



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Could constitutional monarchy crack a democratic conundrum?

It might not be a magic bullet for the old puzzle but could provide an institutional bulwark in democracies where it still exists



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Could constitutional monarchies be a bulwark against rising demagogues? Following the death of Queen Elizabeth II, a long reigning and popular monarch, there has been a lively debate on the continued relevance of lineal monarchy in our Age of Republics.

There appear to be two main camps. The first points to the obsolescence of the institution, the fiscal burden it places on society for its upkeep, and the contradiction between the concept of lineal monarchy and the principles of human equality and elected mandates. Not only has the divine right of kings and their absolute powers long ceased to exist, they have also lost effective executive authority. The democracies in which they still survive are no different politically from republics except that formal authority is exercised in the name of the monarch because s/he is the formal head of state. The monarch's role is now ceremonial and symbolic.

The second camp follows the adage that it is counterproductive to 'fix a system that ain't broken'. It underscores the continuing popularity of lineal monarchs, and their uniting and stabilizing role in a political environment becoming increasingly fractious to the point that democracy itself is coming under threat even in longstanding democracies.

Monarchy, however, is a red herring, for it is not monarchy that is a threat to democracies today but demagogues. The far right periodically throws up charismatic figures who seek to assume absolute powers by leveraging the electoral system through their charisma to overthrow democratic institutions. They are reminiscent of the monarchs of yesteryear. This vulnerability of democracies to demagogues has been long known. It was flagged over two millennia ago by the ancient philosopher Plato based on a short-lived experiment with limited democracy in the Greco-Roman world. The makers of the US Constitution also agonized over this weakness and tried to incorporate checks and balances and separation of powers into its written text to guard against demagogues. Recent happenings in American politics indicate that this is easier said than done. Despite its antiquity, no enduring solution to the democratic conundrum has been found.

I present a stylized case for the second viewpoint in rhyming verse, with the suggestion that constitutional monarchies that have a king or queen rule in parliament, as opposed to being the king or queen of parliament that demagogues aspire to, can possibly be a bulwark against such democratic transgressions. The advantage that constitutional monarchies enjoy is their popularity and legitimacy, which can make them uniting and stabilizing forces in a democracy, rising above divisive politics. They are popular among the people, so may not be as easily set aside by demagogues as



other institutions run by bureaucracies. The charismatic authority of the nouveau monarch would be pitted against the continuing legitimate authority and popularity of lineal monarchs. In such circumstances, the constitutional monarch would essentially be defending constitutional democracy.

There are of course caveats to the argument. For instance, constitutional lineal monarchs could lose their popularity and thus their legitimacy, in which case they serve no useful function, thereby warranting abolition of the institution. Just as a popularly elected democratic leader might jettison democracy on losing popularity, a constitutional monarch could also try and usurp power back from parliament, which would be to mimic the nouveau monarch instead of countering distortions of democracy. If this were to happen, the monarchy would need to be set aside. After all, it was for this reason that Charles I of England lost his head four centuries ago. Lineal monarchy cannot also be made to order, and so the argument is applicable only to select democracies where these still exist, such as Great Britain. America is excluded for the same reason.

Constitutional monarchy might not be the magic bullet that can slay the ages-old democratic conundrum, but it could well provide an additional institutional bulwark in democracies where the institution still exists.

*Constitutional Monarch:
Privileged and to the palace born,
Why should we death of a Queen mourn?
For what place does royal lineage,
Have in our republican age?
For with the blood of monarchy,
On the blocks of equality,
Liberty and Fraternity,
Were built the Republics we see,
They brought with them democracy,
Governance through majority;*

*Rule by, for and of the people,
That made broad progress possible.
Electoral democracy
Also came with new tyranny:
Charismatic authority,
That can act like a monarchy.
This democratic conundrum,
Has from the time of Plato come;
For the charismatic leader,
Can make democracies founder.
The charisma they generate,
Is based on division and hate;
Thus they can with the people's will,
All neutral institutions kill.
Max Weber argued charisma,
Fades and cannot last forever;
Thus democracies can survive,
As old institutions revive.
But there can be no certainty,
Society will again be free;
For all institutions founder.
With society torn asunder.
And herein is the irony:
A constitutional monarchy,
Can an effective bulwark be,
Against absolute monarchy.
The first is king in parliament,
The latter king of parliament;
The first defends democracy,
The other wants autocracy.
Lineal monarchs are popular,
Because they wield little power;
They can give a democracy,
Unity and stability.
For when a King or a Queen dies,
A new sovereign will arise;
It is the one institution,
The rising monarch cannot pin.
But should monarchs unpopular be,
Or seek to usurp power;
That would be for democracies
Cue to abolish monarchies*

