

What is the British Monarchy?

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At present Queen Elizabeth II is Head of State in the United Kingdom.

Monarchy is the oldest form of government in the United Kingdom. In a monarchy, a king (male) or queen (female) is Head of State. They are also referred to as the Monarch, The Sovereign and Her or His Majesty.

Today, the British monarchy is known as a constitutional monarchy. This means that whoever is on the throne does not 'rule' the country, but fulfils important ceremonial and formal roles with respect to Government.

Although there is no political or executive (in charge) role, he or she continues to play an important part in the life of the nation. As Head of State, The Monarch undertakes constitutional and representational duties. These have developed over a thousand years of history.

In addition to these State duties, The Monarch has a less formal role as 'Head of Nation'. The Sovereign 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 voluntary service. In all these roles The Sovereign is supported by members of their immediate family known as the Royal Family.

The Queen represents Britain to the rest of the world. For example, receiving foreign ambassadors and high commissioners, entertaining visiting Heads of State, and making State visits overseas to other countries, in support of diplomatic and economic relations.

They are also Fount of Justice, Head of the Armed Forces and have important relationships with the established Churches of England and Scotland.

Head of the Armed Forces

Throughout history, Kings and Queens have had strong links with the Armed Forces. Armies have defended and attacked territories on behalf of their rulers and have looked to them for guidance and inspiration in times of war and peace since ancient times. (...)

In the centuries since, Monarchs have evolved this 'general, judge, and rewarder' into a more politically neutral, motivational one. Members of the Royal Family are encouraged to serve in the Armed Forces and to develop special relationships to better understand its ongoing work and culture.

Today The Queen and the family which supports her have a substantial investment in the Armed Forces as both Head of the Armed Forces, Patrons and members of the Armed Forces themselves.

The Queen and the Law

The Queen is the 'Fount of Justice'. Supreme Court Queen

In the earliest times the Sovereign was a key figure in the enforcement of law and the establishment of legal systems in different areas of the UK. As such the Sovereign became known as the 'Fount of Justice'.

While no longer administering justice in a practical way, the Sovereign today still retains an important symbolic role as the figure in whose name justice is carried out, and law and order is maintained.

Although civil and criminal proceedings cannot be taken against the Sovereign as a person under UK law, The Queen is careful to ensure that all her activities in her personal capacity are carried out in strict accordance with the law.

Defender of the Faith

In the United Kingdom, The Queen's title includes the words 'Defender of the Faith'.

This means Her Majesty has a specific role in both the Church of England and the Church of Scotland.

As established Churches, they are recognised by law as the official Churches of England and Scotland, respectively.

In both England and Scotland, the established Churches are subject to the regulation of law. The principle of religious toleration is fully recognised both for those of other creeds and for those without any religious beliefs.

There are no established Churches in Northern Ireland nor in Wales. They were disestablished in 1869 in Northern Ireland and 1920 in Wales. There is no established Church in any Commonwealth country of which The Queen is monarch (i.e. a realm).

In addition to playing a role in the Churches of England and Scotland, The Queen recognises and supports the various other faiths practised in the UK and Commonwealth.

The Powers of the Monarchy

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

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

The Queen and her family never vote or stand for election to any position, political or otherwise.

This is because The Queen's role is to provide continuity and the focus for national unity, and the Royal Family's public role is based on identifying with every section of society, including minorities and special interest groups.

Although the law relating to elections does not specifically prohibit the Sovereign from voting in a general election or local election, it is considered unconstitutional for the Sovereign and his or her heir to do so.

As Head of State, The Queen must remain politically neutral, since her Government will be formed from whichever party can command a majority in the House of Commons.

The Queen herself is part of the legislature and technically she cannot therefore vote for members of another part of the legislature.

With the removal of hereditary peers from the House of Lords in 1999, the Royal Dukes (The Dukes of Edinburgh, York, Gloucester and Kent) ceased to be members of the House of Lords and therefore became eligible to vote in elections, and to stand for election. But members of the Royal Family do not exercise these rights. To vote or hold elected positions would not be in accordance with the need for neutrality.