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CENTRU ŞI PERIFERIE – CENTER AND PERIPHERY – CENTRE ET PERIPHERIE

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The Dynamics of Centre and Periphery in the British Society of the Twentieth Century

Each society, from the middle ages to the twenty-first century, has created an image of the monarchy which has given a sense of coherence and purpose to the nation at large. The people (the periphery) have imposed their expectations on the monarchy (the centre), requiring from it both a life-style and beliefs in conformity with the powerful social, economic, political and cultural forces of the nation.

Our study is dealing with the relationship and interference of people's life and attitudes with the life and image of the British royal house. A great merit of the British monarchy has been, except on rare occasions, its real desire and capacity to adapt to the needs and aspirations of the nation over which it has ruled for so long (we refer here not only to the inhabitants of the U.K. but also to the former empire and present Commonwealth). We have also considered important to emphasize upon the role of media in modern times, able and eager to render both the life of people and of the royals.

The technology-dominated twentieth century is linked to the long and eventful history of Britain and every change, event and achievement is bound up with the story of the monarchy. Works of art, literary products, architectural details and music, skilful craftsmen and artists and, more recently, mass media, have rendered the life of the British people linked to the colourful personalities and exploits of Britain's kings and queens.

Media, as a collective term for television, radio, cinema and the press, has always had its own distinctive output, technology, and industrial structure, and nowadays the media is often discussed as a single entity. Among the reasons for this are their combined importance as providers of entertainment, information and communication, their presumed power to mould public opinion and set moral and aesthetic standards, the growth of cross-ownership among various sectors, and their frequent interest in each other's personalities and problems.

Although Edward VII's political importance and influence were less than he imagined, he brought the monarchy into the twentieth century with flair and style. His many contacts abroad were useful in foreign policy before World War I, while at home he assented to major social reforms. His great love of royal occasions, pomp and ceremony gave added lustre to the crown's increasingly symbolic role. Thus, monarchy has changed with changing time.

In spite of the devotion which the old Queen Victoria inspired, she had not been frequently seen or heard by her people; she had very strict ideas on what a queen should or should not be seen doing. After her death, the people and press turned to her son, King Edward VII (1901-1910) and his wife, the beautiful Queen Alexandra, with eager expectation. At his accession, in 1901, he delivered a short speech expressing how deeply he felt the obligations of monarchy and why he had

taken the name of Edward VII, a speech full of eloquence and dignity that deeply impressed everyone present. He was a gregarious, outward-going man, who loved to see and be seen. On the average, he overtook every year thirty public occasions – attending banquets to promote humanitarian causes, opening universities, hostels or bridges, always full of grace and good humour, adept at making short public speeches. Edward VII was far more visible to his subjects than any monarch had ever been before. The king and his queen were the objects of such intense interest that their lives were almost lived in public. They were photographed at the theatre and opera, at Ascot; the parties they gave, the dinners – private as well as public – were reported in the press; the queen's and king's clothes, their jewels, food, dogs – the press and photographers could never have enough. Never before had the private, as well as the public life of royalty been so exposed to public view. And not only in the press, but also on the screen, at the new "picture houses" or cinemas that were springing up in the first decade of the twentieth century. Not only the century and the sovereign had changed, but also the image of the monarch and royalty at large was a new one; Edward VII responded to life on a public stage with an accomplished dignity and affability. Many members of the middle class deplored his gambling, worried about his extravagance but the majority of his subjects, particularly the working class, adored him. They loved his gusto for life, they betted on his horses and were as delighted as he was when one of these won the race.

And most important of all was the fact that Edward VII belonged to Europe almost as much as he belonged to Britain. He was uncle, first or second cousin of nearly all the royalty of Europe. The Emperor of Germany and the Tsar of Russia were his nephews, the King of Denmark his brother-in-law, the Queen of Spain his niece and the list could continue. His popularity in Europe was almost as great as it was in England. Beyond Europe lay his empire, the largest the world had ever known. In 1875-1876 he had paid a visit to India and had enjoyed it immensely. Being a man with large views, the attitude of many political agents to the Hindus and Moslems infuriated him by its obvious racial prejudice.

The friends of the royals were diverse – not necessarily aristocratic, but most of them rich and Edward asked at least one well-known radical to Sandringham[1], his beloved home – because the king enjoyed conversation with such people. Many European sovereigns, particularly the Germans and Russians, twitched their anti-Semitic noses at the fact that some of Edward VII's closest friends were Jews – Rostchilds, Kassels, Sassoons – and he was the first British monarch to attend a synagogue.