Larry Page's flying car failure is a lesson for techno optimists

Moonshots usually fail even if backed by big money and big names



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Kittyhawk's rivals were surprised it decided to wind down

For a project so ambitious, the official grounding post of flying-car startup Kitty Hawk Corp was surprisingly terse. The company's LinkedIn page stated: "We have made the decision to wind down Kittyhawk. We're still working on the details of what's next." The news was greeted with surprise by rivals. Founded in 2010, Kittyhawk figured out early that it needed to make an aircraft as nimble as a car, rather than bolt some wings on an automobile. It helped pioneer a new type of aircraft called eVTOL, or electric vertical takeoff and landing—a cross of drone with a light aircraft—and hopes ran high when the deep-pocketed Google co-founder Larry Page came on board.

The dream wasn't to be. Details on what went wrong for Kittyhawk have not been made public, but there are at least three sobering lessons to glean from its closure. *Technology isn't moving in the direction we expect.* The billionaire tech investor Peter Thiel highlighted the banality of tech's evolution in 2013 when he said, "We wanted flying cars, and got 140 characters instead," referring to the then-character limit for tweets. In the 20th century, people viewed the future through the exciting lens of science fiction: robot housekeepers from the *Jetsons*; or glass-domed houses and 'meal pills' from the 1950s comic strip *Clockwork Orange*; or flying cars from *Back to the Future II*. But predicting the path of technology is difficult when our only reference point is the present, hence why Marty McFly used a fax machine in the film's future world, and why Arthur Radebaugh's 1950s comics featured items like paper and pens for writing "electronic Christmas cards." Back then, the concept of digital information was impossible to fathom.

Digital, networked information ended up becoming the biggest tech leap forward for the 21st century, an invisible force that put small, addictive computers in everyone's pockets and rewrote the dynamics of democracy itself. Trying to predict which technology will be as impactful next is still just as hard to fathom. It could be decentralized crypto networks that give everyone a piece of web3, or a radically different kind of personal computing device, like smart contact lenses that project digital images onto our eyeballs. Now, Silicon Valley thrives on chasing the bold ideas of eccentric entrepreneurs, but it also means the biggest ambitions are often too hard to make real.

Moonshots usually fail. There's a well-known trope among Google employees that's deeply embedded in the company's culture: Failure is good. The head of Alpha's

bet's division, the company's skunkworks R&D lab for churning out radical technological ideas, said in 2016 that the unit had killed about 100 projects in one year and celebrated "fast failing." When a team ended a project, they'd get applause from their peers. Xs CEO Astro Teller said, "Hugs and high fives from their manager," he added. "They get promoted for it." They could also get away with it thanks to Google's \$200 billion ad machine.)

That is the natural process of turning a revolutionary idea into a blockbuster hit. But there have been few hits at X and hyper projects like Google's augmented reality glasses, smart contact lenses for diabetics, or balloons that could beam internet access to the developing world have been shut down. It's easy to get lured by the thrill and promise of projects like flying cars, but they are called moonshots for a reason. When technology is hard to build, it's much less likely to succeed.

Big-name backers don't necessarily solve big engineering challenges. Though it's unclear what went wrong at Kittyhawk, the company likely couldn't solve some fundamental engineering puzzles. One of its models, for instance, suffered a series of fires because engineers had cut out the protective shielding used in lithium-ion battery cells for cars, and bundled the cells together with tape, according to a 2019 investigative report in *Forbes*, increasing the risk of the battery igniting. Engineers who brought up safety concerns were also brushed off by managers who were eager to bring the company's aircraft to market, according to the report, on which the company declined to comment. Kitty Hawk had raised \$75 million from investors including Page, by Pitchbook data. But Page's wealth and connections weren't enough to keep the firm alive. Neither was the cachet of being named after the town where the Wright brothers held their first flying experiments. But someone will make eVTOLs a reality, most likely as a kind of flying taxi operated by an airline or ride-share firm. Boeing and Airbus are building them, as is Uber and a raft of smaller companies, trying to crack the puzzle. As much as a billionaire backer inspires confidence, it doesn't make a highly ambitious project any more feasible. Page's Kitty Hawk project has made it all too clear.

MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

We may tread deep water in pursuit of industrial metals

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The confluence of three major forces has triggered a strategic re-evaluation of the global industrial metals supply chain.

First, worries about climate change have accelerated the arrival of electric vehicles (EVs). EVs today are primarily dependent on lithium-ion batteries. The cathode for this battery is made up of layered crystals of lithium metal oxides. The metal is usually a mix of nickel, cobalt, aluminium and manganese. Nickel by itself can give us the most energy-dense batteries, meaning cars with longer driving range, but it is unstable. Cobalt plays the role of boosting energy density and battery life because it keeps the layered structure stable as lithium ions are exchanged from the cathode during battery operation. The dramatic rise in demand for EVs has put the supply of all these metals under stress.

Second, trade tensions between China and the US have a ripple effect on industrial metals because China is often the largest 'refiner' of these metals. For instance, about

80% of the world's lithium refining capacity is controlled by China. In the case of lithium, China imports the raw material from Australia and then refines the ore into usable lithium carbonate or hydroxide used in the batteries. It then supplies this refined lithium to several 'gigafactories' that manufacture a disproportionate share of EV batteries.

And third, the conflict in Ukraine has put mineral supply from Russia at risk. Russia is a major producer of many metals, but is a key producer of nickel. The Russian city of Norilsk is situated literally atop the world's largest deposit of nickel, copper and palladium. Even though Russia is the third-largest producer of nickel by tonnage, sulphide-sourced nickel from Russia is more suitable for EV batteries.

On behalf of countries that need these materials, many companies have been exploring widely in an effort to diversify away from Russia for nickel in particular and Democratic Republic of Congo for cobalt. One of the largest sources of these metals has been identified on ocean floors at a depth of 5,000m or more. The most massive of such fields is located at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean between Mexico and Hawaii in an area called the Clarion Clipperton Zone (CCZ). Approximately the size of the conti-

United States, the CCZ is home to potato-sized rocks called polymetallic (PM) nodules, which form on or just below the vast sediment-covered abyssal plains. PM consist primarily of precipitated iron hydroxides and manganese oxides on which are found metals like nickel, cobalt, titanium, copper and rare earth elements (other than lithium, typically). There is an enormous quantity of these nodules on the seabed, making it an attractive target for mining.

The International Seabed Authority (ISA) based in Kingston, Jamaica, is the agency that is chartered to "organize, regulate and control all mineral-related activities in the international seabed area for the benefit of mankind as a whole." The ISA is organized under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It regulates 54% of the world's deep seabed beyond national jurisdiction. The ISA maintains a Deep Seabed and Ocean Database that serves as spatial, internet-based data management system.

The United Nations Organization for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) and the ISA are the only pan nation-state organizations that work to manage a common property resource.

The exploration for PM creates significant environmental impact on the deep seabed. Over the last few years, research activity has centred on mitigating this environmental impact. A significant area of study has been the 'sediment plume' left behind after scooping up PM from the ocean floor. Critics say that the impacts of nodules mining are many. PMs take millions of years to form and provide a critical habitat for an array of unique and understudied species. Deep-sea habitats evolve slowly, so recovery from mining could take several centuries.

India has been an active member of the ISA and accorded exclusive rights to explore for PMs in the Central Indian Ocean Basin. Located due South of Kanyakumari, these rights cover about 75,000sq-km of area and

hold a resource potential of 380 million tonnes, containing nickel, cobalt, copper and manganese. In recent years, the National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT) has conducted research, including the use of a mining machine for locomotion and manoeuvrability at depths greater than 5,000m. India is now designing a manned submersible vehicle called Matsya 6000, capable of ploughing depths of 6,000m.

Less well known than the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), the NIOT has quietly been plumbing the depths of the Indian Ocean. Its mandate is to develop reliable indigenous technologies aimed at harnessing non-living and living resources of the ocean.

India has had a mixed track record of mining on land in a commercially purposeful, environmentally safe and community sensitive way. While deep-sea mining facilitates migration to cleaner technologies and has no local human communities to worry about, it has high technical complexity and a potentially harsh environmental impact. Yet, as the world begins to tread on the deep ocean floor, India may have to follow.

P.S: 'How inappropriate to call this planet Earth when it is quite clearly Ocean,' said Arthur C. Clarke.