

The royal family is edging toward modernity – but in 2026, the public will expect yet more transparency

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This year, as King Charles gathered with the royal family for their traditional Christmas at Sandringham, he had much to reflect on. It has been a year that has seen the king grow into the role of a silent but effective diplomat, navigating Donald Trump's visit while demonstrating the UK's support for Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Ukraine. Overseas trips have included successful visits as head of state to Canada – shortly after Trump had suggested it might become the US's 51st state. For his use of the monarchy's soft power to support UK foreign policy and strengthen international relations, Charles has won plaudits.

He has been praised too for his openness about his health – a significant departure from centuries of secrecy surrounding such matters in the British monarchy. This has undoubtedly done much to make the king seem more relatable and empathetic, and has consolidated his personal approval rating among Britons at 62%, according to an October poll by Statista.

But for all this, the fly in the ointment has and will remain his brother Andrew, despite him being stripped of his titles. His proximity with sex-offender Jeffrey Epstein is a scandal that has engulfed the family and continues to raise profound and potentially existential questions for the monarchy. Indeed, contemporary expectations of transparency and accountability are finally beginning to focus on the monarchy. Silence now suggests there is something to hide, and this erodes public trust. Indeed, public support for the monarchy reached its lowest level on record this year. While a majority still supports its continuation, the figure has steadily declined since 2022.

There are questions around what was known and ignored regarding Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor. What further questions of accountability and transparency may arise? Should it not be more widely known that as monarch, the king has sovereign immunity and so cannot be tried in court? Moreover, the monarch's exemption from the Freedom of Information Act prevents scrutiny of how royal funds are spent and conceals the extent to which the monarch may attempt to influence government policy through private lobbying efforts. This, many would argue, fundamentally undermines democratic accountability.

This year the House of Commons library published a research briefing on the finances of the monarchy. The report tracks how the value of the monarch's official funding has risen to £132.1m for 2025/6. The king also received £28.7m in 2024/5 from the Duchy of Lancaster and a private undisclosed income from investments, inherited wealth and income from family estates. Since 1993 the monarch and heir voluntarily pay income tax, but not on the sovereign grant, and nor do they automatically pay capital gains or inheritance tax. Questions as to what constitutes "public" and "private" money should be asked, and a clear separation made between state and royal wealth.

The royal family has consistently been reactive rather than proactive when it comes to change and public opinion, and continues to believe in privilege and privacy at all costs. Yet for the monarchy to survive and thrive, and the king to continue to play a role as a unifying figurehead, supporting charitable causes and exercising soft power internationally, he needs to embrace openness and accountability. Reverence towards the institution is all but lost, but without transparency, it risks further alienation, mistrust and fatal irrelevance. As the king is praised for the openness with which he has spoken about his health, perhaps he might reflect on the expectations the public may have of a truly modern monarch.

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