

WHAT IS CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY, AND WHAT IS ITS ROLE IN THE UK?

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Summary

- The UK is a constitutional monarchy: a system in which a monarch is head of state, but the country is governed by an elected parliament and government.
- The monarch continues to exercise various important constitutional roles, from formal powers and duties relating to parliament and government, to acting as a national figurehead.
- Monarchy remains popular in the UK. Any move to replace it would require a fundamental rethinking of the powers a head of state should hold, and how that person should be chosen.

Background

A constitutional monarchy is a system in which the head of state is a monarch, but that person does not rule the country. Governing is undertaken instead by an elected parliament and government. In the UK, the monarch's involvement in politics has gradually diminished over the centuries, to the point where they effectively no longer exercise political power.

The UK is not alone in having a constitutional monarchy. There are [seven other monarchies in Europe](#), which are very similar to the UK system. The main difference is one of size: the UK has a much larger population than most European monarchies, and a larger royal family to service it.

The UK's monarchy is also uniquely international: the British monarch is head of state for 14 other 'realms' such as Canada, Australia, Jamaica and Papua New Guinea.

What roles does the monarchy play?

The monarchy in the UK plays a number of broadly constitutional roles, in the following areas:

1. The monarch as embodiment of the state

- The Crown is the embodiment of the permanent state. In this capacity, 'the Crown' or 'His Majesty' is named in various public institutions (e.g. HM Revenue and Customs, HM Prisons, HM Courts and Tribunals Service, Crown Courts and the Crown Prosecution Service); barristers are King's Counsel; the monarch appears on the currency and on stamps.
- Members of most armed forces and the police in England and Wales take oaths of allegiance to the monarch. New MPs take an oath of allegiance, as do members of the Lords.
- The monarch is [Commander in Chief](#) of the armed forces, and members of the royal family hold honorary ranks such as Colonel in Chief of army regiments.

- The monarch is also Head of the Church of England, and must swear to maintain the Protestant religion and the Church as part of the [Coronation Oath](#). New monarchs must also swear to preserve the security of the Church of Scotland, but are not head of that church.

2. The monarch and parliament

- The [prerogative powers](#) of the Crown have their roots in the medieval powers of the monarch. Over the years most have been superseded by statute, but important prerogative powers remain. Most are now exercised by ministers (these include the war-making power, and powers to make treaties, recognise states, issue passports, and grant pardons).
- The remaining prerogative powers are formally exercised by the monarch, but this occurs, by strong convention, only on the advice of ministers. A number of these powers relate to parliament.
- The monarch dissolves parliament on the request of the Prime Minister, and summons a new parliament after the election. Parliamentary sessions are closed through prorogation, also on the Prime Minister's request. The monarch opens new sessions at the [state opening of parliament](#), which includes delivering the King's Speech announcing the government's legislative programme.
- The monarch grants [royal assent](#) to legislation once passed by both the House of Commons and House of Lords. Royal assent is the final stage in the passage of legislation, marking formal entry onto the statute book. On the advice of the Prime Minister, the monarch also creates new peers.
- The monarchy is regulated by Acts of parliament. In recent years parliament has passed the [Sovereign Grant Act 2011](#), changing the basis for funding the monarchy, and the [Succession to the Crown Act 2013](#), introducing gender neutrality in the law of succession.

3. Roles in government and policy-making

- The monarch appoints and dismisses ministers, including the Prime Minister, under the prerogative. But this role is heavily circumscribed by convention. In the case of the Prime Minister, the monarch will appoint the leader of the party most likely to command the confidence of the House of Commons. The [Cabinet Manual](#) states that it is for the political parties to determine and communicate to the monarch who is best placed to command confidence. For other ministers, the power is exercised on the Prime Minister's advice.
- The monarch holds weekly audiences with the Prime Minister, reflecting '[the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, the right to warn](#)'. They also have regular meetings with the heads of the armed forces, the security services, and other senior government officials, and receive daily boxes of state papers to read and sign.
- At monthly meetings of the [Privy Council](#), the monarch approves Orders in Council: for example, granting charters to universities and professional bodies.
- The monarch does not become involved in party politics. Their speeches are scripted or vetted by the government. Politicians are expected to avoid dragging them into politics – either by [imputing political views to the monarch](#), or by asking them to act in ways that might prove controversial.

4. The monarch as national figurehead

- The monarch's role in government takes place largely behind the scenes. The public are more likely to see them in a ceremonial role: on occasions such as [Trooping the Colour](#), [Remembrance Day](#), and the [Commonwealth Day service](#) in Westminster Abbey.

