

## SPECIAL SECTION

### Guest editorial introduction:

### The epoch of Queen Elizabeth II: Continuity and rupture in small states and territories

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**ABSTRACT:** The death of Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022 after 70 years on the throne and the ascent of King Charles III precipitated much discussion about the role and relevancy of the British Monarch across the Commonwealth and more particularly whether it was time for those countries who still retained the Monarch as their head of state to move to a republican system. Change is likely, but it may well happen more slowly than commentators first thought. Indeed, the extent of influence and authority of the Crown remains significant, none more so than in the United Kingdom's Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories. This guest editorial introduction offers an overview of the legacy of Queen Elizabeth's reign, the challenges facing her successor and, despite broad public debates about how decolonisation can be completed, illustrates that it is far too early in many places to dismiss or discard the continuing role of the Crown.

**Keywords:** British Crown, Crown Dependencies, King Charles III, Overseas Territories, Queen Elizabeth II, republicanism, The Commonwealth, United Kingdom

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## Introduction

This special section arose from a conversation about colonial continuities and the centrality of the monarchy in small states and territories immediately after the death of Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022. The Queen's stature, longevity, and in many respects her personal popularity, somehow avoided or mitigated interrogations into her role as head of state in so many diverse countries during her reign. These questions resurfaced in the days and weeks following her death, and again when her successor King Charles III ascended to the throne.

Many wondered if the change would provoke an unravelling of the Commonwealth, and if republicanism might sweep through various sovereign former British colonies. After all, it was only two years earlier that Barbados had become a republic, with then Prince Charles attending the ceremony in person, and his candid speech recognised the difficult colonial legacy: "From the darkest days of our past, and the appalling atrocity of slavery, which forever stains our history, the people of this island forged their path with extraordinary fortitude" (Safi,

2021). Leaders in several Commonwealth Caribbean countries, such as Jamaica and St Vincent and the Grenadines, have stated their desire to move to Republican status. Moreover, the debate continues in the likes of Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. Questions were raised as to whether the death of Queen Elizabeth would weaken the bonds between the United Kingdom (UK) and its Overseas Territories (such as Gibraltar and Bermuda) and Crown Dependencies (including Guernsey and Jersey).

It is perhaps too early to come to firm conclusions about whether the British Monarch's still global role will shrink; but there are indications that the dramatic change suggested by some commentators in the immediate aftermath of Queen Elizabeth's death will not happen, or will happen more slowly. Thus, more continuity than rupture. However, there will certainly be tests to come; the first being the visit of King Charles to Kenya in October 2023. This will be his first visit to an ex-colony as King. The visit will test the new Royal Household's engagement on issues of colonial wrongdoing; the first since Charles stood in for the Queen at the 2022 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Rwanda. There he stated:

If we are to forge a common future that benefits all our citizens, we too must find new ways to acknowledge our past. Quite simply, this is a conversation whose time has come (The Commonwealth, 2022).

This editorial is being written a few days before the Kenya visit is due to take place, but it has been reported that Charles will admit "painful aspects" of the UK's relationship with Kenya. Further, he will use the visit to "deepen his understanding of the wrongs suffered", particularly during the Mau Mau rebellion (Smith, 2023). Such admissions of the UK's colonial past are required, but they risk weakening the position of the Monarch as head of the Commonwealth.

There are also challenges, but slightly different ones, in the Commonwealth Caribbean, where most countries retain the Monarch as their head of state; unlike in Africa, where every Commonwealth country is a republic. Between 1962 and 2021, only three Caribbean countries broke away from the monarchy: Trinidad and Tobago (1976), Dominica (1978), and Guyana (1980). Because their paths to republicanism were very particular, none of the countries offered an example to follow and so there was a pause in any further moves away from monarchy. This was even the case in Grenada, despite that country having a left-wing revolutionary government between 1979 and 1983. However, since Barbados became a republic in 2021, the republican debate in the Caribbean has reignited, intensified by the Windrush scandal (Gower, 2020) and the claims for reparations, which are now focusing on the Royal family (Ferguson, 2023). Notwithstanding, and despite Jamaica's intention to hold a referendum on ending the monarchy as early as 2024, there are still major barriers to change, such as whether there is enough of an incentive to vote for a republican system. In other words: do the respective publics feel that a change in their head of state would make a real difference to their everyday lives? We may find out quite soon, and the outcome might be a surprising one.

Therefore, even though change might be more gradual than expected, it is an opportune moment to discuss the epoch of Queen Elizabeth II and her legacy. Her reign (1952–2022) was undoubtedly significant, not only for its duration, but also for its geographical reach. Her role as Head of the Commonwealth was a key one and it saw significant change over her 70-years on the throne. At her accession, the Commonwealth was a body of eight states, including Canada, Australia, India, and Pakistan, which had been empire territories. But over the next two decades she oversaw (at least indirectly) a process of rapid decolonisation across Britain's

Empire in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Today, the Commonwealth has 54 members, 32 of which are small states. Queen Elizabeth took a keen interest in the Commonwealth and its members. She missed only two of the biannual heads of government meetings, and during her reign she visited all but two Commonwealth Countries, as well as most Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies. She also became the first sitting monarch to visit the Channel Island of Sark in 1957.

