

The Guardian | By Martin Kettle | February 8, 2024

In sickness or health, a new path will be needed for the British monarchy and the nation

On this, at least, everybody can identify with King Charles. His cancer diagnosis this week is a traumatic moment, and not just for him but for his family. It has also triggered instinctive public sympathy, not least for the monarch's refreshing relative openness about his condition. All this has fired up a powerful media story that will be part of our national life for months.

But do this week's events actually have institutional implications for the monarchy? The instant reflex of many will be to say no. The British monarchy's recent history of adaptiveness, under Queen Elizabeth II and now Charles, points that way too. After all, "the firm" is hardwired for continuity. Seamless adaptation is what the monarchy does. [...]

Yet the king's diagnosis is still a shared national shock. It reverberates more widely than if the sufferer were you or me. It was also very unexpected. Coming so soon after the end of Elizabeth II's unprecedentedly long reign, it poses governance questions that are unfamiliar to rulers and ruled alike. The country is not used to being presided over by a withdrawn or sick sovereign. This has set people thinking and talking. It is silly to pretend otherwise, and sillier still to disapprove of discussing it. [...]

This week's intimation of royal mortality feels suddenly different. It asks us to take on board properly, in a way that remained secondary in 2022, that this royal reign will be significantly shorter than the last. It whispers insistently to us that one day – still perhaps years off, but perhaps instead disconcertingly soon – both the monarchy and its relationship with the nation will have to evolve again.

This is a bigger question than some would like to believe. Nor should it be ducked. Doubters should instead look at two opinion polls conducted in January. Each reveals a British public whose belief in the monarchy is far more lukewarm and nuanced than you might imagine from watching the news bulletins this week or from reading the papers. They remind us, in particular, that Britain needs to reckon with generational changes, both in public attitudes to the crown and among those who wear it.

The polls, by Savanta and YouGov, have produced strikingly similar headline findings. Among younger voters [...] there was a clear preference for replacing the monarchy with an elected head of state.

None of this should be taken to imply that Britons, even the younger ones, are bursting with republican enthusiasm. They are not. [...]

There are also striking differences between particular parts of Britain. In the YouGov poll, there are more people in support of an elected head of state, as opposed to a monarchy, in Northern Ireland, Scotland and London. This is a reminder, nevertheless, that the monarchy is one of the relatively few British institutions that actively promotes a UK-wide sense of identity. King Charles seems to be notably well aware of this. Unionism comes very naturally to him. But how far is that true of his son Prince William, who grew up during the years when the bonds of the UK were weakening?

[...]

The king's cancer is a reminder that a similar choice between abolition, reform and evolution inevitably faces the monarchy. Britons are divided, not united. The public appetite for opening up these questions and examining them may be low, especially when compared with other, more pressing problems. But even if the king returns to relative health, the issues will not go away.

Does Prince William calling for fighting to stop in Gaza herald a new era of royal frankness? Let's hope so

[...] It's a question being posed after Prince William was heard yesterday calling for an end to the fighting in Gaza as soon as possible.

The words were hardly exceptional: the prince, like every other civilised and sentient being, spoke of the terrible human cost of the conflict and the desperate need for increased humanitarian support as he visited the British Red Cross offices in London. Too many had been killed, he added, as he listened to firsthand accounts directly from the charity's staff amid the rubble at the scene.

You might think it amounted to little more than the sentiments being uttered by politicians across the House of Commons (and just as unlikely to influence the Israeli government). However, British royals are usually supposed to confine their statements to the most anodyne of utterances, so the prince's remarks strayed perilously close to outspokenness in some palace aides' eyes[...]. Nevertheless, might this start a trend?

Good if it does. The prince is right to speak out on potentially contentious issues so long as he doesn't trespass on domestic political controversies [...]. We got used to his grandmother for decades not saying anything remotely contentious, but the modern monarchy needs to show it does not float in a cloud of unknowing about what is happening in the world – and most royal supporters are not going to quibble with that. Only republicans seem to object to them saying anything at all, seemingly preferring them to be out of touch. [...]

King Charles has long had his causes, pre-eminently the environment, dating back to a time when it seemed to be an eccentric personal foible rather than the vital issue it has now become, making him look increasingly prescient rather than quaint. He and his son are more engaged with the issues affecting their subjects' concerns than government ministers, who flit in [...] for a brief photo opportunity and flit out again as soon as the photographs have been taken.

