

The New York Times

What's the Cure for Ailing Nations? More Kings and Queens, Monarchists Say

By **LESLIE WAYNE** JAN. 6, 2018 [in NYT print edition, Sunday, January 7, 2018]



Queen Elizabeth II and her husband, Prince Philip, at a parade in London in 2016 for the monarch's 90th birthday. Credit Richard Heathcote/Getty Images for The Patron's Lunch

OXFORD, England — From the comfort of his country estate in Oxford, a distant relative of the Russian literary giant Tolstoy says he has the perfect solution for what ails the United States.

America, he declares, needs a monarchy.

In fact, Count Nikolai Tolstoy says, more kings, queens and all the frippery that royalty brings would be not just a salve for a superpower in political turmoil, but also a stabilizing force for the world at large.

“I love the monarchy,” Count Tolstoy, 82, said as he sat in his lush garden behind an expansive stone house. “Most people think the monarchy is just

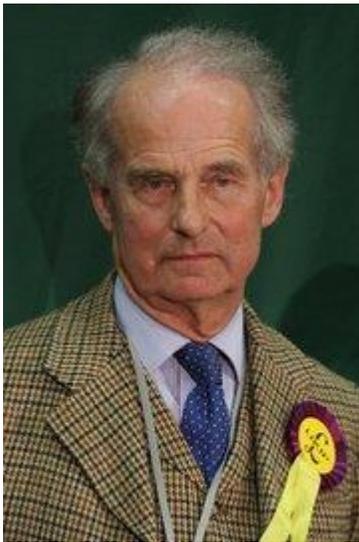
decorative and filled with splendor and personalities. They do not appreciate the important ideological reasons for a monarchy.”

The count is not the only voice advocating rule by royalty. An author and a conservative politician who holds dual British and Russian citizenship, he leads [the International Monarchist League](#) and is part of a loose confederation of monarchists scattered across the globe, including in the United States.

Their core arguments: Countries with monarchies are better off because royal families act as a unifying force and a powerful symbol; monarchies rise above politics; and nations with royalty are generally richer and more stable.

Critics say such views are antiquated and alarming in an era when democracies around the globe appear to be imperiled. The count and his band of fellow monarchists, however, are determined to make their case at conferences, in editorials and at fancy balls.

A recent study that examined the economic performance of monarchies versus republics bolsters their views. Led by Mauro F. Guillén, a management professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, the study found “robust and quantitatively meaningful evidence” that monarchies outperform other forms of government.



Count Nikolai Tolstoy said most people “do not appreciate the important ideological reasons for a monarchy.” Credit Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images

Far from being a dying system, the study said, “monarchies are surprisingly prevalent around the world.” They provide a “stability that often translates into economic gains”; they are better at protecting property rights and checking abuses of power by elected officials; and they have higher per-capita national incomes, the study said.

Mr. Guillén says he was “shocked” by the results, which have not yet been published. “Most people think monarchies are something anachronistic,” he said. “They think that modern forms of government are superior and have trouble accepting that monarchies have advantages.”

When he presents his findings, “there is more skepticism in the room than with the average paper,” said Mr. Guillén, who is not a monarchist. “It’s been an uphill battle.”

His findings come as no surprise, however, to monarchists, who aim to preserve existing monarchies and to support royals who live in exile. They believe that countries with exiled royals should return them to the throne, and that nations without monarchies should consider a switch.

“We support the retention and restoration of monarchies anywhere in the world,” Count Tolstoy said. “Our goal is to persuade people.”

History books, of course, are replete with examples of monarchies that became symbols of repression and rapacious, [cloistered wealth](#). Some were ousted by bloody rebellions (the American and French Revolutions) or collapsed in ruins (the Hapsburg Empire), and many have ruthlessly marginalized whole classes of people.

Constitutions, Not Absolute Control



But Count Tolstoy insists that monarchists are not pining for the days of absolute rulers and the divine right of kings, when Henry VIII of England could order up the execution of unwanted wives and political foes.

Protesters in Madrid in 2014 demanded a referendum on the Spanish monarchy. Credit Daniel Ochoa De Olza/Associated Press

Instead, his group advocates constitutional monarchies, in which a king or queen is head of state and the real

power rests with an elected Parliament — much like those in Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway and Spain (although demonstrators in 2014 demanded a referendum on the Spanish [royal family](#) after [King Juan Carlos](#) abdicated).

All of those countries, the monarchists note, have relatively strong economies.

Mr. Guillén’s study shows that since 1900, 22 countries have abandoned royal leaders, while 35 others adopted them. Forms of constitutional monarchies took root, at least for some time, in emerging economies like Malaysia and Thailand.

