lead the world, what about Britain's ex-colonies? Barbados made the transition to a republic in 2021. Now it has a president. Plans are already in place for Antigua and Barbuda to have a referendum soon on replacing the king as head of state, and the idea of becoming a republic is also popular in Jamaica. In Belize, too, a government minister has said that that country should consider replacing the British monarch as head of state. The idea is also part of mainstream political discourse in Australia and New Zealand.

Most people unquestioningly assume that an elected president is the only option for replacing a monarch, but voting is a very tenuous form of democracy, as is shown by the behaviour of elected politicians worldwide, including those gaining majorities legitimately. Direct democracy is the real thing, but it suits the holders of political and economic power very well that the mass of the population regards direct participation as a crackpot idea, except perhaps in jury service. A small Caribbean nation could install a system of direct democracy in a context that doesn't obviously threaten the dominance of the plutocrats and global corporate behemoths which have resources to block dispersion of political power. Then, by demonstrating that such an idea can work rather well in practice, a beam of light will have been thrown onto the pathway towards genuine democracy. It would be a fine historic irony if an underprivileged Caribbean ex-colony were to repay centuries of exploitation by teaching what used to be called the "mother country" a valuable lesson in how to govern.

In any case, I personally fear that if we humans don't soon get started on the path towards direct deliberative democracy, our global system will break down with mass fatalities. Politics "as usual" will be unable to cope with the interwoven climatic, ecological and social crises that confront the human race.