

The Monarchy in the UK

I. A record-breaking queen

In 2015, at the age of 89, Queen Elizabeth became the UK's longest-reigning monarch (she ascended the throne on 6 February 1952, at the age of 25, on the death of her father King George VI).

When the King of Thailand died in October 2016, Queen Elizabeth II became the world's longest reigning monarch and the first British monarch to reach a Sapphire Jubilee in February 2016, that is to say she has spent 65 years on the throne.

Often hailed as a « rock of stability » through three post war generations, the Queen remains extremely popular.



How can we account for the longevity of the British Monarchy ? What is the role of the Monarch today ? What is to become of the institution after Elizabeth II's death ?

II. Brief history of a thousand-year-old institution

The British political system is a **constitutional monarchy** (also known as **parliamentary monarchy**). The sovereign exercises his or her power within the limits prescribed by an established legal framework (a written or unwritten constitution).

The constitutional monarchy in the UK is the result of a long evolution (see chronology in The Guide p.279-285).

1. Some landmarks

- **Magna Carta** (1215) began a process of reducing the English monarch's political powers.
- 1295 : adoption of the « **Model Parliament** » (which included members of the clergy and aristocracy, and representatives from the different boroughs, cities and counties) by Edward I.
- 1485-1503 : the reign of the Tudors, **split from Rome, creation of the Anglican Church** (see lesson Religion in the UK) whose leader to this day has been the British Monarch.
- 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).
- **Glorious Revolution** in 1688 : James II, instituted a **constitutional monarchy** restricted by laws.
- 1689 : **Bill of Rights** et **Act of Settlement** (1701) which limits the powers of the monarch.
- 1707 : **Act of Union**, the kingdoms of Scotland and England are merged to create the **Kingdom of Great Britain**.
- Power shifts slowly from the hands of the monarch to the hands of his ministers, who had to rely on the support of the Parliament.

2. Characteristics of the monarchy

- **Primogeniture** : the monarch used to be the eldest male child or the eldest daughter if there were no male heirs to the throne.
- This rule changed in 2013 with the **Crown Act** which implemented absolute primogeniture (the eldest child inherits the throne, regardless of gender).
- The **Crown Act** also ended the disqualification of a person who married a Roman Catholic from the line of succession.

III. The powers of the Monarch today : *the Queen reigns but does not rule*

At first sight, the Crown can appear purely **ceremonial and of little consequence** to the realities of government, politics and power.

In theory, it still holds **real and significant powers**, even if by convention they are not exerted. All act of government are carried out in the name of the Crown, but a **cabinet** and its head – a **Prime Minister** – are in

charge of governmental duties. The Queen therefore « **reigns but does not rule** ».

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 (but 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). She appoints bishops on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. Last but not least, she acts as **head of the Commonwealth of Nations** and as such as **Head of State in 15¹ of the 52 member countries**, called the Commonwealth Realms (Barbados became a Republic in November 2021).

IV. The role of the Monarchy

- it provides a **guarantee against extreme governments**, 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 the government were intransigent, she could in principle call on the police and army to protect her right.
- The Queen stands as a **factor of national unity and cohesion**, especially in times of crisis, such as natural disasters, conflicts or terrorist attacks (cf : the Queen's speech on television on April 5, 2020 about the Covid-19 crisis). 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 transformation. (→ Compare with France and its many different political regimes since the Revolution)
- She has the right “**to be informed, to advise and to warn**” : she holds weekly audiences with the Prime Minister at Buckingham Palace to discuss current affairs. The Queen has been the head of state for more than 60 years and has known 14 Prime Ministers so far. This gives her a **good 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. The monarch promotes British interests overseas and, compared to the transience of governments, provides **stability**, which helps the running of harmonious relations.