Still, the study noted that some current monarchies lack basic democratic freedoms, including in Brunei, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Swaziland.

After the Arab Spring, some analysts noted that monarchies like Morocco, Jordan and the Gulf States demonstrated much more stability than countries like Iraq, Libya and Egypt.

But Sean L. Yom, a political-science professor at Temple University who studies Middle Eastern governments, said that stability might be fleeting: With some of those monarchies propped up by oil money rather than a love of any royal family, “monarchies are on their way out,” Mr. Yom said.

“Those surviving in the Middle East are the very lucky survivors of history, and it is just taking more time,” he said. “These countries look so good only because their neighbors look so bad.”

Contesting the Throne

Finding people to reject the monarchists' vision is not hard, even in Britain, where Queen Elizabeth II is revered by many.



Hassanal Bolkiah, the sultan of Brunei, and Queen Saleha waved during a procession in October to mark the golden jubilee of his accession to the throne. Credit Roslan Rahman/Agence France-Press — Getty Images

A London-based grass-roots organization called Republic, which wants the country to hold a referendum on the monarchy when the queen dies, says bluntly [on its website](#), “The monarchy isn’t fit for purpose. It is corrupt and secretive.”

The group has a clear mandate: “We want to see the monarchy abolished and the queen replaced with an elected democratic head of state,” it says.

[Graham Smith](#), Republic’s chief executive, said that current polls showed about 20 to 25 percent of Britons to be anti-royalty, and that it had been hard to win broader support. “Our job is to keep raising that number,” he said, adding that “public opinion takes time to shift.”

As for the Monarchist League, Mr. Smith dismisses it as “a crank organization.” He said: “They are going against the general direction of history. You cannot just pluck a family out of obscurity and put them in charge of a country.”

Count Tolstoy acknowledges that the International Monarchist League had turned into a “league of eccentrics” under its former chancellor, [Victor](#)

[Hervey](#), who had been jailed for a jewel heist, worked as an arms dealer and sought tax exile in Monaco.

It was founded in 1943 on the belief that the monarchies of Eastern Europe could be a bulwark against Soviet expansion. Count Tolstoy took over in the mid-1980s, and says the current members are “sensible, run-of-the-mill people.”



Count Tolstoy has written books on ancient and postwar British history. He has also run, unsuccessfully, as a parliamentary candidate for the far-right U.K. Independence Party in four general elections.

King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands at a celebration in the city of Lelystad in November. Credit Robin Van Lonkhuijsen/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

King of the United States

When he considers the United States, Count Tolstoy is certain it would be better off without a presidency.

“There is an alternative,” he wrote in [an opinion article for The New York Times](#) before the 2016 election. He noted that neither candidate “appears to be a Washington or a Lincoln,” and pointed to a neighbor as an example: Canada, he wrote, “demonstrates that democracy is perfectly compatible with constitutional monarchy.” “

But being an American monarchist can be a tough sell. The country, after all, was born of rebellion against a British king.

Charles A. Coulombe of Los Angeles, a former stand-up comic and a monarchist, said, “If you say you are a monarchist, there is a strain of disloyalty or treason.”

There are no reliable estimates of how many monarchists there are in the United States. But to help disseminate their message, a Washington think tank, [the Center for the Study of Monarchy, Traditional Governance and Sovereignty](#), opened this past year.

American monarchists also find ways to help the cause abroad. Thomas R. Hutson, a retired State Department diplomat who was posted in Belgrade, has been advocating the restoration of [Alexander, the crown prince of Yugoslavia](#), as the monarch of Serbia.

On his own dime, Mr. Hutson has repeatedly traveled to Serbia to promote the prince, who was born in exile in London and later moved to Belgrade. But Mr. Hutson admits that he is making little headway.

“I tell people I’m a monarchist and the conversation lasts three seconds,” he said. “There is resoundingly no interest in him coming back as king. It’s a generational thing. The monarchy completely goes by young people who lack of a sense of history.”

He insists, however: “I’m not giving up.”

The Rev. Canon Kenneth W. Gunn-Walberg, the rector of St. Mary’s Anglican Church in Wilmington, Del., and leader of the Monarchist League’s chapter for the Eastern states, said the appeal of monarchies was simple.

“There is style, a mystery and ethos with a monarch,” he said. “Presidents come and go. There’s continuity, a sense of history with a monarchy.”

A version of this article appears in print on January 7, 2018, on Page A8 of the New York edition with the headline: The World Could Use More Kings and Queens, Monarchists Say.