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Defending the Faith(s)? Democracy and Hereditary Right in England

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The persistence of traditional monarchies in modern societies, which are otherwise characterized by democratic and egalitarian values, remains a paradox in the social sciences. In part this is attributable to the lack of psychological investigation into the relationship between subject and sovereign, and in particular the ways in which the political and social values of the citizenry shape understandings of a hereditary monarch’s right to represent a national community. Adopting the qualitative analysis methods of discursive psychology and grounded theory, the current study examines vernacular accounts of nationhood and monarchy in England in both formalized conversational interviews (n = 60) and impromptu street interviews (n = 56). Focusing on accounts of Prince Charles’s recent proposal to change the role of the monarch, from “Defender of the (Christian) Faith” to “Defender of Faiths,” those in favor treated it as a positive step towards reflecting a diverse (religious) community, bringing the monarchy into line with current concerns of pluralism and upholding values of personal choice and individual rights. Participants who rejected the proposed change in title construed it as antithetical to these values in terms of reflecting personal stake and interest, an abuse of power, or an imposition on other faiths. In all accounts, the prime concern was in safeguarding the political and social values of the citizenry. In conclusion it is argued that the study of subjects’ relationship to the monarch, its function and legitimacy, can provide an opportunity to examine how values can characterize a national community and facilitate national diversity.

KEY WORDS: Monarchy, nationhood, England, democracy, hereditary

In his study of ordinary British subjects’ vernacular accounts of the monarchy, Billig (1992) makes the point that social psychology has offered little work on the relationship between monarch and subjects. Almost 20 years later this remains the
case. Given social and political psychology’s interest in nationhood, the scarcity of research on how subjects understand this role of symbolic leader of a nation is notable. We argue that this is attributable to three main lacunae in the literature: the neglect of traditional forms of leadership; the lack of focus on the constitutional context of national identity; and the neglect of the values particular to specific national identities.

The Monarch as Leader

Social psychological work on leadership has developed from a focus on the behavior of leaders and situational demands on leadership style (Lippitt & White, 1943; Fiedler, 1965) to the interactions between leader and follower, as identified in transactional and transformational leadership (e.g., House & Shamir, 1993; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003), sometimes taking into account physiological traits of leaders (e.g., Sosik, Avolio, & Dong, 2002). If we turn to the recent resurgence of work on leadership in social psychology we find that there remains an absence of work that examines symbolic rather than transformational leadership. Social Identity and Self-Categorization theoretical perspectives have predominantly focused on how leaders emerge as prototypical members of a group, forging a common ingroup identity and appearing socially attractive to their followers (Fielding & Hogg, 1997; Hogg, 2001; Hogg et al., 2006; Hogg et al., 2005).

Some observations have been made about this body of research. Platow et al. (2006) note how leadership work is often leader-centric, focusing on qualities the leader is assumed to have. They suggest that attention needs to be paid to how followers attribute leadership qualities, such as charisma, to leaders. Moreover, Haslam and Reicher (2007) argue that SIT and SCT approaches to leadership tend to undertheorize the active common construction of common ingroup identity which followers and leaders are assumed to share. They note that social identities are demonstrably context-dependent and constructed in the perceived reality of the situation. Perhaps more pertinently, current approaches to leadership tend to assume horizontal communities, such that group members are interchangeable and hence anyone can potentially lead a group. However communities may also be vertical, where leadership roles are not a consequence of perceived ingroup prototypicality, but are based on custom and convention (Meindl, 1995). These leaders may not be transformative, but fulfill a symbolic leadership role with the purpose of perpetuating group norms and structures. Such societal roles have long been described in the sociological literature as “traditional” (Hobsbawm, 1983; Shils, 2006; Weber, 1958) and as more characteristic of long-established, hierarchical, static social organisations. In this sense, psychological approaches have tended to neglect established forms of leadership that rely upon convention and tradition. More specifically, despite a handful of research concerning individual members of the royal family, most notably the life and death of Princess Diana
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(e.g., Abell & Stokoe, 1999, 2001; Abell, Stokoe, & Billig, 2000; Macmillan & Edwards, 1999), the relationship between monarchy and the ordinary folk it seeks to represent remains underinvestigated.

This is even more of a surprising absence if we consider the importance of the monarchy within the United Kingdom. Constitutionally the monarch (Queen Elizabeth II) is the Head of State and head of the Church of England. Within England the reigning sovereign also has the title and role of Defender of the (Christian) Faith. In the absence of a formal written constitution the monarch’s royal prerogative powers are upheld in custom, practice, and convention rather than legally. These include the right to take the country into war, to make peace, to appoint the Prime Minister, to summon and dissolve Parliament; “In law, Parliament is the creature of the monarch” (Harvey, 2004, p. 39). Whilst the current monarch chooses not to exercise her royal political powers, there is nothing to state that a future one couldn’t.

