

A brief history of a thousand-year-old institution

The British political system is a constitutional monarchy (also known as a parliamentary monarchy) which differs from absolute monarchy **in that** sovereigns must exercise their powers within the limits prescribed by an established **legal framework** (a written or unwritten constitution).

Constitutional monarchy in the UK is the result of a long evolution and of several adjustments by law or by convention over the centuries. The British monarchy goes back to small kingdoms of early medieval Scotland and Anglo-Saxon England, which had consolidated into the kingdoms of England and Scotland by the 10th century AD. In 1066, the last crowned Anglo-Saxon monarch, Harold II, was defeated and killed during the Norman conquest of England which meant that the English Crown passed to the Normans' victorious leader, William the Conqueror, and his descendants. The latter were followed by the Plantagenet dynasty in 1154. The **Magna Carta** (1215) began a process of reducing the English monarch's political powers, and Edward I adopted the "Model Parliament" in 1295, which included members of the clergy and aristocracy, and representatives from the different **boroughs**, cities and counties.

The reign of the Tudors (1485-1603) saw the split from Rome and the creation of the Church of England, whose leader to this day has been the British Monarch. From 1603, when the Scottish King James VI inherited the English throne as James I, both the English and Scottish kingdoms were ruled by a single sovereign. His son Charles I, nearly **brought about** the end of the Monarchy as he believed in Divine Right. He was beheaded and Britain became a republic for 11 years (1649-1659). The experience was **short-lived** and there has been continuity since 1660. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 removed the reigning Catholic king, James II, and instituted the joint monarchy of his Protestant daughter Mary and her Dutch husband, William of Orange. It led to a constitutional monarchy restricted by laws such as the **Bill of Rights** (1689) and the Act of Settlement (1701), although limits on the power of the monarch were already in place.

In 1707, the kingdoms of England and Scotland **merged** to create the Kingdom of Great Britain. Queen Anne was the last monarch to veto an Act of Parliament (1707) and with George I and the Hanoverians power continued to **shift** from the monarch to his ministers, who had to rely on the support of Parliament. Queen Victoria was the last sovereign to exercise openly any real personal power but this diminished over the course of her reign, which also saw several extensions of the **franchise** (in 1832, 1867 and 1884) and therefore an increased representativeness and power of Parliament.

The British Monarchy is hereditary and the Monarch used to be the eldest male child or the eldest daughter if there were no male heirs to the throne. The Succession to the Crown Act 2013 **altered** the laws of succession to the British throne as it replaced male-preference primogeniture with absolute primogeniture (for those born in the line of succession after October 2011), which meant the eldest child **regardless of gender** would precede his or her **siblings**. The act also ended the disqualification of a person who married a Roman Catholic from the line of succession.

The powers of the Monarch today

At first sight, the Crown can appear purely ceremonial and of little consequence to the realities of government, politics and power, but it still holds real and significant powers, even if by convention they are not exercised. All acts of government are **carried out** in the name of the Crown, but **we have to bear in mind that** a Parliamentary monarchy is a state headed by a monarch who is not actively involved in policy formation. Instead, a cabinet and its head – a prime minister, a premier, or a chancellor – drawn from a **legislature** (Parliament) are in charge of governmental duties. The Queen **therefore** reigns but does not rule, in a society deeply committed to the ideal of democracy.

The Monarch opens parliamentary sessions and she **delivers** the Queen's speech (whose content she does not write) outlining her government's proposals for the parliamentary year. She can dissolve Parliament (after the decision of the Prime Minister) and call for new elections. **Crucially**, the Queen must give Royal Assent to any new legislation passed by Parliament (no veto has been opposed since 1707).

The Queen also officially appoints and dismisses the Prime Minister (and members of the Cabinet) but she does not choose him or her, as he or she is by tradition the leader of the majority party in the **House of Commons**. The Queen appoints senior magistrates, grants Royal Pardon. She also confers **life peerages, knighthoods** and honours such as **OBEs** and **MBEs**, and **attends** official ceremonies.

