

A royal pain: Take my Queen - please!

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Thursday, February 7, 2002 Print Edition, Page A19 Globe & Mail

Her chief virtue is diligence. Her chief accomplishment is longevity. She has never, so far as we know, said or thought anything even remotely original or interesting. Even for a Royal, she is one of the dullest human beings on the planet. Stunning personal revelation: She does a pretty mean imitation of Boris Yeltsin, not to mention the Concorde landing.

Of course, it's not who she is but what she stands for that's supposed to matter. The Queen stands for tradition, continuity, stability, rectitude and duty. She unites the Commonwealth and, best of all, reminds us we're not Americans.

Curiously, the monarchy has become the last refuge of Canadian nationalists. "The monarchy is one of the few remaining threads in the Canadian identity," writes artist Robert Bateman in a paean penned this week for the Queen's Golden Jubilee. "I sometimes think Americans are envious of our Royal Family. Unlike Disneyland, the monarchy is real with ancient roots and traditions."

Actually, many of the royal traditions are quite new. Toward the end of Victoria's reign, Britain's ruling elites began trumping up the role to disguise the fact that it was they who wielded the power.

The monarch did not regularly open Parliament until well into the 20th century. The investiture of the Prince of Wales was a ceremony resurrected in 1911.

The truth is that the monarchy stands for much that has held Canada back. It embodies the triumph of inheritance over merit, of blood over brains, of mindless ritual over innovation. The monarchy reminds us to defer to authority and remember our place. In Quebec, the Royals are regarded as an insult.

It's a ghastly institution. And the Windsors aren't much better.

The best that can be said of the Queen is that she has never done anything improper. One suspects she lacks the imagination for it. She likes her corgis better than her children (who, unlike the corgis, must make appointments when they want to see her). In fact, she doesn't care for people much at all.

Her children suffer from the curse of inherited wealth and boundless sycophancy, which are nearly always fatal to the development of character. For the most part dim and plain, they are living proof of the perils of inbreeding. Diana (who at least was able to connect with ordinary people) injected some attractive genes, but not smart ones.

So her sons will generate a steady stream of entertaining scandal for the gutter press, the only institution that would truly suffer if the monarchy were done away with.

The Queen's husband is probably no more racist, sexist or snobbish than other men of his age and class. He is also reported to be charmless, boorish and rude. "I thought it was against the law these days for a woman to solicit," he once joked to a female solicitor. "It looks as though it was put together by an Indian," he said about a poorly wired fuse box he spotted on a factory tour. "If you stay here much longer, you'll get slitty eyes," he told a British student studying in China.

As for that lovable, gin-swilling Queen Mum, she once opined that the leaders of apartheid in South Africa were misunderstood. Her most admirable trait is being indestructible.

But the worst legacy of the monarchy to Canada is our parliamentary system, the one that we imagine makes us somehow superior to the Americans. Actually, it's the other way around. Our version of democracy has declined into a one-party state, where the ruling party is elected by a far smaller percentage of the voters but wields far more power than any politicians in America.

We like to deplore America's imperial presidents. But at least they are booted out from time to time. Our leader is not so inconvenienced. No one can check him. No one can get rid of him. As for the House of Commons, for all its influence on the government and its contribution to the national debate, it might as well be filled with yapping corgis.

Walter Bagehot, the legendary British editor and thinker, believed a prominent monarchy was necessary as a symbol of leadership to the ignorant working classes. He also wrote: "Among a cultivated population, a population capable of abstract ideas, it would not be required."

If we thought the monarchy still mattered, we'd have to have a revolution. Because we think it doesn't, we figure we might as well be gracious to the Queen this week.

Polite to a fault, that's us.

But the claim that it strengthens our national identity is pathetic. "The day will surely come," British journalist Joan Smith wrote, "when Buckingham Palace is turned into a theme park for foreign visitors who want to marvel at the revolting attitudes of the English upper classes."

As for the claim that the monarchy signifies our cultural superiority to you-know-who next door, forget it. Sorry, Mr. Bateman. Disneyland and the Windsors are both a form of spectacle.

Personally, I'll take Disneyland any day.