

# Britain: Serving our great imperial family - The Queen, Her Empire, and the Commonwealth of Nations

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**In 1947, Princess Elizabeth promised to serve ‘the great imperial family’, as part of the attempt to remake post-war Britain as a global power. The British Empire collapsed; but this language of service and Commonwealth allowed the Queen to take up the postcolonial concerns of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

## Contents

- [“Devoted to the service of \(...\)](#)
- [The New Elizabethan Age](#)
- [The bloody end of the Elizabet](#)
- [From Suez to South Africa](#)
- [Ebb tide](#)
- [Imperial Recessional](#)

## “Devoted to the service of our great imperial family”

In the week of Queen Elizabeth II’s death in September 2022, British radio and TV stations incessantly played a line from a speech she made on her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, whilst on a royal tour to South Africa in 1947: “I declare before you all that my whole life whether it be long or short shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong.” Was this a sign of the Queen’s devotion to duty and the peoples of the Commonwealth, as most British commentators claimed? No – rather, clear evidence of the monarchy’s close ties to British imperialism, insisted many voices in the post-colonial countries, from Barbados to Zimbabwe, that had suffered settler colonialism and racial segregation.

Yet if we look closely at the history of late colonialism and the British-led Commonwealth of Nations that followed, a more ambivalent, ironic view of the Queen’s life of service emerges. Born in 1926 and having come of age during the Second World War of 1939-45 that threatened global empires, the young Princess Elizabeth found herself as the leading spokesperson for a new, more liberal, modernising form of post-war imperialism supposed to bring benefits “to all the peoples of the British Commonwealth and Empire, wherever they live, whatever race they come from, and whatever language they speak”. [1] This attempt to remake modern Britain as a global imperial power ended in bloody failure. Yet even in the wreckage of empire, the Queen held onto her liberal ideals that her life was one of duty to all Commonwealth peoples. Her language of duty and service built a rhetorical bridge by which younger royals crossed a generational chasm, as they took up the fashionable postcolonial concerns of the early twenty-first century: saving elephants, hugging AIDS

orphans, jetting around the world to attend climate change conferences, in the company of billionaire philanthropists.

## **The New Elizabethan Age**

In 1947, the young, photogenic Princess Elizabeth was sent on a high stakes royal tour to South Africa. Britain, much like the Free French, had come through World War II by squeezing resources and troops from their empires. (« *La France n'est pas seule ! Elle a un vaste Empire derrière elle !* », proclaimed General de Gaulle on 18 June 1940.) [2] Now, in the immediate post-war era, the debts that had accrued from the exorbitant costs of waging total war loomed. Britain was close to bankruptcy. Yet rather than accepting an American bailout on terms that would entrench US hegemony, British politicians planned an audacious economic rescue plan. A revived, economically dynamic empire, reconstructed along modern, liberal, developmental lines would bail out Britain. Remarkably, the consensus largely cut across political divides. Even a veteran socialist, from the radical wing of his party, like Stafford Cripps, would argue: 'the whole future of the sterling group [i.e. the British Empire's common currency] ... depends in my view on the quick and extensive development of our African resources'. [3] The centre-left Labour Government that was in power from 1945-49 eased their consciences by arguing that a more liberal empire would benefit both the Mother Country and the colonial peoples: economic growth in Africa and Asia would be stimulated by investments in education and social development.

Such were the political stakes when the young Princess Elizabeth made her South African birthday speech, broadcast across the empire. Commentators have focused on her peroration promising "service of our great imperial family". Yet the pivot point of her speech is the middle paragraphs. She insists "the British Empire [had] saved the world", thanks to the sacrifice of Imperial and Commonwealth soldiers who "cheerfully" made sacrifices "in defence of the liberty of the world". The British Empire "has now to save itself after the battle is won."

