

HERE'S TO GOOD ROYALTY: A DEFENSE OF CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY

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I lived in Denmark for four years, and I'm going back for the first time since 1986. I'm a little choked up with nostalgia, and one of the things that I miss most is living under a monarch.

On a cold January day in 1972, I stood along side tens of thousands of Danes as the funeral procession of King Frederick IX passed through the streets of Copenhagen. In the old days, the pronouncement would have been "The King is dead; long live the King," but instead 32-year-old Queen Margrethe II ascended to the throne. Her sole female predecessor, Margrethe I, successfully united Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, and Finland in the 14th Century.

Along with her sisters, Margrethe attended public schools and studied archaeology and political science at Cambridge and the Sorbonne. As the Crown Princess, she was wildly popular, and her charm and a growing women's movement led to a change in Danish law that made it possible for her to become queen. She is an accomplished artist, excelling in textiles, book illustration, and set design for the Royal Theatre.

As in all constitutional monarchies, the queen is the head of state but the Parliament makes all the decisions. For this reason, anti-royals everywhere say that monarchies are very expensive anachronisms. In another column on the virtue of patriotism, I demonstrated the dangers of having a political figure as head of state and risking national unity in partisan strife. I submit that competent and popular monarchs are worth every penny spent on them if they succeed in holding their countries together.

In 1992, against the advice of the State Department, I traveled to Thailand, during a time of crisis in which student demonstrators had brought down a military government. During my three-week visit, I was surprised to find both national peace and pride as the country rallied around its Buddhist king. Like most European monarchies, the Thai royals have an impeccable reputation and symbolize an essential civic core that cannot be sullied by political storms.

Royal integrity is the key to a successful constitutional monarchy, and the self-destruction of the Nepali royal family is proof that discredited kings do not, and should not, get a second chance. In 1992, I saw thousands of Nepalis stand in line at the Royal Palace in Kathmandu to receive a personal blessing from King Birendra, but the current King Gyanendra has totally lost his people's confidence after he shut down the media and dismissed the parliament. Gyanendra was one of the few members of the royal family that survived a suspicious family shoot-out in June, 2001.

Unfortunately, the reputation of the British royalty is not as shiny as it was when a young Elisabeth II ascended the throne in 1952, a year before Denmark changed its law of succession. As recent as five years ago, the British public was very cool to the idea of a King Charles, who divorced Diana, the People's Princess, and then remarried a lover whom he continued to see during his marriage.

But now 61 percent of Brits don't mind that the Duchess of Cornwall be called the Princess Consort, and there has been a four fold increase in those who say that it's OK that she be Queen. Still, 19 percent believe that the monarchy should be thrown out entirely.

When I was collecting stamps as a kid, I was amazed at how many of them had Queen Elizabeth on them, but I was too young to know anything about the Commonwealth, 53 former British colonies that still recognize Elizabeth as their leader. She still rules directly as queen in 16 of these countries, including Canada, Australian, and New Zealand.

While on research leave in Australia, I was very surprised to learn that the Australian Prime Minister reports to the Queen's Governor General, the formal head of state. Let's hope that a King Charles and Queen Camilla can command that much respect and symbolize so much international harmony.

With a president who has politicized his own justice department and divided the nation more than ever, I will be happy to have a break from a country where I'm called unpatriotic and a Bush- hater, and join the Danes, who all wave their flag and love their queen.