Many of these visits are remembered with nostalgia. For instance, in Mauritius, the last former British colony to remove the Queen as head before Barbados, the popular 1972 Royal Visit is remembered with great fondness (Gray, 2023, pp. 47-48). Not surprisingly therefore, the present Mauritian Prime Minister, like dozens of world leaders, travelled to London to attend the Royal funeral after the Queen's death. A week later, he paid homage to "the beloved late monarch" at the UN General Assembly (Jugnauth, 2022, p. 6). These views were shared by some in the Commonwealth, but certainly not by all. However, in the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies, there was almost universal respect and mourning, perhaps not surprising as they retain the closest relations with the UK and the Crown (e.g., BBC News, 2022; Reyes, 2022). Indeed, this special section centres on the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies, which often get less coverage when the role of the Monarch is discussed.

The focus of the special section is more by coincidence than design, but there are clear advantages to it. The section goes beyond headline grabbing Royal Visits, high-profile moves to republicanism, or questions about the future of the Commonwealth, to consider the rather hidden aspects of Crown authority and power. They include the constitutional legacies and conventions that still shape day to day governance; as well as territorial identities of small 'UK' islands. Despite the broader public debate around colonial legacy and republican status, as this special section shows, it is far too early in many places to dismiss or discard the continuing role of the Crown.

## **Contributions**

Our contributors to this special section are concerned with the governance structures that ensure the ongoing reliance of the UK's Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories on the somewhat hidden, often unwritten, and arguably undemocratic influence of the Crown and its related conventions. These structures have evolved over time: both in response to local demands for reform, representation and economic autonomy; as well as because of changing regional relationships, from devolution in the UK, the growth in influence of supra-national bodies like the European Union (EU) and the UK's exit from that union ('Brexit').

The first two articles in the section focus on the Crown Dependencies: The Channel Islands, comprising the Bailiwicks of Jersey and Guernsey (which includes Alderney and Sark) off the northwest coast of France; and the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea. For centuries, these Crown Dependencies were jurisdictional fiefs of the British Monarch, administered either directly or indirectly through aristocratic families connected with the Crown. As footage of the Queen's 1957 visit to Sark illustrates, at her harbour arrival she is met by a curtsying La Dame du Sark "whose family has governed for over one hundred years" (Pathé, 1975). Gary Wilson and Will Hanlon offer context to the status of these Crown Dependencies and revive debates around insular autonomy, by demonstrating that, even in periods of intense geopolitical flux, these islands are far from expressing independence nor able to define their own relations with neighbouring European partners after Brexit (Wilson and Hanlon, 2023). This is explained in

part by the exceptional juridical gymnastics that allowed these islands to be both constituent parts of, and aloof from Britain, associated with and unambiguously distinct from the EU.

Given these states of relative exception, constitutional scholars and practitioners often disagree over the exact status of the islands. Administratively categorising these small states therefore becomes an iterative and contentious exercise. As Caroline Morris points out, their administrative status is derived not from the UK government but from their personal and constitutional relationship to the British Monarch. For Morris, the inclusion of Sark, a small island with a land area of 5.5 km<sup>2</sup> and 500 people, needs refreshing; it might more helpfully be considered a dependency of the British Crown in its own right rather than one of three islands that comprise the Bailiwick of Guernsey. Key to Morris' justification is that, since the earliest periods of organised settlement, Sark has had its own links to the British Crown and its own distinct and distinctive, systems of government (Morris, 2023).

While the UK Overseas Territories are less directly bound to the Crown, the most senior UK official in them, the Governor, is enabled by virtue of Royal prerogative (reserve powers). The Overseas Territories span the globe in Europe, Southern and Western Atlantic, Caribbean, and Pacific, and via them the geographical reach of the Monarch is significant. Derek O'Brien and Peter Clegg assess the range of duties of the Governor and interrogate the structures that allow them to exercise power over the territories without ultimately being accountable to local governance institutions or to the citizens that live there (O'Brien and Clegg, 2023). Instead, they, as career civil servants, are responsible to the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office in London, giving rise to what scholars have termed a "democratic deficit" (Yusuf and Chowdhury, 2019). As is the case for the Crown Dependencies, there are administrative grey areas that create ambiguity over where power lies and how it should be exercised.

These papers show how legally ambiguous administrative systems inherited from times of regal ascendancy maintain a problematic Royal authority around the world. The Queen and now King continue to influence, albeit often indirectly, the lives of thousands of people in many territories. The Monarch is much more than a distant or hidden authority figure. In the Cayman Islands, for example, which is located south of Cuba in the western Caribbean with a population of 68,000, the British Monarch has significant social and cultural clout. To the extent that, as Grace Carrington argues, it has functioned symbolically to reinforce a local colonial order rooted in White supremacy. In turn, this has helped to preserve the political control of powerful merchant families and to smother attempts to develop diverse and more progressive leadership structures (Carrington, 2023).

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