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*A democratic alternative to the monarchy*

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Mr David Jordan  
Director of Editorial Policy  
BBC, White City  
201 Wood Lane  
London W12 7TS

Cc: Mr Mark Thompson  
Ms Helen Boaden

Dear Mr Jordan

### **Request for meeting over BBC bias in reporting on the monarchy**

I wish to raise with you our serious concerns about widespread and institutionalized bias in favour of the monarchy which is evident throughout the BBC's output, whether on air, in print or online, a bias which has the effect of excluding, offending, disparaging and marginalizing a substantial section of the British public.

This is a general complaint which has been exacerbated by the Corporation's coverage of the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. I wish to illustrate our case by citing examples but I would stress these are only examples of a more general problem: I am seeking a response to the whole problem, not just answers to the specific points and examples below.

Specifically I am asking for a meeting between yourself and Helen Boaden, Director of BBC News, and representatives of Republic, so we can set out our case further and discuss this matter in more detail. But first let me explain further why we are seeking this meeting as a matter of some urgency.

The basis for our complaint is that the monarchy is a contested and disputed institution, a great many people want to see it abolished: 10-12m people in this country would support the abolition of the monarchy; polls indicate more than half of Britons want the taxpayer to stop funding the monarchy; other polls show a majority would prefer William replaced Charles as next in line to the throne; two thirds of people want the palace opened up to more scrutiny.

Furthermore this is, by its nature, a political institution. It is not a benign entity: it is a core part of our constitution and the power structures that exist in this country. To emphasise this point I would quote a report from the respected think tank Demos:

"The monarchy is at present an exceptionally political institution. The Crown in Parliament is the core principle upon which our un-codified constitution rests, and the monarch is



responsible for various tasks including settling such issues as the selection of a prime minister, the dismissal of a parliament and the operation of the judicial system. The Queen is even required to be the ultimate political 'insider' in the UK system, with regular meetings with the prime minister. These roles are without equivalent in the constitutional and symbolic monarchies of northern Europe ..."

I can also quote the constitutional law expert Professor Adam Tomkins, who has said the idea the monarchy is powerless, non-political and just for show: "is one of the greatest myths that the monarchy has put forward ... it is just patently false ... the monarchy has immense constitutional power."

As a consequence of this and the hereditary and unaccountable nature of the institution members of the royal household are public figures who should be treated in the same manner as afforded to politicians: recognized as being publicly funded, in need of scrutiny and open to challenge.

Conversely as a contested institution that is all too aware of its need to retain public and political support the monarchy itself puts a lot of effort into its own promotion and PR, seeking to sustain myths and images that cast the institution as benevolent, benign and unifying. It is clear to us that the wedding is being used as part of this continuing PR campaign to shore up support for the monarchy and for William Wales as future head of state.

It is understandable that the palace would seek to do this. Every institution seeks to promote and justify itself. It is also appropriate for the palace to provide opportunities for their supporters to join in any celebrations they may hold. What is not appropriate however is for the BBC to join in those celebrations, to allow itself to be co-opted by the palace press office or to abandon its usually high standards of impartiality when reporting an event such as the royal wedding.

It is the job of the BBC to report the monarchy, as with any institution or issue, in an impartial and balanced way. Your own guidelines state that the BBC must: "...apply due impartiality to all... subject matter."

Yet despite this the BBC has failed to follow its own guidelines in covering the monarchy in general and the royal wedding specifically – the Corporation has continued to treat the monarchy as benign, harmless and apolitical and works on the assumption that everyone supports the institution. There is a catalogue of evidence of a general and deeply entrenched bias, whereby the monarchy is promoted and celebrated by the BBC while the most minimal lip-service is paid to alternative views.

The evidence includes, but is not limited to:

- The presentation of royal reports stands out from other reports by marked deference and hushed tones from the reporters. There is also a general sense of happiness and excitement from reporters and news presenters which implies royal stories are simply about fun and entertainment.
- Since the announcement of the engagement in November the BBC News website has published over 100 stories related to the issue, many of which comment on the popularity of the monarchy or matters regarding public spending or government decisions. Many simply relay information provided by the palace press office. Only one makes any substantial reference to Republic or republicanism.
- The BBC has reported as fact the suggestion that the wedding will provide a boost to the UK economy, despite evidence from the CBI that a public holiday would cost the economy between £5bn and £6bn.
- You have repeated without question statements from VisitBritain about the effect of the wedding on tourism, despite their claims not being supported by the evidence and despite a challenge to these claims being made by Republic.
- The BBC has continued to imply through the tone and prevalence of its coverage that the whole country is excited by the wedding, despite polling evidence that a clear majority are not interested.