Constitutionally, the British monarchy was cast as the central symbol a new imperial unity, with the monarch heading a revamped Commonwealth of Nations (est. 1949), which was described as a free association of English-speaking peoples. Even nations that opted for early independence and full republican statehood, such as India, removing the British monarch from their stamps and coins, remained tied into Britain through their membership of the Commonwealth of Nations. [4] (British politicians briefly entertained vain hopes that the vast Indian army might become the cornerstone of a Commonwealth military alliance.) More informally, the British royals wore uniforms and took on imperial military roles. Indeed, Princess Elizabeth enjoyed the first years of her married life in Malta, when her new husband, Prince Philip, commanded a frigate based in the great naval base of Valetta, which held the key to the western Mediterranean. [5] Many decades later in 2007, the royal couple would return to the island for their 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary- the Queen remembering these days in late imperial Malta as the happiest and most carefree of their lives.

The height of this new imperial project came when the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II took place in 1952. It was meant to herald a New Elizabethan Age. The reference was to Gloriana, Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603). Incidental, insubstantial, plucky triumphs of exploration were taken as proof that twentieth-century Britain remained a buccaneering nation, which could still conquer the earth. New Zealander Sir Edmund Hilary even managed to time the conquest of Everest to coincide with the royal coronation. Yet as much as royal courtiers organised elaborate ceremonies conferring knighthoods on these New Elizabethan adventurers, in reality the Space Race between the USA and USSR was the true test of technological and military supremacy in these early Cold War years.

## The bloody end of the Elizabethan empire

Yet a brutal imperial reckoning soon came with the Suez Crisis in 1956. As all British History undergraduates know, an alliance of French, Israeli and British troops briefly seized control of the Suez Canal, after the nationalist leader General Nasser took control of the foreign-owned Suez Canal Company. Whilst militarily successful on the ground, the campaign was a strategic disaster that ended with abject retreat. Britain buckled days after the USA threatened to withhold their support of British currency. For geopolitical “realists”, such as the distinguished historian of imperialism, John Darwin, the events of 1956 simply revealed what should have been obvious for decades. The New Elizabethan age had been an illusory chimera, for the great ship of empire had been holed beneath the waterline by the strains of World War II. [6] The royal family would spend the next decades attending flag-lowering ceremonies that marked the end of empire – a sequence that ended with the retreat of the last imperial governor of Hong Kong to the royal yacht *Britannia* in 1997.

British society has never needed to reflect too deeply on the legacies of colonialism, in the way that the insurgencies and wars of decolonisation in Algeria and Vietnam are scarred into the collective memory of France and the USA. If anything, the British Empire, particularly in its final liberal, developmental, modernising phase, was remembered as “a good thing”. [7] Yet the experience of liberal empire on the ground in the post-war years after 1945 was often very brutal. New taxes, forced removals and mandatory cattle culling programmes, which were supposed to drive productivity gains and improve economic growth, cut deep in Asian and African peasant societies. One historian of East Africa described these decades as “a second colonial occupation”. [8] In Kenya, the late colonial agricultural modernisation programme allowed white settler farmers to sweep their lands clean of African farmworkers and tenants, as labourers were replaced with tractors and machines. By the early 1950s, the Mau Mau insurgents were launching their first attacks on settler farms from their hideouts in the Aberdare Forest. The then Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip found themselves cast as unwitting extras in the bloody drama of decolonisation when they conducted a royal tour to Kenya in February 1952. The climax of the tour was a state dinner at Treetops Hotel – a safari lodge themed as a quintessential colonial hunting platform, lying deep in the heart of the Aberdare Forest. (It was here that Elizabeth learnt that her father, George VI, had died and she was queen.) Two years later, Mau Mau insurgents burnt down the hotel, which had most recently been used as a lookout post by members of the Kings African Rifles tracking guerrillas. [9]

In the same year as Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation in 1952, Kenya’s last imperial governor declared a state of emergency that ran for seven years until 1959. At least 25,000 Kenyans died; a further 30,000 passed through in detention camps, known for forced labour and brutal torture; around one million villagers living in the conflict zone went into emergency camps behind barbed wire. Unsurprisingly enough, many Kenyans today have mixed views of monarchy. When Kenya’s president, Uhuru (i.e. “Freedom”) Kenyatta ordered four days of national mourning on the death of the Queen, the airwaves were flooded with a wave of criticism. [10]

