



Rachel Stroud

AND THE AWARD for least surprising piece of news so far this decade goes to...Charles and Camilla's decision to marry! Thanks to the legions of royal reporters, biographers, speculators and general hangers-on (yes, Paul Burrell, I mean you) who are constantly available for comment, we were all aware of exactly what was going to happen years before Charles asked the footman to fetch a cushion so that he could get down on one knee.

In light of this, it seems odd that there has been such a fuss made of the whole...ahem...affair (sorry, Charles; cheap shot). I have seen more media polls (most of them showing moderate disapproval) on the subject in a fortnight than on the war in Iraq in two years, and it says something about the British relationship to monarchy that everyone seems to have an opinion on the morality of the situation, and seems fully convinced of their right to comment on it.

So what exactly is it that makes the convoluted relationships and private lives of the Windsors so much more *our busi-*

Family, if their dramas are too dull for us, then we don't have the luxury of other channels to tune into. And unavoidably, the public workings of the monarchy are never *quite* as interesting as the hidden private ones. With regard to the royals, the nation has a greater fondness for soap-opera than documentary.

We feel that our investment in the Queen and her family justifies our criticism of them, but our attitude toward them has changed: we have, perhaps foolishly, applied our approach to the BBC (a corporation) to the Queen and co. (human beings. Honest). We expect our money to provide not only representation, but also entertainment.

Having monitored this situation, I feel Prince Harry has been the first and most successful in cottoning on to this and is currently providing the best value for money. Despite the fact that the fees for his Eton education - funded by his grandmother's humble subjects - purchased only two mediocre A-level results, his irresponsible pot-smoking, womanizing, fascist-dressing antics (and strangely unnoticed 24-month "gap-year") have provid-

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ness, and so much more interesting, than those of any other family?

The royals are public figures. An inherent aspect of their role is to represent their subjects, and as such we should be entitled to comment on their behaviour. But the two words of which the phrase "public figure" is comprised should surely suggest some kind of distinction between which aspects of royal lives that the public should be entitled to access and criticize, and which should remain firmly in the realms of their own business.

Yes, the monarchy has "public" responsibilities. Charity work and diplomacy are areas in which they represent the British people, and as such they should be accountable to those people when working in these fields. However, they are also human "figures" who have a right equal to our own to conduct private and family lives in which their roles and actions are not representative of their subjects, and which should, as a result, be off-limits for public scrutiny.

Of course, it's not that simple. The Royal Family are like the BBC: a state-funded institution. The public's financial stake in these institutions, it would seem, gives them a right to criticize programming schedules. However, when it comes to the Royal

ed endless potential for delighted public disapproval. All in all, I bet Grandad Philip, Duke of Edinburgh and King of the Inappropriate Remark (if not of England), is very proud of the way his successor is shaping up, and at such a young age, too.

The fact is, we love feeling that we have the right to criticize. The royals are fun because we can feel uniquely legitimate and justified in criticizing their actions. And they have other uses, too. Say what you like about how the Monarchy is weird, irrelevant, outdated, pointless, and a waste of public money, it is nevertheless a useful barrier between British society and the kind of American-style political structure of which President - sorry, Prime Minister - Blair seems to be such an advocate.

While the Windsors continue to provide their own particular brand of family drama to satisfy the public fascination for dynasty and scandal, we can get this out of our system before undertaking the serious task of electing someone else to run the country who is actually up to the job. This way we can have the best of both worlds, keeping incompetents with interesting family connections in the gossip columns where they belong, but out of positions in which they have enough practical power to be dangerous.