

Britain's Prince Charles attacks science

By Richard Tyler
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Last week the BBC took the unprecedented decision of inviting Prince Charles to deliver one of its prestigious Reith lectures. These annual lectures were inaugurated in 1948 to honour John Reith, the BBC's first director general, who maintained that broadcasting should be a “public service enriching the cultural and intellectual life of the nation”. The BBC World Service transmits these lectures to an international audience.

The overarching theme of the lectures was “Respect for the Earth, Can Sustainable Development be Made to Work in the Real World?” Apart from Charles, the five other lecturers included such figures as Chris Patten (European Union commissioner for external relations), Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland (director general of the World Health Organisation) and Dr. Tom Lovejoy (chief biodiversity adviser for the World Bank).

In the wake of a plethora of food scandals—such as BSE (“mad cow” disease), e.coli, dioxin and salmonella—Charles has sought to utilise genuine concerns about food safety to advance socially regressive ideas. In his lecture he argued that “sustainable development” meant abandoning science in favour of mysticism.

“It is only recently that this [religious] guiding principle has become smothered by almost impenetrable layers of scientific rationalism,” he declared. “I believe that if we are to achieve genuinely sustainable development, we will first have to rediscover, or re-acknowledge a sense of the sacred in our dealings with the natural world, and with each other.”

His particular ire was aimed at genetics. He argued that it was all right to use science to “understand how nature works”, but “not to change what nature is, as we do when genetic manipulation seeks to transform a process of biological evolution into something altogether different.”

He continued: “It is hard not to feel a sense of humility, wonder and awe about our place in the natural order.” He concluded his lecture by virtually advocating the abandonment of industrialised agriculture and modern medical science: “Only by rediscovering the essential unity and order of the living and spiritual world—as in the case of organic agriculture or integrated medicine or in the way we build ... will we avoid the disintegration of our overall environment.”

The views expressed by Charles in his talk are not new. In 1996 he accused science of trying to establish a “tyranny over

our understanding”. In a speech at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies in 1993 he attacked progressive thinkers such as Copernicus and Descartes and the “coming scientific revolution” for undermining the “sanctity of the world”. In 1982 he criticised the British Medical Association for modern medicine's obsession with “cells and molecules” at the expense of “traditional” holistic medicine.

Charles has no qualifications whatsoever to speak on scientific or developmental issues, but he is understandably keen on preserving the so-called “natural order”. In the past his ancestors were usually ready to employ imprisonment in the Tower, or beheading, should any subject question the “natural order”, and particularly the monarch's pre-eminent place within it.

Charles is heir to what remains one of the greatest fortunes in the world (conservatively estimated at £250 million, excluding Royal palaces and treasures). He owns and controls the Duchy of Cornwall, established in the fourteenth century to provide an income for the heir apparent. The Duchy's total area is some 126,000 acres (51,000 hectares) spread over 22 counties.

Much was made of the fact that the troubled Prince had prepared his remarks while on a recent pilgrimage to a remote Greek monastery, where in humble dormitory surroundings, he read and prepared his talk by the light of an oil lamp. However, his journey there was in stark contrast to the ascetic surrounds of his retreat and his “environmentally friendly” message. As one newspaper reported, he came “on board the third biggest luxury yacht in the world, the Alexander, plaything of his friend, the elderly Greek shipping tycoon John Latsis. The Alexander comes equipped with ballroom, two speedboats and a helicopter.”

It is absurd that, on the opening of the new Millennium, political debate in Britain on a topic of vital importance—the production of safe food and the fate of the environment—has been dominated by the pantheist ramblings of a feudal relic. That the BBC provided him with such a prominent public platform to do so is extraordinary. Nor will it end there. The Prince has now been invited to address the all-party parliamentary science and technology committee, unprecedented for a member of the Royal Family.

It has long been a convention that the Monarchy should avoid making political statements not written for them by the government of the day, and that they should not become

involved in controversy on any question. Like the adage that children should be seen and not heard, Britain's ruling class is generally happier when the Royal House of Windsor provides a public spectacle in all their dynastic finery and do not presume to expound on questions they usually know little about.

