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MONARCHY

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DEBATING MATTERS
**TOPIC
GUIDES**

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MOTION:

**“AN UNELECTED HEAD
OF STATE SHOULD
HAVE NO PLACE
IN 21ST CENTURY
BRITAIN”**

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KEY TERMS

Head of state

Representative democracy

Royal Prerogative

INTRODUCTION

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1 This year marks the 350th anniversary of the restoration of the monarchy following the English Civil War. Despite the industrial revolution and the collapse of the British Empire, the UK remains a constitutional monarchy with the Queen as the unelected head of state [Ref: [Direct.gov](#)]. Debates about whether the monarchy should be abolished have taken place for centuries; however the nature of the debate today differs from previous eras. Whilst **4** few people in secular Britain would now support the notion of a divine right to rule, many enjoy the celebrity, pomp and ceremony of the Royal Family; seeing it as part of a harmless **5** British tradition, good for tourism and international trade, and a bulwark against political and social instability. **6**

Campaigners against the monarchy point out the more insidious anti-democratic aspects of having an unelected head of state, for instance the use of the ancient royal prerogative by the Prime Minister and members of the cabinet to pass legislation and make decisions without having to consult elected representatives in parliament [Ref: [History Learning Site](#)]. Indeed in 2008, the UN Human Rights Council published a report recommending that the Britain should consider holding a referendum on whether the monarch should remain the head of state [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)]. Others argue there is no public appetite for such an initiative and that Britain benefits from having a monarchy that stands apart from the ‘murky’ process of electioneering and the potential ill-judgement of the electorate.



THE MONARCHY DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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An anchor in a changing world or holding back progress?

After the 2009 MPs' expenses scandal [Ref: suite101.com], the Queen was held up as a shining example of reliability and trustworthiness compared to the rotten, corruptible political class [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](http://DailyTelegraph)]. Following the hung parliament in the May 2010 general elections, the presence of a monarch was said to be crucial in keeping Britain from chaos [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](http://DailyTelegraph)]. The fact that the head of state is unelected, it is argued, is positive, as it allows him or her to look to Britain's long-term interests, rather than pandering to the short-term desires of the public to secure votes. Many agree with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's description of the Queen as 'an anchor for our age' in a 'changing and churning world' [Ref: [United Nations](http://UnitedNations)]. Opponents argue that such a position shows an elitist contempt for the idea that the public are capable of governing their own affairs. Far from 'steadying the ship', argues commentator Brendan O'Neill, the presence of a monarch encourages the idea that people are not in control of their own destinies and need a blue-blooded 'expert' to make decisions on their behalf [Ref: spiked]. Supporters point to the knowledge and experience the monarchy possesses, and argue that focusing on overturning centuries of tradition distracts from looking at other, more important problems with contemporary society [Ref: [New Statesman](http://NewStatesman)]. Opponents argue that the existence of the monarchy is fundamentally at odds with a society promoting democracy and equality, perpetuating the idea that wealth and power result from an accident of birth, rather than merit [Ref: Guardian].

A threat to democracy or harmless figureheads?

Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (1867) famously outlined a template for relations between monarch and parliament – the monarch has 'the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, the right to warn' - which has been broadly followed since. Whilst the pomp of traditional regal ceremonies remains, the monarch does not interfere in the business of parliament. Consistent with this, Buckingham Palace made it clear that the Queen's personal preference would play no role in determining the outcome of the hung parliament at the last general election [Ref: [BBC News](http://BBCNews)]. On the other hand, Prince Charles is notorious for using his position to campaign around certain causes [Ref: Guardian], from opposing GM food to promoting alternative medicine to lobbying the Qatari Prime Minister to alter the design of the Chelsea Barracks building [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](http://DailyTelegraph)].

Critics further point out that the royal prerogative allows the Prime Minister to bypass the democratic process, and according to *The Observer*, endows the PM with 'quasi-dictatorial powers covering everything from making war to signing treaties' [Ref: Guardian]. The royal prerogative is not simply a dormant principle: for example, former Prime Minister Tony Blair used it in 1999 to commit UK forces to Kosovo without parliamentary approval [Ref: [The Times](http://TheTimes)]. Supporters of the monarchy point to the flaws in politicians and Parliament, and argue that electing a President as head of state could result in a more powerful politician whom the electorate do not trust. Opponents argue that the virtue of elections is that people get to make the choice of their political representatives; and that a bad politician, unlike



the Queen, can always be stripped of his or her power by being elected out [Ref: [spiked](#)].

