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Prince Harry Is Right, and It's Not Just a Matter of Royal Gossip

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Any close follower of the British media should not have been surprised that after Prince Harry fell in love with Meghan Markle, the biracial American actress, years of vitriolic, even racist coverage followed.

Whipping hatred and spreading lies — including on issues far more consequential than a royal romance — is a specialty of Britain's atrocious but politically influential tabloids.

People like me, uninterested in celebrities, shouldn't dismiss the brouhaha around Harry's memoir as mere celebrity tittle-tattle. He has made credible, even documented claims that his own family refused to stand up against their ugly, sustained attacks against Meghan. In other words, it appears that Britain's most revered institution, funded by tens of millions in taxpayer funds annually, plays ball with one of its most revolting institutions.

At the very least, it seems clear by now where some senior members of the royal family position themselves in all this.

Among those in attendance at a Christmas lunch in mid-December were Camilla, Britain's queen consort; Dame Judi Dench; Dame Maggie Smith; and some less luminous celebrities, including the acid-tongued columnist Jeremy Clarkson and the broadcaster and columnist Piers Morgan.

Both Clarkson and Morgan have been among the foremost participants in the multiyear media evisceration of Meghan, a daughter-in-law of Camilla and King Charles.

Clarkson has prior ties to Camilla. His farm was featured in an edition of *Country Life* magazine that she guest-edited. Just days after that Christmas lunch, he blasted Meghan when he wrote in his column in *The Sun*, "At night, I'm unable to sleep as I lie there, grinding my teeth and dreaming of the day when she is made to parade naked through the streets of every town in Britain while the crowds chant 'Shame!' and throw lumps of excrement at her."

The palace made no comment about that. Clarkson publicly apologized for the column after a fierce public outcry.

As for Morgan, he has called Camilla "a class act." More than a decade ago, when many in Britain were still resistant to her becoming a queen consort because of her adulterous affair with Charles, Morgan wrote in his *Daily Mail* column, "I can't actually think of a single other woman in the world better suited, or more suitably experienced," to be queen.

Morgan quit his ITV morning show in a huff in March 2021 after being roundly condemned for saying that he did not believe Meghan's claim to have been suicidal during her first pregnancy and that he "wouldn't believe her if she read me a weather report." It wasn't his first such diatribe about her, and it wouldn't be his last.

But he said Camilla soon "demanded to know when I'd be back on television."

Clarkson and Morgan are just two players in a swamp of commentators and tabloids that are intimately tied to the royals they cover. Just before Queen Elizabeth II died, Charles hosted the editor of The Sun, something the editor said was a regular occurrence. She wrote that he was always "jovial and cheery" with her. And Charles and Camilla recently hired The Daily Mail's longtime deputy editor as their communications secretary.

What could Charles and Camilla think they are conveying by maintaining a camaraderie with a tabloid press that has behaved so noxiously to members of their own family, with articles that have been so ugly, and even racist?

Hasan Esen/Anadolu Agency, via Getty Images

In 2016, days after Harry and Meghan's relationship went public, The Daily Mail called Meghan, who, as a child, lived in Los Angeles, "(almost) straight outta Compton" — an allusion to the '80s hip-hop album and later movie. The Mail described her family's picturesque Los Angeles neighborhood as "gang-scarred."

For years, royals have had to fend off tabloid attacks. But the vitriol that has been applied to Meghan, and the double standard to which she has been subjected, is palpable.

Once, after avocado toast was served at a lunch she hosted, The Daily Mail ran a story with the headline "How Meghan's Favourite Avocado Snack — Beloved of All Millennials — Is Fuelling Human Rights Abuses, Drought and Murder." The Daily Express similarly proclaimed, "Meghan Markle's Beloved Avocado Linked to Human Rights Abuse and Drought, Millennial Shame." The same tabloids ran approving stories associating Prince William and Princess Kate with avocados, with no mention of human rights abuses.

When Kate was seen holding her pregnancy bump The Daily Mail said she did so "tenderly." When Meghan did that, it was described as an act of vanity and "virtue signaling" that implied "the rest of us barren harridans deserve to burn alive in our cars."

Most insidiously, Meghan has been portrayed as a threat to other royal family members, even the children. The Daily Express claimed that Meghan may have put "Princess Charlotte's life at risk." How? By including at her wedding lilies of the valley, which shouldn't be ingested; however, they were also used at the weddings of Kate and Princess Eugenie without disapprobation.

Queen Elizabeth, too, was portrayed as Meghan's victim. Especially after Harry and Meghan stepped down from their royal roles, the tabloids repeatedly claimed that Meghan had endangered the queen's health.

Harry has said that he pleaded with his family to publicly condemn this ugly campaign. But instead, Harry says in his book, "Spare," the couple were ordered to remain silent, even against outright lies. "Never complain, never explain," was the royal motto.

But the royal family isn't always so complacent.

When a plastic surgeon claimed on his Instagram account that Harry's sister-in-law Kate was receiving Botox, Kensington Palace officials issued an official condemnation and denial. They reportedly got at least one tabloid to take down a story claiming Kate was wearing hair extensions.