V. The popularity of Elizabeth II

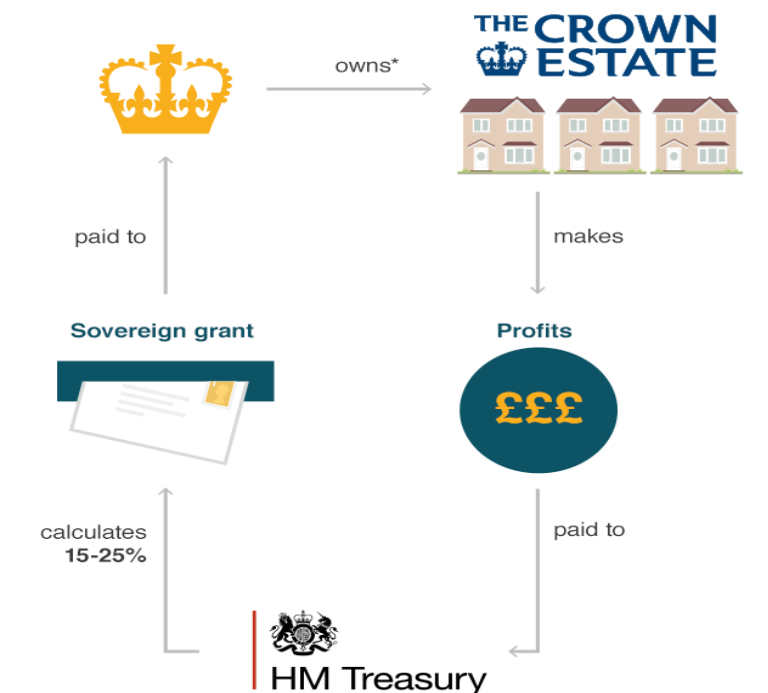
- **68% of the British population believe that the institution is « good for the country »** (2015 YouGov poll). Support is wide-ranging – with the monarchy gaining majority support from voters of all political parties and every age group. Older people are most enthusiastic, with almost eight in ten over-60s saying the monarchy is « good for Britain ».
- Popular sentiment continues to view the Monarchy with affection. It does provide 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 wife, stands in sharp contrast with 1992, the Queen's « annus horribilis » (Princess Anne's divorce, separation of Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson, Prince Charles and Diana's divorce and fire at Windsor Castle) or the aftermath of Princess Diana's death in 1997. Lately, Prince Harry stepped

¹Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Belize, Grenada, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea, Saint Lucia, Solomon Islands, St Kitts and Nevis, and St Vincent and the Grenadines. Jamaica's prime minister Andrew Holnes suggested to the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge during their visit in March 2022 that his country may be the next to become a republic.

down as senior member of the royal family, became financially independent and moved to the Duchess of Sussex's native Southern California. He and his wife have engaged several lawsuits against the media for unauthorized photographs in particular, and he claims the media are to be blamed for his decision to step down from his duties. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey in October, the couple has accused some royal members of racist remarks against their son.

- 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 Cambriges and Prince Harry, a new poll has revealed that most want the rest of the family to take a pay cut.
- The cost is met through the **Sovereign Grant** (revenues generated by the **Crown Estate**, portfolio of properties and investments, mostly in London) and money from the Duchies of Lancaster and Cornwall, whose profits go straight to the Treasury. In fact, **the monarchy brings in more money than it costs**. In 2016, the Crown Estate delivered a record £304m to the **Treasury** (*Ministère des Finances*), whilst the Queen received a grant of nearly £43m, currently at 15% of the Crown Estate's profits.

How the Crown Estate works



* The assets of the Crown Estate are not the Sovereign's private estate. They are part of the hereditary possessions of the Sovereign "in right of the Crown".

VI. The Future of the Monarchy

- Some people argue that **it should either be abolished or stripped away of its legal powers** (as it is the case in Sweden or Denmark, which have effectively privatized their monarchies).
- The strongest argument against this system is **the hereditary principle**, which is **undemocratic**, offers no guarantee of the suitability of the heir to the Crown and is a matter of pure chance. It could be argued that the Monarchy underpins an outdated class system and gives the impression that Britain is a backwards-looking nation. However, the idea of Republicanism has never taken deep root in the United Kingdom, probably partly due to the political apathy of the British, who are not a revolutionary people. 62% of the British believe Britain will still have a monarch in 100 years' time (2015 YouGov poll).
- Prince Charles is considered a questionable successor to Elizabeth II because of regular revelations about his love life and the fact that he has expressed his personal views on a range of different matters while political anonymity and neutrality are the keys to the longevity of the institution. Prince William is thus considered by many as a more suitable successor than his father.



Questions :

1. Who normally inherits the throne ? When did the succession rules last change ?
2. What does the phrase 'the Queen reigns but does not rule' mean ?
3. What is the *Magna Carta* ? Explain its significance.
4. What is *Habeas Corpus* ?
5. What major principles were introduced at the time of the Glorious Revolution ?
6. Why was the royal family criticized in the 1990s ?
7. How is the monarchy perceived nowadays ?