Phil Ehrig grew up about an hour and a half east of Lancaster in Emmaus, Pennsylvania. While at F&M, he majored in history and German and was active in Brooks College House, German Club and the Black Pyramid Society. He has accepted an English Teaching Assistantship Fulbright to Germany as his post-graduation plan.
In the political discourse in which we as Americans engage, I have often found that we look abroad to find solutions that have worked elsewhere to serve as models through which we might solve our problems. Seemingly inevitably, the focus of this search centers on the experiences and institutions in Europe. I often hear, “well it works in Europe.” Healthcare, taxation, public transportation, etc.—in all these areas the Europeans, or specific European countries, can be touted as shining examples of what we could do. This, if nothing else is in part the problem of American exceptionalism. This paper will not examine this phenomenon and its potential validity. That would be too easy. Instead, I hope to present my own particular European infatuation. I will describe the strengths of monarchy as it pertains to the Anglosphere, with a sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, comparison to our republican system in the United States.

Before I go any further I first need to lay out some definitions or else we may get bogged down in a nineteenth-century semantic debate. Tonight when I speak of *monarchy* I will mean to use the fourth possible definition from the Oxford English Dictionary, “rule by a single sovereign; hereditary leadership of the state” or to use my own words, a system of government which determines the Head of State by birth.¹ Now, when I use the word *republic* I will be using the word in the second possible definition, “A state in which power rests with the people or their representatives; spec. a state without a monarchy. Also: a government, or system of government, of such a state; a period of government of this type.” The OED further clarifies, “The term is often (especially in the 18th and 19th centuries) taken to imply a state with a democratic or representative constitution and without a hereditary nobility, but more recently it has also been used of autocratic or dictatorial states not ruled by a monarch. It is now chiefly used to denote any non-monarchical state headed by an elected or appointed president.”² In short, for my purposes, a republic is a system of government where birth does not determine the Head of State. Tonight I will review *constitutional monarchy*, which stands as very different thing than Louis XIV’s Versailles, just as *constitutional republic* is something quite other from the People’s Republic of China or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

One more note about definitions before we begin. As I mentioned in my opening, this paper is in part inspired by those who look to Europe for examples, and so I too will in part look to a European country’s institutions for my examples. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland as the United Kingdom, and neither as England nor Great Britain. England is but one of the four nations which compose the United Kingdom, along with Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Great Britain is the island on which England, Scotland, and Wales are located. A problem arises when I want to talk about the people of the United Kingdom, because as I cannot refer to the people from the United States as “United Statesers” (well, my Puerto Rican roommate tells me I should, but that sounds funny to my ear and is certainly uncommon), so too I cannot refer to the subject-citizens of the United Kingdom as “United Kingdomers.” I will therefore refer to them as Britons or British, and in doing so find support from the CIA world fact book.³ My apologies to the Northern Irish; however they should know that, although they are not located on the island of Great Britain, when I say British I include them.

Right, now onto the good stuff. I find myself, probably more often than is normal for the average American, engaged in discussions as to the merits of monarchy. Trust me, on a weekend
night, when people find out you have a deep tyrian purple streak running through your political beliefs, they only want to talk about monarchism. Of course that’s not the only time the subject comes up, but in all situations I have found one’s conversational interlocutor invariably declares something like, “The royals are just taxpayer-funded parasites and celebrities.” I will first deal with this issue of funding before I try to put forth why parasite itself is a poor term indeed.

In the United Kingdom the government funds the monarchy through an agreement first struck in 1760 by George III (aka mad King “now-where-did-l-put-those-colonies” George). George III agreed to render to Parliament the revenue from the Crown Estates, minus the Duchy of Lancaster, and in exchange Parliament agreed to forgive his debts and pay him an annual pension called the Civil List. Every British monarch since George III has continued this arrangement. The current parliamentary coalition has altered this agreement slightly; however, nothing major has changed. The Civil List has been combined with the rest of the Queen’s publicly funded expenses into the Sovereign Grant.

