

**Monarchy and the British Political Elite:  
Closet Republicans in the House of Commons**

Keywords:

United Kingdom, House of Commons, republicanism, monarchy, constitution

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Word count : (8,834—text and endnotes)

Manuscript date: October 7, 2009 (final version after acceptance)

\* The London School of Economics and Political Science and The Boston Athenæum generously provided library access and academic resources for this research.

## Monarchy and the British Political Elite: Closet Republicans in the House of Commons

“...no doubt of [the monarchy’s] universal popularity...there is no republican sentiment left today in parliament or the country. [1908]”<sup>1</sup>

“Even in the 1990s...no political party considered even reforming the monarchy. It was striking that the reform of another largely hereditary institution...—the House of Lords—did not provoke an open debate about the monarchy.”<sup>2</sup>

The title of *Her Majesty’s* Government is not arbitrarily bestowed. The Sovereign enjoys a central position as both head and object of Britain’s democratic and legal institutions, even if bound by the conventions of an unwritten constitution. Three times during the reign of Elizabeth II—in 1957, 1963, and 1974—it has fallen to the Queen to name a Prime Minister in the absence of a clear selection mechanism within and among the parliamentary parties<sup>3</sup>. The Queen is also known to bring both her personal views and her knowledge of public policy to bear upon her weekly meetings with her Prime Minister. As Baroness Thatcher<sup>4</sup> put it in her memoirs, “anyone who imagines that [these meetings] are a formality or confined to social niceties is quite wrong; they are quietly business-like and Her Majesty brings to bear a formidable grasp of current issues and breadth of experience.” Taking these together with the formalized instruments of the Crown-in-Parliament, the position of Commander-in-chief, the Royal Prerogative, and others, the Queen’s role in the governance of her realm cannot be dismissed as entirely symbolic.

At the same time, there have long been quiet, if persistent, voices seeking to alter or even to abolish that role. This opposition, often called “republicanism” (referring to the form of government with which its adherents would seek to supplant the Crown), has moreover been reported in the press to be extensive among at least one parliamentary party. As sweeping a change as eliminating the hereditary Head of State would likely

need to be accomplished by way of public referendum rather than legislation. However, the Commons would necessarily be involved in any such initiative. The openness, or resistance, to the idea of a “British republic” among Members of Parliament (MPs) is therefore highly relevant to the plausibility of any such reforms. Yet little is known about republican sympathies and efforts in the Commons beyond a scattering of often vague newspaper reports and the public grumblings of a few outspoken, and oftentimes rather marginalized, republican MPs.

We therefore undertook to study republican leanings among members of the House of Commons of the United Kingdom, in hopes of better understanding the likelihood and potential impetus for any future republican reforms in that country. Our findings might be considered both discomfiting and somehow reassuring for monarchists; while we find rather extensive anti-monarchist sentiment among the membership of the Commons (twice as great as in the British public at large), we also found that few of these republican MPs placed those views high on their political agenda. We further found that those who actively agitate within parliament for the idea of a British Republic generally report feeling thwarted and are strikingly pessimistic for the immediate future of their cause.

### *Public Support*

Some 30 years ago, Rose and Kavanagh<sup>5</sup> systematically studied public support for the monarchy and found British subjects to be overwhelmingly supportive of the institution. They discovered this to be a surprisingly rational rather than an emotional tie, one based on the institution rather than on its individual occupants. Unfortunately, there have been few other empirical studies to examine the monarchy as a formal social and

political force apart from the particular personalities and behavior of members of the Royal Family. Even during the public crisis over the official recognition of Princess Diana's death in 1997, when some surveys showed support for the monarchy dropping based on dislike for Prince Charles as heir apparent<sup>6</sup>, the British media were reluctant to sponsor polls on the topic<sup>7</sup>. The few surveys that have been done, both before and after Rose and Kavanagh, have confirmed their findings about persistently high public support for the institution of the monarchy, with younger people and the Labor-voting middle class being the most reserved in their enthusiasm<sup>8</sup>.

Despite extensive debate on other constitutional issues, the movement against monarchy in Britain has also received very little political attention over the past several decades. For instance, Anthony King's recent book<sup>9</sup> on the constitution spends less than three pages discussing the monarchy in a nearly 400-page study, concluding that it is inoffensive to representative government and that it will continue for the indefinite future. Two other brief summaries of the role of the monarchy in constitutional reform are Bogdanor,<sup>10</sup> who devotes one chapter largely to defending the monarchy against republican criticisms, and Foley<sup>11</sup>, who describes public opinion and media ferment on this issue, along with the institutional barriers to change. Other contemporary constitutional analyses give the topic almost no consideration at all.<sup>12</sup>

The apparent reluctance to bring monarchy into the broader constitutional debate likely owes much to the institution's persistently strong public support. Worcester<sup>13</sup> states that "the measure of public opinion to the monarchy is the most stable measure of public opinion that exists in this country," with support having only fluctuated within a narrow range of 69 to 75 percent from 1969 to 2007. (See Table 1.) When asked by MORI about

whether, in a referendum, they would favor Britain becoming a republic or remaining a monarchy, over the past fifteen years only about 20 percent of Britons consistently have sided with the former choice<sup>14</sup>. Other survey data presented in Olechnowicz<sup>15</sup> indicate somewhat more volatility in public support for the monarchy, but from 1953 to 2005 anti-monarchism never rose to even 40 percent of the public and came back down to its normal level of about 20 percent relatively quickly. While this is an impressive level of support for the monarchy, it also shows that a persistent (and non-trivial) segment of the British public want a fundamental change in their country's system of government.

(Table 1 about here.)