This has become highlighted as the heir to the throne, Prince Charles, is often accused of making his political views on a range of matters, from EU policies to architecture, known and as such has been accused of threatening a “constitutional crisis.” For example, in 2002 he declared that when he comes to the throne, in England he shall be the Defender of Faiths rather than Defender of the Faith. This not only caused a media outcry but also brought into focus the tensions that exist between Crown, State, religion and democratic values in the United Kingdom, and specifically in England.

Constitutional Considerations

Constitutionally the United Kingdom experienced the most significant change in over 300 years with the devolution of government power as Assemblies were granted to Northern Ireland and Wales, and a Parliament to Scotland. Outwith psychology, political, historical, and media commentators and scholars have been quick to point out the increasingly tricky position the British monarchy finds itself in as a consequence of constitutional change. Harvey (2004) notes that as the hereditary right of peers to sit in the House of Lords was ended after 700 years by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair, and as a result of the devolution of government power, the United Kingdom leaves a glaringly obvious anomaly at its helm: a hereditary monarch. The principle of hereditary right is incompatible with that of democracy (see also Cannadine, 2004). Harvey remarks that hereditary rights continue to uphold discriminatory practices of religious and sexist bias that would in other forms of social life be unacceptable in a democratic society.

Nairn (1988) observes that the monarchy is a crucial component in a world of nation-states in its representation of a national people. This is apparent in Britain where the monarchy remains a popular symbolic cornerstone of the nation. References to “Britain” in everyday talk of British nationals often concern the monarchy rather than the government, territory, or the people (Condor, 1997; Condor...
This is further evidenced in the British Social Attitudes survey, which contains a question asking how important the continuation of the monarchy is in Britain. Consistently, results show that over 70% of people surveyed indicate that it is “quite” or “very” important. Greyser, Balmer, and Urde (2006) argue that one explanation for this popularity is the perceived function of a monarch to create unity in diversity. The royal family can act as a form of social glue in holding together an otherwise diverse population.

Clearly then, one of the most important challenges for existing European monarchies in the modern democratic world is to reinvent themselves in terms of new roles, functions, and rationales for their continued existence in a democratic society. Monarchies succeed or fail on the basis of how credible and convincing they are over those whom they reign (Cannadine, 2004). As research has observed, their attendance at football matches, pop concerts, and the media’s role in broadcasting royal events to mass audiences has occurred at a time when the nation increases its democratic policies (Cannadine, 1983, 2004; Cardiff & Scannell, 1987; Dayan & Katz, 1992).

In Billig’s Talking of the Royal Family (1992) he observes the tension between democracy and hereditary monarchy in Britain, declaring: “In a country supposedly imbued with the values of democracy—indeed in the country which proclaims itself to be the home of democracy—this ancient institution of inherited status still persists” (p. 1). As such, he identifies irreverent, often disrespectful and egalitarian discourses such as “they’re doing a job,” as ways of managing ideological dilemmas, as participants grapple with the common-sense principles of democracy and hereditary rule. Billig proposes that lurking beneath such discourse is an implicit understanding that “we” are their employers, noting: “It’s as if the ordinary subject occupies the superior position, and royalty awaits the jury’s decision. Symbols of inequity are being reversed” (1992, p. 14). Similarly, in her mass media study of the Danish Royal Family, Phillips (1999) draws comparisons with Billig’s work and examines how a largely supportive media reconciles democracy with hereditary rule through the presentation of the monarchy using egalitarian discourse. Phillips suggests: “The effect may be to reinforce the national self-image of Denmark as an egalitarian democracy in which people are not servile royal subjects but citizens who choose to support the monarchy as symbols of the nation” (p. 233). By means of the media, Phillips argues that support for the monarchy is discursively won.

The Specific Context of Englishness

So far this work has illustrated how political values of democracy have implications for how ordinary people understand their relationship to the monarchy and how it is presented to subjects. But these values also have implications for how we understand and legitimize the role of the monarchy in representing the national population as a whole. This is especially pertinent in
England where a growing body of political and social psychological work has considered vernacular understandings of nationhood and national identity.