Queen Alexandra was a woman of great beauty, who created for herself a personal style of elegance, particularly in clothes. Even the French aristocracy rushed to imitate her hats, dresses and parasols. She was a woman of generous

[1] Sandringham can be considered the most informal of the queen's residences in England today, being essentially a large country estate. It was bought for the Prince of Wales, the future Edward VII, in 1861. in 1870 he replaced an existing building with the present Sandringham House, designed in a neo-Jacobean style by A.J. Humbert.

personality who enjoyed the same pleasures and hobbies like her husband and cared deeply for him. She tolerated with grace the beautiful women with whom he liked to surround in later years and was sympathetic to his need for company when her extreme deafness made prolonged conversation difficult. Anyway, she always retained her husband's deepest affection and regard throughout their long marriage. The wealthy friends of the king were eager to give him and the queen presents at Christmas, at birthdays, on every possible occasion. But Queen Alexandra insisted on modest gifts and refused, for the most part, to receive any personal jewellery except from her immediate family. However she adored Fabergé, so her friends and husband knew how to please her; this led to one of the most remarkable collections of Fabergé ornaments in the world: animals, rock crystal vases containing a stem of flowers or fruit. Everything by Fabergé was welcome – paperknives, boxes (some with exquisite views of Sandringham in sepia), cigarette boxes, photograph frames, even bell pushes and parasol handles. This passion for Fabergé lasted for three generations. Although Sandringham was a world for the rich and aristocratic – an elegant, secure and whimsical world in which everything was taken lightly – in Edward VII himself was a sense of serious commitment. He used to write letters to his mother about the treatment of Indians by English political agents, devote long hours to working people's housing conditions, go from one busy public function to another with dignity and warmth. The newly formed Labour Party adored him. The ante-chamber to the library at Sandringham palace symbolises one of the most important roles that Edward VII had discharged; there, to one side, is a red pillar box for posting letters and it represents the link between Sandringham (the favourite house of the king) and the vast empire over which Edward VII ruled and on which the sun never set. Many territories were tied closely to the mother country and communicated by cable along which telegrams could pass, and above all by postal service which Britain did so much to develop.

Sir Rowland Hill introduced the adhesive postage stamp, which was to become both a new art form and a new territory for the compulsive collector. The first members of the British royal family who became interested in stamps were King Edward when Prince of Wales, and his brother Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh. The latter became the Honorary President of the Royal Philatelic Society in London, later. Edward VII was deeply attracted to his sons, particularly George V, and their relationship was a vivid contrast to the troubled and difficult childhood he had experienced with his own parents. Edward VII brought back colour and pageantry to the monarchy, he loved the brilliance of the uniforms, state occasions, the grandeur that surrounded the visits of other monarchs. Beneath the surface of these glittering occasions were political and diplomatic tensions, particularly between Germany and Britain and the sovereign of Britain worked with all his diplomatic skill and personal charm to ease. It was not his fault that he failed, the conflicts being too deep.

The son who succeeded him, George V (1910-1936), was completely different in temperament. Although a king, he went on living, until his mother died, in 1925, in a modest villa, York Cottage, at Sandringham. Both the king and his wife, Queen Mary, retiring people, loved the house for its domesticity. The bedroom in which

she gave birth to all of her children, save one, was modest in size. The king was a splendid shot – many of his trophies are in the Game Museum at Sandringham and he sailed with great skill; he raced regularly at Cowes, often in friendly combat with Sir Thomas Lipton, the tea merchant. Unlike his father, he did not enjoy large weekend parties, endless dinners, cards and gossip. In the evening he preferred either to work in his study or sit with Queen Mary and read aloud to her. While the Edwardians expected a profuse ostentation, George V and his wife were to live through the terrible disasters of the first World War and bear the grim years of the 1920s that culminated in the General Strike of 1926, the bitter conflicts in Ireland, the terrible depression of the 1930s and the renewed menace of fascism in Germany and Italy.

In a desperate world of shifting and changing values, of revolution and disaster, the royals reflected an image of quiet dignity and family probity, a monarchy that was dedicated, dignified and given in no way to excess. But before the outbreak of the Great War, there was one occasion of imperial splendour: the great Durbar[2] which George V held as King Emperor at Delhi in December 1911, and was for the first time when a reigning monarch visited India. The king was well aware that there was a strong and vigorous movement towards independence, a growing criticism of the anarchism of princely India. The Indians – a crowd of 50,000 approximately – had expected their Emperor to ride on an elephant, but he rode on a horse into Delhi and had passed them before they could realise who he was. The king had taken along with him an official artist, Jacomb Hood, to record the highlights of the Durbar, but there also came photographers and film makers. The steady development and improvement of still and movie cameras were making unposed, outdoor action shots of royal occasions both easier and more dramatic. Edward VII had been extensively photographed but the exposure to the camera and to the world's press steadily increased throughout the twentieth century. Gradually more intimate scenes of royal family life were published in newspapers and magazines, to the delight not only of millions of British people, but also of Europeans and Americans. It became more and more difficult for the descendants of George V to maintain balance in order to retain both the dignity of the monarchy and a core of personal privacy. And this balance has been maintained with exceptional skill that has met the challenge of television, of action photography and film.

