

The English Republic

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By the second half of the eighteenth century, England must have seemed the European country most likely to dispense with monarchical and aristocratic government. English kings had been by-passed, dethroned, even decapitated for the protection of the protestant faith and the sanctity of parliamentary government. Legitimacy in English monarchs came second to adherence to acceptable political and religious views. The ruling house of Hanover was unpopular with many sections of the populace, a populace notorious for its and unruly and levelling behaviour. A cheap and expanding press fed a sophisticated and organised public opinion among the lower orders. In 1779 increasing concern with political and clerical authority erupted into major riots against catholic relief and against the refusal of parliament to modify the relief bill in response to mass petitioning. The riots, which took the name of the instigator of the petitions, Lord George Gordon, also took in attacks on poll booths and prisons, the symbols of state power. Two hundred people perished in the military confrontation by which the rioters were brought to heel, and other European states, particularly France, where central control and policing were more powerful, looked on in horror. By the opening of the twentieth century, however, the death of a monarch brought hundreds of thousands of mourners into the streets in England, and by the close of that century Britain was one among a group of north European countries in which a stable democracy existed under a monarchical system.

It is one of the curious aspects of British history that there has not been in England, at least since the seventeenth century, a republican party. What is more, there has been little consideration of republican thought in England by historians of modern Britain. Most of those who have written on the subject have equated anti-monarchism with republicanism, a slip in logic which is easy to make. As recent history has shown, however, hostility to the present incumbent of an office may reflect a lofty ideal of the office rather than hostility to the office itself. (I have to confess that while I have been following much of the discussion about the monarchy that has gone on in the popular press in recent months, I have not read it

all and may well have missed some of the arguments). It remains the case that hostility to the crown in English history has more often been in the name of an alternative candidate for the throne than of the abolition of the institution. In this connection, too, much of the writing has been more concerned with attacks on individual monarchs than with actual republicanism. Thus Anthony Taylor, in his work on British anti-monarchism since 1790,¹ devotes the few pages he gives to Ireland to demonstrations of hostility to individual monarchs rather than to that part of Britain and Ireland in which practical republican tactics and ideals of republican government can be seen to have developed in the years under consideration. Mocking or subversive attacks on individual monarchs may be made for a variety of reasons or based on a variety of readings of the symbolism of the crown and its rituals. The positive establishment of a republic may be a good distance away from mere carping at individual monarchs.

The great republics in modern times have, for the most part, been established as the result of the overthrow of despotic, often foreign, domination. The republican spirit inspired the movements of opposition to monarchical or imperial power, as well as forming the political philosophy of the governments that replaced them. The American revolution threw off the power of the British crown; the French revolution of 1789 overthrew a crown and aristocracy based on privilege and oppressive power. In the course of the nineteenth century, the French people asserted the values of republicanism against oligarchy and empire. In the twentieth century, Ireland and India established republics as the result of throwing off imperial domination by Britain. In all these examples republicanism represented a positive alternative to monarchical or imperial rule, not simply the abolition of monarchy. The British Commonwealth of the seventeenth century, set up after the power struggle between parliament and the monarchy, and the republicanism of Thomas Paine, expressed in part as a defence of the American and French revolutions in the eighteenth century, were both resistant to authoritarian forms of church and state, and were also the expression of an alternative, more democratic and rational idea of government.

Traditionally, English public-schoolboys have been educated largely through the classics—the grammar from which their schools got their names, and the literature and histories of the Greek and Roman empires. The idea of the republic came into their early education and vocabulary. By the seventeenth century, the word meant, according to the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘a state in which the supreme power rests in the people and their elected representatives or officers as opposed to one governed by a King or the like’. This definition may be said to include

both the classical ideal of the republic and the emerging non-monarchical ideas of the Europe of the time. Both these are positive notions of participatory government by citizens and not simply systems without a monarch at their head.

What I want to consider here is English (not British) republicanism and republicanism rather than anti-monarchical activity. The two latter, of course, are not mutually exclusive, but it must be noted that, while republicanism is by definition against the institution of monarchy, anti-monarchical demonstrations are by no means always in the name of republicanism. Even Paxton's lines in praise of Cromwell use the terminology of royalism: '*The best of princes England had was the Farmer of St Ives*'.

Modern English republicanism begins with Tom Paine. After the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, when the throne was brought within the compass of the law and limited in its powers, radical reformers until Paine emerged tended to include a constitutional monarchy as part of a reformed and widened constitution. The chief spokesman for universal suffrage in the eighteenth century was Major John Cartwright. According to the memoir written by his daughter:

Although in forming a new government in another part of the world Major Cartwright would certainly have preferred a form of government as simply republican as would be consistent with security from anarchy, he never wished, in his own country to interfere with its ancient constitution.