In 2012 the Sovereign Grant paid £32.3 million to British Monarchy, which covers everything from state functions, to the salaries of civil servants and all others in the employ of the monarch, to grounds and maintenance of the palaces. The United Kingdom has a population estimated at 63.05 million, meaning that for the average British taxpayer in 2011-2012, the monarchy cost 52 pence. Here I would offer a comparison to annual cost to maintain the American Presidency; however, I could not easily find any facts or figures other than the President’s salary. However the moneys paid to the monarchy are only half of King George’s deal you will recall. The Crown Estates were valued at £7.3 billion as of the last financial cycle and reportedly have risen. The Telegraph reports that revenue paid to the government from the Crown Estates has risen along with the value of the estates themselves from £231 million to £240 million. It should be noted that although the Queen does not collect revenue from the Crown Estates, she does pay tax on them. As the earnings from the Crown Estates cover the amount paid to the monarchy in the form of the Sovereign Grant, we can subtract the Sovereign Grant from the Crown Estates’ earnings for a figure of £198.7 million, which divided by the United Kingdom’s population of 63.05 million, means that arguably in the last fiscal year the average British taxpayer paid £3.15 less because of the monarchy. These figures do not include the untold fortune Britons rake in from tourism (especially American tourism). So much for parasites living off the public dole.

In 1867, Walter Bagehot the British essayist wrote of the monarchy, “Its mystery is its life. We must not let daylight in upon on the magic.” It is often this mystery which at once both seems to fascinate and confound Americans, and therefore with the issue of the cost of the Crown out of the way, I will seek to explore the magic. I will do so largely through theory, conjecture, and anecdote based on my own impression and the impressions of friends and mentors with whom I have interacted through discussions both in the classroom and outside of it. My apologies this time to the Academy, for I will basically defenestrate it for the rest of my paper. I especially need to make note of the indulgence of much of the history faculty (especially Professors Stevenson, Schrader, and Pearson), who continue to put up with my prattling.

On May 11, 2012, David Cameron assumed the office of Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. The following night The Daily Show with Jon Stewart covered this transfer of power.
in the United Kingdom in the final installment of “Clustershag to 10 Downing Street,” with John Oliver serving as “Senior British Person.” The following exchange occurred after Jon Stewart opined about how the United Kingdom had moved so quickly to replace one Prime Minister with another:

    Jon Stewart: I expected a little more...
    John Oliver: What?
    Jon Stewart: I don’t know...
    John Oliver: What?
    Jon Stewart: ...Pomp and circumstance for your transfer of power, some majesty.
    John Oliver: Okay, so like they were royalty?
    Jon Stewart: Right, right.
    John Oliver: Right, Jon you see, we have actual royalty for that. That’s why we can treat our political leaders like the disposable bureaucrats that they are.  

John Oliver went on to compare the Inauguration with the coronation of the monarch, before noting that the British system allows Britons to make their disliked, out-going Prime Ministers cry. But John Oliver’s line about the Brits reserving pomp and circumstance for their royalty is a massive idea worth exploring.

In a constitutional monarchical system like that of the United Kingdom, the position of Head of State is divorced from the position of Head of Government. The Head of State, Her Majesty the Queen, is by practice and tradition an apolitical figure. The setting of the monarch above the petty politicking of government serves a two-fold function. First, the monarch serves as a repository for and of national hope, pride, and unity. During the past election cycle, both candidates spent an inordinate amount of time attempting to prove one was more patriotic than the other. For example, Governor Romney attacked the President for an “apology tour” in the Middle East, while President brought up the fact that Governor Romney had investments in China.  

Both of these are merely examples of both sides’ attempts to prove themselves more patriotic, more American than the other. In the United Kingdom this need not happen, as the monarchy is the continuing expression of patriotism by the British People. Therefore the Prime Minister, as Head of Government/Chief Executive, can focus solely on the tasks of running the government.

Second, as John Oliver astutely noted, the existence of the monarch means that politicians can be treated as what they are, “disposable bureaucrats.” The existence of the monarch seems, to me, to cap and check the aspirations of politicians by denying them the ability to achieve the highest office in the land and in the most extreme scenario checks the possible of political circumstances which led to men like Hitler. Phillip Bond, a noted British political thinker wrote, “Monarchy - the rule of the one - acts as a kind of umpire which ensures that the democratic process itself cannot be subverted and that it displays a certain rule of fairness. In short the monarch upholds the rule of law.”  

They are politicians and nothing more. This also seems to set the tone for parliamentary parties. The disposable bureaucrat does not have the ability to obfuscate party platform with patriotism as politicians do in this country. Thus parties must define themselves, not as our big-tent parties, but rather by occupying clear positions on the spectrum defined by policy.

“But wait a minute Phil,” someone may be saying in their head right about now. “You’ve breezed over the middle ground, a republic with a ceremonial Head of State where power still
primarily rests with the Head of Government, a parliamentary republic like in Germany.” Right, can anyone name the President of the Federal Republic of Germany? And if you can, is it because you actually knew, or because you had to learn it for a class or some other requirement? This illustrates my first point about parliamentary republics, their Heads of State are faceless party functionaries who do not serve as a source of identity and are therefore fundamentally useless because they neither occupy the role of the “decider” like in presidential republics such as the United States or France, nor do they recall the history and spirit that a monarch does in countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, etc. In short, they have neither power nor sentimentality on which to ground themselves.

I assert that in both a parliamentary monarchy and republic, the basic guiding principle is that power should be vested in the elected lower house where differing but measured views can be expressed and debated. Thus, a ceremonial Head of State is required, because by this logic, concentrating power in one office is not democratic. So then how should that Head of State be decided? Well there are two options. One, the Head of State can be raised from birth to carry out the duties of state, to serve as a symbol of the nation(s), the land, and history. Or two, the Head of State can be a party functionary, not well known outside of the country, and possibly not well known within the country, who seemingly redundantly, is elected to do nothing. I view the former as a thousand times better than the latter, because the latter becomes little more than a high school glee club election on a national stage, an overblown popularity contest.

Finally, I want to talk about notions of egalitarianism because one of the most obvious criticisms of a monarchical system is that it is inherently unegalitarian. This is true; a monarchy necessitates a system that is hierarchical and based on deference. But let us step back for a moment. Jacques Monet, a Canadian Professor of History and Jesuit Priest in 1976 wrote, “A king is a king, not because he is rich and powerful, not because he is a successful politician, not because he belongs to a particular creed or to a national group. He is King because he is born. And in choosing to leave the selection of their head of state to this most common denominator in the world- the accident of birth- Canadians implicitly proclaim their faith in human equality; their hope for the triumph of nature over political maneuver, over social and financial interest; for the victory of the human person.” Father Monet essentially says that monarchy, by its very nature of being non-egalitarian, is also egalitarian. It not only recalls history and tradition, but serves as the only form of government which definitively extols the greatness of man, as determined by God or biology or what have you.

Starting with George Washington’s election in 1789 Americans have elected forty-four Presidents, all of them men, one of them black. In that same time period, the United Kingdom has had nine monarchs and in spite of male-preference primogeniture, two of them have been women, reigning for a combined total of 126 years and counting, or a time period spanning half of the existence of these United States - all this by the accident of birth. But the monarch serves a final function tied to egalitarianism on which Monet touches. In being born to reign, the monarch can represent the whole country, the majorities and minorities, without regard to ethnicity, class, etc. The monarch in this sense defies what Benedict Anderson termed the imagined community. In a republic (or at least our republic) all that is needed to become Head of State is fifty percent plus one. Yes it maybe in the Electoral College, but were we to do away with it, our process for selecting a Head of State would become a glorified popularity contest of fifty percent plus one in
the popular vote, which is determined by money and influence. Furthermore, a President is lucky if he can maintain a fifty percent plus one approval rating. A large portion of the country inevitably sees him as not representative of them (to say nothing of this “not-my-president phenomenon”) and he can therefore never be head of all the imagined communities in America. A monarch, by the nature of their selection does not face this problem. There may be opposition to the system, but there cannot be opposition within the system as occurs in a republic.

So with all of this said, what is my end goal in pontificating about the virtues of monarchy? Well, let me be absolutely clear, as much as I find monarchy to be a valid, and indeed better, system of government, I do not advocate its installation as the system of government for the United States. If nothing else, it would not represent the same sense of history, tradition, and identity that it does in European countries and the Commonwealth. But it does represent some part of our collective history; our country defined itself at birth in opposition to monarchy and we continue to be fascinated by it as evidenced by the broadcasting of both the Royal Wedding two years ago and the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee this summer by major American news networks.

I think monarchy offers a useful lens through which to view our own government and understand what makes the American system unique by giving us something with which to contrast. We have just come out of an exhausting election cycle only to fall back into what some would call “gridlock.” But a nuanced understanding of the American government in contrast to another government, I believe, at least allows us to better understand the structures of our republic. Maybe those structures need to be changed. Maybe we want or need some figure of unifying national identity. But those are questions for the political scientists and country as a whole.

Finally, I hope that someday you find yourself, if not in the United Kingdom, Canada, or Australia, then in one of the continental monarchies, and that, while there, you are able to appreciate why it is that countries like the Netherlands or Denmark, which are highly functional social democracies, are also so attached to their royalty. Monarchies in the modern era do not continue to exist just out of a sentiment for pomp and circumstance, but also because they give their peoples a belief in a land of hope and glory.

Thank you and God Save the Queen!
References


