

## Why is the Queen still head of state in 14 independent countries?



Queen Elizabeth II is not only the monarch of the U.K., but also of 14 other countries, including Canada, Australia, and Papua New Guinea, known as the Commonwealth realms. They are distinct from the Commonwealth of Nations, a group of 54 countries that were once part of the British Empire—the majority of which no longer recognize the Queen as sovereign.

The nations of the Commonwealth realms are constitutional monarchies—the Queen is a symbolic head of state but the countries are ruled by elected governments. The Queen is not involved in governing but she does still have some constitutional duties, such as approving new governments and legislation, which are carried out by a royal representative. Although the Queen's position in these nations is mostly symbolic, the U.K. government noted that the monarchy forms part of Britain's outsized influence on the world.

In November, Barbados became the first country to remove the Queen as head of state since Mauritius in 1992. Dame Sandra Mason, the island's governor-general since 2018, was named as president-elect of the nation. "The time has come to fully leave our colonial past behind," she said. Debates about abolishing the monarchy have rumbled on for decades in other Commonwealth realms. Both Australia and the Caribbean nation St. Vincent and the Grenadines held failed referendums on becoming republics, in 1999 and 2009 respectively. The Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Arden, told the *Guardian* in 2018 that she expected the country to transition to a republic in her lifetime.

According to Barbadian political analyst and pollster Peter Wickham, certain Commonwealth realms may struggle to relinquish the monarchy even if the public and government want it. Barbados was able to become a republic because its constitution allowed the government to take the decision independently. In countries like Jamaica, it can only happen through a referendum with a two-thirds majority. "I don't believe it will ever happen because the referendum will be manipulated by political parties," Wickham says, drawing comparisons with the divisions caused by the U.K.'s Brexit referendum.

### Why do campaigners no longer want the Queen as head of state?

Although the Queen's role in Commonwealth realms is largely symbolic, attitudes towards the royal family are varied and complex. Wickham says that although Elizabeth herself is quite popular in many Caribbean countries, she is perceived as "not really relevant."

"We don't have a problem with her or even monarchy as such," he says. "Most of us think she's all the way in England and there's no reason why we should maintain her as head of state."

Some believe that keeping the Queen as head of state undermines independence, and only serves to perpetuate colonial subservience. “Imagine being given independence, and then to be told as an adult nation, that the Queen still had a stake in Jamaica and that the island is not really free. It is still an infant colony,” Jamaican-born British writer and academic Dr. Velma McClymont told TIME. Calls for republicanism have been growing in Jamaica, which celebrates its 60-year anniversary of independence from Britain this year.

Another issue influencing public opinion in former British colonies is allegations of racism made by Meghan Markle, the first biracial woman to marry into the royal family.

“Suddenly, all of us who before didn’t really take much notice of the royal family began to see what was happening to Markle,” McClymont says. “She was vilified as a Black woman and no statement of support was made by the [royal] family.”

Markle’s allegations were so damaging the royal family was forced to respond. The Queen issued a statement calling them “concerning,” while Prince William defended the monarchy, saying, “We’re very much not a racist family.”

### **What does the future hold for the British monarchy around the world?**

Despite a string of royal controversies in recent months, public opinion of the Queen herself remains high. But the same may not be true of her heir. A poll conducted by Ipsos Mori of over 2,000 British adults found that the Queen is more than three times more popular than her immediate heir, Prince Charles. Some royal observers have suggested that the Queen is investing in Prince William and Kate, aged 39 and 40 respectively, as future leaders of the royal family. The couple are twice as popular as Charles who, at 73, may not be on the throne as long as his mother. The Caribbean tour was a crucial test of the monarchy’s relevance in the modern era—the scale of the opposition William and Kate faced may well trouble the Queen.

Ultimately, however, Barbadian political analyst Wickham believes the future of the British monarchy outside the U.K. is less an issue of royal popularity than it is about countries’ national identity. “This is not about Queen Elizabeth herself. It’s not about an individual,” he says. “It’s really about us moving in a different direction.”

Eloise Barry, *Times*, March 24, 2022