- Offering a voice for the nation, the monarch gives a [Christmas broadcast](#), and Queen Elizabeth II gave an exceptional [broadcast](#) at the start of the Covid pandemic.
- The monarch and the royal family undertake numerous visits to all four nations and all parts of the UK, for example showing their support for public and voluntary service or opening new buildings.
- Members of the royal family are also involved in many charitable causes, including as patrons of charities. But the recent [reduction](#) in the number of ‘working royals’ means that it may not be possible to sustain previous levels of royal visits and patronage.

5. International roles

- The monarch makes state visits abroad, and receives visiting heads of state and other dignitaries at the government’s request. They give an audience to all incoming and outgoing ambassadors.
- The UK’s monarch has always served as head of the [Commonwealth of Nations](#), comprising 56 countries, mainly former British colonies – though the role is appointed, not hereditary.

Impact of the monarchy

The nineteenth-century writer Walter Bagehot [characterised](#) the monarchy as the ‘[dignified](#)’ part of the UK constitution (as opposed to the ‘efficient’ part played by government), whose key role was to foster a sense of affinity to the established constitutional order among the public. Still today, the monarchy is often said to have impact primarily by providing a focus for national identity and loyalty, moral leadership, and continuity, as well as through their visibility around the world.

The monarchy’s concrete impacts are much more limited. One key question is what the monarch should do if asked by ministers to use a power in a way which would violate a constitutional norm. This difficult issue surfaced in two key ways during the parliamentary debates over Brexit. First, there was [speculation](#) that ministers might ask the Queen to refuse royal assent to a bill passed by parliament against the government’s wishes, for the first time [since 1708](#); in the event, royal assent was granted automatically (as it always now is). Second, the lengthy prorogation of parliament in September 2019 on the advice of then Prime Minister Boris Johnson was judged unlawful by the Supreme Court.

One suggestion sometimes put forward is that the monarch can act as a constitutional ‘longstop’ against a rogue executive. In extremis they could, for example, [refuse dissolution](#). They could also refuse a prorogation: the Supreme Court’s judgment provides space for a monarch to refuse a future request for prorogation if its effect would be to frustrate or prevent parliament from carrying out its constitutional functions.

But for the monarch to defy ministerial advice on the use of the prerogative would still be highly controversial. It would challenge the principle that the monarch sits above politics. A monarch who did this – even if seeking to uphold established constitutional principles – would be vulnerable to the charge of stepping into party politics, especially since such a situation would likely arise only during a particularly tense political moment.

This raises questions over whether the monarch realistically can have a sufficient constitutional longstop role. As the scholar [Anne Twomey](#) has noted, the monarch’s powers are most effective as a deterrent, to encourage other constitutional actors to exercise self-restraint.

What is the alternative to a constitutional monarchy?

Support for the monarchy in the UK remains substantial, with [YouGov polling](#) at the time of King Charles III's coronation finding 62% of people in favour of retaining the monarchy. This compares to YouGov's high of 75% in 2012/13. The greatest fall has been among younger generations.

[Advocates of the monarchy](#) point to the monarch's potential to play a unifying role as a figurehead for the nation, as well as the royal family's role in supporting charitable causes and exercising soft power internationally. [Supporters of a republic](#) argue that it is inappropriate for a modern democracy to retain an unelected head of state, particularly if the monarch's practical ability to act as a constitutional longstop is in question.

In democracies, the alternative to a constitutional monarchy is a republic, with an elected head of state. Such officeholders are widely known as presidents. In other countries that, like the UK, have parliamentary systems of government – e.g. [Ireland](#) and [Germany](#) – presidents play very different roles to those in presidential systems such as the US. They occupy a largely ceremonial position rather than exercising significant day-to-day executive power. Some such presidents are directly elected by voters; others are indirectly elected, for example by national and regional legislatures. It has long been recognised that in practice the UK would need to hold a referendum before the monarchy could be abolished.

If the UK ever chose to become a republic, two important issues would need to be addressed. The first is deciding how the future head of state should be chosen; failure to resolve that question led to the [defeat of the republican referendum](#) in Australia in 1999. The second question is where the functions performed and formal powers held by the monarchy might go. It could not be taken for granted that all of these would automatically transfer to a new head of state; debates would be likely over whether some should instead transfer to parliament or the political executive.

The current role and powers of the monarchy have evolved over a very long period of time. Any move to a new head of state would therefore require some very fundamental questions to be addressed.

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