### *The Republican Critique*

Although most Britons view the monarchy variously as a unifying bulwark of the traditional constitution, as a tourist attraction, or as a harmless historical ornament atop the machinery of state, republicans argue that the endurance of the monarchy underlies, and is symbolic of, many of Britain's most serious political and social problems. Nairn<sup>16</sup> exemplifies this critique by calling the monarchy a symbol of a bygone era that encourages social divisions rather than the unifying, forward-looking office its proponents would make it out to be. Republican arguments highlight the importance of the representative principle, the notion of equality, and the basic question of how matters of state are to be decided. These issues become even more pertinent in the current atmosphere of constitutional re-evaluation and the growing discussion of what "Britishness" entails<sup>17</sup>.

Republicans often criticize the subsidy of hereditary privilege at public expense. Willie Hamilton MP, in his book *My Queen and I*<sup>18</sup> argues that monarchy and its

privileges are immoral in a democratic society with a belief in social equality. Others, such as Tony Benn, the “republican elder statesman”<sup>19</sup>, are more concerned about the power of concentrated executive authority in Britain. They see the monarch as a buttress of such authority, making it more difficult to restrain and hold accountable the executive authority of the prime minister and cabinet. Benn, who was interviewed for this study, said that his objections to the monarchy are “not so much about the Queen herself as about the Crown as a *legal institution*.”

Benn and others argue that the broad Royal Prerogative powers, loosely referred to as “the Crown” to distinguish it from the person of the monarch, act as an undemocratic influence on even the best-intentioned prime ministers and their cabinets. Because they are not statutorily derived, many of these powers can be exercised without consulting parliament, and, in some cases, without even being subject to challenge in the courts. Thus the government of the United Kingdom can be said to be more informal, secretive, and haphazard than those states with a more codified basis for executive authority<sup>20</sup>.

The prime minister may, for example, send the country into armed conflict in the name of the Queen without consulting the Commons (though in the wake of the Iraq War, Prime Minister Gordon Brown has proposed limiting this authority). The armed forces swear allegiance to the Queen, not to the parliament or the British people. The signature and ratification of treaties and the granting of pardons, charters, patronage appointments, and honors all fall under the auspices of the unchecked Royal Prerogative<sup>21</sup>. In a literal sense, then, the prime minister, in kissing hands with the Sovereign, is delegated something resembling the highly concentrated power that the monarch once held. This

power can, of course, be wielded only for as long as the prime minister can keep his or her parliamentary majority whipped into place, but the power is no less real for this fact.

Benn introduced a comprehensive constitutional reform proposal, including abolition of the monarchy, periodically in the House of Commons from 1991 until his retirement in 2001, but it never received a Second Reading. The Commonwealth of Britain bill proposed that the United Kingdom become a "democratic, federal and secular commonwealth," in effect, a republic with a written constitution<sup>22</sup>. More recently, however, Graham Allen MP<sup>23</sup>, has proposed legislation to limit the same centralized executive powers that underlie Benn's republicanism but without calling for an end to the monarchy from which those powers are derived.

#### *Impediments to the study of contemporary republicanism*

There are at least three significant impediments to understanding the state of contemporary British republicanism.

##### *(1) The problem of definition*

Writing about the term "republicanism" as used in historical scholarship, Worden<sup>24</sup> complains about the confusion surrounding its use. Indeed the word suffers the same muddled usage in contemporary British politics as in historical discourse. Most generally applied to any opinion that includes some form of anti-monarchical sentiment, republicanism could logically encompass stances ranging widely from modest opposition to expenditures on the Civil List (the stipend paid to the Royal Family) to, *in extremis*, calls for the forcible removal of the Queen herself. At the same time, many contemporary political theorists (British and otherwise) define republicanism much more broadly than anti-monarchism, tracing the concept from the political values of ancient Rome, through

Machiavelli, Enlightenment America, and even the underlying narrative of *Star Wars*<sup>25</sup>. To confuse matters further, a minority of writers—most significantly, Thomas Paine<sup>26</sup>—even allow for the prospect of a “republican monarchy,” which some claim describes the current arrangement in the UK, with the monarchy justified and sustained by continuing public support<sup>27</sup>.

The term in common British usage does not specify whether republican opposition to the monarchy necessarily implies other political values that might also be described, in theory at least, as republican: advocacy for a written constitution and bill of rights, opposition to all other forms of hereditary privilege, belief in checks and balances in government, etc. Many republicans do, in fact, define their cause as including these very ideals<sup>28</sup>.

The awkward situation of discourse, then, is that individuals of widely differing theoretical and practical opinions may be described using the same general term: anti-monarchists and pro-monarchists, radical constitutional reformers, and those who merely have reservations about the symbolism of monarchy. This naturally impedes precise study—or even discussion of—contemporary British republicanism, whether as a mere concept or as an actual political movement.

There appears to be no consensus even among republican activists on the precise boundaries of their cause. The republican pressure group Centre for Citizenship<sup>29</sup> defines its “republicanism” broadly to include an end to monarchy, eliminating all forms of aristocracy, abolishing the House of Lords, disestablishing the Church of England, adopting a written constitution, and engendering a belief in the sovereignty of the British

people. By contrast, the group Republic<sup>30</sup> tends to focus exclusively on removal of the hereditary head of state.

There are also quasi-republican shades of opinion between total fealty to the monarchy and supporting outright abolition. The think tank Demos<sup>31</sup>, for example, has proposed a modernization scheme, which would include a periodic vote by the British people giving their assent to the Royal Family's continued existence as such, placing the people rather than the Queen at the center of British political authority. This modernization would throw aside notions of "divine right" and hereditary entitlement while enacting related reforms such as the disestablishment of the State Church and a decoupling of the monarchy from the nation's political institutions and ceremonies. While advocacy for such reforms has a decidedly "republican" feel (à la Paine) about it, the authors of the Demos pamphlet explicitly disassociate themselves with that term, seeming to imply that it ought to be restricted only to those who favor full abolition.