Popular and good for tourism?

Reasons often given by the public in support of the monarchy include its importance for tourism, trade and international relations, particularly with the US. But such assertions have been criticised as a Royal spin campaign [Ref: [Republic](#)]. A leading polling organisation has reported that public support for the monarchy has remained consistently high: only 18% would see it abolished, the same as when polls began in 1969 [Ref: [Time](#)]. This, it is argued, demonstrates public support for the monarchy, rendering a referendum unnecessary; and at a time when there is little republican fever in the UK, there seems to be neither the will nor the basis for abolishing the monarchy. Opponents counter that if people use popular support as an argument for the monarchy, why not allow a referendum to take place to prove this?

ESSENTIAL READING

British Monarchy: will it continue to endure?

Dominic Sandbrook *BBC History Magazine* 14 April 2010

The Barriers to a Republic in Britain

Brendan O'Neill *spiked* 29 November 2009

MPs' expenses: the Queen has a role to play in stabilising government

Simon Heffer *Daily Telegraph* 18 May 2009

Britain should get rid of the monarchy, says UN

Nick Allen *Daily Telegraph* 13 June 2008

Q&A Ancient Royal Powers

The Times 6 February 2006

FOR

Monarchy spending should have been squeezed

Graham Smith *Guardian* 23 June 2010

We should cut off more than their handouts

Rob Lyons *spiked* 3 June 2010

There can be no constitutional renewal while a monarch sits on the throne

New Statesman 9 July 2009

Goodbye to Royalty

Peter Tatchell *Guardian* 1 June 2007

AGAINST

Long live the Queen!

Simon Walker *New Statesman* 9 July 2010

Stop the Queen opening Parliament? We need the wise old trouper more than ever!

Tom Utley *Daily Mail* 30 May 2010

Gawd bless yer, Ma'am – a hung parliament shows how crucial the Queen is

Harry Mount *Daily Telegraph* 7 May 2010

The Queen's pearls of wisdom over 50 years

Christopher Howse *Daily Telegraph* 22 December 2007

IN DEPTH

Does the monarchy still matter?

New Statesman 9 July 2009

Prince Charles: Ready for active service

Jonathan Dimbleby *Sunday Times* 16 November 2008

How Diana transformed Britain

Diana Meyer *Time* 16 August 2007

The Monarchy as entertainment: Is it more than a joke?

Frank Vilbert *Open Democracy* 14 November 2002

Win the argument

Republic

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BACKGROUNDERS

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The austerity monarch

Richard Alcock *Guardian* 1 August 2010

Prince Charles meddling : a royal right, or a privilege too far?

Robert Booth *Guardian* 30 June 2010

Why are we still supporting the Monarchy?

Jennifer O'Mahony *Liberal Conspiracy* 22 June 2010

Prince Charles, disgusted of Windsor

Guardian 21 June 2010

The Queen and a hung parliament

Nicholas Witchell *BBC News* 7 May 2010

Prince William shows he can do the job – but does he want it?

Michael White *Guardian* 22 January 2010

Can you call for the abolition of the monarchy without risking the noose?

Anna Fairclough *Guardian* 21 July 2009

The Monarch and Parliament

Parliament

The monarchy

Directgov

Monarchy trends 1993 -2006

Ipsos MORI

The Royal Channel: The Official Channel of the British Monarchy

You Tube

The Royal Family: celebrating royal visits and occasions

ORGANISATIONS

Republic

The official website of the British Monarchy



IN THE NEWS

Australia 'should drop Royal ties'
Press Association 16 August 2010

Value of Queen's private estate increases by £25m
BBC News 27 July 2010

Royal Spending cut by £3m a year
Guardian 5 July 2010

Queen's visit open debate over her future in Canada
BBC News 2 July 2010

Queen's Civil List payment frozen at £7.9m for 2010
Independent 23 June 2010

Cameron hung parliament defiance 'could threaten monarchy'
Politics.co.uk 4 May 2010

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