

QUESTION TIME

The British Monarchy

Britain has a constitutional monarchy.

As a system of government, constitutional monarchy has many strengths. One is that it separates out the ceremonial and official duties of the Head of State from party politics. Another is that it provides stability and continuity, since the Head of State remains the same even as governments come and go.

Constitutional monarchy is a form of government in which a king or queen acts as Head of State, while the ability to make and pass legislation resides with an elected Parliament.

The Sovereign governs according to the constitution - that is, according to rules, rather than according to his or her own free will.

Although the United Kingdom does not have a written constitution which sets out the rights and duties of the Sovereign, they are established by conventions. These are non-statutory rules which can bind just as much as formal constitutional rules.

As a constitutional monarch, The Queen cannot make or pass legislation, and must remain politically neutral. On almost all matters The Queen acts on the advice of ministers.

However, the Sovereign retains an important political role as Head of State, formally appointing prime ministers, approving certain legislation and bestowing honours.

The Queen also has official roles to play in other organisations, such as the Armed Forces and the Church of England.

As a system of government, constitutional monarchy has many strengths. One is that it separates out the ceremonial and official duties of the Head of State from party politics.

Another is that it provides stability, continuity and a national focus, since the Head of State remains the same even as governments come and go.

The Bill of Rights Act of 1689 set out the foundations of constitutional monarchy.

Rights obtained by Parliament included:

- Freedom from Royal interference with the law;
- Freedom from taxation by Royal prerogative;
- Freedom to petition the King;
- Freedom to elect members of Parliament without interference from the Sovereign

The origins of constitutional monarchy in Britain go back a long way. Until the end of the seventeenth century, British monarchs were executive monarchs, which means that they had the right to make and pass legislation.

A brief history

Until 1603 the English and Scottish Crowns were separate, although links between the two were always close - members of the two Royal families intermarried on many occasions. Following the Accession of King James VI of Scotland (I of England) to the English Throne, a single monarch reigned in the United Kingdom.

The last four hundred years have seen many changes in the nature of the Monarchy in the United Kingdom. From the end of the 17th century, monarchs lost executive power and they increasingly became subject to Parliament, resulting in today's constitutional Monarchy.

Particular groups of monarchs were known by their family title or background and are often referred to as the House of e.g. House of Wessex; House of Tudor; House of Stuart; House of Windsor.

The House of Tudor

The five sovereigns of the Tudor dynasty are among the most well-known figures in Royal history (Henry VII 1485-1509; Henry VIII 1509-1547; Edward VI 1547-1553; Mary I 1553-1558; Elizabeth I 1558 – 1603). Of Welsh origin, Henry VII succeeded in ending the Wars of the Roses between the houses of Lancaster and York to found the highly successful Tudor house. Henry VII, his son Henry VIII and his three children Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I ruled for 118 eventful years.

During this period, England developed into one of the leading European colonial powers, with men such as Sir Walter Raleigh taking part in the conquest of the New World. Nearer to home, campaigns in Ireland brought the country under strict English control.

Culturally and socially, the Tudor period saw many changes. The Tudor court played a prominent part in the cultural Renaissance taking place in Europe, nurturing all-round individuals such as William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser and Cardinal Wolsey.

The Tudor period also saw the turbulence of two changes of official religion, resulting in the martyrdom of many innocent believers of both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The fear of Roman Catholicism induced by the Reformation was to last for several centuries and to play an influential role in the history of the Succession.

The House of Windsor

The current Queen Elizabeth II (1952 to present; 62 years so far) is the fourth member of the House of Windsor to rule the UK. She became Queen at the age of 27. Her predecessors were George V (1910 – 1936); Edward VIII (1936); and her father George VI (1936 – 1952). Her reign has been one of the longest in British history. Only Queen Victoria (1837 – 1901: 64 years) has been longer, but there is time yet!

Who becomes King or Queen?

Traditionally succession has been through the oldest male heir. So when the current Queen dies or abdicates, Charles will become the King. He will become Charles III, as there have already been two King Charles on the British throne (Charles I 1625 – 1649: and Charles II 1660 – 1685)

William, Charles oldest son, will succeed Charles as king. He will become William V. If there is no male heir, then the oldest daughter succeeds to the throne. That is what happened with our current queen.

In 2011 The Commonwealth Heads of Government agreed unanimously to alter the laws of succession so that the first born child would succeed to the throne whether or not they are male or female. This became law in UK in 2013.

What does the Queen do?

As Head of State, The Queen undertakes constitutional and representational duties which have developed over one thousand years of history. In addition to these State duties, The Queen has a less formal role as 'Head of Nation'. She acts as a focus for national identity, unity and pride; gives a sense of stability and continuity; officially recognises success and excellence; and supports the ideal of public and voluntary service.

In all these roles The Queen is supported by members of her immediate family.

Members of the Royal Family support The Queen in her many State and national duties, as well as carrying out important work in the areas of public and charitable service, and helping to strengthen national unity and stability.

Those who undertake official duties are members of The Queen's close family: her children and their spouses, and The Queen's cousins (the children of King George VI's brothers) and their spouses. (Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh; The Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall; The Duke of York; The Earl and Countess of Wessex; The Princess Royal; The Duke and Duchess of Gloucester; The Duke and Duchess of Kent; Prince and Princess Michael of Kent; Princess Alexandra)

Younger members of the Royal Family who are presently in education or military training - such as Prince William and Prince Harry - do not undertake official duties full-time, but often play a role in important national events and commemorations.

Every year the Royal Family as a whole carries out over 2,000 official engagements throughout the UK and world-wide. They entertain some 70 000 people each year to dinners, lunches, receptions and garden parties at the Royal residences. They receive and answer some 100,000 letters each year.

More information at <http://www.royal.gov.uk/output> website.