Once again the British Royal Family is in the news. As always, there is a chorus of, “Why are they so important? Who cares about them?” ... and then followed by a frenzy of eagerly devoured media reports about these uninteresting, unwelcomed people.

This process demonstrates exactly why the royals are important. They are supposed to represent everything that is best in their country – and deep down, everyone still wants them to.

Things which no one would remark upon when others do them – affairs, divorces, unguarded comments, falling over – these are the big issues [if] the royals are guilty. A different standard is expected of royalty, whether anyone likes it or not, whatever ever people think of the monarchy or individual royals.

But far from damaging the Royal Family, the reaction to such behaviour only demonstrates the continuing hold the Windsors have on a global public, not merely their own. The worse they are perceived to be, compared with the job description, the more people acknowledge what they represent.

So in a sense, every scandal demonstrates that the royals are doing their job. Therefore the institution of monarchy is also doing its job. Too many people within the royal system have a twisted idea of what that job is – but the royals themselves, for all their faults, are the ones best placed to change that just by getting up every morning and being the people they are.
The wrong road still leads home

The two big points from the swiftly notorious Prince Harry and Meghan Markle interview with Oprah Winfrey were the claim that one of the "family", whether an actual family member or a functionary, was concerned about whether their baby would look black, and Meghan feeling suicidal trapped in the royal household. Much is being made of these claims, although others have raised the same question about any children the couple may have, and the questioners are generally those who assume the royal household would drive anyone to suicide.

Are the royals racist? The Queen is Head of The Commonwealth, most of whose citizens and leaders are non-white. Many of the independent states which make up The Commonwealth were founded by leaders whose selling point as national figures was that they had been jailed by the British.

If The Queen was racist, we’d know, because Commonwealth leaders would love scoring such a cheap and easy political point off her. If the rest of the family were, we’d know even more about it, because as with the present scandal, there are many who would not criticise the Queen, but are happy to have a pop at the rest of the royals for not being like her, as they see it.

Prince Andrew is being accused of involvement in Jeffrey Epstein’s underage sex ring – a very serious charge, which is rightly being pursued vigorously. In fact it has been suggested that protecting Andrew lies behind the latest scandal – kicking Meghan Markle out is thought to form a wall around those who stay in.

So if anyone could pin casual racism on Prince Andrew, or the rest, they would. The Windsors may be white privilege, but not in the sense that ordinary Afrikaners were when South Africa was excluded from the Commonwealth due to its racist policies.

The whiteness of the royal family is more a matter of tradition, despite its historic non-white members. It is this tradition which was the real target of Meghan and Harry’s comments. It wasn’t monarchy itself, or the royal family and its role and duties, but the concept of “what is expected of you”.

The British public have seen all this before. When Princess Diana was killed in 1997 the Royal Family followed what it insisted was the protocol in such matters – remaining in Scotland rather than attending her funeral. This was “what was expected” according to the paid employees of the Royal Household, the principal private secretaries and the like.

It may have been once, but it wasn’t in 1997. The British public were angry at the apparent disrespect of the Royal Family towards both Diana and the public. It was their job to be with the people at this time, not in splendid isolation on their impenetrable Scottish estates.

The Queen probably knew this, and younger members of the family too, as they all have official engagements and deal with the public every day. But the householders behind the scenes are not public figures. To be part of the royal apparatus they have to follow rules they think set them apart from the rest of humanity, and they have to insist those rules are followed to justify them being there rather than somewhere else.

Eventually the Queen and the rest of the family went down to London, and the public forgave them, but didn’t forget. They weren’t the problem, it was the rules of the game. Bad advice had made the royals out of place in their own country, a system for the sake of a system, much like Communism became when everyone played by the Soviet rules but no one believed in them anymore.

There are two sides to the stories Harry and Meghan have told, and there are plenty of things the royal household could also say about them. But what will ring true is their claim that they were trapped in that environment, and their relatives still are.

Everything is done a certain way because someone thinks that’s what the royals should do. But no one seems to be asking why. It is hardly surprising that Meghan should have felt life wasn’t worth living, if she could project more royalty as a person, despite being an in-law, than she was allowed to do by the rules which were supposed to make her royal.

Human example, inhuman rules

In a constitutional monarchy, royalty is all about example. If something isn’t good enough, the royals will make it better, for the sake of their country and what it stands for.
An example of this occurred in 1998, when then-Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia was on an official visit. Saudi Arabia doesn’t allow women to drive. This is contrary to the liberal democratic traditions of the United Kingdom, so the Queen could not comment on this policy, but would not put up with it either.

