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GA 4: Special Political and Decolonisation (SPECPOL)

Research Report

Topic 1: Working towards dismantling the Commonwealth



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Introduction:

Born from the husk of the colonial British Empire, the Commonwealth of Nations is a large intergovernmental organisation with 56 members that today does a lot of work for democracy, development and peace. But with Britain's colonial crimes looming in the past, the Commonwealth often finds itself at the epicentre of the debate about neo-colonialism. Of its 56 members, 15 independent countries still have the British monarch as their head of state. In many of these countries, calls have intensified to cut ties with the British monarchy, which is seen by some as a reminder of dark colonial times and by some as a tradition worth keeping. Should the Commonwealth be kept or restructured, or should we be working towards dismantling the Commonwealth?

Definition of Key Terms:

Commonwealth: A commonwealth is a somewhat loosely defined term, “a [...] political unit, such as one founded on law and united by compact or tacit agreement of the people for the common good”.¹ The term has had various uses, sometimes as a synonym for republic or in the official name of some countries. In the context of this research report, it is used to denote the British Empire, which used the term to describe the collective of independent members which it was made up of. Today it is used in the name of the organisation that succeeded the British Empire, the Commonwealth of Nations.

Commonwealth Realm: Commonwealth Realm is the term used for the 15 countries in the Commonwealth of Nations that share the same head of state (a monarch). Charles III is currently the King of the United Kingdom and the other Commonwealth Realms. All Realms have separate monarchies, but they share the same monarch. This means that Charles III also has the titles King of Canada and King of Australia, and 12 more. If the line of succession was to be altered, all Commonwealth Realms must agree on who the new monarch should be. The monarch is represented by a governor-general in each of the Realms. Although formally head of state in the Realms, the monarch plays a ceremonial role and does not partake in the politics of the Commonwealth Realms, which are independent states. The Commonwealth also includes 5 countries with their own monarchies, with independent and locally chosen monarchs completely separate from Charles III and the British monarchy. These five countries are Malaysia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Tonga and Brunei and are not to be confused with the Commonwealth Realms as they are fully independent and sovereign states.

The Monarch and Monarchy of the United Kingdom: The United Kingdom is a monarchy headed by a monarch, currently King Charles III, who succeeded Queen Elizabeth II in 2022. To avoid confusion, the terms “monarch”, “monarch of the United Kingdom” and “British monarch” are used in this research report to denote these two and the monarchs in general. The United Kingdom is in a personal union with 14 other Commonwealth Realms, and the monarch of the United Kingdom is also monarch of these realms.

¹ [Commonwealth Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#)

Neocolonialism: A modern version of imperialism, the term neocolonialism refers to when states exert pressure over other states, typically former colonies, in order to gain global influence. This is usually done by keeping states dependent on the neocolonial state for economic support, but neocolonialism can manifest itself in many ways. It is widely criticised as it is a form of exploitation and reduces the independence of target states.

Background Information:

At the peak of its power in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the British Empire spanned the entire globe, with large territories on all continents. Most of these colonies were controlled by Britain, but towards the mid-19th century some of them, so-called ‘dominions’, were granted their own constitutions and more independence.²

The British Commonwealth of Nations came to be after the Balfour Declaration of 1926 and the Statute of Westminster 1931, which declared that all dominions are equal within the Commonwealth and cannot be controlled by laws of the United Kingdom. The King of the United Kingdom remained head of state of all dominions, thus being the uniting factor of all members of the Commonwealth. The dominions were Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, South Africa and Newfoundland (later also India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka). It is important to note that the majority of the British colonies, notably those in Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean, continued to be under British rule and did not enjoy the same equality and independence as the dominions.

Decolonisation and the dismantling of the British Empire after the Second World War brought a change to the now renamed Commonwealth of Nations. Anticipating the independence of India as a republic in 1950, the London Declaration of 1949 enabled India to stay a member without the monarch of the United Kingdom as head of state. Thus, although the monarch of the United Kingdom remains head of the Commonwealth, republics may also be part of the Commonwealth, without the monarch as head of state.³

As more countries became independent from the British Empire, most of them joined the Commonwealth of Nations. Today, the Commonwealth comprises 56 member countries, with a total population of 2,5 billion.⁴ Not all former British colonies and client states have joined, notably Myanmar and the countries of the Arab Gulf. Ireland and Zimbabwe are former members.⁵ Four member states have not been part of the British Empire: Mozambique, Rwanda, Togo and Gabon. The member states can be split into three categories: 15 Commonwealth Realms, which share the same head of state, 36 republics of the Commonwealth and 5 monarchies. Currently Charles III is the King of the United Kingdom

² [“Dominion status”: History, framework and context | International Journal of Constitutional Law | Oxford Academic](#)

³ [British Commonwealth of Nations \(1931\) | Making Britain](#)

⁴ [Facts | Commonwealth](#)

⁵ [History of the Commonwealth](#)

and the 14 other Commonwealth Realms.⁶ He also acts as the ceremonial head of the entire Commonwealth, a position which does not give him powers over the republics and monarchies of the Commonwealth, which are fully sovereign.