Although the film of the 1911 Durbar would appear now quite primitive in technique, it was startling at the time. It brought royal events into tiny picture palaces scattered throughout Britain, after that event more and more royal activities were eagerly followed on the screen and in consequence ordinary people became aware of the duties and relentless nature of the monarchy's yearly and formal rituals.

[2] *The Durbar* was a pompous ceremony in Delhi where the princes of India were supposed to pay homage to their Emperor. It had been planned with impressive grandeur. In December 1911 King George V and his Queen sat crowned and in their robes of state, not outmatched by the dazzling jewel-bedecked costumes of the princes, some of them richer than the European sovereigns.

Not only did improvements in cameras and filming please the royals, it also greatly pleased the public. By the accession of George V the royal photographic collection was immense and it grew even more. His mother, Queen Alexandra, had been an excellent photographer and his wife, Queen Mary, a natural collector, possessed a most sympathetic eye for photography and was quick to seize on human and moving situations for her private collection.

The British royals survived the social, political and economic crises caused by World War I; the Queen and other members of the royal family helped the king in his endless visits to factories, ports, hospitals and troop camps; the king visited his troops in France and his sons were eager to serve their country by land or by sea. All these activities were recorded and the films and photographs are part of the royal inheritance, giving life to one of the most critical periods of Britain's destiny. Every British family had its tragedies and the royal family was no exception. The king suffered severe injury during the war years and returned to England in terrible pain, having experienced at first hand the suffering and physical torment of many of his wounded soldiers. And yet these eventful years forged deeper bonds between the king, his family and their people.

An anti-German feeling led George V to adopt the family name of Windsor in 1917 instead of their former family name of Saxe-Coburg & Gotha and the royals' total dedication increased their popularity among the people belonging to all social strata. They were constantly seen, photographed and filmed, and at the same time they maintained some of the ancient mystique of monarchy in an age when class barriers were crumbling and the demand for a wider social democracy grew louder. The restoration of Brighton Pavilion and the completion of Holyrood House (in Scotland) showed Queen Mary and George V's passionate interest in the royal inheritance and their dedication to its preservation; both of them regarded themselves as guardians rather than owners of national treasures. The queen, especially, was considered a pillar of strength to the directors of London's museums and she took a special interest in the Victoria and Albert Museum; she learned a great deal about conservation, and about the need of careful cataloguing for scholarly research into so vast a collection as the Royal family possessed. Thus the royal collections were placed in the hands of distinguished scholars in the world of art – a process which has continued and expanded until the present day.

In 1920 a group of people decided to choose a gift that was intended as a gesture of good will and gratitude to the Queen and, at the same time help raise money for her favourite charities. So the Queen's Dolls' House[3] appeared in 1924.

[3] Queen Mary's Dolls' House (at Windsor Castle) was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and the garden by Gertrude Jekyll. All the exquisitely detailed contents were made by craftsmen or firms specializing in the full-scale equivalents. Everything is on the scale of an inch to a foot, so the taps in the bathrooms, the tennis rackets and golf clubs in the games cupboard, the wine bottles in the cellar or the cars in the garage are all one-twelfth of life size. Famous artists provided tiny drawings and prints for the cabinet in the library, and famous authors – Max Beerbohm, Thomas Hardy, A. Huxley, R. Graves – wrote miniature books to be

It was first exhibited at the Great Empire Exhibition at Wembley and has continued to draw tens of thousands of visitors a year to Windsor Castle. The public loved it when they first saw it and it still raises great sums for charities. Millions of ordinary men and women could now identify with the hobbies of the king and queen's delight.

The monarchy had begun to reach out to the most deprived and hard-pressed of their people. No matter how bitter the industrial strife, or how wretched the conditions, the king and the queen never hesitated to visit and to comfort, trying to more closely communicate with them and helping to promulgate the sense of one family, one people. At the time of the great economic crisis, which plunged Britain and many other countries into the deep depression of the 1930s, King George V and his advisers decided that words of comfort and endeavour would be deeply appreciated by the nation, and so, in 1932, he made his first Christmas speech broadcast from Sandringham. Millions of families throughout Britain and the Empire sat in silence around their wireless sets and listened to his words of hope. When George V died, in 1936, Britain lost a king who showed instinctive skill in adapting the monarchy to the modern world – making it constantly visible without losing its dignity and mystique.

