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PRINCE CHARLES AND HIS LETTERS

One item of news since the last issue of the *Intelligencer* will be greatly welcomed by UK skeptics. This is the long-awaited publication (*notes 1 and 2*) of 27 letters exchanged between Prince Charles and UK government ministers and departments, followed up by the release of a further 17 letters (*note 3*). They are only a small sample of the correspondence between the prince and government ministers over many years. In 2012 a tribunal ruled that the letters should be disclosed, as the public was entitled to know how and when the prince sought to influence government. However, the then Attorney General Dominic Grieve vetoed the ruling, arguing that publication of the letters would seriously damage Charles's future role as King because they would compromise his political neutrality. This was a somewhat illogical argument since the prince himself had already done this by writing the letters (and there is no guarantee at all that when he eventually becomes King he will display political neutrality). In March the Court of Appeal ruled that Mr Grieve's use of the veto had been unlawful; the judges declared that he had 'no good reason for overriding the meticulous decision (*of the tribunal*)'.

The first batch of letters refer to a range of topics including 'beef farming, dairy quotas, the power of supermarkets, Lynx helicopters, badger culling, Irish gaols, the fate of sea birds, derelict hospitals, listed buildings, Scott and Shackleton's Antarctic huts, summer schools, old-fashioned teaching methods, herbal medicines and of course, albatrosses and the Patagonian toothfish'. The second batch includes further appeals in favour of alternative medicine and concern about hospital food.

The insistence that the *reigning monarch* should act in a politically impartial manner appears to be universally held and is likely to have been reinforced by the strict example set by the Queen herself for the last 63 years. (Before that, her great uncle Edward VIII's comment during a tour of poverty-stricken villages in South Wales that 'something must be done' was interpreted as interference in political matters. Her father George VI actively supported Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy and was initially unhappy about Winston Churchill's succeeding him as prime minister. He was known to be uneasy about the pace of reform instituted by the postwar Labour government and the dismantling of the British Empire.)

There have only been three previous heirs apparent in the last 100 years. The future Edward VIII seemed more interested in his personal life than anything else and his brother, the future George VI, was first in line for only a brief period until the Abdication in 1936. The present Queen was only 26 when she came to the throne in 1952. So the implicit rules that limit the future monarch's overt expression of his or her political views are not clear. It seems reasonable to speculate that the rigorous standard of perceived neutrality set by Charles's mother, which is highly valued by the nation, has created similar expectations about the behaviour of the next in line, even before he comes to the throne.

Despite this, it does not seem that the public in general have been all that troubled by what Charles has to say or about his writing the letters in the first place. Journalists are divided. Apologists for the Prince claim that in the course of his duties he meets thousands of people from all walks of life and all he is doing is drawing the government's attention to their concerns. Inspection of the letters does not bear this out: clearly he is expressing his own concerns and opinions and what policies the government should adopt. Neither does the accolade 'a man ahead of his time' (by 10 years according to his son Harry, who recently advocated the return of National Service) hold up. One may say that people can agree or disagree with his opinions and politics but his role when he is King is to unite the nation, not divide it.

Whether or not the prince is entitled to voice his opinions to government ministers, what is of most concern is that this has largely been undertaken in secrecy. In addition, according to the *Guardian*, analysis of court circulars reveals that since the start of 2010, he has held 87 meetings with ministers, opposition party leaders, and top government officials. Also, from the beginning of 2015 until the start of the election campaign, he held meetings with, among others, David Cameron, SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon, education secretary Nicky Morgan, and Alistair Carmichael, then Scotland Secretary. That the British public should not be allowed to know the contents of all of

this lobbying and letter-writing between its elected government and the future head of state is an affront to democracy.

Notes

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/prince-of-wales-correspondence-with-government-departments>
2. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/prince-charles-letters>
3. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/live/2015/jun/04/second-batch-of-prince-charles-black-spider-memos-to-be-published-live>