## From Suez to South Africa

Yet out of the wreckage of the British Empire emerged a remarkably strong Commonwealth of Nations headed by the monarchy. Much was due to a subtle recasting of royal attitudes. Instead of hunting tigers in South Asian game reserves, royals now also spoke about conservation and worried for the fate of African wildlife. The quixotic environmentalism of the Queen’s son, Prince Charles, for instance, derived from his close friendship the South African hunter and social adventurer, Laurens van der Post. Importantly too, the Queen remained steadfast in her beliefs that her Commonwealth was “[built on the highest qualities of the Spirit of Man: friendship, loyalty, and the desire for](#)

[freedom and peace](#)" [11]. In her 1983 Christmas Day message, given during the first year of famine in Ethiopia, she spoke of her trips around the Commonwealth and warned that "the gap between rich and poor countries and we shall not begin to close this gap until we hear less about nationalism and more about interdependence." This rhetoric might seem anodyne today; but it earned her a double-barrelled blast from Enoch Powell, a far-right politician perhaps best remembered for his prediction that post-colonial immigration into Britain would lead to "rivers of blood" and a race war.

The crucial test of the Commonwealth of Nations – and the high point of its influence – was its principled stand on the question of settler colonialism in Southern Africa. In 1961, India organised a successful campaign to have apartheid South Africa thrown out of the Commonwealth. Seeing the writing on the wall, Britain kept quiet. In the end, the apartheid government left before it was pushed. Something similar happened to Rhodesia in 1965. Once again, the Commonwealth confronted apartheid in the mid-1980s when its Eminent Persons Group, led by former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and former Nigerian Head of State Olusegun Obasanjo, paid a high-profile visit to South Africa, including a visit to Nelson Mandela on Robben Island. The attractiveness of the Commonwealth of Nations during this time was that it operated by consensus, allowing a well-organised coalition of post-colonial states to carry voice in a way that was not possible in Bretton Woods institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, which skewed towards European and US power. The irony here was that an organisation revamped in the 1940s to preserve British imperial influence had essentially become a megaphone for post-colonial leaders.

We cannot know precisely what Queen Elizabeth thought of this post-colonial turn, given that the mystique of monarchy and the UK's unwritten constitution required she kept public silence. However, it is clear that the Queen came close to making a public stand against the government of the day when in 1986 the palace gave an off-the-record briefing, leaked into *The Sunday Times*, which suggested the Queen favoured sanctions against apartheid South Africa, a position supported by the vast majority of the Commonwealth nations. This took the monarchy into choppy constitutional waters: the palace apparently briefing against Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who still believed that Nelson Mandela's African National Congress was a Communist organisation. A veteran South African journalist recalled how a palace press officer was made a sacrificial lamb to preserve the myth of royal impartiality. The Queen was also entering a debate that divided British society. Indeed, a statue of Mandela on London's Southbank, erected in the mid-1980s, had to be taken down after racist skinheads repeatedly defaced it.

Ultimately, it was the Queen, not Prime Minister Thatcher, (nor the skinheads), who had the better political judgement. Nelson Mandela emerged from Robben Island, led his country to democracy in 1994, and then brought South Africa back into the Commonwealth, casting some of his stardust onto the venerable institution. In 1995, the Queen made her first state visit to South Africa since her 1947 royal tour, sharing a joyous church service in the Cape Town cathedral with Nobel peace prizewinner, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Tony Blair's New Labour party came to power in 1997, promising an "ethical foreign policy", within which the Commonwealth offered "'a unique network of contacts, linked by history, language and legal systems" and [pledged to give it renewed priority in foreign relations](#)' [12]. Even the new generation of Conservative party leaders, from William Hague to David Cameron, and, later, Boris Johnson, decided they had to move away from Margaret Thatcher's foreign policy stance. Trying to detoxify their image as "the nasty party", full of "'fruitcakes', 'loonies' and 'closet racists'," they cosied up to Nelson Mandela and attended the Caribbean street festivals that celebrated London's diasporic heritage. [13] The Queen's championing of the Commonwealth had helped make Britain a post-colonial nation somewhat more at ease with itself.