Many reformers based their claims for a wider extension of the franchise on a mythical conception of 'pure' Saxon government in which the king took the counsel of all his subjects, or on pre-Norman monarchs, from Boadicea to Alfred the Great, who had led struggles for English or British freedom against foreign invaders. A constitutionally constrained monarchy was included in most reformers' vision of change. Much anti-monarchical rhetoric since then has had this image of the constitution behind it and has demanded better behaviour from the monarch rather than the abolition of the institution. Paine's first broadside against the British monarchy in his *Common Sense*, published in America in 1776 and supporting the republican ideals of the rebellion, was contested among radical and Jacobin circles in England who looked to the pure constitution of Alfred for their model. 'Much as we respect the opinions of Mr. Thomas Paine', wrote John Baxter, 'we cannot agree with him that we have no constitution'. This contradiction—between the idea of a constitution which would be modified and extended but retain its monarchical character and the ideal of a remodelled republic based on American republicanism and the French revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and

fraternity—was present at the beginning of the nineteenth century and has been present in the arguments of radical reformers ever since.

Edmund Burke, who had welcomed the American revolution, was moved by the French revolution to reject constitution-building in favour of more gradualist reforms. The French revolution had set a new precedent by overthrowing a system of absolute monarchy, privileged aristocracy, and an authoritarian church, and writing a new secular constitution based on the concept of citizenship, which meant equality before the law, freedom of worship, and the diminution of local control by landlords and large property owners. It was in response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in 1790, that Paine wrote his *The Rights of Man*, published in 1791 and 1792. This became, and has to a degree remained, the main British text for a republican programme which rejects any kind of monarchy in favour of the concept of a written constitution based on the values which inspired the French revolution. Indeed, it went in some ways further than this in a second part enunciating a concept of social responsibility for the care of the old, the sick and others without means of support, which presaged in many ways the social democratic, republican programmes of nineteenth-century European reformers.

In his recent work, Anthony Taylor has suggested that historians of British radical movements have concentrated too much on Paineite republicanism and have, thereby, missed an important form of 'populist' republicanism. This he discerns in the knockabout anti-monarchism of the popular press in the nineteenth century and in the republican political rumblings in the 1860s and 1870s, some of which found a parliamentary voice opposing grants to the Queen's children on occasions such as royal marriages. In the decade following the death of Prince Albert, when the queen retired and withdrew from all public duties, there was certainly an outbreak of anti-monarchical squibs and pamphlets, and the need for a monarch was questioned when the country was clearly managing very well in her majesty's absence. But the very history of these outbreaks and the profile of their rise and fall illustrate rather well the basic differences between republicanism and criticism of particular members of the royal family. When the royal profile was raised by the illness of the Prince of Wales and the picture of the queen, his mother, watching at his bedside, there was an outbreak of popular support for the monarchy which effectively wiped out the upper levels of the republican movement in parliament and demonstrated a profound concern with the actions of, in Bagehot's famous words, the 'retired widow and ... unemployed youth'.

The draconian suppression of popular political movements in England during and immediately after the wars of the 1790s, and in the first decades of the nineteenth century, were inspired by fear of the influence

of French revolutionary ideas in England. The wartime measures of the Combination Laws and the Six Acts were followed in the post-war years by the hanging of the leaders of the Pentridge rising of 1817, the Peterloo massacre of 1819, and the public execution of the leaders of the Cato Street conspiracy in 1820. For a time, all movements for reform of parliament, let alone of the establishment of a republic, were forbidden and suppressed. Gradually, however, movement for parliamentary reform took off throughout Britain and Ireland. Extra-parliamentary pressure was a major force in bringing about the first Reform Act, of 1832, which gave the suffrage to property other than that based on land ownership. In the years that followed the Act, those who were still excluded from the franchise formed the massive nationwide Chartist movement which demanded universal manhood suffrage and the granting of full citizenship to all men. Supporters of the Paineite republican tradition played an important part in Chartism, but they were only one of a number of democratic plebian traditions which came together in the movement. It may be noted here that the Paineite tradition had always been presented in terms of male citizens. I have argued elsewhere that the exclusion at all influential levels of political discourse of the idea of female citizenship was in fact an important element in the stabilisation of the monarchy under the long reign of Victoria. In an age in which women were effectively excluded from public political life, the image of a monarch outside and above politics was more sustainable when that monarch was a woman.²