For decades, Charles has been thoroughly engaged with the work of the Prince's Trust, helping disadvantaged young people. William himself seems to engage more directly with those he meets on visits, too, and shows genuine personal concern. Perhaps that's his mother's influence.

He doesn't always get it right of course, as he demonstrated at the Baftas the other night, telling Mia McKenna-Bruce, the star of the film *How to Have Sex*, that: "I think it looked like you had a lot of fun all the way through." The film deals with rape – much less fun than the title may have suggested to him, but he did admit that he hadn't yet seen it. [...]

Time will tell how genuine this generation of royals is about the social concerns of the people. Will their compassion endure? Or will it be more like William's great-great uncle Edward VIII, who toured the desolate south Wales industrial districts in November 1936 – and famously told the unemployed and destitute miners and steelworkers that something must be done. [...]

What the Welsh miners *didn't* know was that the king had already told the prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, his mother and his three brothers of his intention to abdicate to marry the woman he loved. Within three weeks he had renounced the throne and left the country for a life that evinced no concern for the comfort of anyone else ever again.

The moral of Kate's picture-editing debacle is simple: the royal family should tell all

Not since Trotsky vanished from the Soviet politburo portrait has photo-editing caused such a storm.



What dark secrets lie behind the daughter's misaligned sweater, the blurred skirt and the twisted zip? What dynastic horror is being concealed by the Princess of Wales's missing wedding ring? What are we not being told?

Questions over the princess's abdominal operation follow hard on the heels of those over the king's cancer. Both suggest something has been seriously wrong with the health of senior members of the royal family, something that they want to keep private. It

has not worked. That subtlety of art forms, publicity manipulation, has gone awry. The palace must be asking, where is some nonsense from Prince Harry when we most need it?

The picture of the Princess of Wales and her children published over the weekend could hardly have been more charming and reassuring. After weeks of seclusion, she appeared smiling, hale and hearty. Good for her. If something went a bit fuzzy with the picture of her hand, so what? Her face is what matters. We can surely congratulate her on apparently being well, and turn the page.

Except that has not happened. The reality is that since the early years of Queen Elizabeth, the British royal family has validated itself through the medium of publicity. It did not follow most of Europe's "cycling monarchies" into modesty and privacy. It did not treat its anachronistic status as purely ceremonial. The Queen presented her monarchy in full historic majesty, represented by an extended family of uncles, aunts and cousins with an estate of palaces, titles and functions, all involving serious money.

There was only one form of legitimacy in this approach: that it was popular. British royalty relied on its celebrity, promoted worldwide. Broadly speaking, it worked. The Queen, King Charles and Prince William have been ideally cast. If others didn't follow the script – Princesses Margaret and Diana and Prince Harry – they were almost perfect foils. But to the end of time, the institution of monarchy will depend on popular support. That is why its handling of the media is crucial. Press officers are its brigade of guards.

The iron law of celebrity states that there can be no such thing as privacy. There may be sympathy. There may be understanding. But there is no secrecy. The column inches and websites, once brought to life, are aching to be filled. They ache even more today, galvanised by an undisciplined and unregulated digital media, free to pour its poison into a world where lies are cash. The social media treatment of the health of the Princess of Wales has been disgusting. That such material should be unpoliced and legal is a scandal.

The moral of the editing of the royal picture is simple. Tell all. The princess has now admitted she edited the photograph but not why or what she edited out. At this stage, privacy does not work. It breeds rumour, gossip and fabrication. When fake news and fake pictures are rampant, secrecy is the enemy of truth. Just say what the matter is. It is more likely to generate respect.

Some of the new king's realms may become republics

Over the course of her long reign Elizabeth II served as head of state of 32 countries, most of them colonies. At her death she remained so for just 15. And for most of the subjects that she retained, the queen maintained a mere ceremonial presence in their lives. Her face appeared on banknotes and coins; prime ministers met her; parliaments were opened on her behalf. But as King Charles III takes over from his mother, for some of the 15 remaining realms even that limited interaction may be too much.