Worden (2002) offers a useful framework for understanding the varieties of republicanism, which has been adopted by other authors<sup>32</sup>. It divides the historical approaches to defining republicanism into two categories. The first of these, associated most prominently with Quentin Skinner<sup>33</sup>, refers simply to government without a king or queen. Worden calls this "constitutional republicanism." The second, "civic republicanism," is closely associated with J.G.A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment*<sup>34</sup>, though it is by no means the first use of the term. This latter term is meant to encompass the broader classical notion of republicanism as a model of virtue in government, in which the people are the object of governance rather than private interests. Civic republicanism therefore does not strictly exclude the possibility of a monarch, so long as

the monarchy is “republican” in character (as Demos’s “modernised” monarchy might be described). Worden’s taxonomy of constitutional and civic republicanism is intended primarily as a way of describing currents of political thought in the 1600s, but it is also an adequate way to describe some currents of republican sentiment today as well. In any case, it clearly demonstrates that “republicanism” is neither a unified nor irreducible concept.

Because of this wide range of plausible definitions for “republicanism,” any study of its contemporary manifestations must address the problem of terminology. To that end, the first part of our study focuses on publicly self-avowed republicans, partly to ask them directly what exactly they mean in ascribing the term to themselves. Additionally, the second part asks surveyed MPs who describe themselves as republicans to tie the term to a specific issue or set of issues.

*(2) The problem of what population to study*

Republicanism, broadly defined, has at various moments in the past been a lively movement among the British population at large. However, current public engagement in such grand constitutional issues is at a relative historical nadir<sup>35</sup>, notwithstanding the interest in the constitution taken by the government under Tony Blair. In polls of “important issues facing Britain today,” voters rank constitutional reform near the very bottom of the list when it appears at all. One poll, taken repeatedly over recent years, asks voters to look ahead to the next general election and report whether they feel several issues would be “very important” in helping them to decide for which party to vote. Since 1997, only 5-10 percent of voters have agreed that constitutional issues held such importance to them<sup>36</sup>. Even if people do seem to hold definite opinions on constitutional

issues when asked, these are certainly not issues on which Britons take to the streets. One MP interviewed for the present study reported having received precisely *two* letters (out of thousands) from constituents in the preceding year that even mentioned constitutional reform of any sort, republican or otherwise.

Given the apparent public apathy towards debate on constitutional reform, opinions on republicanism among the “political elite,” who almost by definition do tend to hold opinions on such issues, are poised to play a uniquely important role in defining the concepts and movement for reform at large. Constitutional reform in Britain is in fact usually a top-down affair, most often emerging from elite consensus-building rather than from the political

grassroots. Pressure for such reforms tends to originate from the postulations of think tanks, the polemics of journalists, and high-minded discussions at party conferences. Therefore, studying the nature of elite opinions on republicanism may be valuable in predicting the manner and likelihood of any future republican initiatives, perhaps even more so than existing measures of public opinion on the subject.

### *(3) The problem of existing research paucity*

The third and final challenge to the study of contemporary British republicanism is the paucity of scholarly research on sympathy for the issue in the House of Commons or among other political elites. The most abundant writing available on contemporary republicanism exists in the form of polemics. These works tend to be of a more popular<sup>37</sup> than scholarly bent, oftentimes written by journalists<sup>38</sup>, professional polemicists<sup>39</sup>, or think tanks<sup>40</sup>. Although the political scientist Stephen Haseler<sup>41</sup> has written exhaustively on republicanism, his work also is generally concerned with issue advocacy rather than

scholarly analysis or empirical observation. While all of these writings help us chart the topography of contemporary republican thought, they in no way constitute an objective assessment of republican opinion or the likelihood of that opinion to be transformed into policy.

Though scholarly work on contemporary republicanism may be lacking, there is a somewhat more thorough and balanced literature on historical republicanism, in particular, Prochaska's<sup>42</sup> and Taylor's<sup>43</sup> recent studies of the history of republicanism in Britain. Their observations about the future of the movement and the extent of its support among the political elite, however, are conjectural rather than empirical.

Although empirical studies of republicanism among the British political elite are scarce, we do know that such sentiments exist. A small circle of republican MPs occasionally can be found commenting on the subject in the media. For example, a brief interview with republican MP Dennis Skinner recently appeared in the BBC documentary *Monarchy: The Royal Family at Work*<sup>44</sup>, in which he describes his traditional role in the State Opening of Parliament: making a sardonic remark when Black Rod arrives to summon the Commons into the House of Lords for the Queen's Speech. He further explains that it's not the ceremony of the State Opening that irks him, but rather the attendant implication that "the aristocracy is important."

A 1993 poll reported in the *Sunday Telegraph*<sup>45</sup> found that nearly a quarter of Labour MPs favored Britain becoming a republic. Unfortunately, within the context of the problems enumerated above, this finding really poses more questions than it answers. How do these putative republicans define their would-be republic? Would their republic entail a written constitution, a separation and balance of powers, a rejection of all forms

of hereditary privilege, etc., or merely an abolition of the monarchy with all other existing institutions remaining intact? Additionally, did MPs answer the question by supplying their personal opinions or their official stances as politicians?

To survey elites about their views without asking whether those views affect their official positions as policy-makers is, after all, to miss the point of why one is interested in the views of politicians in the first place. It is not that politicians hold especially interesting opinions, but that these opinions are more significant because they, among all others in society, have the greatest *potential* to affect public policy. The emphasis here is on potential, however, because there is, of course, a crucial distinction to be made between the personal and public positions of politicians in a democracy. The likelihood of republicanism among MPs to influence policy depends entirely on the extent to which that republicanism is a public position (which they are willing to work to make realized) and not merely an idle private predilection.

Equally, by focusing narrowly on Labor MPs the *Sunday Telegraph* poll ignores recognized republican sentiments in other parties<sup>46</sup>. There also are avowed republican members of Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party (SNP)—the official policy of the latter being that the British monarch should remain head of state of an independent Scotland unless the people of Scotland decided otherwise. The present study was designed to address the foregoing challenges, in hopes of beginning to patch these holes in the academic literature.

