

Palace Courtiers Quietly Lobbied the Major Government for Royal Yacht Replacement

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Buckingham Palace courtiers discreetly lobbied John Major's government in the mid-1990s to advocate for a new royal yacht to replace the decommissioned Royal Yacht Britannia, newly released files from the National Archives have revealed.

A letter dated May 1995 from Sir Kenneth Scott, then Deputy Private Secretary to the Queen, was sent to the Cabinet Office expressing the monarch's quiet desire for a successor to Britannia. The vessel, which had served the Crown for over 40 years, was due for retirement. While Sir Kenneth emphasised that the Palace did not wish to apply overt pressure, he noted that the Queen “would naturally very much welcome” a replacement vessel.

Officials at the time were particularly wary of public perception. The correspondence made clear that any suggestion of a royal demand for a new yacht could be politically damaging. The Palace, therefore, urged that the discussion remain confidential to avoid sensationalist headlines that could provoke criticism.

Plans under the Major administration to replace Britannia using public funds were ultimately abandoned due to a combination of public scrutiny, economic restraint, and controversy surrounding the Royal Family during that period. By the time Tony Blair's Labour government took office in 1997, the matter had been quietly dropped, and the vessel was retired later that year without replacement.

A royal-authorized history later criticised Major's handling of the issue, suggesting that two and a half years of indecision allowed the project to lose momentum and eventually become politically untenable.

Interest in a replacement has resurfaced periodically. In 2017, a group of Conservative MPs (Members of Parliament) backed a proposal to fund a new royal yacht through a national lottery, positioning the project as a symbol of a post-Brexit Global Britain. More recently, former Chancellor Jeremy Hunt and other senior ministers have supported the idea of a

privately funded vessel for diplomatic and trade purposes, while making it clear that taxpayers would not bear the cost.

From a centre-right standpoint, proponents view a new royal yacht as a valuable tool for promoting British trade and soft power overseas.

Detractors argue that, given current fiscal pressures, such expenditure would be difficult to justify, particularly as members of the Royal Family have not expressed direct support for the initiative.

The episode underscores the delicate balance the Palace must strike between preserving national tradition and navigating shifting public expectations.