Many see maintaining links with Britain's monarch as a colonial anachronism. "The time has come to fully leave our colonial past behind," declared Mia Mottley, Barbados's prime minister, in September 2020. Last November her country replaced the queen as head of state with Dame Sandra Mason, previously the island's governor-general. Jacinda Ardern, the prime minister of New Zealand, has said she expects her country to become a republic "within my lifetime". Before Barbados, the last country to sever ties with the British monarchy was Mauritius, in 1992. The queen's passing provides an opportunity for others to make the break in a tasteful, diplomatic way.

Australia is a particularly interesting case. The British monarch's notional sway over its national affairs has long seemed anachronistic. [...] And with Charles now Australia's king, many of its citizens will wonder if this is the moment to relinquish the monarchy. Polling finds that around one-third of Australians would back a republic. Fewer Australians have links with Britain today than in the 1960s and 1970s, when it was still the primary source of new immigrants; more are aware of the enormities inflicted on indigenous Australians by British colonialism. Ms Hocking, a republican activist as well as a historian, says that replacing the monarchy would be "the obvious end point of our postcolonial settlement" with Britain.

But breaking free is easier said than done. The switch to a republic would require a referendum to pass with majorities not only nationally but in at least four of Australia's six federal states. The motion would also have to propose an alternative head of state, such as an elected or appointed president. In 1999, despite pro-republican polling, a referendum failed by ten percentage points thanks partly to splits among the republican movement over which alternative to plump for.

Canada, too, may decide to ditch the monarchy. But the hurdle to getting rid of Charles is even higher than in Australia. Instead of a referendum, Canada requires "unanimous consent": that is, a majority of the House of Commons, the Senate and all ten provincial legislatures. Emmett Macfarlane, a political scientist at the University of Waterloo, points out that "The irony is that probably the most likely way Canada would abolish the monarchy is if the United Kingdom did it,".

Some places are less strict. In New Zealand, an act of parliament would suffice to remove the monarchy. But despite her conviction that the monarchy will not last her lifetime, last year Ms Ardern said that she had not yet "sensed an appetite from New Zealanders for significant change in our constitutional arrangements". Many Caribbean countries could turn republican without referendums, too. Yet several have failed to deliver on promises to do so in the past. A number of Jamaican prime ministers have announced fruitless plans to unseat the queen. A referendum in St Vincent and the Grenadines in 2009 failed. Barbados's successful attempt to remove the queen was preceded by a failed one in 2008.

In the end, King Charles III may continue to reign over several places simply because of inertia. The modern monarchy is not as popular as it once was, but neither is it widely resented. In many places certain politicians might like to get rid of it; now, as the crown passes from Elizabeth to Charles, should be their moment. But many countries have far more pressing problems than King Charles.



The British Empire

(1601 – 1997)

What was the British Empire?

British Empire was a worldwide system of dependencies that was brought under the sovereignty of the crown of Great Britain and the administration of the British government over some three centuries.

When did the British Empire begin?

The first tentative steps toward the establishment of the British Empire began with overseas settlements in the 16th century. Great Britain's maritime expansion accelerated in the 17th century and resulted in the establishment of settlements in North America and the West Indies. The East India Company began establishing trading posts in India in 1600, and the first permanent British settlement in Africa was made at James Island in the Gambia River in 1661.

Which sub-Saharan African country was the first to gain independence from the British Empire?