## Methods

### *Samples*

Members of the House of Commons were divided into two target samples. MPs who had publicly expressed republican sympathies were the “active republican” sample, and the rest of the House of Commons, all MPs whose views on republicanism were not a matter of public record, were the “undeclared” sample. The purpose of the interviews among active republicans was to understand the breadth and character of the more committed republican opinions in the Commons and to provide a conceptual framework that might help in interpreting the quantitative survey results. Surveys of the undeclared sample were used to gauge republicanism in the House of Commons as a whole. Both surveys and interviews were carried out during the 2004 session of Parliament.

Three sources were used to define the active republican sample: the official supporters’ list of the pressure group Republic, a *Guardian* article titled “Secret meeting unites republican MPs”<sup>47</sup> that listed several Members in attendance at a republican meeting at Westminster in 2002, and also the (very few) MPs who have independently expressed their support for republicanism in public. Although there was considerable overlap between these three sources, each contributed at least one additional name to the active republican sample not provided by the others. It is perhaps a sign of the perceived political risks involved in being seen to criticize the monarchy that this list included only 23 MPs. All 23 were sent letters inviting them to participate in the study. Of that number, 11 (or 48%) agreed to be interviewed about their opinions on republicanism.

The second sample, the undeclared, comprised the remaining 636 Members of the House of Commons. All MPs in the Commons, regardless of ministerial or Parliamentary position, were invited to fill out a survey on “constitutional issues,” which included three key questions of interest regarding republicanism, among other items. In order to

maximize response rate, potential participants were promised that the results of the survey would not be broken down by party. Of these surveys, 143 were returned (a 23% response rate). In total, 154 sitting Members of Parliament participated formally in the study.<sup>48</sup>

## Results

### *Interviews of the active republican sample*

Interviews with actively republican MPs revealed a considerable diversity of opinion on the issue, even among the small number who publicly campaign for the cause.

(1) *Definition of republicanism.* On the primary question of the interviews, the definition of republicanism, all but two MPs restricted the term to opposition to the monarchy. The first said that republicanism is:

...a move away from the middle ages, disestablishment of the state church, an end to Royal patronage, an end to the House of Lords. We republicans need to look to Philadelphia. It was one of the few times in history, and certainly the first, where a whole group of people in society sat down and tried to figure out what would be the most rational way to organise a government. That's republicanism. ... Part of republicanism is also to have a constitution—if it's good enough for the bloody Americans, it's good enough for us.

The second interviewee who subscribed to a broad definition explicitly invoked the phrase “classical republicanism.”

The concept dates its origins to the ideals of the [French] Revolution—liberty, equality, fraternity. You find it permeating British radicalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To a certain extent you would see it as a division of Church and State. You find odd manifestations in different ways: meritocracy and/or redistribution of wealth, along with some of the ideas of Mill.

The comment of one MP sums of the position of all the others, who define republicanism more narrowly:

I do agree with the removal of all hereditary components of power in Britain, a written constitution, abolition of the House of Lords, and all that, but I don't lump them together. Republicanism as I understand it is about having a constitutional head of state, elected through some system, and nothing more.

(3) *Republican activism*. All interviewees were asked what they had done at Westminster to campaign for republicanism. All noted their frustration at not being able to raise the profile of the issue in Parliament as effectively as they would like. The majority, however, noted that the issue is not anywhere near the top of their own political agenda.

One MP was particularly upset by what he sees as active efforts to stifle any debate on the issue. He said he tries to use every opportunity to “say a few nasty things when [he] gets the chance in the Chamber,” but he claimed that the

Speaker (Michael Martin) too often restrained such speech in the Commons, forcing the MP in question to make his objections known only in a “satirical way.” He adds that on the “nasty right-wing BBC” that you have to “raise your complaints about the monarchy on a live programme or else they’ll edit out the anti-monarchist sentences before broadcast.” Another MP said that his most effective republican tactic was “subtly undermining the monarchy—which is, after all, a fairly low-rent pantomime—with ridicule and satire at every possible opportunity.”

Several MPs cite the tabling of questions and the holding of adjournment debates on aspects of policy *related* to the monarchy (the *Act of Settlement*<sup>49</sup>, Royal finances, the loyalty oath) as republican activism. However, several said they would encounter institutional opposition if they broke the taboo of directly discussing the issues of monarchy or republicanism in the Chamber. One said that the House of Commons Table Office would “rule out of order” any proposal for a debate directly on the question on the very *existence* of the monarchy.

(3) *Impetus for republicanism.* A few MPs were particularly outspoken about the reasons why they came to a republican view. One objected to the anti-Catholic aspects of the modern monarchy (the Sovereign is forbidden from being or marrying a Catholic.) Another pointed to the fundamentally “irrational and fascist human instincts upon which monarchy feeds,” specifically mentioning Kingsley Martin’s *The Crown and the Establishment*<sup>50</sup> as what persuaded him of the republican position. Several others raised the loyalty oath to the Queen required of MPs as their primary objection—“I happen to

believe that taking an oath is a serious matter...unlike that farce that goes on when we take the allegiance oath.”<sup>51</sup>

(4) *The question of the European Union.* An interesting and unexpected issue that arose in the interviews was first raised by an MP who said he avoids groups like Republic and other republican MPs in the Commons because he feels that their republicanism is about more than it seems. He claimed that their republicanism is primarily about membership in the European Union and the diminishment of national sovereignty that this entails. According to this MP, the main republicans in Parliament only call themselves republicans because they want to see Europe become sovereign in Britain. Interestingly, however, precisely the *opposite* rationale is presented in the book by Republic Chairman Stephen Haseler<sup>52</sup>: he supports the EU because it weakens the monarchy, not that he is opposed to monarchy because a British Republic would strengthen the EU. Other interviewees asked about this assertion of their colleague dismissed it somewhat indignantly.

