

The Cambridges in Australia: Balmorality 2.0?

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Students of the British Empire and students of the British monarchy are faced with a similar dilemma: the lack of a clear set of rules that makes either system intelligible. The Empire, with its wide variety of complicated constitutional arrangements, its formal, semi-formal and informal parts, may be largely gone today, but its successor organization, the Commonwealth of Nations, can only be understood if it is put into the context of the gradualism and pragmatism that characterized British imperialism for centuries and that left its legacy for substantial parts of the globe. A historic approach is also essential for those seeking to grasp the political and cultural relevance of the British monarchy, an institution whose role has continuously evolved and changed over time in a country with no written constitution. The recently concluded visit to New Zealand and Australia by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and their little son, Prince George, has been a good opportunity to look back on the historic relationship of monarchy and Empire-Commonwealth, and to discuss the consequences of the past for the present. In many ways, this royal tour can be interpreted as an attempt to breathe new life into two interrelated concepts that have defined the role of the British monarchy and its connection with the Empire, and later the Commonwealth, for at least a century: family and visibility.

When Victorian writer Walter Bagehot famously remarked in his 1867 study of *The English Constitution* that 'a family on the throne is an interesting idea', he probably was not thinking of a baby prince on a play date in New Zealand.¹[1] However, little Prince George's recent encounter in Wellington with a group of fellow toddlers selected carefully – and with due political correctness – from among his future subjects, and the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's informal meeting with their parents, could have easily been used by Bagehot as an example to illustrate his argument that the advantage of a family monarchy laid in turning

¹[1] Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London 1963), p. 117.

the otherwise abstract concept of sovereignty into something ordinary people could understand and relate to.²[2] The pictures of the happy young family on their trip Down Under fit neatly into a tradition which began with Victoria and Albert and their numerous children, was continued and reinforced by George V and Queen Mary, George VI and his wife, Queen Elizabeth, and, of course, Queen Elizabeth II, but was drastically interrupted during the 1990s, when one widely publicized family drama after the other struck the House of Windsor. The whole idea of family monarchy has been based on the condition that the royal family would live and behave in a certain manner, conveying a set of values, ‘Balmorality’, as Sir David Cannadine calls it, that do not include scandal, adultery or divorce.³[3] At least until now, the Cambridges have met that set standard, and in an age when any photograph of them travels the globe in an instant, everyone can see it.

The fact that the Duke and Duchess have chosen this trip to Australia and New Zealand, rather than public engagements in Britain, to finally give the world more than a glimpse of Prince George, and to introduce themselves as a small family jointly working for the monarchy, is also meaningful, and not only because of the continuity demonstrated by a visit of two future kings to their subjects on the other end of the globe. Since the later years of Queen Victoria’s reign coincided with the high age of imperialism, the British monarch has been portrayed and staged as the head of two different families, one real, one metaphorical: the royal family, and the ‘great imperial family’.⁴[4] This was part of a process in the course of which the Empire gave the British monarchy a new role after it had been deprived of most of its political power at home: to act as a symbol of the connection between Britain and its colonial dependencies. Splendid ceremonial events, such as the Delhi Durbars of 1877, 1903 and 1911, when Victoria, Edward VII. and George V., were proclaimed Empress and Emperors of India, were used to reinforce that image.⁵[5] The strategy of *being seen* and, following the invention of the wireless, *being heard*, both in Britain and across the Empire, was taken to a new level by King George V. and his wife, Queen Mary, after the First World War. Shaken by the series of revolutions that had swept away the monarchy in so many countries on the European continent and cost the King’s cousin, Tsar Nicholas II., his life, George V. and his consort added new elements to their roles by making themselves visible to the people, putting a greater emphasis on royal charity, cooperating with the press, broadcasting royal speeches and dispatching their grown-up children to tour the Empire. Their legacy for the British monarchy could be felt throughout the twentieth century and continues to do so.⁶[6]

²[2] On Bagehot’s line of argument see Philip Murphy’s enlightening new book, *Monarchy and the End of Empire. The House of Windsor, the British Government, and the Postwar Commonwealth* (Oxford 2013), pp. 1-2.

³[3] David Cannadine, *History in our Time* (London 1997), pp. 3-4.

⁴[4] Cannadine, *Ornamentalism* (London 2001), p. 119; *History in Our Time*, p. 4.

⁵[5] Cannadine, *Ornamentalism*, p. 101-107.

⁶[6] Miranda Carter, *George, Nicholas and Wilhelm. Three Royal Cousins and the Road to World War I* (New York 2009), p. 422.

The Empire no longer exists, but the metaphor of family ties that have bound its former components together has survived and continues to resonate to the present day.^{7[7]} Interestingly, the use of this rhetoric is not one-sidedly British or restricted to the royal family. In his speech on ANZAC day 2014, delivered during a war memorial service attended by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Australia's Prime Minister Tony Abbott underlined the 'family' ties that in his opinion continue to bind his country to Great Britain, even if the latter could no longer be called Australia's 'mother country'.^{8[8]} New opinion polls show that support for the monarchy in Australia is much stronger now than it was during the 1990s, and especially pronounced among the young generation. This contradicts earlier expectations that the role of the monarchy in the Commonwealth realms would automatically phase out in the post-imperial age.^{9[9]} The question remains, of course, whether the revived popularity of the monarchy in Australia can be regarded as a sign of a continued link with Britain, or whether it results from the fact that, in the age of digital media, the Duke and Duchess, and now also their little son, have turned into global icons that are likely to attract great interest anywhere, not just the Commonwealth. In any case, the masterfully staged royal tour to Australia and New Zealand has shown that the next generation of the British royal family is ready to embrace the strategy of public Balmorality. The most important prerequisite for its use is in place: people are watching.

^{10[9]} On the prominence of this perception during the age of decolonization see Murphy, *Monarchy and the End of Empire*, p. 8.

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^{7[7]} Murphy, *Monarchy and the End of Empire*, p. 3.

^{8[8]} <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2014/apr/25/tony-abbott-questions-mythologising-of-the-gallipoli-campaign>