

# The Queen and her Guards

Jayati Ghosh

From the middle of May onwards, media in Britain have been completely obsessed with the celebrations of the diamond jubilee of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. By the first week of June, when the formal festivities took place, the obsession had transmitted to the public, such that even otherwise sensible people seemed to talk of little else. While not quite commanding the same cachet as a royal wedding, this particular landmark has also been milked for all it is worth by the government as a "once in a lifetime party" to celebrate sixty years of rule, even if only titular in nature.

Much of the media coverage has been fawning and adulatory, with attempts to whip up royalist fervour and popular enthusiasm that can be cringe-making to an outsider. Of course, this is a nation that apparently still sees the monarchy as one of its cherished institutions – a remarkable recovery from two decades ago when its image was at an all time low. The Queen herself described 1992 as an "annus horribilis", when tax problems, messy family divorces and other scandals plagued the Royal Family.

Thereafter, a combination of astute media management (including not just through official channels like the BBC but even commercial movies depicting real life personalities like the Queen herself) and the growing lack of trust in other British institutions led to a recovery of the fortunes of the Windsors in public perception. According to opinion surveys, support for the monarchy is now at its highest level for three decades, and the Queen's personal popularity ratings are close to an astonishing 80 per cent.

This particular anniversary has been seized on as an opportunity for Britons to forget, at least temporarily, the decline in the economy, the rising unemployment and the swingeing fiscal cuts that are soon going to undo many aspects of life that they have taken for granted. It is of course also an attempt to re-establish Britain's image and "soft power" abroad, with the monarchy seen as one of the more significant cultural exports of Britain, responsible for encouraging a lot of tourism. As one government Minister put it "pageantry is what we do, what we are good at". The events surrounding the Diamond Jubilee have been seen as a way of showing to the rest of the world that the United Kingdom can put up an impressive show, not just in this case but as a forerunner of the London Olympics to be held a few months later.

So the celebrations have been multiple and prolonged, with people being encouraged to hold street parties everywhere, public areas festooned with banners for weeks, several events like road and river processions held in open areas for the public to watch, and so on. Royal carriages and royal barges, some of them not used for decades, were taken out of storage, cleaned and painted and generally smartened up for the show, while media ran riot speculating on what the relevant ladies of the Royal Family might wear and what they finally did wear.

Yet in this choreographed display of national pride, there were already some disquieting undercurrents. Even before the Jubilee celebrations started, the Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt

(who is in charge of managing this event as well as the London Olympics) has been under fire for his close links to the media empire of Rupert Murdoch, which are alleged to have affected his declared impartiality in assessing a takeover bid by one of their companies that would have given them near monopoly cable television rights in the UK. As the official enquiry into the matter proceeds, his fate is still not clear.

Even worse, just after one of the most trumpeted events, some sordid details emerged of the way that a private company dealing with the security cover had dealt with their labour. This brought out how superficial the display of glorification had been, in a context of dramatically eroded material conditions and fragile social cohesion.

One of the highlights of the anniversary celebrations was supposed to be the procession of the Royal Barge down the river Thames, flanked by various other decorated boats and watched by tens of thousands of spectators on the banks. As is common nowadays in Britain, much of the security for the events was not handled directly by the metropolitan Police, but parcelled out to different private security agencies, several of whom are also bidding for or already contracted to provide security for the London Olympics.

The day after that event, it emerged that one of the security companies, "Close Protection UK", had been using unpaid wage labour working in terrible conditions to provide the actual security. A report in the Guardian newspaper on 4 June 2012 noted that "A group of long-term unemployed jobseekers were bussed into London to work as unpaid stewards during the diamond jubilee celebrations and told to sleep under London Bridge before working on the river pageant. Up to 30 jobseekers and another 50 people on apprentice wages were taken to London by coach from Bristol, Bath and Plymouth as part of the government's Work Programme."

The group of young people from Bristol were picked up at 11 pm the previous night and brought into the city by coach. They reached in the middle of the night, at 3 am. Because of the concrete, no tents could be put up. So they were told that they would have to sleep in the open through the wind and rain, huddling under the London Bridge for some protection from the elements. They were woken at 5.30 am and given their "uniforms": boots, combat trousers and polo shirts.

The young men simply changed under the bridge, and after a fruitless wait for some place to change in (even the coach, which turned out to be locked) the young women also had to undress and get into their uniforms in public. They had to wait a long time to get some food before work started. They were then "on duty" until nightfall, around 16 hours. After the river pageant was finally over and all the people had left, they had to travel to a campsite in Essex where they had to pitch their tent in the dark, before leaving for home in the morning.

For this "valuable work experience", the company concerned confirmed that those on apprentice wages received GBP 2.80 per hour (which is less than half of the official minimum wage for workers above 21 years) while the 30 or so unemployed people received nothing. Several of them reported that they were originally told they would be paid, but when they reported for the work and got into the coach to London, they were told that the work would be unpaid and that if they did not accept it they would not be considered for well-paid work at the Olympics.

A spokesperson for the private security company had a different take on the matter: "The only ones that won't be paid are because they don't want to be paid. They want to do this voluntarily, [to] get the work experience." This was apparently because they would no longer be able to claim jobseeker benefits if they accepted a wage for the work.

There has since been an outcry on the matter, with the former Deputy Prime Minister Lord Prescott writing to the Home Secretary to demand an enquiry into whether the company concerned has broken the security industry's own standards and action against the company if this is found to be the case. But this particular case, which has been publicly exposed by committed reportage, may well be the tip of the iceberg of the rapidly declining employment standards in Britain.

Indeed, such employment practices are precisely what all the official moves towards "labour market flexibility" are all about, in the United Kingdom as well as in other parts of Europe. It is interesting that the same officials who cry themselves hoarse about sweatshops in the developing world are eagerly promoting such aggressively exploitative practices by private employers using state funds.

The worst affected are the youth, who experience historically high rates of unemployment and few prospects of any improvement in the near future. They are increasingly forced into this kind of underpaid or unpaid work in the forlorn hope to getting something even slightly better in the form of paid work in the future.

The irony of the situation is compounded by the fact that this was for security work to cover an event celebrating the uniquely long-lived nature of British royalty, and by extension, all things British. They are clearly "changing guard at Buckingham Palace"...

\* This article was originally published in the Frontline Volume 29 - Issue 12 :: Jun. 16-29, 2012.