(5) *The group Republic.* All MPs interviewed (other than the one mentioned above) had a favorable assessment of the group Republic. They tended to say that Republic was reasonably successful in bringing greater attention to the issue of the monarchy and putting a respectable face on republicanism. For example, “I think Republic does a good job of keeping the issue on the radar screen. I have no problems with the way it is run. They serve an important democratic function.”

(6) *Constituent reactions.* MPs had varying experiences with constituents reacting to their publicly republican positions. Two stated that they had never had a complaint. Another said he had had “half a dozen, if that.” Another said, “as long as my constituents believe that my beliefs are sincerely held, I find that they accept them. [An opponent] tried to use it against me in the last election, but it wasn’t effective.” Another MP was less sanguine: “Absolutely, my republicanism is unpopular locally. Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, and that’s still seen as a virtue in politics. I have a very working-class constituency, 50 percent immigrants, and they tend to conflate country and Queen.” One MP said he is active with groups like Republic around Westminster, but he doesn’t raise the issue in the constituency or in speeches. He said that the local press would headline it as “Local MP Savages Queen,” without printing his detailed rationale for why the monarchy ought to be abolished.

(7) *The 2002 House of Lords Meeting.* Two MPs discussed their experiences at the 2002 “secret meeting” of republican MPs described in *The Guardian*<sup>53</sup> which was organized by the group Republic and Lord (Jack) Dormand, a former government whip in the Commons. The first MP interviewed who attended felt that it was “useful, with very good presentations,” but that it wasn’t as well attended as he would have hoped. The other felt it was intellectually rewarding but not encouraging for the future of the cause, noting that most of the attendees were quite old or had already retired from the Commons. He added, “it was sort of like a support group for the beleaguered. You know: ‘my name is John and I’m a republican,’ that sort of thing.”

(8) *Future of republicanism.* One thing upon which all interviewees agreed was that the immediate future of the republican cause is bleak (for at least as long as Queen Elizabeth II remains on the throne), but that success for the republican cause is almost inevitable in the long term. “[The monarchy] will wither on the vine and slowly die. Deference is dying and for a monarchy to survive you need a belief in the divinity of kings. That has just dripped away, and will continue to do so.”

*Surveys of the undeclared sample*

(1) *The extent of republicanism in the Commons.* Of all survey respondents, 64 (or 44%) considered themselves to be “republicans.” Of these self-described republicans, 55 (or 86%) saw republicanism as their personal opinion only, not an official position. As a check on possible sampling bias, a chi-square test was performed to check for a statistically-significant effect of party affiliation on response rate, even though responses are not broken down by party in the present results in keeping with a promise to participants. The result of this test was non-significant, supporting the use of our sample to generalize about the House of Commons as a whole.<sup>54</sup>

(2) *Definitions of republicanism.* Among those who do call themselves republicans, there also is considerable agreement, over 80 percent, that it means “desiring an end to the monarchy,” although some also combine this with other positions. Among those MPs who say they are not republicans, every single one defines the term as “desiring an end to the monarchy.” (See Table 2.) However, Republican advocacy does not seem to embody a whole set of constitutional reforms (e.g., the Benn “maximalist” position) in the minds of most MPs.

Republican and non-republican MPs differed in the distribution of their opinions on the other survey questions only by the somewhat greater desire of self-described republicans to see the House of Lords completely abolished and a proportional representation system for electing MPs.

(Table 2 about here.)

### Discussion

There appear to be more than twice as many republicans in the Commons as in the British public at large<sup>55</sup>. This extensive republicanism in the Commons—nearly one half of the Chamber, as our study suggests—looks, *prima facie*, like a sign of ardent sentiment on the subject, perhaps of imminent attempts at reform. Yet the mere number of self-described republicans in the Commons clearly does not tell the whole story; only a tiny fraction of these republicans say they are willing to do anything as MPs to bring their opinions on the monarchy to bear upon public political discourse.

This provides an important clarification to the *Sunday Telegraph* poll<sup>56</sup> that found extensive republicanism in the Parliamentary Labour Party and seemed to imply, with its front-page headline, that it was a burgeoning issue in Parliament. While a surprisingly large proportion of MPs are republicans, there appears to be little to no chance that this fact will spontaneously evolve into any serious policy initiatives in the immediate future. What it does signify, however, is that there is a rather large reservoir of passive republican sentiment in the Commons that might “come out of the closet,” as it were, if some future event were to decrease public sympathy for the monarchy—as, for example, some polls suggest the coronation of Prince Charles might do<sup>57</sup>.

*Factors disinclining republicans to act*

The interviews in this study shed some light on why there is significantly less republican *activism* among MPs as there is *sympathy* for the cause. MPs who had chosen to make their republicanism an active political cause encountered both Parliamentary and political obstacles. Some actively republican MPs said that their public support for the cause had created a backlash among constituents. Others cited the fact that one must be secretive about republicanism in Parliament as a sign of the widely perceived volatility of the issue. They also noted that pursuing the issue as a near-term objective can often seem futile. In this, one begins to perceive a set of contingencies that can easily account for why so few republican MPs are willing to take their stance public. Given that the potential for success is minimal, that the potential for constituent anger is real, and that there are numerous institutional obstacles to raising the issue, any rational political calculus would tend to exclude making one's republicanism a public issue. This is particularly the case since even the actively republican MPs said they felt the issue was very low on their personal list of legislative priorities.

Of course, this leads to a political paradox. If individual politicians are unwilling to raise the risky issue because it is seen as having a low probability of success, then it will necessarily continue having a low probability of success because so few politicians are trying to raise the issue. If MPs who are privately republican could somehow organize themselves and raise their issue in a large bloc then it might provide sufficient diffusion of risk to allow them to make a public statement on the issue and move the cause forward.