## Ebb tide

The afterglow of the triumph against apartheid marked the high tide of the Commonwealth's influence in global affairs. Whilst the 2000s were a decade of evangelical humanitarianism, the action took place in other multilateral forums. British Prime Minister Tony Blair epitomised this decade: declaring "Africa a scar on the conscience of the world" and vowing to "make poverty history", whilst also invading Iraq and cutting deals with Muammar Gadhafi's oil rich Libya. Striking, too, was how little this British Prime Minister used the Commonwealth as a policy tool. [14] Rather, his 2005 Africa Commission delivered its report amid a great media fanfare to a G8 Meeting held at Gleneagles. The Commonwealth Heads of State meeting, held four months later in Malta, passed virtually unnoticed. Apparently, Prime Minister Blair found the endless discussions that were [the hallmark of the organisation's consensual style tedious](#) [15]. The 2008 financial crash also threw the contours of the international order into stark relief. For all the talk of a multipolar world, it was the US Treasury – belatedly supported by the European Central Bank – which vowed to do "whatever it takes" and used the "big bazookas" of their currency reserves to save the global economy. [16]

In the face of the major challenges of the early twenty-first century, the Commonwealth was a comparative minnow with little organised financial clout and very few shared strategic interests. By contrast, the Association of Small Island States threatened by rising sea levels has proved a far more effective interlocutor in UN debates on climate change, for instance. Admittedly, a hard-core of true believers in Britain claimed that the Commonwealth of Nations could reinvent itself as a buccaneering free trade zone – a revival, of sorts, of the imperial mercantilism of the mid-twentieth century. Some flavour of the changing tone of British politics was seen in a keynote government report commissioned by Boris Johnson's Brexit government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age* (March 2021). The report was beautifully bound into a front cover that showed an aerial view of the British Isles – a clear allusion to William Shakespeare's patriotic lines: "This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle...This precious stone set in the silver sea" (*Richard II*). Lyricism aside, a cool look at the cold statistics revealed that intra-Commonwealth trade had shrunk dramatically in the late twentieth century, after Britain entered European common market. To gain some sense of Britain's global reach, simply count the number of embassies on the African continent. In 2010, the UK ranked ninth with 26 embassies: approximately half the number of the USA (46), Russia (45), and China (42), and one-third less than France (38). [17]

For many political leaders in the Global South, the actions of successive British Prime Ministers, from Tony Blair to Boris Johnson, simply confirmed that rhetorical promises to revive Commonwealth relationships were baloney; and they would do better getting into multilateral forums on their own. Nigeria focused its efforts on getting a former finance minister, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, elected head of the Washington-based World Bank. (She failed here, but instead got the directorship of the World Trade Organisation.) In South Africa, the rainbow nation presidency of Nelson Mandela was followed by the intellectually prickly pan-Africanism of Thabo Mbeki, who threw his diplomatic efforts into reviving the African Union and binding South Africa into the Brazil-Russia-China-India axis of emerging powers.

There was also the vexed question of supposed shared Commonwealth values. For all the annual Commonwealth meetings produced communiqués promising to uphold the rule of law, free and fair elections, promoting girls' education, and whatever other cause was flavour of the month, it was painfully clear that many a good number of members were out of step with the prevailing values of liberal humanitarianism. Uganda forbidding sodomy, Swaziland being run by an autocratic monarch, Sri Lanka finding itself mired in the genocidal throes of a bloody civil war. The Queen continued attending Commonwealth meetings assiduously, as ever preaching the liberal values of mutuality and a shared humanity that she held close to her heart. Yet by now, these phrases, of the sort



endlessly regurgitated by billionaire philanthropists and movie star humanitarian missionaries, seemed careworn to the point of cliché.