The next king, Edward VIII (1936), while still Prince of Wales, seemed very eager to participate in the fast, sophisticated life of the 1920s. He possessed an extraordinary charm and captivated the people as much, if not more, than his parents; the papers and the news films were rarely without his picture, whether he was dancing in a night club or hunting in the shires, or visiting an institute for working men. He was widely popular and expected to make a good king. When Edward VIII's liaison with Mrs Willis Simpson began, the British press was all discretion, judging more wisely than he the mood of his people. As Prince of Wales he had had several affairs with Society ladies but had never shown any inclination to marry. When he inherited the throne, in 1936, aged forty-two, he soon made it clear that he wished to marry Mrs Simpson, a twice-divorced American lady. His family, the government, the Church and many of the British people were amazed. At one stage it seemed that the British monarchy would come to an end if he renounced the crown. Realising that he could not marry Mrs Simpson and keep the throne, Edward VIII chose to abdicate – the first British king ever to do so voluntarily. On 10 December, 1936, Edward VIII executed an Instrument of Abdication that was given legal effect the following day, by which Edward VIII and any children he might have were excluded from succession to the throne. In

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beautifully bound in leather. And all the rooms show a remarkable perfection of craftsmanship: the silver candelabra in the drawing room, the sofas and settees in the salon, the roll-topped desk in the Queen's bedroom, with its garniture of miniature porcelain. When enlarged by photography, these appear as perfect as they would have been if they had been made for a real royal palace.

Conceived as a present from the nation to the queen after the trauma of World War I, the Dolls' House was ready in time to be a centre of attention to the British Empire Exhibition at Wembly in 1924.

1937 he took the title Duke of Windsor and he and the Duchess spent the rest of their lives in exile, hoping in vain to be allowed a useful role in British public life.

Although Edward VIII had plunged the country into its first serious constitutional crisis since the seventeenth century, George VI (1936-1952), who succeeded him, together with his wife, Queen Elizabeth, by their constant devotion to the royal duties and their people, quickly re-established the popularity and the traditional role of monarchy – a new type of monarchy ready to cope with new challenges and requirements. But soon the country had to pass through the crises that resulted in the cataclysm of World War II. Never before had the British people suffered more the terrible ravages of war at home. The monarchy together with the people responded nobly. The king visited Coventry immediately after its bombing; both the king and the queen picked their way through the rubble of the East End of London, encouraging people and trying to bring them hope. They shared with their fellow-countrymen the experience of being bombed: Buckingham Palace was hit twice, the chapel devastated, the windows of king's study blown in. They used to keep a record in photography and film, which illustrated the heroism of ordinary men and women and also their own concern for the sufferings of their people; and the Christmas messages from Sandringham had never been more welcome than during those years. The king and queen spent the nights and some weekends at Windsor with their young daughters: Elizabeth and Margaret; they themselves played as active a part as their age allowed in the war effort.

The shy, retiring Queen Mary was also skilful in strengthening the affection in which monarchy was held. She possessed curiosity about people as well as a warmth and understanding towards human beings. In the Second World War hitch-hiking members of the armed forces in Gloucester- shire, where Queen Mary lived at Badminton House, would be amazed to see the royal Daimler draw up. They were invited to get in; then kindly questions about family followed and sincere best wishes as they were put down on their way to home or camp. An important feature of Queen Mary's character was her energetic and tireless curiosity, her sincere desire of helping people around.

When victory came, the people thronged to Buckingham Palace in their thousands for the traditional moment – the appearance of the royal family on the balcony; they had to return again and again to their cheering people.

But King George VI's health, never too strong, had been weakened by the strain of war and the years of economic and social crisis that followed. When he could escape from the constant round of public duties he and the queen spent time encouraging and giving their patronage to British artists. But George VI's health grew worse and worse. Visits to the Commonwealth countries – Australia and New Zealand – had to be postponed and he underwent drastic surgery; he seemed to recover, but died suddenly at Sandringham in February 1952.

So, the U.K. had now a young queen, whose coronation was the next year, 1953, the most spectacular royal event that television ever recorded. During her reign – more than 55 years now – the royal presence became more and more visible and so, too the royal homes and possessions. Queen Elizabeth II, Prince Philip, Prince Charles and other members of the royal family are deeply concerned not

only with their inheritance, but also that it should be made available to an ever wider public. Thousands of people visit now Windsor, throng to Osborne, swarm at Sandringham, travel to see Balmoral; even the great array of old masters, the stamps, the wonderful collection of motor cars and carriages are all put on display. And the family photographs and letters, invaluable source material for social history, are available for scholars.

This dialogue between the royals and the people, mainly through the media, has been of exceptional importance in the twentieth century and required great skill in its handling. When used with brilliance and subtlety it has been of great service to the popularity of the British monarchy.

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Summary

The beginning of the twentieth century brought a whole new dimension to the nature of the relationship monarchy had with its people. New means of communication as well as the development of the media became a means of changing the face of the monarchy, making it more transparent and more “human” to its subjects. Although in time it became more difficult for the royalty to maintain a balance in order to retain both dignity and a core of personal privacy, it has been maintained with exceptional skill that has met the challenge of television, of photography and film.