*Institutional and party barriers*

Many interviewees cited institutional barriers to their ability to push the republican agenda. Indeed, debates on aspects of the Royal Prerogative have been refused in the past<sup>58</sup>, and the interviewed republican MPs cited fears that the Table Office would rule out of bounds any attempt to have a debate on the existence of the monarchy. Nevertheless, abolition of the monarchy has been discussed previously in the House, most recently after Edward VIII's abdication in 1936<sup>59</sup>.

But the political barriers appear to be more formidable than the procedural ones, especially since a ruling by the Speaker in 1996 that the House could debate matters relating to the monarchy if the two front benches agreed to do so<sup>60</sup>. Of course, to proceed very far in the Parliamentary timetable, any proposed legislation on the matter would need at least tacit government support.

The greatest current barrier to having an open parliamentary debate on the monarchy seems therefore to be the pro-monarchical attitudes of party leadership. "The meeting was arranged in great secret to ensure that the Labour whips in both the Commons and the Lords were unable to intervene. Downing Street is highly sensitive about republicanism in the Labour party."<sup>61</sup> There is no indication of leadership support for republicanism in the other parties at Westminster either. Any steps to move the cause forward in the public business of parliament would have to find a way around this obvious initial obstacle.

Press reports suggest that parliamentary republican sentiment resides primarily within the Labour party. However, reform of the monarchy has been labeled "Labour's last taboo,"<sup>62</sup> and abolition has not been the subject of a party conference debate since

1923<sup>63</sup>. Indeed, until very recently, Labour has been somewhat reticent to pursue constitutional change of any sort. Bogdanor<sup>64</sup> perceptively describes “a very profound conflict between constitutional reform [which generally involves the weakening of a historically centralized power base] and socialism or social democracy,” observing that a “strong socialist government at Westminster” is a necessary instrument for the socio-economic levelling and regulation that inheres in Labour ideology. And there is no more potent symbol of centralized authority than the Crown.

One need only watch Tony Blair talking fondly about the traditional public ceremony of the Queen’s speech in a recent documentary interview<sup>65</sup> to see that Labour party leadership understands how useful the monarchy can be, lending historical legitimacy and respectability to the party’s legislative agenda. While Left-leaning MPs may safely be presumed to be the more republican, it is fair to question why a Labour government would be willing to relinquish that tool merely for the largely intellectual satisfaction of “constitutional reform” for its own sake. This tension between constitutional idealism and more subliminal political considerations has always played a role in Labour’s thinking on constitutional questions such as devolution and Lords reform<sup>66</sup>, and it is likely to continue to do so on the question of monarchy—perhaps to an even greater extent, given the largely symbolic nature of the latter issue. We can thus easily imagine why republicanism might look better from the Labour backbenches than it does from in front of the despatch box.

#### *The definition of republicanism*

The fact that most republicans (and all non-republicans) in the survey of the Commons define republicanism far more narrowly than republican theorists and many

republican activists is interesting and significant. It gives a sense of where Britain might be heading in the distant future if the hopes of the republicans are realized. The answer is: not all that far. Despite some well-known republican books advocating an entire overhaul of the British constitutional system<sup>67</sup>, support for that type of reform seems to be non-existent among MPs. With only a very few exceptions, “republicanism” is defined narrowly as the abolition of the hereditary head of state, with all other existing constitutional arrangements remaining unchanged.

Both the interviews and survey in the present study confirmed this interpretation, but they also validated the notion that republicanism can at least potentially be understood more broadly, even if this is currently a minority view among republicans. In fact, one reading of the data would suggest that republicans might potentially have more success if they portrayed their cause as having to do with more than simply being rid of the Queen—about the classical notion of a republic. It is noteworthy, that is, that all survey respondents who did not consider themselves republicans defined the issue simply as removing the hereditary head of state. However, there was at least some diversity in definitions among the self-described republicans in the survey (25 percent defining it more broadly). This suggests that republicanism may be more palatable when viewed as part of a larger framework of political values.

#### *The future of the republican cause*

Notwithstanding current republican frustrations and pessimism, there is some reason for republicans to be optimistic for the longer term. An independent poll conducted by MORI in April 2004 (commissioned by the activist group Republic) found that public support for an elected head of state jumps by 11 percent when respondents are

asked whether they would prefer that alternative to Prince Charles becoming King<sup>68</sup>. In the same poll, over a third of Britons (35 percent) said they would prefer a “scaled down” monarchy when the Queen retires. In an interview for this study conducted before the MORI poll, Stephen Haseler, head of Republic, accurately predicted the results. He said that latent World War II nostalgia about the Royal Family’s staying in London during the Blitz colors contemporary views on the monarchy and when the Queen is gone, public support for the monarchy will wane. The MORI poll lends some support to this view. It suggests that republicans may have an opportunity to capitalize on greater public sympathy when circumstances within the Royal Family change, as they inevitably will.

It is worth noting, at the same time, that the British Royal Family have survived dramatic changes of personnel in the past. There is, moreover, a long tradition of separating reticence about a particular monarch from opposition to the concept of the British monarchy itself.<sup>69</sup> The argument that Charles’s coronation will mark the downfall of the monarchy also cuts the other way; it means that the monarchy may enjoy a great resurgence of popularity when his much more popular son, Prince William, takes the Throne. It is also equally possible that the glow of the Crown will simply render Charles more popular rather than his coronation tarnishing the Crown. The latter certainly has more historical precedent. Edward VII, to cite one example, was popularly viewed as a rake before his ascension; yet he went on to enjoy considerable popularity as king<sup>70</sup>.

No party in mainland Britain has proposed ending the monarchy, even in a time when several other fundamental constitutional issues are on the political agenda. The party seemingly most likely ever to undertake such reforms would be Labour. However,

the large Labour majorities in the House of Commons since 1997 are unlikely to be seen again soon.