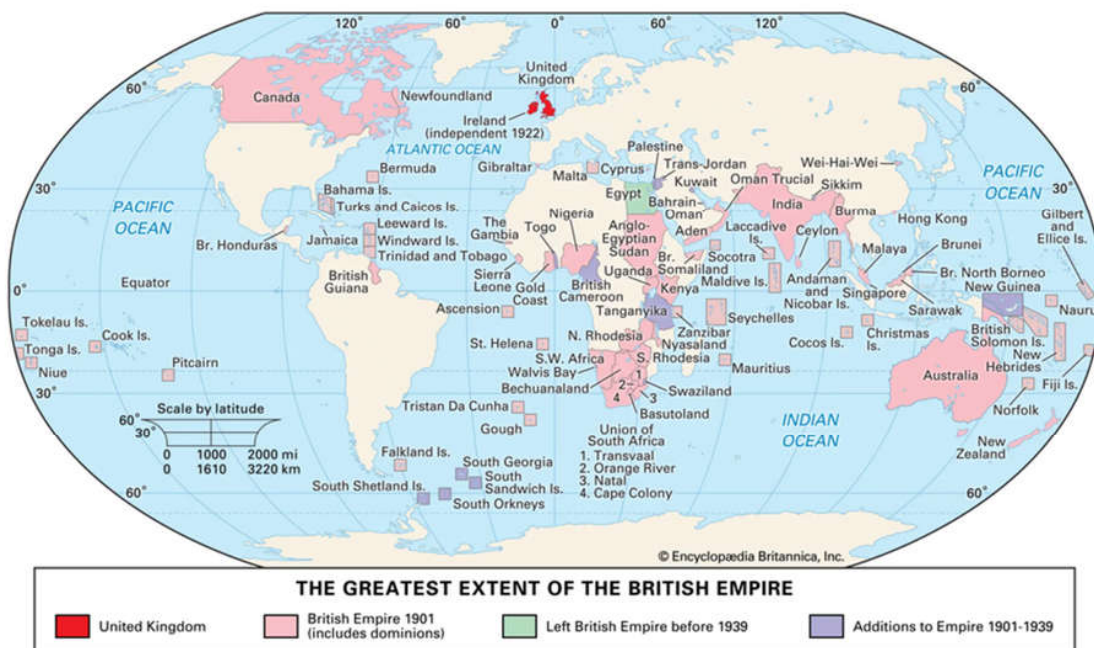
In 1957 the Gold Coast became the first sub-Saharan African colony of the British Empire to reach independence (as Ghana).

What was the last significant colony of the British Empire?

The last significant colony of the British Empire was Hong Kong. It was returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997.

Does the British Empire still exist today?

The British Empire does not exist today. However, the Commonwealth is a free association of sovereign states comprising the United Kingdom and many of its former dependencies that acknowledge the British monarch as the association's symbolic head.

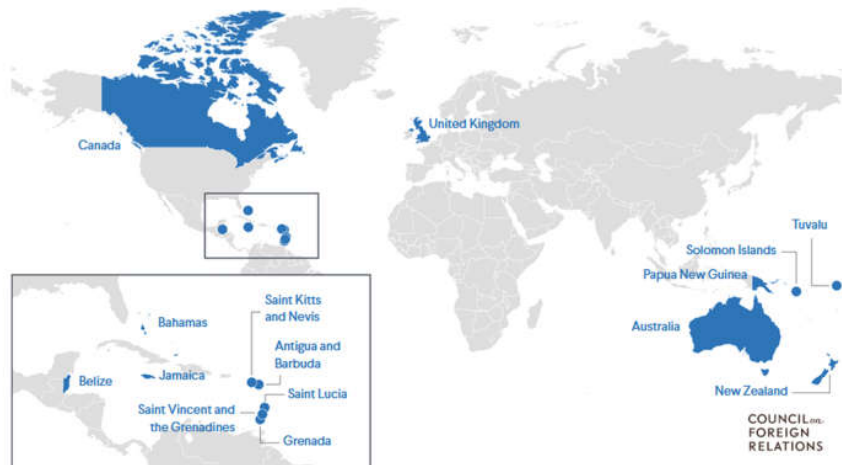


Which countries recognize Charles as king?

Charles, like Elizabeth was, is not only monarch of the UK, but also of **fourteen additional countries**, including Canada and others across the Asia-Pacific and the Caribbean. These are known as the **Commonwealth realms**.

Commonwealth realms are distinct from the **Commonwealth of Nations** which is an association of **fifty-four nations** that largely evolved out of the former territories of the British Empire. (In recent years, several countries without historic ties to the UK, such as Rwanda and Mozambique, have also joined.) These countries, which apart from the UK include **Australia, Canada, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa**, and many others throughout Asia and Africa, account for some 2.4 billion people, or a third of the global population.

