

The fate of the Commonwealth after Queen Elizabeth's death

More than just a relic of the old British Empire, the grouping will forge ahead under the new monarch

BY DAVID HOWELL

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

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Then-Prince Charles, now the king, bids farewell as he prepares to leave Barbados after taking part in events to mark the transition of the island country to a newly created republic in November. |

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It was widely expected yet it came as a great shock.

Only a week or so ago, Queen Elizabeth II, aged 96, who had reigned for 70 years (the longest in British history) had been shaking the hand of a new U.K. prime minister, Liz Truss, and saying farewell to the departing one, Boris Johnson, at her castle home, Balmoral, in Scotland.

Yet, within two days she was gone, leaving the nation in grief and scarcely able to absorb the suddenness of her ending.

In the U.K., the monarchy continues. At the moment of the queen's death, her son, 73-year-old Prince Charles, became Charles III, king of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and also — although this had been arranged some time before hand — head of the Commonwealth.

The official transition ceremonies, most of them passed on from ancient times, were completed within two days — having been of course prepared and rehearsed over many months past.

The queen was much loved. Most people in the U.K. have never known any other monarch on the throne during their lives. Now the assessment begins as to what the change implies and how the new king will both follow in his mother's footsteps and set his own new course, in some areas.

One question will undoubtedly be about that phrase “head of the Commonwealth.” What does it actually mean in today's rapidly transforming world? Skeptics have long been inclined to dismiss the Commonwealth as a nostalgic relic of the old British Empire and bearing no great significance in modern geopolitics.

Besides, liberal standards of governance in some of its member states fall well short of what they should be, or what members have theoretically subscribed to in the Commonwealth's charter. Many Commonwealth governments show minimal interest in the organization, or are outrightly hostile toward each other — Pakistan and India being prime examples.

But that is not what the late queen thought at all. Somehow she endowed the peoples of the 56 nation body with a real sense of common values and purpose, welling up from the grassroots and connecting every kind of group and interest, especially among the young.

Sentiments sparked by her death, from all around the Commonwealth's membership of 2.6 billion people across the continents — sometimes with ceremonies to mark her passing — confirm the almost universal feelings of loyalty, deep respect and the intense admiration for her as a stateswoman of the highest caliber.

So here we have a puzzle and a dilemma. If the Commonwealth no longer matters how is it that countries keep wanting to join, even though they had no connections with the old British Empire? The 56 was until recently 54, and before that far fewer. Originally, back in 1949, when it was first founded it had only eight members.

Now it contains several of the world's richest, most advanced and fastest growing countries in the world — Canada, Australia, India and Malaysia, for example. But it also includes a long list of poorer nations, both coastal states in Africa and Asia and especially clusters of small island states in the South Seas and in the Caribbean.

And still more have shown they would like to join.

So could we be looking at a new kind of magnetism in global affairs that does not fit the conventional pattern of international relations.? The suspicion must be that we are. The Commonwealth has no treaty binding it, all membership is voluntary and

only a light secretariat supports it. No heavy rule-imposing central authority sits over it.

It could be that in the digital age, different forces are at work from those that shaped old blocs and alliances. Strong nationalism and populism are on the rise. Outside interference, or being tied too closely to superpower spheres of influence, whether Chinese or American, is increasingly resented by the people and the voters.

Big powers bullying smaller ones, such as is blatantly occurring between Russia and Ukraine, is not the kind of thing they want to see encouraged and nor is it part of the Commonwealth ethos in which all are equal and respected — large nations and the tiniest ones alike.

In the past century, such nations were called “the nonaligned.” They did not want to get caught up too much in the ideological wars, with either communism or American-led free world capitalism. It could be that in the 21st century today, the much greater number of these countries now, treasuring their own sovereignty and identity, find a so-called safe harbor in this modern and growing Commonwealth network.

Most are completely independent republics, while some elect to remain directly under the British crown as so-called realms (in fact, there are 14 out of the full membership). Some are mulling the idea of changing their status, such as Australia and Jamaica. Barbados recently transitioned to a republic — with then-Prince Charles in attendance at the ceremony to celebrate the changeover. But in practice it makes little difference — all remain within the Commonwealth and the British monarch remains in the leadership role.

Could it be, also, that today’s proud and independent-minded nations are the modern age’s new sort of nonaligned societies? That is to say, they broadly favour democracy (of varying kinds) but find comfort in coming together under a head figure who is above the political strife and resides in a country where the rule of law really does mean that the law covers everyone, however high in the land — the rulers as well as the ruled, including the monarch himself or herself.

Indeed, outgoing British Prime Minister Johnson was in part brought down precisely for this reason, by a small personal breach in the laws governing assembly under the COVID-19 restrictions.

These are the questions and issues that come to the surface as the newcomer takes the throne. Of course the towering global problems do not change — in some areas like energy and food crises they may yet get worse. Climate violence threatens, wars continue, terrorism lurks and bitter polarization deepens almost everywhere.

But in the smooth and rapid transition from one monarch to another lies the powerful message and example that some sources of authority still retain trust and stand unerringly for the values of peace and justice that many peoples of the world yearn for and yet continue to be denied.
