

The Queen: Mr. Blair comes to the rescue

By Paul Bond
7 December 2006

The Queen, directed by Stephen Frears, written by Peter Morgan

Following their earlier film, *The Deal*, about the power-broking deal between Prime Minister Tony Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown, director Stephen Frears and scriptwriter Peter Morgan have again returned to tensions within the British political establishment. Intercutting dramatized reconstructions with documentary footage, *The Queen* covers the period from May to October 1997. Beginning with Blair's landslide election victory, it focuses on the week between the death and funeral of Diana Princess of Wales.

The film opens on the day after the election in early May. As it becomes clear that the Labour Party have won the election, the royal establishment begins to make preparations to deal with the incoming government. Blair, they have heard, is intending to "modernize" government, beginning with the adoption of a more informal style. There is some arch comment about whether Blair has been sent a protocol sheet yet. Queen Elizabeth (Helen Mirren) points out that it is not up to the winner of a popular mandate to form a government, it is up to the monarch to invite them to do so.

The royal household we are shown here is one that is supremely confident at first in its authority and position. When the queen and her adviser Robin Janvrin (Roger Allam) discuss whether Blair will try and update the monarchy, it is (at this point) as something unthinkable. The monarch's position is so secure that she can even see herself as being apart from and above the political life of the country: on polling day, with complete sincerity, she tells a portraitist painting her that she envies his ability to vote and the "sheer joy of being partial."

The awe felt by the Labour leadership at this authority is well captured in Blair's nervous fidgeting before his first audience. Asked why he is nervous, Tony Blair (Michael Sheen, revisiting the role from *The Deal*) stammers that "She's still ... y'know ... the queen." Later in the film Cherie Blair (Helen McCrory) tells him that "all Labour Prime Ministers go ga-ga for the queen." Mirren has the calm authority of vested power as she twists the knife in his embarrassment.

The Queen also captures well the archaic ritual and protocol of the institution. Blair contorts himself awkwardly so as not to turn his back on the monarch while leaving the room. Frears' film is full of subtle touches suggesting the Labour Prime Minister's assimilation of these protocols and mannerisms as, for example, his adoption of Janvrin's telephone call opening, "Sorry to disturb," rather than his earlier more natural informality.

Three months later, though, on August 31, 1997, the monarchy finds itself adrift following the death of Princess Diana and her boyfriend in a car crash in Paris. Secluded on their vast Scottish estate (40,000 acres) at the time of the accident, the royals initially choose to see Diana's death as a private matter. Expressing their concern for the welfare of Diana and Charles' sons, their responses are conditioned largely by their determination to protect the institution of the monarchy.

Prince Philip (James Cromwell) is a hidebound idiot who believes that the best thing for the boys is to be taken stag-hunting, with its "fresh air," and to be kept from all press reports. The Queen Mother (Sylvia Syms) is a protective grandmother, but contemptuous of any undermining of the monarchy. Neither sees any reason to change any of the longstanding

traditions. Their callousness is captured when Prince Charles (Alex Jennings) checks to make certain that his staff have made arrangements for a coffin: if it were left to the royal undertakers, he says, "They'll bring her back in a wooden crate."

Even Charles, who is portrayed as the most sensitive to the changed situation, is most concerned about getting a royal plane to go to Paris to bring back the mother "of the heirs to the throne." Frears and Morgan seem throughout to have toyed with images of motherhood and nation, and the idea of the monarchy as a dysfunctional family. They are not entirely successful in this (it is not a particularly interesting idea), but they do manage to bring out the royal family's real dysfunctionality, rooted in the crushing subordination of these individuals to the age-old institution they represent. As the queen tells Blair, in an apparently heartfelt comment, "Duty first, self second—that's all I've ever known."

Expressions of emotion among the royals are stifled and strangled. Mirren and Jennings, particularly, are brilliant at conveying this well of emotion without outlet. Emotion is regarded as something to be expressed privately or not at all. When Charles tells the princes of their mother's death they are seen in another room. For all the concern at their welfare expressed by the characters here, *The Queen* shows the princes being brought up into the same stunted tradition. Philip's insistence that the best way for them to deal with their emotions is by channeling them into bloodsports exemplifies this retardation of humanity. Similarly, the one moment when the queen expresses any overwhelming emotion, she is alone on her thousands of acres. As tears well up in her, Mirren is photographed from behind as if to emphasise the way in which such expressions of emotion are not quite the done thing.

One of the film's strengths is the way it looks at this process of subordination through the prism of the loyal retainers, particularly Janvrin (another fine performance from Allam). When Blair's speech is broadcast Janvrin suggests that it was "a bit over the top," and is somewhat disconcerted to find the royal staff in tears at it. Janvrin, professionally loyal to the point of obsequiousness, is eventually forced to play the intermediary between various royals and Blair in the attempt to deal with the changed situation.

It was Blair who rode to the monarchy's rescue in 1997, and the film shows his struggle with them over making the mourning public and an official occasion. In this, he is forced to confront their insistence that they know best and can rely on what they have always done. The queen tells him at one point that nobody knows the British people better than she does, and she fully expects them to behave as she predicts.