In the Chartist movement, Paine's was a name that was honoured. His birthday was celebrated with feasts and pie suppers, and his works enjoyed an enormous circulation, being published in Welsh as well as English. Nevertheless, Taylor is probably right in seeing his influence on precise political programmes and pronouncements as being limited. Neither his republicanism nor his deism were ever dominant in the programmes or the rhetoric of the Chartists. Its popular appeal still included christian rhetoric and constitutional arguments based on the idea of the corrupt Norman yoke and the ideal purity of the Saxon heritage. For example, one of the leading Chartist intellectuals, Samuel Kydd, took the pseudonym 'Alfred' for his history of the Factory Movement and its fight against the exploitation of child labour. The most detailed set of political demands actually offered to parliament by the Chartists was in the second petition of 1842 and its important preamble. As well as the six points—universal (male) suffrage, secret ballot, abolition of property qualification for standing for parliament, payment of MPs, equal electoral districts, and annual parliaments—the preamble included the demand for the repeal of the 1801 Act of Union with Ireland and the 1834 Poor Law Amendment

Act and criticism of the money paid to the queen, her consort and the king of Hanover (her uncle who had assumed the crown of Hanover from which Victoria was excluded by the Salic law governing the German throne, which excluded women from the royal line, and who still received a handsome payment each year from British funds). These huge payments were compared with the few coppers a day on which many of her subjects were forced to live. There was, however, no suggestion of a demand for her abdication, let alone for the abolition of the monarchy. Indeed, Chartists on occasion appealed to the queen to dismiss her ministers when they feared an attack on their organisation and meetings, and not a few seem to have believed, mistakenly, that she had personally intervened in 1840 to secure the commutation of the death sentences on the Chartist leaders of the Welsh rising of 1839, the one seriously organised outbreak of violence in the Chartist years. In the autumn of 1839, thousands of Welsh iron-workers and miners marched on the town of Newport and were defeated by the armed garrison there. The death sentences on the three chief leaders, John Frost, Zephania Williams and William Jones, were commuted to transportation for life after a nationwide petition for mercy. Ironically, it was neither the queen nor the Whig government leaders who procured the commutation, but the recommendation for mercy of the presiding judge, Chief Justice Tindal, which the premier, Lord Melbourne, himself totally committed to carrying out the death sentence, felt could not be ignored.

The Chartist paper, the *Northern Star*, did indeed publish squibs against the 'royal tax-eaters' which their queen was constantly bringing into the world, but this was hardly republicanism. Peter Murray M'Douall, an expert in these anti-royal jibes, also published in his *Chartist and Republican Journal* a 'Poetical Petition to Queen Victoria on Behalf of the Oppressed Working Classes of Great Britain and in Demand of their Political Rights and Liberty'. This address was criticised by W.J. Linton, a republican of the Paineite or Mazzinian variety, but it does, in fact, seem to represent a general Chartist desire to exploit all constitutional means to get their petitions heard. Disraeli, whose picture of Chartism in his 1844 novel *Sybil or the Two Nations* is one of the most politically sophisticated of all the 'Condition of England' novels, has his girl factory workers invoke the presence of a queen on the throne to justify their own active participation in Chartist politics.

There certainly were committed republicans in the Chartist movement, men like W.J. Linton and W.E. Adams. These men propounded a republican ideal based on citizenship and on the tradition of the Commonwealthmen of the seventeenth century and the writings of Paine and Giuseppe Mazzini. Their contemporary model was the Italian's idea

of a republic, set up in defiance of royal and papal rule and based on the ideals of democratic secular government and of the commitment of citizens to a pure and honest society. Republicans of this sort were, however, as Taylor says, a small minority, almost a sect. Later in the century, they were to dismiss with scorn the ‘republicanism’ of parliamentarians like Dilke and Chamberlain, who based their opposition to the monarchy on the inadequacy of a particular contemporary ruler.

The Chartist attitude was, in general, more pragmatic. Ernest Jones, one of the intellectuals of mainstream Chartism, assumed a generally anti-monarchical view among his readers. His long poem *The Revolt of Hindustan*, written while he was in prison for sedition and published in 1851, predicated the rise of a new ideal republic on the overthrow of the British Empire, which was to begin with a revolt in India. Among the many evils of the old imperialist nation that were to be overthrown was the monarchy:

*Royalty, that dull and outworn tool!
Bedizened doll upon a gilded stool—
The seal that Party used to stamp an Act
Vanished in form as it had long in fact.*

Jones dedicated his poem to ‘the people of the United Queendom and of the United States’: the latter, ‘free citizens of the republic’; the former, ‘unenfranchised subjects of the monarchy’.

