

A DUCHY SUBJECT

Back in the early 1980s, much fun was poked in the West at the frail and aged leaders of the Soviet Union. Leonid Brezhnev had been looking poorly for a while by the time he died aged 76 in 1982. He was followed by the ghostly Yuri Andropov, who was only 68 but died just 13 months later. His bedridden replacement Konstantin Chernenko (73) lasted little more than another year. None of these people were as old as the current US president, but they seemed ancient at the time, and now they were all dead. The gerontocracy was over, and what Ronald Reagan called the Evil Empire seemed sure to collapse too.

Sure enough, with no more post-Stalin big beasts left standing, supreme power passed to 54-year-old spring chicken Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. Just as the older generation had feared, he gave up on the Cold War and dissolved the USSR just six years later.

World-leading Waxworks

Prince Charles caused a minor diplomatic incident in 1997 by referring to the massed Chinese leadership as “ghastly old waxworks”. The remark was particularly ill-judged because he was in Hong Kong at the time, ceremonially handing back this territorial relic of the thoroughly defunct British Empire. A quarter of a century later, as Charles is painfully aware, the UK has the dubious distinction of being the undisputed world leader in the waxworks stakes. His 95-year-old mother is not only the world’s oldest and longest-reigning head of state. She is also closing fast on the record for the longest-ever reign, currently held by Louis XIV who sat on the French throne for 72 years.

Yet apparently, having the same head of state for 70 years is something to celebrate. There may not be bread, but there will definitely be circuses this year, not to mention extra bank holidays. No-one is supposed to think that this regime’s time is nearly up.

Willie’s Bill

This year also sees a less well known anniversary, which deserves marking by those who care about land distribution in the UK. Fifty years ago, in February 1972, the MP for Fife West got to his feet in the Commons and proposed “a Bill to take into public ownership without compensation the Crown lands, the Duchies of Lancaster and Cornwall, and all the revenues therefrom, for the public good.”

Willie Hamilton’s Bill didn’t pass, but despite predictable outrage from the Conservative benches, 104 MPs voted for it, including two future leaders of the Labour Party. The roll of honour is preserved in Hansard, as is the lively debate, in which Hamilton was ordered to withdraw his description of Prince Charles as “that young twerp”, and rebuked by a furious Tory for having “a strange fixation with the Royal Family”.¹



Schoolchildren and celebrities march to Buckingham Palace to deliver the Wild Card petition, October 2021

Rewild Or Reclaim?

The Crown Estate owns around 615,000 acres of the UK, the Duchy of Lancaster 45,000 acres, and the Duchy of Cornwall 130,000 acres. Further land privately owned by the Royal Family totals over 70,000 acres. This all adds up to roughly 1.4 percent of the UK, an area twice the size of greater London, and includes plenty of urban property as well as farms, forests and moorland. The Crown also owns the seabed within the country’s territorial limits, and receives billions of pounds for graciously allowing offshore wind farms to be built out there.²

Campaigners are politely asking the royal family to rewild “their” land, not least their grouse moors and deer-stalking estates. This appeal is clearly aimed more at green-leaning Charles than at the present incumbent, and may meet with some success, despite the questionable merits of aristocratic rewilding (see page 17). But whether it be rewilding, affordable low-impact housing, allotments, agroforestry or whatever, wouldn’t it be easier and more equitable if all that land was publicly owned, and available for public-interest uses? No sensible person would trust the present Government to make best use of it, but hopefully they won’t be around for ever either.

Hamilton was an old-school socialist, and a lifelong republican. He did not mince his words, famously referring to the Queen as a clockwork doll, and Charles as “a nitwit and a gentle parasite”. (Efforts to locate a suitable quote about Andrew were unfortunately fruitless.) He campaigned tirelessly for the abolition of the monarchy, which he memorably called “a totem pole for tribal capitalism”.

This phrase might not have been very PC, but remains accurate. The continued existence and fetishisation of the British monarchy legitimises inherited aristocratic wealth and power, extreme inequality, and archaic feudal patterns of landownership. It’s a shame that no-one in the Commons today dares to voice what Hamilton argued loudly for decades: this madness has to end. It’s time to abolish the monarchy.

1. Hansard, 16 Feb 1972: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1972/feb/16/nationalisation-of-crown-lands-and-the>
2. www.wildcard.land/royals/ see also <https://whoownsengland.org>