

The royal wedding and the myth of national unity

Julie Hyland
29 April 2011

Events such as the royal wedding, the *Telegraph's* Matthew d'Ancona opined, “drop a dauntingly heavy payload of political symbols, messages about the social fabric, hierarchy, class, manners and our collective optimism: where we are as a nation, in other words.”

So where, exactly, is Britain today?

One thing can be established—a royal wedding is a sure indicator of hard times, at least for the broad mass of the population not invited to the ceremony but expected to foot the bill.

Princess Elizabeth married Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten on November 20, 1947. Two years before, Britain had emerged as one of the victors of the Second World War and the Labour Party had won a landslide in the 1945 General Election promising a land “fit for heroes.”

Britain's triumph over Germany, however, came at a price—the final ceding of its global domination to the United States. And, while Labour had carried through the nationalisation of key industries and implemented health and welfare provisions, widespread shortages, rationing and pay freezes continued.

In 1947, a growing sterling crisis saw the situation worsen significantly. In November of that year, just days before the royal nuptials, Labour Chancellor Stafford Cripps unveiled a budget of public spending cuts and tax increases that inaugurated an “age of austerity.”

Fast forward to July 29, 1981 and the marriage between the heir apparent, Prince Charles, and Diana Spencer. It was two years since the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher had taken power, pledged to dismantle the nationalised industries, roll back the welfare state, deregulate the City of London, and reinvigorate Britain's imperial ambitions.

Unemployment was at three million that year. In February, Thatcher had made a tactical retreat from plans to close 23 pits so as to better prepare a confrontation with the coal miners three years later. In the meantime, youth joblessness and police harassment ignited the first major British riots of the 20th century in Brixton, London in April.

In May, Bobby Sands became the first of 10 members of the Irish Republican Army to starve to death in Long Kesh in protest at the British government's decision to refuse them

political prisoner status. Riots swept nationalist areas in Northern Ireland at news of Sands' passing.

In July, little more than a fortnight separated further inner-city rebellions in Brixton, Handsworth in Birmingham, Toxteth in Liverpool and Moss Side in Manchester from the lavish ceremony at St Paul's Cathedral.

On to the wedding of Prince William, second in line to the throne, and Catherine Middleton. It takes place 30 months after the worst financial crash in 75 years, and 11 months into a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government that is utilising the resulting crisis to shift the class agenda even more decisively in favour of the super-rich.

The government's £100 billion programme of public spending cuts is the most severe since the 1930s, and one would have to go back to the same period to find a comparable squeeze on workers' living standards.

That royal nuptials, with their theme of national unity, invariably occur at times of increased division and strife is not only blindingly obvious, those charged with orchestrating such mood music openly admit to it. Winston Churchill described the 1947 ceremony as a “flash of colour on the hard road we travel,” while the marriage of Charles and Di supposedly enabled people to forget their worsening problems for a day. The pairing of “Wills and Kate” has been similarly packaged as good for national morale.

There, however, the similarities end. In November 1947, there were street parties in every town and city to celebrate, and even in July 1981 an estimated 10 million people participated in similar events.

What is most striking about today's event is that, though the powers-that-be have been pressing the same well-worn buttons, the response is markedly different.

Despite entreaties from Prime Minister David Cameron and special measures to reduce the red tape surrounding road closures, officials admit that few public celebrations have been organised, and those that have been prepared are largely confined to southern England. According to the Local Government Association, just 5,500 applications have been received, with the highest numbers in Hertfordshire and Surrey.

In large areas of the country, particularly the north, there are barely any events. There has not been a single application for a

street party in Glasgow, for example. Just four applications have been made in Sunderland, and the same number in Bolton, which held more than 100 in 1981. Oxford has received just five applications.

According to an ICM opinion poll, fully 45 percent of people questioned have no interest in the wedding and will try to ignore it. Only 18 percent say they have an “active interest.”

Sales of sick bags featuring a cartoon of the royal couple are a big hit, as are mugs with the slogan, “I couldn’t care less about the royal wedding.”

There is more than disinterest. Notwithstanding the fawning deference of the media (including its nominally liberal and republican components) and the official political establishment, there is a palpable sense of resentment amongst a significant section of the population.

It is not only that another hanger-on is to be added to the public purse, or that the estimated £4 billion cost of the additional bank holiday has hit small businesses particularly hard, while tens of thousands of workers without permanent contracts have lost a day’s pay. Even among permanent staff, more than a tenth have not been given the day off with pay (as usual on a bank holiday), and many more, including health care employees, are having to work as usual.

Announcing the wedding, a Royal spokesman said, “The couple are both very mindful of the economic situation the country is in.” Therefore, the royal family would pay those costs “normally associate[d] with a wedding ... such as flowers, reception, transport,” he added graciously.

Leaving aside that the royal family is largely funded by the taxpayer, the items listed do not include the cost of transporting, accommodating and entertaining the 2,000 or so guests—including senior government figures, 50 foreign heads of state and hundreds more of the not so great. The security bill alone is the most expensive in history. Estimates range between £20 million and £80 million, and this does not include the cost of Wednesday’s full dress rehearsal, complete with representatives of the armed forces marching around central London in the early hours of the morning.

An estimated 5,000 police are on duty in central London—along with armoured vehicles, surveillance, snipers and helicopters. According to the *Daily Mail*, they are necessary because “Irish and Islamic terrorist groups are considered serious threats to the occasion, while there are also fears over anarchist groups and hundreds of lone individuals with known mental health problems who have stalked members of the royal family.”

The police have warned that “robust” action will be taken against anyone planning to disrupt procedures.

In the last week or so, police teams have been involved in “pre-event investigation” and “intelligence gathering” which included visiting the homes of known protesters to warn them to stay away from central London today.

It is reported that more than 70 of those arrested during the

student protests and the TUC demonstration on March 26 have been banned from central London as part of their bail conditions. One young woman who faces aggravated trespass charges for a protest at Fortnum & Mason reported that she had been visited by plain clothes police and warned to keep clear.

What are the “messages” about “social fabric, hierarchy, class” conveyed by such measures? What accounts for this extraordinary nervousness?

In December, the limousine carrying Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall became trapped amongst a group of students protesting in central London against the tripling of tuition fees. Though the couple were untouched, the scene, replete with shouts of “Off with their heads,” has intensified the siege atmosphere surrounding the ruling establishment.

In March, the Liberal Democrats met behind a specially erected steel fence in Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg’s supposedly safe political seat of Sheffield. Days later, half a million people demonstrated against the coalition’s austerity measures in the sole national protest organised by the Trades Union Congress since the new government came to power last May.

In the *Telegraph*, journalist and political commentator Peter Osborne wrote that it was the “highly intelligent pragmatism” of the British monarchy, its “sure instinct as to when and how to adapt,” that had enabled it to outlive many of its international counterparts.

It should be noted, in this regard, that the first national public holiday to celebrate a royal wedding was in 1923, with the marriage of Prince Albert to Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, later the Queen Mother. It was the defensive response of King George V to the revolutionary upheavals of 1917 in Russia that had overthrown the Tsar.

But at the start of the 21st century, the pomp and ceremony of the latest royal wedding cannot conceal that “we” are not all in it “together”. Rather, it is rightly regarded by many as one more proof of the opposite.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact