

## THE NOT-SO-SYMBOLIC POWER OF THE KING

While some Brits are mourning their queen, and others are being arrested for exercising their democratic right as anti-monarchy protesters<sup>1</sup> (Timsit, 2022), in the Netherlands, king Willem Alexander informs the country of its public policy and budget allocation for the year to come.

The occasion is a national holiday, *Prinsjesdag* (the Day of the Little Prince), which was handed down to us from the 19th century. A modern tradition that falls on the 3rd of September, commemorating the birthday of king William V, and marking the beginning of the new financial and parliamentary year. This day, thick with tradition and symbolism, is in essence a political parade with the Monarchy as the star of the show. A public spectacle for the masses – live-streamed from all major national news outlets. It starts off with a royal procession, transporting the king and royal entourage in a gold crested glass carriage<sup>2</sup> to the Ridderzaal<sup>3</sup> to deliver the *Troonrede*<sup>4</sup> (speech) to the parliament and by extension those at home. Later the same day, the *Miljoennota* (budget) is presented to the second chamber by the Minister of Finance in a briefcase. The document itself is wrapped in festive orange bowties.

*While one of the NOS reporters on the Livestream of the royal procession calls Prinsjesdag “a celebration of democracy, “ it quite obnoxiously exemplifies its infringement.*

In the Netherlands, the political power and role of the monarch are often perceived as purely ceremonial – said to be symbolic, traditional. The monarch’s role is believed to be exhibited and exercised solely in public moments such as the *Prinsjesdag*. Their political duties are hollowed out and performative rather than active and decisive. It is as if their form overrides the contents. This idea is often mobilised to defend the monarchy. If it were true that the power of the monarchy did not stretch beyond the pictorial, it would not make much of a difference to transition from a constitutional monarchy to a republic other than ‘a waste of time.’

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<sup>1</sup> One example thereof is Symon Hill who was arrested because he shouted “Who elected him?” during the proclamation of king Charles.

<sup>2</sup> While the tradition of *Prinsjesdag* has been largely static since its invention, minor adjustment to allow a certain but rather limited “evolving with the times” have been made. This retirement of the infamous **Golden Carriage** (2020), in use since 1903, and replacement by the Glass Carriage being one of them.

The National Platform Slavery has been actively protesting against the usage of the Golden Carriage for much longer. Already in 2012 they sent an open letter to the Dutch government, defining the Golden Carriage as “the symbol of the Dutch Monarchy wherein, through the painting on the Side Panel of the Carriage, the criminal colonial history of oppression and exploitation is being glorified.” (Biekman, 2012)

<sup>3</sup> The Ridderzaal ‘Hall of Knights’ is the venue where the speech is held on *Prinsjesdag*.

<sup>4</sup> This is the official name of the speech delivered by the monarch on *Prinsjesdag*. It literally translates to ‘speech from throne’.

The idea of the monarchy as symbol does not come out of nowhere. The ceremonial image of the monarch is one that is made highly visible, covered, broadcasted and live-streamed by the main media. Visibility always comes at the cost of the invisibility of something else.

Today, the monarch is still imbued with signing every law, ratifying international treaties, hiring and firing ministers, representative of the Kingdom for both internal and external affairs and chairman of the council of state. Additionally, a weekly meeting with the prime minister and often with ministers and state secretaries belong to the responsibilities as well. The belief that the power of the monarch, while existing on paper, is limited to none rests on tradition. The power to oppose the parliament has not been explicitly exercised much over the last years.

There exists what parliamentary reporter Fons Kockelmans calls an “unwritten rule of trust” that the parliament cannot rule when at odds with the monarch. The limited or symbolic power of the monarch thus rests on the consent of the monarch itself. However, there is nothing merely symbolic nor democratic about the power that resides in the position of monarch. The power only remains symbolic until the monarch explicitly disagrees with something.

It is difficult to believe that the aura of richness and power surrounding the royals on days such as Prinsjesdag, cloaked in tradition can be anything but performed. There is a campiness in it, as if the king plays at being king. But the only thing played by this relic from a seemingly distant past is us, citizens. This day repetitive to the point of no surprise is used to legitimize and normalize a set of collective values that encompass hierarchy, exceptionality and democratic delusion. A constitutional monarchy and democracy are at odds with one another.

The monarchy has never represented anything but exceptionalism; an immunity to law and order if not, especially in times of economic malaise. It is not surprising that this year’s royal speech was marked by the gloom of inflation and insecurity due to the aggressions in Ukraine; “It is painful that an increasing number of people struggle to pay their rent, groceries, healthcare premium or energy bill,” while the king forgets to mention the royal budget will see an increase of 450.000 euro’s compared to last year<sup>5</sup>, which roughly translates to 1232 euro’s a day, to keep the same standard of living despite this crisis. The royals (like many companies) are not made to bear the same consequences as the rest of us.

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<sup>5</sup> The 450.000 is made available for the income of King, Maxima, 3 prinses and Beatrix, personal costs and material costs.

The fortune of the monarch is exempt from heritage tax and income tax and according to the state itself is said to cost 42,3 million a year. Rene Zwaap, from the pro-republican magazine<sup>6</sup>, spent two years researching the cost of the monarchy and ends up with a calculation amounting to 345,5 million instead (Republiek 2022). The un-elected monarch drains large sums of public money from the public sphere to the private one. It is a one-way movement. There is nothing symbolic about this power. Nor is there anything democratic about this power.



**Fig 1:** income monarch Netherlands compared to other European states with a monarch. This is before the 450.000 raise is taken into account (Republieknl 2022).

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<sup>6</sup> This magazine as part of the pro-republican movement in the Netherlands should not be confused with Republican Party in the US for example. This protest movement pushes for a reconfiguration of the Dutch state, transitioning from an monarchy to a republic e.g. a state in which the supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives rather than an un-elected head of state such as a monarch.

## Resources

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- Republieknl (2022). *Republiek on Instagram: 'In de troonrede vast veel aandacht voor mensen die de energierekening niet meer kunnen betalen Overigens klopt het tweede plaatje (salaris staatshoofd) niet meer, we hadden de laatste verhoging nog niet meegenomen. #troonrede #prinsjesdag #koningshuis #levederepubliek'*. [online] Instagram. Available at: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CimK-\\_pISqU/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CimK-_pISqU/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link) [Accessed 25 Sep. 2022].
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