Blair also has to face the pushy cynicism of those closest to him. Cherie Blair is portrayed as the most critical of the monarchy as an institution, but it is certainly not a matter of principle, even as she mockingly calls Blair "Mr. Saviour of the Monarchy." Her alleged "republican" sympathies are little more than the bitterness of a section of the upper middle class who feel that their wealth and ambitions are restricted (unlike those of their counterparts in the US) by the existence of the monarchy and attendant institutions. Differences between her and her husband on this have a tactical rather than strategic character. At one point she describes the royals as "freeloading ... nutters," to which Blair

tells her that it is “unimaginable this country being a republic.”

Even more unprincipled is Blair’s Director of Communications, Alistair Campbell (Mark Bazeley). His opposition to the monarchy is thoroughly shallow and selfish. Campbell appears to judge everything and everyone by whether they will facilitate or obstruct his progress. Whereas Blair grows concerned at polls indicating that one in four support the abolition of the monarchy, Campbell sees only Blair’s increased popularity ratings (and the impact on his own career presumably).

For all his loyalty to the monarchy, Blair’s determination to save them has more to do with his position than theirs. Calling Diana the “people’s princess” (the phrase is Campbell’s) and making this his rallying cry, he sought to modernize the monarchy in line with the fraudulent quasi-populist rhetoric he was employing in regard to the Labour Party. Sensitive to the landslide electoral shift that had ended 18 years of Tory rule, Blair was wary of anything which might serve to emphasise further the distance between the royal family (and the entire British ruling elite) and ordinary people, hence his assertion that “the people” had kept faith with Diana, and his request that the queen “attend to their [i.e. the public’s] grief.”

At the same time he is seen as being driven to distraction by the monarchy, complaining, “They screwed up her life, I hope they don’t screw up her death.” When the royal family still refuse to hold a public funeral, Blair answers a telephone call from the queen’s household with the question “Have they seen sense?” When the royals refuse to fly a flag at half-mast over Buckingham Palace because they only fly the flag when the monarch is in residence, Blair cries out in frustration, “Will someone please save these people from themselves?”

In his dealings with the queen, whom he is shown as defending absolutely, Blair is portrayed as entirely cut-throat. When Elizabeth is finally persuaded to give a live broadcast (as monarch and “as a grandmother”), Cherie observes, “She doesn’t mean a word of this.” That’s not the point, replies Blair, “That’s how to survive.”

Perhaps the most telling expression of this cynicism lies in the way the film deals with the legacy of Diana herself. Charles is seen describing the divergence between the real Diana and the public image of her. He admits that the mythical Diana will probably win out.

Blair, too, acknowledges that the image of the sainted Diana was a fiction. Even while he was publicly talking about “the people’s princess,” Blair is shown telling Campbell that she had seemed “hell-bent” on destroying everything the queen had ever worked for. The almost casual abandonment of that image of Diana is significant. She is not directly portrayed in the film, but there is documentary footage, particularly from her interview with Martin Bashir. As montage takes us from the election to August, we see her telling Bashir “I am not a political figure.”

Diana comes across as a media-savvy, not particularly bright and perhaps quite neurotic young woman. What survives in her legacy is the effort to adapt the monarchy to new circumstances. It is this that the filmmakers touch on when the queen, watching the Bashir interview again, says “Maybe we were partly to blame.” Blair’s use of Diana, given his comments about her attacks on the monarchy, is shown as quite cynical—almost as cynical as the use she made of herself.

What Frears and Morgan do not comment on, however, is the way in which Diana had welcomed the arrival of Blair into Downing Street. She had seen in Blair someone with whom she could work to ensure the future of the monarchy, and the entire establishment.

The Queen’s critical and intelligent attitude toward the institutions of state, and their representatives, is welcome. The lack of respect for the authority figures is healthy. However, this operates within certain definite limits. The strength and precision of the performances, and their reverberations, may show us more than the filmmakers can articulate explicitly. Morgan, for example, has described the film as “primarily affectionate and sympathetic to all the people involved” and with

“nothing vicious or defamatory” in it.

This can also spill over in the opposite direction, into a blanket criticism of everyone, whether in power or not. Philip, watching the television broadcasts, says of the crowds mourning Diana’s death, “They’re sleeping in the streets and crying ... and they think we’re mad.” The film has relatively little to say directly about the public commotion over Diana’s death, aside from obliquely making reference to the political and moral vacuum that existed in British society.

In the absence of an alternative to the repellent conduct the film portrays, the writer and director find themselves championing some unlikely figures. Ultimately, it is the queen who is shown to have adapted most successfully to what she describes as a “shift in values.” Invoking the language of New Labour, she tells Blair at the end of the film that when the world has changed “one must ... modernize.” The embracing of this change, ironically, allows the queen to be seen as stolid, and remaining firmly within the monarchy’s traditions. Frears told one reporter that “The queen is steadfast and principled whereas Blair we see as lacking principles.” This is pretty paltry stuff.

In part perhaps it reflects the disillusionment felt by many of those who voted for Blair in 1997 or who had some vague hopes that a Labour government would represent a real change after years and years of Thatcherism. As in *The Deal*, the filmmakers are trying to find out where things went wrong. In the same interview Frears described Blair as “such a disappointment.”

The Queen ends with a warning to Blair. In the final audience between monarch and Prime Minister shown here, the queen puts Blair on notice that his popularity too may suddenly wane, and he will then have to face suddenly-changed circumstances. It is a telling moment, and, in light of the massive unpopularity of the Iraq war in particular, seems one of the filmmakers’ most pointed comments.

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