Condor’s thesis that people in England resist categorizations of a homogenous national identity due to its associations with racial exclusion and xenophobia has highlighted the problematic tendency in social psychology to conflate national group citizenship with feelings of shared national identity (Condor, 2000, 2006). This has provoked an array of research studies illustrating the point, including the disparity between support for the England football team and claims of common national identity and pride (Abell, Condor, Lowe, Gibson, & Stevenson, 2007), explaining away service in the British armed forces as a matter of social networks and skill acquisition rather than collective national pride (Gibson & Abell, 2004; Gibson & Condor, 2009), and the examination of repertoires of national geography to manage matters of national and political community (Abell, Condor, & Stevenson, 2006). Running though all these studies are the values of personal liberty, accommodation, and cultural pluralism that exist within England and the implications these have for social and political life. Specifically, Condor and Gibson (2007) have considered the implications these ideological values in England have for political behavior in young people. Drawing on types of citizenship as identified by Oldfield (1990), they examine how young people grapple with an ideological tension between liberal individualism (passive citizenship) and communitarianism (active citizenship), in explaining political participation and disengagement. Contrary to explanations that explain political inactivity as a consequence of apathy, ignorance about political matters, and no sense of community (cf. the Crick Report; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998), they note how ideological dilemmas surrounding liberal democracy function in legitimizing political (dis)engagement.

Political disengagement has also been evidenced in English responses to constitutional change within the United Kingdom. What dominated political and a media debate prior to devolution was the anticipated English backlash. Moral panics declared that the English would be concerned with the fragmentation of a British identity, resist devolution, and even worse, assert their collective English national identity and demand their own political voice. However, subsequent research and attitude surveys have revealed these fears to be unfounded (e.g., Curtice, 2003; Curtice & Heath, 2000; Curtice & Sandford, 2004). Contrary to popular explanations of English apathy, which include arrogance and a lack of national identity (cf. Aughey, 2007), theorists have argued that political disengagement can be better understood as a rational response (Condor, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Condor & Abell, 2006a, 2006b). Whilst national identity might be considered to be a reasonable ground for political action for Scotland, this was certainly not regarded to be the case in England. Adopting values of pluralism and liberal democracy, people in England considered the mobilization of English national identity for political gain as a regressive step and illegitimate.
The aims of this present study are therefore to examine how ordinary people in England understand the role of a symbolic leader, a hereditary monarch, in representing its people. More specifically, in England where political and social values of democracy, pluralism, and civil liberty permeate understandings of nationhood, we seek to examine how subjects negotiate the legitimacy of a hereditary monarch in representing a national people. It takes as its focus participants’ concerns regarding Prince Charles’s 2002 declaration to become Defender of Faiths rather than the current Defender of the (Christian) Faith. As such, it draws on matters pertaining to democracy, the legitimacy of hereditary rule, and who “we” are that are represented.

Method

The data were taken from two sources. The first was a five-year panel study (2000–2005) involving qualitative interviews monitoring reactions to devolution in England to U.K. constitutional change.¹ In accordance with standard recommendations for qualitative research, respondents were recruited with a view to ensuring sample diversity. Two key sites in England were selected on the basis of their contrasting character: Greater Manchester and rural East Sussex. Within each site, panel members were recruited through a combination of open and theoretical sampling to ensure heterogeneity in terms of age (range 16–89), gender, political affiliation, and socioeconomic status. For the present purposes only interviews with white respondents in England (N = 60) were examined.

Respondents were interviewed individually or together with a friend or partner. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 4 hours, with a mean of approximately 90 minutes. The research was introduced simply as a study of “people’s attitudes to where they live” in the context of “recent political changes.” Matters of the monarchy were mostly raised in response to direct questions about the Queen’s Golden Jubilee celebrations (June 2002) and Prince Charles’s declaration to become Defender of the Faiths when he comes to the throne. However, some instances of monarchy talk were spontaneously raised when discussing issues related to Europe and the United States.

The second source of data came from 56 informal interviews conducted with individuals, couples, groups of friends, and family groups approached informally on the streets and in public parks during the time of the Queen’s Golden Jubilee celebrations (4–7 June 2002). In these interviews people were asked about their activities over the Jubilee weekend as well as their thoughts and opinions on the monarchy generally. This provided an interview context in which issues of monarchy, rather than political change and national identity, are the focus of conversation, hence allowing the examination of talk around monarchy under a different set of interactional concerns.

¹ “Migrants and Nationals,” funded by the Leverhulme Trust Constitutional Change and Identity programme (Grant number: 35113) conducted jointly with David McCrone, Frank Bechofer, and Richard Kiely, Edinburgh University.
Analytical Procedure

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed for content and basic features noted using a simplified form of Jefferson (2004) transcription conventions. All transcripts were thoroughly anonymized prior to analysis. All stretches of talk that included reference to the monarchy and/or royal family were indexed and extracted for further analysis using Atlas t, a software package for the management of textual material. Analysis began with the identification of rhetorical commonplaces (Billig, 1987) or interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) used by respondents in accounts of the monarchy and/or royal family. Inductive techniques based on Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) using constant comparison and deviant case analysis were used to identify the conditions under which a type of response occurred and to map out variability across the data set. Discursive psychology was applied to the data to examine how accounts are rhetorically organized in producing responses in favor of, or opposed to, the proposed constitutional change (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Edwards, 1997; Potter, 1996). Rhetorically interesting features such as the construction of matters of stake and interest were analyzed for their function in these accounts.