## **Imperial Recessional**

In 2018, aware that she was fading, and determined to keep the leadership of the Commonwealth of Nations in royal hands – (theoretically, it could have been transferred to any member state) – the Queen asked her fellow heads of state that her son and heir take up her role on her death. Yet it is difficult to see what Charles III will make of this inheritance, given that this small, financially overstretched institution has recently been riven by infighting inside its secretariat. Troubling, too, seems to be the rise of a republicanism in the Caribbean Commonwealth realms, which galvanises support by mobilising protest against royal tours of the islands. The Queen, stoic to the last, never showed any sign of disappointment in her vision of the Commonwealth, however. In one later speech she stated, “When I was 21, I pledged my life to the service of our people and I asked for God’s help to make good that vow. Although that vow was made in my salad days, when I was green in judgement, I do not regret nor retract one word of it.” [18]

On 8 September 2022, the Queen died aged 96. Her rein had spanned the age of empire, the decades of decolonisation and the Cold War, the globalisation of the 1990s, and the rise of China as a potential new superpower in the early twenty-first century. In the week before her funeral, Elizabeth’s body lay in state in Westminster Hall. The weighty imperial crown, whose jewels include the giant Cullinan diamond from the fabulously wealthy mines of South Africa that pierce kilometres deep into the earth, lay heavy on her coffin.

**Timothy Gibbs**, 13 December

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- Books and Ideas. 13 December 2022:  
<https://booksandideas.net/Serving-our-great-imperial-family.html>

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### **Footnotes**

[1] ‘A speech by the Queen on her 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday, 1947’, found at:  
<https://www.royal.uk/21st-birthday-speech-21-april-1947#:~:text=On%20my%20twenty%2Dfirst%20birthday,me%20messa>

[2] “France is not alone! She has a vast Empire behind her!”

[3] Fred Cooper, “Modernising Bureaucrats, Backward Africans and the Development Concept”, in Fred Cooper and Randall Packard (dir.) *Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, Berkeley, U. California Press, 1997, p. 70

[4] Republicanism is a non-sequitur. The Palace always insisted that they do not mind in the slightest if decolonising states decided to leave the Commonwealth Realm of which the Queen was head of state. The key question was whether they refused to join the Commonwealth of Nations, headed by the British monarch – as did Ireland, but very few others.

- [5] Prince Philip, an unusually intelligent and capable royal, could have enjoyed a distinguished career in the Royal Navy, had he not resigned his command to become his wife's royal consort.
- [6] John Darwin, *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 476.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 641.
- [8] David Low and John Lonsdale, "Introduction", in David Low and Anthony Smith (dir.), *The Oxford History of East Africa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976, pp. 1-64.
- [9] Treetops was rebuilt in 1957 and revisited by the Queen in 1983.
- [10] 'A brutal legacy': Queen's death met with anger as well as grief in Kenya', *The Guardian*, 12 September 2022.
- [11] "The Queen's Christmas Broadcast, 1953".
- [12] Philip Murphy, 'The curious case of the disappearing Commonwealth', *The Conversation*, 22 April 2015.
- [13] Timothy Heppell, Cameron. *The Politics of Modernisation and Manipulation*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015.
- [14] Julia Gallagher, "Healing The Scar? Idealizing Britain in Africa, 1997-2007", *African Affairs*, vol. 108, n° 432, 2009, pp. 435-451.
- [15] Philip Murphy, "Sorry, Brexiters. Banking on the Commonwealth is a Joke", *The Guardian*, 10 April 2018.
- [16] Adam Tooze, *Crashed. How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World*, London, Penguin. (2018) – particularly pp. 166-202, 422-47.
- [17] Britain's abandonment of its colonies compares sharply to France, which maintained cosy, sometimes deeply corrupt, and arguably neo-colonial ties through institutions such as the annual France-Afrique summits – cf. Thomas Borrel, Amzat Boukari-Yabara, Benoît Collombat, and Thomas Deltombe (dirs.), *L'empire qui ne veut pas mourir : une histoire de la Françafrique* (Seuil, 2021).
- [18] "Britain Marks the Queen's Silver Jubilee", *The New York Times*, 8 June 1977. p. 73. Also, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9haU4bK5YA4>.