Although clearly of republican sympathies at this time, Jones, who never defected from his general position on universal suffrage and Irish independence, was able, in a famous defence of democracy in a debate with Professor Blackie of Edinburgh in 1867, to concede that ‘there may be democracy under a king as well as under a president’. He refused comparisons between France and England:

France, where licentious tyranny mocked at every virtue and trampled on every right, and Britain, where the virtues of the throne are but an emblem of the virtues of the nation; between the land of Charles the Ninth and Louis Quinze, and the Empire of Elizabeth and Queen Victoria.

Here again he was linking the current female monarch with a queen who had reigned in the quasi-mythical period of England’s true greatness.

The resurgence of parliamentary republicanism during the period of the queen’s retirement from public duties after her husband’s death, and the more radical outbursts among working men and women in response to the Paris Commune of 1870 have been studied by several historians.³ This was perhaps the period in the nineteenth century at which Painite republicanism and ‘populist’ anti-monarchism came together for a time. It appears, however, that the surge of popular monarchism which came with

the illness and recovery of the Prince of Wales in the winter of 1871 effectively killed both the small parliamentary support and the wider public discontent with the monarch's behaviour. It may be noted again that much of the criticism of the crown, even in this period of consciously republican politics, was concerned with the expense of the queen and her family rather than with the validity of the institution.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, English Labour politicians have often made vaguely republican noises. Left-wing intellectuals, from positivists such as Frederick Harrison and Edward Beesly, to William Morris and the members of the Socialist League, believed in the ideal of a secular republican form of government. After the death of Victoria, however, republicanism never appeared in the programme of any of the political parties. Perhaps it has been seen as a possible diversion from the more urgent matter of attacking a system which had to be overturned in its entirety before it could be reformed. As an editorial in the Socialist League journal, *Commonweal*, declared in 1887:

We assume as a matter of course that a government of privileged persons, hereditary and commercial cannot act usefully or rightly towards the community; their position forbids it. [But] as to mere politics, Absolutism, Constitutionalism, Republicanism have all been tried in our day and under our present social system, and have all alike failed in dealing with the real evils of life.

The word republicanism, then, has been used in England with two distinct meanings. One of these proposes an alternative structure for a democratic state, the other simply the abolition of the monarchy. In modern England, it is said that members of parliament may be found in all three of the main parties who would welcome the abolition of the monarchy. Whether these people hold a common vision of an English republic, however, is open to question. The abolition of some of the hereditary votes in the House of Lords without a clear set of proposals for an alternative democratic second chamber reveals some of the problems of abolishing a part of the old constitution without considering its replacement. Few people regard the present mixture of hereditary voters, placemen and women, superannuated politicians, and wealthy business persons as more democratic than the old hereditary lot. The reform of the House was not informed by any kind of republican spirit.

This spirit, indeed, would appear to be the main element missing from the contemporary debate. It is all too easy to make out a case against monarchy. It is expensive, non-modern, produces public figures who give the country cause for alarm and embarrassment, and much more. But is there a robust, democratic spirit in the wings, waiting to direct and inspire the national conscience when the royals are deprived of that function? Criticism of the members of the royal family is rife in today's political

atmosphere. Nevertheless, the outbursts after the death of Princess Diana and, perhaps even more, the space given in all the press, broadsheets as well as tabloids, to the activities of her elder son suggest a strong current of popular monarchism to which Labour as well as Conservative politicians subscribe avidly. A strong and positive vision of a renewed democratic republic does not seem to have a place in contemporary English politics. On the contrary, radical intellectuals, even 'republican' intellectuals, now seem to have abandoned the traditions of earlier generations and joined the queue of actors, cricketers, arms dealers, failed politicians, dodgy businessmen and party funders to accept honours from the royal hand, some of them given in the name of the British Empire. While this atmosphere continues, an English Republic is not on the agenda.

Notes

¹ Anthony Taylor, *Down with the Crown* (London: Reaktion 2000).

² Dorothy Thompson, *Queen Victoria: Gender and Power* (London: Virago Press 1990). New edition due in early 2001.

³ Royden Harrison, 'The Republicans: A Study of the Proletarian Left' in *Before the Socialists* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1965); and Fergus D'Arcy, 'Charles Bradlaugh and the English Republican Movement 1868-78' in *Historical Journal* XXV, 1982.

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