Analysis

The analysis first considers those respondents who proposed that the proposed constitutional change in the role of the monarch would be a positive move. For some respondents the Defender of Faiths role was a progressive step forward in representing the value of individual liberty:

Extract 1: “He should defend people’s right to have their own personal faith”

1 I One thing that’s come up recently was Prince Charles’s notion of if he were to become king being defender of faiths. What do you think of that?
2 Colin Well as a pagan I don’t worry at all, I have no faith so it doesn’t worry me at all. I think as a concept I think it’s very good because personally I would support disestablishment of the church, I don’t think the state has any business whatsoever in being involved in any religion at all. I suppose being a pagan, agnostic, I would be saying that. But I think (...) no (...) I rather resent the fact that the state has a preferred religion. I think the state should be completely secular. I don’t agree with Mr Blair’s faith schools, I think they’re, I think it’s another case of muddle-bosh thinking. I don’t even agree with Catholic schools I’m afraid or C of E schools. I think all schools should be secular. Teach religion by all means teach it. But I think it’s a matter of personal and family choice. If parents want to bring their children up in a particular faith that’s entirely their business, to be left to them. And their child, in their turn,
when they are grown up can decide for themselves which faiths they choose. I
think that’s my own belief because it is such a personal decision that the state
should not be involved in any one faith. And in that sense I suppose I would support
it so far that he should defend people’s right to have their own personal faith. As
long as that faith of course does not then mean the destruction of the people who
are not of their faith

Recurrent across our data set, participants presented their views as those of
someone who had no religion and no personal stake in the Defender of the
Faiths issue. Colin begins his account pointing to his pagan status, his lack of
religion, and therefore his absence of investment in the issue (“so it doesn’t
worry me at all,” line 1). However, his argument that the state should be dis-
established from religion is treated as coming from an interested party, and he
confesses his stake in the issue (“I would be saying that,” lines 6–7). However,
the “But” (line 7) signals his view as not being just based on his paganism but
on broader concerns. These include favoritism (“a preferred religion,” lines 7–8),
and “muddle-bosh thinking” (line 9) that have led to faith schools. Unsure of the
interviewer’s own views or religion, Colin offers mitigation for his comments
(“I’m afraid,” line 10) and presents a personal opinion (“I think,” “my own
belief,” lines 14–15) rather than seeking to speak for anyone else. That religion
should be a “choice” rather than imposed by state or education is emphasized in
the remainder of this extract. Whilst children are not presented as having cat-
egory entitlements to make their own decision, for adults, their children’s and
their own religion is “entirely their business, to be left to them” (line 13).
Support for Prince Charles’s declaration to become Defender of Faiths is con-
tditional on it being a defense for choice, individual rights, religious pluralism,
and freedom for all.

The Defender of Faiths role could also be supported on the basis that it
represented a diverse population:

Extract 2: “He is king of everybody here”

I remember hearing that Prince Charles well, he was saying that well, if he was ever
going to become king, he’d er (.) he said he’d want to be defender of all faiths. Do
you think that’s—

Well, he’s head of the Church of England, how can he?

Ah, but you can also argue that as head of the Church of England that was set up to
worship Henry VIII, how can he be defender of the faith anyway? That was set up
because he didn’t want people worshipping God. Ha, ha! He said, look, what is this
God you’re worshipping? I’m your king. You should be worshipping me. Set up the
Church of England and that’s where it all stemmed from, so (1) but I don’t see it as
being a problem because there are that many faiths over here now. And if he were
going to be the king of England then he is king of everybody here. And you’ve got
Muslims and so on. Buddhists and everybody, so he has to be. Like anybody pays
any attention to him anyway!
Wendy points to a constitutional fact that prevents Charles from taking on this role (line 4). However, invoking the historical figure of Henry VIII, the legitimacy of the existing constitution is undermined by her husband Bob who points to the self-interested motivation on which it is based. He uses active voicing (Wooffitt, 1992) to display Henry VIII’s vanity in forming the constitution (“I’m your king. You should be worshipping me,” line 8). Having produced the stake that drove the current relationship between religion and state, he offers his own position as one that is consistent with increasing diversity that has occurred within the country (“there are that many faiths over here now,” line 10). The three-part list of religions residing in the country includes a generalized list completer “everybody” (Jefferson, 1990) to argue that the role of the monarch is to represent such diversity. This bears some resemblance to Greyser, Balmer and Urde’s (2006) observation that people support the role of the monarch to the extent that it offers unity in diversity. However, Bob ends his account noting the insignificance and the powerlessness of Prince Charles (“Like anybody pays any attention to him anyway,” lines 12–13). As Billig (1992) noted in his own study, people support the monarchy to the extent that it is seen as purely symbolic, powerless, and doesn’t interrupt everyday life.