When the Queen casually offered Abdullah a tour of the estate in a Land Rover, he somewhat reluctantly agreed, not realising the Queen herself would be driving him. She took the opportunity to show her what a woman driver can do, tearing around like a rally star at the age of 76 using the advanced driving skills she’d been demonstrating since she drove military vehicles in World War Two.

By this example the Queen demonstrated what her country was about, and more so than any partisan politician could. This is the continuing role of the monarchy. But maintaining the connection with the public, rather than following rules for the sake of it, is crucial to that.

The Queen is notorious for knowing everything that’s going in, and wanting to know more. The staff at the royal palaces generally get along very well with her because she takes a keen interest in everybody and everything.

She has been known to stop her car and get out so to watch children playing a game she’s never seen before, just so she can know what it is and how people react to it. Shops on or near her estates are liable to get unannounced visits so she can see what people are buying, and how much the shopkeepers are daring to charge them.

Successive British Prime Ministers have thought on taking the job that their weekly audience with Her Majesty would be like an afternoon off, a nice friendly chat with an old lady. They soon realise this not the case at all, as she wants to know every detail of what is being done, and why, and what benefits it will bring to the country.

Elizabeth II has seen it all, and sees the consequences of policies better than those who make them. BoJo the Clown might joke his way through parliament, but the Queen won’t put up with anything less than thorough professionalism from her politicians, determined to get the best deal for her country and citizens.

The personal failings and misfortunes of the Queen’s family are not setting the best example, but show that the example is there. Ultimately, the British public wants that. After all, who on earth would want to be ruled by politicians?

Letting the people elect a president just wouldn’t work in the UK. British governments are always elected by minorities of those who vote, due to the first past the post electoral system, so no one is really interested in government by the popular will, as the venom directed at the one such government they’ve had in living memory, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition which destroyed the latter as a parliamentary force, amply demonstrated.

For all its faults, the Royal Family really does represent the country better than elected politicians could. At present the UK is deeply divided over Brexit. At the heart of that is a debate over what it means to be British, and too what it doesn’t mean.

Canadians are famous for not knowing who they are, only who they are not, but the British are now vaguer about their national identity, and their own, than ever before. No elected politician could represent the UK in this climate as well as a royal can, as BoJo’s purge of non-Brexiteers from his party, a very untraditional thing for any British politician to do, as he showed the world at the last election.

The monarchy is made more secure by every scandal precisely because it is a scandal. Whether it can fulfil the role the British instinctively know it has is a problem, and the misguided ideas of royal household functionaries has given it. But no failure of understanding can shake the concept of statehood, which exists in a very subtle form, but permeates every country’s life regardless of whether it is even noticed.

**Only people do it this way**

The United Kingdom, as a constitutional monarchy, is governed by consent. Its monarch and Royal Family are embodiments of the principles and values of the nation as a whole. In a republic the people rule, whether they are right or wrong, good or bad. In a dictatorship the dictator’s ideas are the highest value, regardless of their consequences or motivations.

The day may come when the British public no longer consents to rule by the House of Windsor. With no other royal family waiting in the wings, despite several with better claims, the alternative would be a republic. But what happens then?
England has been down this road before, prior to the United Kingdom being invented. The Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell was in effect a military dictatorship with a strong ideological stamp, which over time came to be seen as narrow and pointless rather than the best way to address public grievances with King Charles I.

Everything we associate with royalty was altered by the Protectorate. Castles and palaces became stables and military garrisons, the crown jewels were melted down, the person of the monarch was replaced by the head of an armed committee which enforced the public morals. These were not symbolic acts which manifested the change of regime, but practical necessities for the maintenance of the new state on the terms it had constructed itself.

The British Royal Family are a tourist attraction in the way that other reigning royal families, say those of Sweden or Belgium, will never be. This is because the United Kingdom needs them to have an identity, however monarchies-turned-republics there may now be.

Sweden is easy to imagine without a king - its democratic, socialist image sits well with its cars and furniture and cleanliness, but don’t imply monarchy. Its monarch has a role, but is more a historical relic. In Belgium monarchy is the lowest common denominator, essential for the country in the negative sense that nothing else could keep it together, rather than because it represents what the country is about.

You’ll never have a United Kingdom without a monarchy because the institution is so bound up with what the country represents to both its citizens and everyone else. Nothing equally British, in the eyes of either domestic or international populations, can replace that.

The Royal Family doesn’t have to change, it merely has to re-educate its staff about what being royal is. Each new generation of royals does that, to one degree or another. Even though they have left “The Firm” and have now attacked it on global TV, both Harry and Meghan have done more for the monarchy and the UK than any number of politicians will, by showing they are real people, and those around them should be too.

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