- One story is about Scarborough council providing public money to 'train' local residents in organizing street parties. We know from one of your own journalists that there was local political opposition to this and we informed the same journalist of our opposition to it, yet the story is entirely positive on the matter with no mention of the opposition.
- You published an article by Paul Reynolds, BBC World affairs correspondent, in which Mr Reynolds departs from reporting fact and starts making unfounded and baseless claims about the monarchy, including: "The British monarchy therefore is adapting, just as it always has. That is why Britain is most unlikely to become a republic" and "It is probably no coincidence that monarchies have survived where democracies have thrived. There are royal families in countries with the most impeccable modern democratic traditions - the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Britain ... Why is this? Probably, because in these places, the monarchs were disempowered but left as figureheads. The real business of society was and is done by the people. The rest is for show. And on 29 April it will be quite a show." These are opinions that are at odds with the facts and which completely ignored other views. Moreover these comments show an inexcusable level of ignorance of the British constitution and play into the myths that monarchists prefer to promote about the institution – that it is benign and unifying.
- The BBC has reported on any number of related matters that include a story about a Margaret Tyler who has collected royal memorabilia for 30 years, yet has completely ignored the activities of the thousands of people who support Republic, and Republic's own preparations for the royal wedding.
- Since the announcement of the wedding, and with the exception of a handful of BBC local radio stations, Republic has not received one invitation to contribute to any debate or discussion on the issues surrounding the wedding, despite your regular coverage of the issue. It is worth pointing out that not all that coverage has been about dresses and honeymoon plans, but has often looked at related issues or invited comment on what the wedding means for the future of the monarchy or how it reflects public opinion regarding the monarchy, issues which opponents of the monarchy would clearly have a view on.
- BBC Radio 4 and the BBC News website have carried content from Phillip Blond in which he makes a (very poor) case for keeping the monarchy. There was absolutely no balance in this whatsoever and to date no attempt has been made to rectify this, despite a promise that the programme on Radio 4: "aims to achieve due impartiality over time by inviting a wide range of contributors".
- In a piece on the BBC News website about "what makes a great royal wedding" the BBC dismisses "cantankerous republicans", a reference to a large body of the British public that is simply offensive. The same piece goes on to associate the monarchy with patriotism, again dismissing republicans and implying that we are not patriotic. Here we see the BBC actively promoting a particular political view by disparaging and insulting a strong and proud British political tradition that is supported by a substantial number of British citizens.
- Overall your news and factual output has provided considerable coverage of the royal event and the monarchy, often covering not the royals themselves but other people who are taking an interest in the institution or the wedding. Yet there has been not one item (beyond a single website report on one of our press statements in November) which covers republicans or republicanism.

The sum total of your reporting gives a misleading impression of the monarchy, reinforces misunderstandings about its nature and its role in our country, suggests that all right-thinking and sensible people have positive feelings toward the monarchy and fails to question or scrutinize those assumptions. The effect of all this is that a substantial body of opinion is marginalized and excluded by the BBC. I can testify to this fact as I regularly receive emails and letters from republicans – by no means all our members – who are angry and frustrated about the BBC's coverage. There is a widespread view that the BBC has a pro-monarchy bias, a view even shared by some of your own distinguished journalists, not least, apparently, Jeremy Paxman, who in 2008 accused the BBC of "fawning" over the royal family, adding that the BBC did not know whether to "report" or "celebrate" royal events. I would suggest that the job of the BBC is to report, yet you instead end up celebrating.

Let's be clear about one thing before we go on: we are not simply seeking more coverage for Republic, although it would be appropriate to see our spokespeople invited to contribute to debates more often given that we are the UK's only organization that seeks to represent mainstream republican opinion. Our complaint is about the overall tone, substance and style of the BBC's royal reporting. It is of course the case that you cannot be expected to have a republican voice in every royal report, but every royal report must be balanced, the tone must be one of an impartial, disinterested report and the content must reflect the points above about the monarchy's contested nature. It is also the case that the BBC could make some effort to reflect the diversity of opinion by covering republican opinion and activity, also in a fair and balanced way (without resorting to clichés and stereotypes).

I believe one source of this problem is that your department has failed to categorise the monarchy as a 'controversial issue', something you do for most other issues that involve a variety of opposing views. I would stress that even without this categorization our argument stands up and your duty of impartiality applies. However, categorizing this issue as controversial is not only appropriate, it would place greater emphasis on the need of your editorial staff to ensure balanced and impartial coverage.

To press this point further I will draw your attention to your own guidelines, which state: "In determining whether subjects are controversial, we should take account of:

- the level of public and political contention and debate
- how topical the subjects are
- sensitivity in terms of relevant audiences' beliefs and culture
- whether the subjects are matters of intense debate or importance in a particular nation, region or discrete area likely to comprise at least a significant part of the audience
- a reasonable view on whether the subjects are serious
- the distinction between matters grounded in fact and those which are a matter of opinion."

On most of these points the monarchy fits the bill. This issue is regularly a subject of debate in the media and is certainly contentious. As noted above opinion is clearly divided on the various issues around the monarchy. In parliament a number of MPs support the abolition of the monarchy, including Caroline Lucas MP, leader of the Green Party. Parliament has recently debated reforming the finances and secrecy of the institution.

The subject is often topical and there is clearly a need to be sensitive to the beliefs of the 20%+ people in this country who oppose the monarchy. The issue is clearly of a more sensitive nature in certain regions and nations of the country and carries important connotations within the context of various nationalist movements. Clearly it is a serious subject grounded in fact and opinion.

I am sure you will agree that with 20% of the population being denigrated, ignored and excluded by the BBC this is a serious matter. So for the reasons I have set out above I am asking for an urgent meeting between you and representatives of Republic, so that we may press upon you the seriousness of this issue, explain in more detail the grievances of republicans and discuss ways in which reporting on these issues can better serve our diverse society.

I have previously received an email from Helen Boaden in which she dismissed my concerns, so I would add that if the BBC continues with its current policy and practice we will be seeking other avenues through parliament and the courts. I would hope and trust, however, that you will give this matter the serious attention it deserves and agree to meet with us at the earliest opportunity, so we can at least make our case to you and discuss this matter further.

All the best



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