That the role of the monarch is to represent diversity could also be represented as consistent with changes in wider society:

Extract 3: “Part of the national curriculum”

1 I I remember over the past few years Prince Charles declared that he was going to
2 become defender of faiths in general rather than the faith.
3 Zoe Oh that’s right, yes. And the Queen she visited a mosque recently didn’t she?
4 I That’s right, yes
5 Zoe And there was quite a lot about it, that she hadn’t done that before. And it’s quite,
6 as a school they make a lot of effort to um, you know, to bring in all the faiths. My
7 little boy is 7 and they have religious education and it’s covered all the faiths you
8 know so he will come back and tell me a little bit about all of them which was
9 certainly not the case when I was at school. I should imagine that’s part of the
10 national curriculum actually rather than being specific to Manchester, that is one of
11 the core subjects.

In response to the interviewer’s comment on Prince Charles’s declared change of role, Zoe offers a concrete example of the increasing religious inclusiveness of the royal family, noting the Queen’s visit to a mosque. The recency of this is observed as is the implicit notion that the royal family are playing catch-up with the rest of society in becoming more inclusive. This implicit criticism is further warranted in Zoe’s account of her son’s education in “all the faiths,” which is now part of the “national curriculum” (line 10), and “one of the core subjects” (line 11). The narrative sequencing of these events is rhetorically interesting as the Queen’s recent visit to a Mosque is followed by a description of the “lot of effort” (line 6) displayed by the school in being inclusive. Implicitly there is an accusation that the
royal family has previously been out of step, and possibly not doing enough to engage with a fundamental national concern for religious diversity.

To not be inclusive was equated with intolerance, narrow-mindedness and naivety:

Extract 4: “You have got to be open-minded”

1 I I suppose one other thing was Prince Charles was a couple of years ago I think, that
2 if he was going to become king he’d be defender of all faiths as opposed to just
3 Church of England
4 Russ See, I love that.
5 I Yeah?
6 Russ Yeah. My mother wouldn’t agree at all. Now my mother, politics and religion,
7 you’re going to hurt me with these things [laughing]. I’ve got strong opinions on
8 these because I’ve had a Christian upbringing. I lived with my grandmother and my
9 sister, my mother, and my father they are all Christian . . . basically, yeah I would argue
10 with my mother about, she’ll frown at Buddhism or whatever because I very nearly
11 did a course which spent 2 weeks and you could do it for free in a Buddhist
12 monastery. If I told my mother she’d be so upset because I had not, I had to put a
13 line in that I never set out to hurt her religion you know, so she frowned upon it and
14 I’d say “Mum, come on that’s not fair because you think about the majority of
15 people who frown upon Christianity and just think about one person follows one
16 person you have got to be open-minded” and she said “yes but there is only one God”
17 and blah, blah, blah. We do it nearly every day at the moment. Last night again she
18 was giving me a bible passage. She’s a wonderful woman, a wonderful lady but
19 what I hate, for me it’s like a naivety that you won’t accept these other ones, so for
20 Prince Charles to say that is wonderful I think (. ) Brilliant.

Russ’s positive emotional evaluation of Charles’s change of role is warranted on his characterization of religious bias, depicted through a personal account of his mum’s Christianity. Signalling the start of a story (“Now my mother,“ line 6), Russ warrants his own attitudes on matters pertaining to religion (“strong opinions”), upon his marginal nonreligious position in an otherwise Christian family. More specifically, his mother’s intolerance of other religions is presented in contrast to Russ’s tolerance, and her beliefs are offered as nonnegotiable and inhibiting. They have practical implications preventing Russ from getting on in life in terms of embarking on a course, and also emotional ones requiring him to justify his choices as not being intentionally anti-Christian. Reporting his conversation with his mother, Russ makes the accusation that her views are contradictory and not “open-minded” (line 16). Her response is represented in a brief bottom-line argument (“There is only one God,” line 16) and glossed as not worth engaging with (“blah, blah, blah,” line 17). The dogmatism of religion is further represented in the daily arguments between Russ and his mum and her quotation of bible passages. As such, those who are religious are presented as narrow-minded and intolerant. Interestingly his mum’s religious views are not treated as damaging to her character. His mum is “a wonderful woman, a wonderful lady” (line 18). Her naivety
and intolerant views are attributed to religion. In conclusion, the change in role for Prince Charles is appraised as “wonderful” and “brilliant” (line 20), as it represents a counter to the intolerance of religious bias.