William and Kate issued a strong statement and threatened legal action against the magazine Tatler after it called Kate "perilously thin." "Swaths of passages" the palace had reportedly objected to were deleted from the story.

Even less prominent members get explicit protection. Once, the palace defended Charles's brother Prince Edward's use of a private jet instead of an available train.

Harry has claimed that while the royal family stayed silent about the media's abuse of his wife, behind the scenes it leaked, planted or influenced stories with the worst elements of the Royal Rota — representatives of news organizations that cover the palace in a preferential press pool — in return for favorable coverage for themselves or distractions from their own brewing scandals. After telling only his immediate family about plans he and Meghan were making to travel or distance themselves from royal duties, Harry says in "Spare," those plans appeared in the tabloids attributed to unnamed sources.

It's not just a matter of Harry's suspicions. The Daily Mail columnist Dan Wootton has said "much of the negativity towards the couple is coming from within the royal family. The royal family, and staff of the royal family, are the ones that are very often leaking these stories to the press."

Other prominent members of the Royal Rota agree. Robert Jobson, the royal editor for The Evening Standard, told the Australian morning show "Sunrise" that "they can deny it all they like until they're blue in the face, but there's been an awful lot of leaking, particularly from Kensington Palace," the office of William and Kate. In tweeting an early report of the rift between Harry and his kin, Richard Palmer of The Daily Express said the royal family "and their advisers recognize the value of a symbiotic relationship in communicating with the public who pay for them. I'm not sure Harry does."

Another journalist, Omid Scobie, claimed in an interview for an ITV documentary in 2021 that William was planting stories about his brother's mental health in the press. The station reportedly received a legal threat from William — so much for the policy of silence — and scrubbed Scobie's statement from the show.

The British journalist Andrew Marr, a confessed fan of Queen Elizabeth II, says Harry's claims are important. After all, Marr said, "either well-known journalists are making a lot of stuff up, just sitting at their laptops at the kitchen table inventing the detail of feuds and private confrontations, or a particularly confidence-rotting form of anonymous briefing has been taking place."

Maybe they could be part of an inquiry similar to the one after the phone hacking scandal by Rupert Murdoch's tabloids.

This sort of royal relationship with the media is not new, of course. In a BBC documentary, Charles's former press secretary said William was furious that when he was 16, The Sun published the details of his first meeting with Camilla. The author of the story said the source was Mark Bolland, Charles's deputy private secretary and public relations adviser.

It was all transactional. Sandy Henney, a former press secretary, said of Charles: "When I joined his office in '93 he was going through some pretty virulent criticism — 'Bad father, unloving husband.' I think he was pretty hurt." She said Bolland worked to change Charles's image. Leaking to the media was reportedly one way to curry favor. "Brilliant manipulator," Henney said of Bolland. "He got the result that he wanted." (Bolland denied these accusations.)

Bolland was also accused of approving a News of the World article claiming a 16-year-old Harry had taken drugs, in exchange for praise for Charles for taking Harry to a rehab center, illustrated with what the tabloid said were photos of the visit. Harry writes that the seven-page tabloid spread left him sickened and horrified, and that the photos were from an earlier official visit he had made to the center. Bolland later admitted the sequence of events was distorted to make Charles look better. The coverage, after Diana's death, spun the portrayal of Charles. "No more the unfaithful husband," as Harry puts it in his memoir. "Pa would now be presented to the world as the harried single dad."

I think I've made the case that Harry and Meghan have gotten a raw deal.

And I haven't even mentioned that in response to all of this vitriol, would-be violent actors rose from the woodwork. Neil Basu, a high-level British law enforcement official, recently confirmed that Meghan received credible threats to her life, namely from the far right.

Even so, shortly after they left Britain, Harry and Meghan had their official security pulled abruptly. Harry says in "Spare" that his father didn't step up then to help pay for replacement, despite now reportedly planning to shoulder 3 million pounds annually to provide security for his brother Andrew, accused of sexual exploitation of young women and girls (which he has denied), after Andrew's official security ended, and whose 12 million pound settlement with an accuser was also reported to be partly paid by the queen.

The way the tabloids can spread unhinged claims, generating a sense of urgent threat to create a social frenzy, can be used for targets other than a stray royal.

During the run-up to the Brexit vote, among other outright big lies, British tabloids screeched that, thanks to a secret conspiracy being cooked up in Brussels, the European Union would allow hordes of Turks to invade Britain, commit crimes, have too many babies and bankrupt the social services. Turkey isn't even a member of the E.U. and is nowhere near becoming one. Brexit narrowly won, with damaging consequences still unfolding for Britain.

My impression from his memoir is that Harry wants to make a crusade of applying sunlight to corrupt media practices and his family's participation in them. If he succeeds in fighting the vile forces that he feels contributed to his mother's death and imperiled his newfound love, he might bring a greater sense of decency in Britain, and maybe even curtail the power of the worst practices in media. Good luck to him.

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