

23084 Reality Is Coming for Britain's Royals

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Watched by millions around the world, the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II demonstrated the enduring glamor of Britain's hereditary order. As recession looms, however, and the pound sinks to its lowest in nearly four decades, it is time to ask: Can the monarchy reform fast and radically enough to adapt to an age of social and economic breakdown?

The modern era began with the decapitation of a king and its main ideologies — whether democracy, socialism, market capitalism, anti-colonialism or, most recently, populism — have centered around fairness and a distrust of entitled elites. The queen's dignified presence helped an anachronistic institution postpone a long-overdue reckoning. But the unique privileges of her family — taxpayer-funded lavishness, no inheritance tax, immunity to prosecution — will increasingly come under hostile scrutiny.

The reality is that Europe's surviving kings and queens have faced adversity or extinction since World War I. When not exiled, they've had to reconcile themselves to their irrelevance amid a democratic revolution that expanded through crises and mass revolts. The most striking case for a reformed monarchy emerged in Spain. The former king Juan Carlos, also present at Queen Elizabeth's funeral, had presided over the restoration of democracy in 1975 after the death of dictator General Francisco Franco. In 2014, the monarch was forced to abdicate after a series of scandals; he now lives in exile in the United Arab Emirates.

His son and successor King Felipe has managed to slim down the royal family drastically, banning its members from accepting presents or participating in business deals. The new faces of the monarchy in Spain are his wife, Queen Letizia, a former journalist from a modest background, and their teenage daughter, a student in Wales. Still, a small majority in Spain today supports replacing the monarchy with a republic.

Confident of greater public backing, the British royal family seems relatively robust. The new King Charles III is rumored to be keen on reforms of the kind already in place in Spain and other European democracies. There is certainly much he can do: Buckingham Palace with its 775 rooms and a swimming pool could be a luxury hotel with perfect location in central London. He could tell most of the massively over-extended royal family to lead normal lives, outside their golden cages.

Now that Queen Elizabeth is gone, more scandalous behavior by taxpayer-supported idlers could sink the royal family very quickly.

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