Sympathy for the republican cause among MPs is a necessary but not sufficient element of potential reform. Our study confirms that at least the potential for a move towards a British Republic exists, if not yet the political will. Notwithstanding the private feelings of MPs, it is therefore probable that the monarchy will survive in the near term. And, so long as no substantial changes in public opinion emerge to cause party leaders to move the issue much farther up the public agenda, this state of affairs may persist indefinitely.

However, in the presence of such a shift in public opinion, there is a significant bloc of MPs who might be willing to capitalize on newfound support for an initiative they have always supported. The role of party leadership, however, would be critical. When the monarchy was in crisis over the estranged Princess Diana's death in 1997, Prime Minister Blair moved to support the Palace by suggesting ways to pacify the public. As long as elite pillars, especially parliamentary party leaders and most of the mainstream press, support the monarchy, it will be very difficult to dislodge.

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<sup>1</sup> A. L. Lowell, *The Government of England* (New York, 1908), pp. 51-52, as cited in A. Olechowicz, ed., *The Monarchy and the British Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> A. Olechnowicz, "'A Jealous Hatred': Royal Popularity and Social Inequality," in A. Olechnowicz, ed., *The Monarchy and the British Nation, 1780 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), p. 313.

<sup>3</sup> A. Roberts, *The House of Windsor* (London: Cassel & Co, 2000), p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p.18.

<sup>5</sup> R. Rose and D. Kavanagh, "The Monarchy in Contemporary British Political Culture," *Comparative Politics*, 8 (1976), 548-576.

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<sup>6</sup> Olechnowicz.

<sup>7</sup> Bob Worcester, "The Power of Public Opinion: Princess Diana: 1961-1997," *Journal of the Market Research Society*, 39 (1997), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Bob Jessop, *Traditionalism, Conservatism and British Political Culture* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974); J.G. Blumler, J.R. Brown, A.J. Ewbank and T.J. Nossiter "Attitudes to the monarchy: their structure and development during a ceremonial occasion," *Political Studies*, 19 (1971), 149-171; Olechnowicz.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony King, *The British Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Vernon Bogdanor, *The Monarchy and the Constitution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> M. Foley, *The Politics of the British Constitution* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> R. Hazell, ed., *Constitutional Futures: A History of the Next ten Years* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999); P. Catterall, W. Kaiser and U. Walton-Jordan, eds., *Reforming the Constitution: Debates in Twentieth Century Britain* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Bob Worcester, "Political Commentary," <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/content/political-commentary1.ashx> (2007, Retrieved March 13, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> MORI, "Issues facing Britain today," *MORI Political Monitor* (April 2004); Rose and Kavanagh.

<sup>15</sup> Olechnowicz.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Nairn, *The enchanted glass: Britain and its monarchy* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> P. Ward, *Britishness since 1870* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Willie Hamilton, *My queen and I* (London: Quartet Books, 1975).

<sup>19</sup> Tony Benn, "Being a citizen not a subject", *The Guardian* (June 1, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Foley.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *The Monarchy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Tony Benn, A. Hood, and R. Winstone, *Common sense: a new constitution for Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Graham Allen MP, *The last Prime Minister: Being honest about the UK Presidency* (Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic, 2003).

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- <sup>24</sup> B. Worden, "Republicanism, regicide and republic: The English experience," in M. van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, *Republicanism: A shared European heritage, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).
- <sup>25</sup> W.R. Everdell, *The end of kings: A history of republics and republicans* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 2000).
- <sup>26</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of man and Common sense* (London: Everyman, 1994).
- <sup>27</sup> Rose and Kavanagh; Olechowicz
- <sup>28</sup> e.g., S. Haseler, *The end of the House of Windsor: Birth of a British republic* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 1993); J. Freedland, *Bring home the Revolution: The case for a British Republic* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998).
- <sup>29</sup> <http://www.centreforcitizenship.org>.
- <sup>30</sup> Republic, *Ending the royal farce: The case for an elected head of state* (Oswestry, England: Quinta Press for Republic, 2003).
- <sup>31</sup> T. Hames and M. Leonard, *Modernising the monarchy* (London: Demos, 1998).
- <sup>32</sup> S.D. Glover, "The Putney debates: Popular versus élitist republicanism," *Past and Present* (No. 164, 1999).
- <sup>33</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).
- <sup>34</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975).
- <sup>35</sup> The apogees of public debate on the issue of monarchy being under George III between 1776 and 1789 and in the early period of Victoria's reign during her long withdrawal from public life. See Prochaska (cited in Footnote 42 below) and A. Taylor (cited in Footnote 43 below) for a historical track of the vicissitudes of the issue over the past 200 years.
- <sup>36</sup> MORI, "Survey data: politics and leadership," *British Public Opinion* (Year End, 2003).
- <sup>37</sup> e.g., Freedland
- <sup>38</sup> "An idea whose time has passed," *The Economist* [UK Edition] (October 22, 1994), 15.
- <sup>39</sup> e.g., Nairn; Hitchens
- <sup>40</sup> e.g., Fabian Commission on the Future of the Monarchy, *The future of the monarchy*. (London: Fabian Society, 2003).

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<sup>41</sup> Haseler

<sup>42</sup> F. Prochaska, *The republic of Britain: 1760-2000*. (London: Penguin, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> A. Taylor, *'Down with the Crown: British anti-monarchism and debates about royalty since 1790* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999).

<sup>44</sup> *Monarchy: The Royal Family at Work*. (London: The British Broadcasting Corporation, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> T. Helm, D. Harries, and K. Wharton, "Labour split on monarchy widens," *The Sunday Telegraph* (January 24, 1993).