As well as causing intolerance and narrow-mindedness, the role of religion in conflict could also be invoked in offering support for Charles’s Defender of Faiths role:

Extract 5: “Problems have been caused by religion”

I What do you think of Prince Charles saying that if he became King he’d like to be defender of faiths as opposed to the faith?

Dinah That’s great, that’s wonderful you know. I mean, it’s got to be. Look at all the problems. I mean all of what about eighty percent of the problems have been caused by religion, people taking religion and using it you know. Not the religion, I mean you know Jesus, I mean you know the Irish thing [laugh] it’s nothing to do with the religion, it’s to do with us, what we’ve done to Ireland, not to do with religion. It’s just been polarised like that you know. I mean (.) even sort of Muslims, I mean that conference they had “Oh, you’re a Moslem.” When you read, that’s not what they’re about you know, that’s not what they’re about. But you get somebody who says “I have God on my shoulder and I can do anything now because he’s speaking in my ear” (1) Um, so I think you know it’s very brave of him to do that. And I think er that would be wonderful and hopefully if his son does it then it will happen. I mean the sooner the church is disestablished I think it would be better in this country, all countries.

Dinah’s positive evaluation of the Defender of Faiths role is based on an account of religious bias, politics, and war. Attributing the cause of most problems to religion, Dinah notes that it isn’t religion per se that leads to such issues but what it is used for. Possibly alluding to the interviewer’s nationality (Northern Irish), she gives the example of Ireland where tension has been understood on religious grounds but actually is about one nation’s (“we’ve”) actions towards another. So when religion and state are intertwined, conflict occurs and national groups misunderstand one another. This misunderstanding is also given modern-day currency noting the misrepresentation of Muslims beliefs. Dinah shifts from misperceptions of religion to the religious few who are dogmatic in their views. Similar to Russ’s characterization of his mum, Dinah uses active voicing to portray the undemocratic and unreasonable claims and entitlements (“I have God on my shoulder and I can do anything now,” lines 10–11). Thus on the basis that religion leads to conflict and underlines undemocratic views, Dinah concludes that the Defender of Faiths role would offer a solution as would the disestablishment of state and church globally.

So far we have considered how those who display some support for the change in role for Prince Charles do so on the basis that it offers a resolution to undemocratic and unreasonable acts and attitudes, offers unity in diversity, is consistent with a changing population, upholds religious pluralism, and represents personal
choice. In these accounts, to promote a particular religion is considered as antithetical to democracy. Rather, it is equated with bias, intolerance, and has the potential to lead to misunderstanding and conflict.

However, not all respondents thought that Charles’s wish to become Defender of Faiths was a positive move. Rather, this could be understood as an undemocratic imposition on people that reflected matters of personal stake and an abuse of power:

Extract 6: “He’s got darned all to do with it”

I: What do you think of this idea
Dom: Yes, of religions?
I: Yes, yes, the defender of faiths
Peggy: Well, yes, I, I don’t agree with that myself
Dom: Well, he can say that if, if we disestablish, well he can’t say that, no, he actually can’t say it can he? Because he isn’t (..) He is defender of the faith as defined. At the moment. He can’t say faiths because he’s got nothing whatsoever to do with the Catholic church and he hasn’t got anything to do with the Muslims or Sikhs. How can he say he’s defending the Sikh faith? He’s got darned all to do with it for heaven’s sake, you know (..) and what about Taoists and Buddhists who are here as
Dom: well?

Whilst Peggy offers her disagreement with Charles’s declaration, her husband Dom repairs his initial estimation that a change in role is possible to a question suggesting that it is probably not currently possible (“He is defender of the faith as defined,” line 6). This constitutional fact is coupled with Charles’s lack of category entitlements to represent different religions that are here, using extreme-case formulations (“nothing whatsoever to do with,” line 7; “darned all to do with it,” line 9). Hence, to claim to represent these various religious groups would be an imposition upon their current freedoms.

Participants could also disagree on the basis that such a move would exclude them:

Extract 7: “consistently excluded”

I: Suppose over the past few years, erm, Prince Charles has been suggesting that he’d like to be defender of
Ste: All faiths. Yeah, well that’s another reason why I’m a republican (..) I mean I find it disagreeable intensely because I don’t have any faith at all, and there’s, I almost find there’s a collusion where people who, like me, who are atheists consistently excluded from all sorts of debates, so people-religious people you hear on the media on the radio, debating amongst themselves about social phenomena

Noting both his political stance (republican) and lack of religion (atheist), Steve expresses his negative attitudes to the Defender of Faiths role on the grounds that it excludes people like himself. Moreover, there is a suggestion that this exclusion is motivated by a religious conspiracy in which certain sections of society are
normatively prevented from engaging in debates about the role of the monarch. So the role of the monarch and their relationship to the people is characterized as a religious concern rather than a national one and is therefore exclusionary.