Where King Charles III Reigns
Countries where King Charles III is head of state



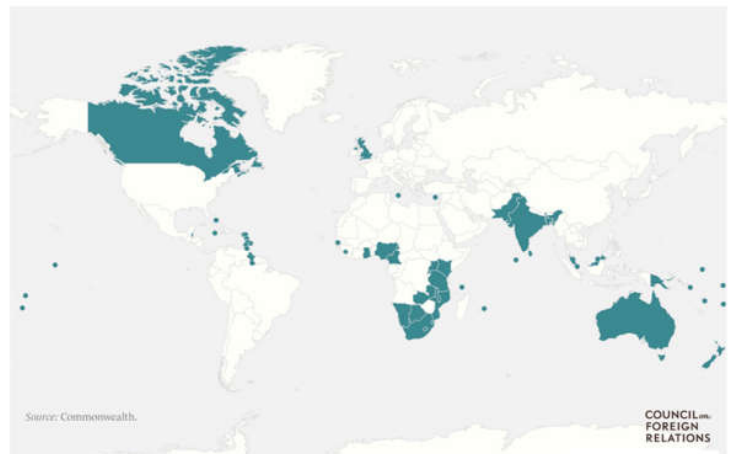
The association was formed in 1926 as part of the **Balfour Declaration of 1926** and is one of the oldest political organizations in the world. The goal of the declaration was to form a union in which all countries once under British rule were **treated equally**, with all countries **pledging allegiance to the British king or queen**.

The **1949 London Declaration**, which created the Commonwealth in its current form, **declared the monarch**, then King George VI, the "symbol of the free association of its independent member nations."

The Commonwealth is a **consensus-based, intergovernmental organization** with many objectives, including economic development, democracy-building, free trade promotion, poverty reduction, health-care programs, and cultural exchange. Its day-to-day operations are headed by a secretary-general—currently the UK's Patricia Scotland—who is appointed by Commonwealth leaders to no more than two four-year terms.

Commonwealth Members, 2020

The Commonwealth is an association of fifty-four nations that largely evolved out of the former territories of the British Empire.



<https://thecommonwealth.org/our-member-countries>



A FEW HISTORICAL LANDMARKS

The British Empire lasted from the early 17th to the late 20th century. In its heyday it encompassed a fifth of the world's population. With colonies in the Americas, Africa, Asia, the Pacific and even Europe (Malta and Cyprus), it was said that "**the sun never sets on the British Empire**". The diversity of the peoples who found themselves under British rule produced a highly diverse Commonwealth in the 20th century.

In the 19th century, a minority of colonies stood out from the others. **Australia, Canada and New Zealand** had a predominantly white British population composed of settlers and their descendants. These inhabitants felt strongly British but they were also keen to defend what they saw as their **inalienable rights as British subjects**. This included **the right to govern themselves**. Wishing to avoid the risks of new colonial revolts (cf. 1776 in the US) the UK **granted autonomy to these colonies in the mid-19th century**. They were free to govern themselves to a large extent, with minimal interference from the imperial government in London. Canada was formerly described as a "**Dominion**" in 1867, in recognition of its new status. This label was extended to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. In 1922, the newly independent Irish Free State¹ was also referred to as a Dominion.

In **1926**, a conference of the prime ministers of the United-Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and South Africa produced the **Balfour Declaration** and the first mention of the Commonwealth. It declared the United Kingdom and the Dominions to be '*autonomous Communities within the [British Empire](#), equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to [the Crown](#), and freely associated as members of the British [Commonwealth of Nations](#)*'.

In **1931**, the **Statute of Westminster**, adopted by the British Parliament and ratified by the Dominions, confirmed the complete independence of the Dominions, which remained **associated with the United Kingdom by choice**. They were bound together by a shared sense of **identity**, and by practical forms of cooperation, such as preferential **trade** relations.

After WWII, Gandhi and Nehru's peaceful and popular nationalist campaign in India led to that country's independence, alongside Pakistan and Sri Lanka. All three joined the Commonwealth, despite India's refusal to acknowledge the British monarch as a symbolic head of state. **The London Declaration of 1949**, which recognized India's membership of the Commonwealth as an independent republic, was a **turning point**. From then on, the Commonwealth became the "New Commonwealth" and was joined by almost every former British colony, upon their achieving independence. Most of the British colonies in Africa became independent in the 1960s and all of them chose to join the organization.

Today, the Commonwealth of Nations is a loose, free association of 56 sovereign states, encompassing all of the world's continents. Its members are united by a shared history and traditions and by a commitment to the fundamental values of democracy, human rights and equality.

¹ The Irish Free State came to an end in 1937, when the citizens voted by [plebiscite to adopt a new constitution](#). Under the new constitution the Irish state was named Ireland.