In addition, the Monarch is commander-in-chief of the armed forces and can alone declare war and peace. She is the Head of the Established Church (the Church of England), a legacy of the Tudor period. She appoints bishops on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. Church and State are indeed linked through the Crown.

Last but not least, she acts as Head of the **Commonwealth of Nations** and as such as Head of State in 16 of the 52 member countries, called the Commonwealth Realms.

The role of the Monarchy

The powers still exercised by the Monarch are often said to provide a guarantee against extreme governments (which could seem paradoxical). For example, if a government were to call a general election for improper reasons and against the interests of the people, the Crown could refuse to dissolve parliament, or if a government were intransigent, she could in principle call on the police and the army to protect her right.

Besides, the Queen stands as a factor of national unity and cohesion, especially in times of crisis, such as natural disasters, conflicts or terrorist attacks. British history is characterized by continuity and one of the major aspects of British society is its political and institutional permanence. Many formal ceremonies were invented in the 19th century, in order to create an impression of **ageless** tradition and provide reassurance during a time of radical transformations.

Although she does not exercise her executive role, the Queen still holds the right to be informed, to advise and to warn, which is why she holds weekly audiences with the Prime Minister at Buckingham Palace to discuss current affairs. The Queen has been Head of State for more than 60 years and has known 13 Prime Ministers so far. This gives her a deep understanding of British political affairs, **on** which Prime Ministers can **draw**.

Her advice is particularly **valuable** concerning foreign affairs, especially **when it comes to** the other Commonwealth countries, 16 of which still accept the Queen as a Head of State. The monarch promotes British interests overseas, and, compared to the **transience** of governments, provides stability, which helps the running of harmonious relations.

The popularity of Elizabeth II

The monarchy's **enduring** popularity was confirmed by a 2015 YouGov poll, with a **resounding** 68% of the British public believing the institution to be “good for the country”. Support is wide-ranging – with the monarchy gaining majority support from voters of all political parties and every age group. Older people are most enthusiastic, with almost eight in ten over-60s saying the Monarchy is “good for Britain”. The fact that the Queen does not interfere at all with political life is probably one of the major reasons why the British are still attached to the Monarchy.

Popular sentiment continues to view the Monarchy with affection. It does provide the people with the eventful life stories of a dynasty, with births, christenings, engagements, weddings and deaths getting **blanket coverage** in tabloids and celebrity magazines (as well as the sometimes questionable conduct of the Princes). The current popularity of the Royal Family, which probably **owes a great deal** to Kate Middleton, Prince William's wife, and Meghan Markle, Prince Harry's fiancée stands in sharp contrast with 1992, the Queen's “annus horribilis” or the **aftermath** of Princess Diana's death (1997).

However, the question of the cost of the Monarchy remains a **sore point** with many people. The need to finance a Head of State inevitably means high costs to a nation, and efforts have been made in the past to cut the cost of the institution for the taxpayer. Since 1992, the Queen has also paid tax on her personal income. Although the British do not directly fund any royal activity, they do bear the cost of providing police protection for royals, which is funded via the **Home Office**. If taxpayers are generally happy to pay for the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Charles, the Duchess of Cornwall, the Cambridges and Prince Harry, a new poll has revealed that most want the rest of the family to take a pay cut.

Today, the cost of the Monarchy is met through the Sovereign Grant (which replaced the annual Civil List payment in 2011) and money from the Duchies of Lancaster and Cornwall. The Sovereign Grant is taken from the revenues generated by the **Crown Estate**, a portfolio of properties and investments (mostly in London) belonging to the Monarch for the duration of his or her reign, but that cannot be sold by him or her and whose profits go straight to the Treasury. In fact, the Monarchy brings in much more money than it costs. In 2016, the Crown Estate delivered a record £304m to the **Treasury**, **whilst** the Queen received a grant of nearly £43m, currently calculated at 15% of the Crown Estate's profits.