The wish to change the role of the monarch could also be presented as motivated by personal stake and interest rather than any real desire to represent the population:

Extract 8: “It’s just sheer self-interest”

Using extrematization (Pomerantz, 1986), Helen evaluates Charles as “the most hateful person in this country” (line 3) and the reasons behind her support in eradicating the monarchy. Helen produces an interested account of Charles’s self-serving stake in proposing a change to the role of defender of the faith. Dismissing his entitlement to represent other people (“he’s got a cheek,” line 4), she asserts that it is issues pertaining to his personal life and wish to marry a Catholic divorcee (Camilla Parker-Bowles) that motivates his desire (“sheer self-interest,” line 8) rather than a genuine wish to represent people. Moreover this abuse of power is treated as symptomatic of the outdated class system in today’s society. Her assertion that the aristocracy is an anachronism in modern society renders them “ridiculous” and “unbelievable” and is the foundation for her final proposition that we should “get rid of them” (line 9).

The final extract concerns a deviant case in which the respondent explicitly presents himself as Christian in a “mixed emotions” account about Charles’s declaration:

Extract 9: “I’d hate people to sort of label me as a bigot”
of, er religion, er, when, probably the principle thing was that they were merely
looking for diverting funds from that to something else . . . . it was the
defence of the realm rather than the defence of the faith that was, was
happening . . . I suppose (1) I’m first and foremost (.) I suppose, I’m, I’m a Christian,
and therefore to, to that extent (.) erm (.) I would I would believe that he
should in fact be putting the Christian faith foremost. But, equally I’d hate people to
sort of label me as a bigot, and erm, you know, because I know it’s our faith to go
and say that. That, that, you know, thou shalt take no other gods, but that equally,
er, (.) I mean, the Muslim faith is in fact, you know, younger than the Christian one,
and, quite frankly, I mean. We are all, in, in terms of, you know, the erm (.) what is two
thousand years in, in relation to the age of the world, is, is which is five hundred
million years old, what is two thousand years to that? Charles himself, he’s, he’s of
course, is probably finds himself, because of his rather (.) poor chap, I mean he, he
was forced into a marriage that was, perhaps not the one of his choosing and
therefore he in fact chose to go and have a very permanent and longstanding
relationship of which we are now still seeing. But probably because of that, he in
fact, doesn’t wish to be seen to, to appear to be to partisan in any particular way,
and I wonder just how much he is really, he is saying that he would be, you know,
defender of the faith, and, regardless of people’s faith, be they Buddhist, Muslim, or
whatever.

In response to a “controversial” issue, (line 3) as defined by the interviewer,
Cooper produces a hedged account (“I don’t know. I don’t know,” lines 5–6) in
which he formulates his opinions. As conversation analysts point out, hedging
indicates trouble in interaction, and the reason for this becomes apparent in the
rest of the extract. Positioning himself as one with “mixed emotions” (line 7),
Cooper indicates his category entitlements (“having an architectural back-
ground,” lines 7–8) before contrasting the destruction of religious buildings with
“merely” fundraising. This becomes the foundation for an overarching claim that
historically, monarchs have been engaged in a form of ontological gerryman-
dering (Potter, 1996; Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985), framing the matter as one of
religion rather than national territory (“defence of the realm rather than defence
of the faith,” line 12).

More hedging occurs as Cooper confesses having a stake in the issue, “I’m a
Christian” (line 13). This sets him apart from other respondents who often denied
having any religious or personal investment in the matter. This gives Cooper
something of a dilemma; on the one hand acknowledging a religious identity
which upholds certain beliefs, whilst on the other being tolerant of other religions.
In doing so, he adopts a passive footing (“I suppose,” line 13) in declaring his faith
and in acknowledging the view of his faith on the topic (“I would, I would believe;”
line 14). The delicacy of this position, and the potential charge of being prejudiced
is oriented to in a disclaimer (“I’d hate people to sort of label me as a bigot,”
lines 15–16). Although he does not openly dismiss his religious beliefs, he puts
Christianity and the Muslim faith into a global context noting their youth in
comparison to the age of the earth, implying their insignificance.
Cooper shifts to consider the future monarch’s motivations for a change in role, and in an account littered with mitigated opinions (“probably,” lines 22 & 25; “perhaps,” line 23; “I wonder,” line 27) and empathic evaluations of Charles’s situation, makes available the observation that once again religion is being used as a vehicle for mobilizing other concerns. In changing his role to Defender of Faiths, Charles is actually upholding values of personal choice, based on personal negative experience of partisanship. That religion is used by monarchs past and future as a means for achieving other more personal aims echoes arguments put forward by Bob (extract 2) and Helen (extract 8) to argue for and against the proposed constitutional change. Here, Cooper’s rejection of the Defender of Faiths title and role is not based on his own Christian religious views, but on the lack of authenticity underlying such a change.