For this reason the Prince of Wales' remarks were generally greeted with disapproval in the press, for fear that his display of ignorance, arrogance and hypocrisy would highlight the fundamentally undemocratic nature of the Monarchy as an institution. The *Times* described his appeal to "instinctive wisdom" as "dangerous nonsense". The *Independent* wrote, "If every farmer was to till the land in the same organic fashion as the Duchy of Cornwall there would only be enough food to feed about 4 billion people in the world-about 2 billion short of the current total."

The sharpest criticism of Prince Charles came from scientists such as the eminent zoologist and professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, Dr. Richard Dawkins. He attacked the notion that society should return to small-scale "sustainable" forms of agriculture: "The large anonymous crowds in which we now teem began with the agricultural revolution, and without agriculture we could survive in only a tiny fraction of our current numbers. Our high population is an agricultural (and technological and medical) artefact." He criticised the Prince's "hostility to science.... Far from being demeaning to human spiritual values, scientific rationalism is the crowning glory of the human spirit."

Scientists active in the field of genetics were especially disparaging about the lecture. Professor Steve Jones, author of *The Language of Genes: Solving the Mysteries of Our Genetic Past, Present and Future*, said, "I have no time for ... people who prefer ignorance to knowledge." Pointing out the essentially retrogressive implications of the policies advocated in the lecture, food science expert Professor Hugh Pennington said, "If we went down the scientific route Prince Charles is proposing the health of the nation would suffer and life expectancy might decrease."

John Sulston, director of the Sanger Centre, part of the project to sequence the human genome, said it is "commerce not science" that is the problem.

However, Charles' remarks had a specific purpose and were directed at a target audience. At 52 years of age, he sees his hopes of becoming King receding. If his mother, the Queen, lives as long as his grandmother, who celebrates her 100th birthday this year, he could well die before her. Since his public standing hit an all-time low following his divorce from Princess Diana, he has been thrashing around for some means to enhance his popularity and justify his right to succeed to the throne.

His denigration of science and appeal to the irrational and mystical are directed towards layers of the middle class whose reaction to the economic and social upheavals produced by new technologies and globalisation expresses a mistrust of science

and a fear of the future.

Among the few voices raised in support of Charles in the press was that of Andrew Marr, a former radical, editor of the *Independent* and soon to be the BBC's new chief political editor.

Writing in the *Observer*, Marr described his shared "private passion" with Charles for the author Wendell Berry. The Kentucky farmer Berry, says Marr, is "against big corporations, free trade, computers and industrial farming". His espousal of small-scale, low-tech local production is combined with a mystical evocation of petty agriculture and "community". His anger is primarily directed at the urban working class, which he calls the "industrial eater".

The toleration of Charles' ignorant and backward-looking comments forms a low point in intellectual life in Britain. Even many of those who dismiss his arguments still regard them as part of a "legitimate" discussion on science and the environment. They are not. Berry and his Royal disciple advocate policies that would mean the ending of modern production methods, throwing millions into unemployment, and reducing the world's population to isolated "communities" based on a barter/subsistence economy. Applying such principles would only be possible on the basis of returning to almost feudal levels of production and population.

Following the rapid developments in computers and telecommunications, today's groundbreaking discoveries in the field of biotechnology hold the potential to abolish the scourges of disease and starvation that afflict millions of the world's poor. Unlocking the human genome could provide the basis to cure diseases such as AIDS, presently decimating Africa. The use of genetic modification to enhance the pest-resistance and yield of vital food crops holds out the prospect of abolishing malnutrition.

It is the domination of agriculture (and science itself) by transnational corporations, engaged in a global competition for profits, that is antithetical to the safe and socially responsible development of new techniques and applications. Organising production along fundamentally different lines, on the basis of social equality and under the democratic control of working people, would harness the potential benefits of new scientific discoveries for the good of all, and the protection of the environment.

Transcripts of the Reith Lecture series are available on the BBC web site:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/events/reith_2000/

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>