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**6 December 2000**

The problem is not one particular royal family or one particular royal. The problem is the office itself. Now that Westminster has been purged of most of its earls, dukes, marquesses and viscounts, there is a general acknowledgement that the purge was long overdue. The present arrangements are widely agreed to be flawed, but no one at all argues for the return of the hereditaries. That leaves the beached whale of monarchy as the only remaining part of our unwritten constitution dependent on the accident of birth.

This is, in itself, indefensible. While much of the rest of our society - its aristocracy, its land, its property, its money, its hierarchies and feudal arrangements - was organised upon hereditary lines, the monarchy comfortably fitted into a wider pattern. Our society is no longer arranged upon these lines and the monarchy no longer fits.

It seems fruitless to begin by demanding the immediate advent of a republic in Britain: it ain't going to happen. We should begin instead by asking for a referendum about what sort of head of state we should have once the Queen dies. People ought to be able to say whether they would prefer to have an elected head of state or to continue with a monarchy. Do they want to be citizens or subjects?

We declare our hand: we hope that in time we will move - by democratic consensus - to become a republic. We are gradualists: we accept that it will not happen tomorrow. Let the Queen remain Queen for as long as she lives, or she wishes, or she remains able. But in the meantime there should be a long, vigorous and grown-up debate - both inside and outside parliament - as to who, or what, should succeed her.

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