Discussion

The paradox of the endurance of monarchies in modern societies remains underexplored within social and political psychology. The aim of this paper has been to offer some insight into how people in England understand the role of the monarchy in representing its people. More specifically, it has focused on Prince Charles’s 2002 proposed constitutional change from Defender of the (Christian) Faith to Defender of Faiths. The rationale for this focus is based on the assumptions of, and implications for, the national, political, and religious community the monarchy represents in England. This study therefore contributes to a scant social psychological literature on the relationship between subjects and sovereign and how the political values of the populace shape perceptions of the function and legitimacy of a symbolic leader representing a national community.

Drawing on a body of social psychological work that maps out how values of individual liberalism, pluralism and democracy form vernacular understandings of nationhood and the national community in England, this study has examined how these impinge on accounts of a symbolic leader’s proposed change in representing “us.” Some existing work has considered how subjects reconcile democracy with hereditary monarchy using egalitarian discourses that represent the royal family as “doing a job” (Billig, 1992). However, the function and legitimacy of the monarch’s role in symbolically representing a national community has more far-reaching consequences in illuminating how people imagine their national community.

The findings from this study suggest that the values of individual liberalism, pluralism, and democracy are not juxtaposed to the monarchy, but pervade perceptions of the monarch’s role. More specifically, those who displayed some support for Prince Charles’s proposed constitutional change to the title Defender of Faiths suggested that this could be a positive step towards reflecting a diverse (religious) community, to bring the monarchy into line with current concerns of pluralism, and to uphold the values of personal choice and individual rights. Such
accounts offered a communitarian discourse, in which the role of the monarch was to hold a diverse people together, and this change in title was for the greater good of all.

Those respondents who rejected the proposed change in title did not do so on the basis that the monarch should only represent a national community held together by a common Christian religion. Rather, the same values of liberal individualism, pluralism, and democracy also featured in these accounts such that rejection of the future monarch’s wish was regarded as necessary to safeguard these values. The move to become Defender of Faiths could be construed as antithetical to these values in terms of reflecting personal stake and interest, an abuse of power, or an imposition on other faiths. In short, it was not the business of the monarch to impose his/her wishes on others as it contravened the principle of individual rights.

How subjects understand the role of the monarch as a symbolic leader of their national community is a complex affair, but our study suggests two key implications for the understanding of such symbolic national leaders. Firstly, in terms of leadership, the monarchy is of course not popularly elected and therefore represents inherited privilege. In this sense monarchs are hardly prototypical of those they represent. However if we consider that they occupy a traditional and symbolic rather than a political role, we can see that their relationship to the populace is to reflect and refract the values of the national community rather than their characteristics. Indeed for those opposed to Charles’s position, the monarch would be breaching their role to represent a sectional interest within the nation to the exclusion of others. In other words, the role of monarch is precisely opposed to the style of leadership hitherto considered in the Social Identity tradition (SIT), which presupposes that leaders embody the interests and goals of their followers in order to further ingroup interests against other groups. The role of the monarch for our respondents is to symbolically represent and enact the values rather than pursue the goals of the nation.

Secondly, our study points towards the role of the monarch as facilitating the representation of the diversity of the national community. One implication of the SIT emphasis on the prototypicality of the leader is the assumption of a perception of ingroup homogeneity among group members. In contrast, for our respondents, the monarch is taken to symbolically encompass the many different elements within the nation without an assumption of interchangeability. Indeed the idea that the monarch would represent a homogenous nation is actively resisted. While many social psychologists have wrestled with the tension between the desire for a common ingroup and the value of subgroups maintaining distinct identities (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000), our research suggests one way in which the diversity of the nation can be accommodated within a common representation of the group. In line with previous investigations of the national imagination in terms of geography (Billig, 1995; Abell, Condor, & Stevenson, 2006), symbolic architecture (Devine-Wright & Lyons, 1997), countryside (Wallwork &
Dixon, 2004) and national history (Condor, 2006; Condor & Abell, 2006a), our research attests to the manner in which the nation can be strategically constructed around a symbol, the monarch, in order to display the values rather than the characteristics of the population. Further research could profitably consider other such ways in which the ideals of diversity and pluralism can be made manifest in representations of the national community.

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