

# British crisis has the monarchy at bay

by Mary McCourt Burdman

All is not well with the House of Windsor, Britain's royal family. Scandals hit the family all summer, but even the antics of the Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson, or the frozen marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales would have counted for little more than soap opera a few years ago. But now, Britain is plunging into a crisis worse than that of the 1930s, and all institutions are being shaken by the chaos. It is no coincidence that the last great crisis of the British crown, ending in the abdication of Edward VIII, later the Duke of Windsor, happened in 1936.

Britons by the millions are losing jobs and homes. The Tory government is destroying by the day what remains of the British economy. But Britain cannot sustain this for long. The chancellor of the exchequer may go; Prime Minister John Major may go. The highest levels of the British oligarchy are not immune.

The British crown is being hit on two fronts: financial and constitutional. Both are essential to its survival as one of the most influential institutions in the world. The possibility that the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales could end in divorce could shake the throne. The issue is not "family values." Charles is not only heir to the throne but also will be head of the established Church of England; the days when a monarch could dispose of wives with impunity, as Henry VIII did, are long gone. It is already being proposed that Charles abdicate the throne in favor of his son, Prince William.

Just as important are the calls to disestablish the church. A majority of British Members of Parliament polled in July, before the latest round of royal scandals, said they thought that church and state should be separated, the *London Times* reported Sept. 5. This would end the Queen's most important constitutional position, as supreme governor of the Church of England. The laws of the established church are the laws of Britain, and it is the monarchy, through its prime minister, which nominates the bishops for the church. If the church were to be disestablished, "I cannot see how there would be any role left for the monarch. The two go together," stated one church lawyer.

It was the evil Lord Louis Mountbatten, the uncle of Prince Philip, who created the "modern monarchy," which cultivates its own celebrity with the British people. This was the only way, Mountbatten thought, that the monarchy could survive. But the plan is not working.

In early September, Major felt compelled to state that the monarchy is "entrenched and enduring, and valuable,"

before making his official summer visit to the Queen at her Scottish retreat in Balmoral Sept. 12-13. Major is under pressure to demand of the Queen that some of the lesser young royals be dropped from the public expenditures, and that she might even pay taxes on her private fortune.

## 'Time to call a halt'?

Things have gone so far that the *Daily Telegraph* published an editorial Sept. 12 to disclaim a commentary it had printed two weeks earlier calling for the Queen to abdicate to make way for Prince Charles. In the editorial, titled "The Monarchy at Bay: Time to Call a Halt," the *Telegraph* wrote: "The Queen, today, represents the best hope for the stability of the crown," and demanded that the tabloid press stop hounding the royals. "It would be tragic if this summer's events were allowed to result in lasting damage to the monarchy."

Politicians from the three main parties in Britain, including the Tories, are calling for urgent action to prevent the monarchy from falling even lower in public esteem. Tory MP Michael Colvin wrote to Major calling for "revolutionary changes" in the way the royal family is treated. The scandals surrounding the Queen's children have "degraded the royal family," Colvin said.

MP Michael Ancram, himself an aristocrat, called for limiting the public payments to the royals, and warned that a constitutional crisis was fast approaching. Harold Brooks-Baker, director of *Burke's Peerage*, the aristocracy's Who's Who, said that "if the royal family doesn't change many aspects of its style, it will simply disappear, like its relations did across the continent."

The House of Windsor is one of the world's wealthiest operations. As British author Philip Hall describes in his book *Royal Fortune: Tax, Money and the Monarchy*, published this year by London's Bloomsbury press, the modern monarchy only gained its wealth since the last century. It did this by looting the British Empire and hoarding the public funds expended on its upkeep. The Queen invests the "private" fortune acquired in this way, which Hall estimates at £340 million but *Fortune* magazine puts at a whopping \$11.7 billion, free of taxation. This is new: The monarchy paid all taxes until 1910, and there is no "constitutional" basis for its not paying taxes now.

Yet the royals cost Britain at least £70-80 million a year. All estates, yachts, and so forth are maintained at public expense. In addition, the Queen and most members of her extended family are paid by the British taxpayers according to a Civil List which nominally goes to cover expenses of meeting public duties. This amounts to close to £10 million a year. In 1990, a 10-year deal was reached so that the annual scandal about increasing the Civil List for the likes of Prince Edward or Princess Margaret would be avoided. The deal cannot be revoked by Parliament; in addition, Parliament has no right to scrutinize any expenditures, a situation beginning to provoke an outcry.