<sup>46</sup> see Jack Straw, "Abolish the royal prerogative," in A. Barnett, ed., *Power and the throne: The monarchy debate* (London: Vintage, 1994), on the Conservative party; Norman Baker "Why the House of Windsor must reform," retrieved from [http://www.normanbaker.org.uk/normans\\_views.htm#The%20Monarchy as a Liberal Democrat example](http://www.normanbaker.org.uk/normans_views.htm#The%20Monarchy%20as%20a%20Liberal%20Democrat%20example).

<sup>47</sup> N. Watt, "Secret meeting unites republican MPs," *The Guardian* (24 January, 2002).

<sup>48</sup> Members who had been allocated to the "active republican" sample were sent a brief sponsoring note written by a Member of Parliament urging her colleagues to participate in this academic study. Nine of the eleven respondents replied to arrange a one-on-one interview. The remaining two preferred to answer questions by e-mail. Interviews conducted in person were held around the Parliamentary Estate. Interviews followed a semi-structured format. While the interviews sought to address several standard issues, whenever possible MPs were allowed to follow their own narrative and to explore other avenues. Interviews lasted between 10 and 60 minutes, with an average of 35 minutes. Because the number of public republicans is so small, providing any further demographic data such as age or number of years in office would be tantamount to listing participants by name, so we have not done so in our analysis. Initial consultations were held with both Labour and Conservative parliamentarians when the survey was being designed, with the paramount objective of learning how to maximize response rate. Several suggestions from these consultations were taken into account in the final survey, particularly the strong recommendation that statistics not be tabulated in terms of party. MPs indicated that one of the primary reasons that response rates to surveys of the House of Commons are often extremely low is political risk aversion. One MP said that whips on at least one side of the Chamber have in fact previously circulated the explicit admonition that "completing surveys is rarely helpful to the party." Therefore anonymity in

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individual and party identity was granted to respondents. Since the most important questions are the extent and nature of republicanism in the House of Commons as a whole, this seemed a worthwhile compromise. As with the interview solicitations, a covering letter written by an M.P. was attached, urging her colleagues to participate.

<sup>49</sup> As recently as March 2009, a Private Member's Bill for changing the *Act of Settlement* to allow gender equality in inheriting the crown and allowing the monarch to marry a person of another religious faith was debated and defeated in the House. At this time the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, revealed that he had had discussions with the Palace on this topic; "Today in Parliament," (British Broadcasting Corporation [Radio 4], 30 March, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Kingsley Martin, *The crown and the establishment* (London: Hutchinson, 1962).

<sup>51</sup> All MPs must swear allegiance to the Queen before being seated although some have said that they "crossed their fingers behind their backs" while doing so. Ostensibly the Queen is protected through the *Treason Felony Act 1848*, which declares it a crime to deprive the Queen of her Crown, in addition to forbidding war against her or encouraging any invasion of a country that is a dominion of the monarch. *The Guardian* newspaper pursued an official legal opinion about whether it could publish articles on the topic of whether British voters in a referendum could choose to become a republic. In a unanimous judgment in 2003 the Law Lords found that the litigation was unnecessary, but most of the judges also supported Lord Steyn's view that "the part of section 3 of the 1848 Act which appears to criminalise the advocacy of republicanism is a relic of a bygone age and does not fit into the fabric of our modern legal system. The idea that section 3 could survive scrutiny under the Human Rights Act is unreal."

<sup>52</sup> Haseler.

<sup>53</sup> Watt.

<sup>54</sup> It is reasonable to conclude that the most likely sampling bias for survey responses would be party affiliation of the respondents. There are two reasons to suspect this. Firstly, the covering letter was necessarily written by an MP of a particular party. This could bias colleagues of the same party toward replying, or make MPs of other parties reluctant to do so. Secondly, MPs in opposition parties, particularly the minor parties, might be more inclined to reply simply because they have fewer Parliamentary and/or ministerial demands on their time. As a check on this possible sampling bias, and in support of using the

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findings from the sample to generalize about the extent of republicanism in the whole House of Commons, a chi-square test was performed to check for a statistically-significant effect of party affiliation on response rate. Although replies to specific survey questions will not be broken down by party, information was collected on response rates by party. It is therefore possible to check for a sampling bias of party affiliation, without specifically tabulating responses to the survey itself by party and violating the promise made to participants. A chi-square test was performed to compare the sample frequencies of four party groupings (Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, and minor parties) to the expected sample frequencies based on the actual party proportions in the House of Commons as a whole. This test yielded a non-significant result:  $\chi^2(3, N = 139) = 5.31, p = .15$ .

<sup>55</sup> MORI, "Issues facing Britain today."

<sup>56</sup> Helm, et al.

<sup>57</sup> MORI, "The future of the monarchy," retrieved from <http://www.mori.com/polls/2004/britishrepublic.shtml> (2004).

<sup>58</sup> Foley.

<sup>59</sup> Bogdanor.

<sup>60</sup> Foley.

<sup>61</sup> Watt.

<sup>62</sup> Fabian Commission on the Future of the Monarchy.

<sup>63</sup> Bogdanor.

<sup>64</sup> Vernon Bogdanor, "Constitutional reform," in Anthony Seldon, ed., *The Blair effect: The Blair government, 1997-2001* (London: Little, Brown, 2001).

<sup>65</sup> Reid.

<sup>66</sup> M. Taylor, "Labour and the constitution."

<sup>67</sup> e.g., Haseler; Freedland.

<sup>68</sup> MORI, "The future of the monarchy;" see also surveys of a similar question reported in Olechnowicz

<sup>69</sup> One can't help but think here of Prime Minister Francis Urquhart's deposition of a Charles-like King in Michael Dobb's political thriller *To Play the King* (London: Harper, 2007), in which Urquhart repeatedly insists that it's not the Throne he opposes but merely its current occupant.

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<sup>70</sup> Stanley Weintraub, *The importance of being Edward: King in waiting 1841-1901* (London: John Murray, 2000); Olechnowicz.