Today the Commonwealth has many missions across many different fields, vastly different from its colonial origins. Structurally, the Commonwealth is divided into the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning. The Secretariat, acting on the government level, is focused on supporting the democracies, environments, economies and youth of member states.⁷ The Foundation operates on the level of the individual, working in areas such as health and gender equality.⁸ The Commonwealth of Learning is focused on promoting education in its member states.⁹ The Commonwealth also hosts a large sports event, the Commonwealth Games, every four years.

Although today vastly separate from the imperial institution it once was, the Commonwealth is based on the remnants of a colonial empire led by a country that has committed a multitude of colonial crimes in the past. Some see the Commonwealth as Britain's way of keeping its former colonies under its influence in the modern world, such as The Gambia, which left the Commonwealth in 2013, calling it a "neo-colonial institution".¹⁰ The Gambia rejoined in 2018, following a change in government.¹¹

Of bigger controversy today is the status of the Commonwealth Realms. Of the 52 former British members, 41 have already removed the Monarch as their head of state. The most recent of these was Barbados, which became a republic in 2021, being the first one to do so in 30 years.¹² Following the death of Queen Elizabeth II on September 8th 2022, more Commonwealth Realms are now considering splitting from the Monarchy of the United Kingdom. The Caribbean nations of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Jamaica and Antigua and Barbuda will all host referendums regarding the removal of the monarch as their head of state in the coming year. Their reasons are a will to become fully independent and to separate themselves from the colonial and slave trade era government. Other Caribbean nations may follow suit, but the larger Commonwealth Realms, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, do not have such intentions yet.¹³

It is important to note the difference between the Commonwealth of Nations and the Commonwealth Realm status in the current debates in these countries, as the Commonwealth itself is usually seen as positive. When questions of the abolition of the British Commonwealth arise, they are usually only directed towards the status of the monarch as

⁶ [The Commonwealth | The Royal Family](#)

⁷ [Our work | Commonwealth](#)

⁸ [Commonwealth Foundation Strategic Plan 2021-2026](#)

⁹ [Commonwealth of Learning](#)

¹⁰ [Gambia pulls out of 'neo-colonial' Commonwealth | Reuters](#)

¹¹ [Gambia rejoins Commonwealth as it seeks to rebuild world standing | Reuters](#)

¹² [Barbados becomes a republic and parts ways with the Queen - BBC News](#)

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/12/monday-briefing-commonwealth>

head of state, for example all of the countries seeking to remove the monarch as their head of state still wish to conduct close cooperation with the Commonwealth and will remain members of the Commonwealth of Nations. The Commonwealth Realm framework is separate from the Commonwealth organisation, and the Commonwealth itself does not differentiate between members that are Commonwealth Realms and those that aren't.

The Commonwealth of Nations			
Head: King Charles III (ceremonial role with no powers)			
Commonwealth Realms	Republics of the Commonwealth		Monarchies in the Commonwealth
Head of state: King Charles III (holds the title of King of each of these countries) ¹⁴	Head of state: elected independently in each country according to own rules (president, prime minister) King Charles III does not hold any power in these countries ¹⁵		Head of state: a monarch, independently chosen according to own rules, completely separate from the British monarchy. King Charles III does not hold any power in these countries.
United Kingdom	Bangladesh	Barbados	Brunei
Antigua and Barbuda	Botswana	Cameroon	Eswatini
Australia	Cyprus	Fiji	Lesotho
Bahamas	Dominica	Gabon	Malaysia
Belize	Gambia	Ghana	Tonga
Canada	Guyana	India	
Grenada	Kenya	Kiribati	
Jamaica	Malawi	Maldives	
New Zealand	Malta	Mauritius	
Papua New Guinea	Mozambique	Namibia	
Saint Kitts and Nevis	Nauru	Nigeria	

¹⁴ [Realms and Commonwealth | Prince of Wales](#)

¹⁵ [Map of Commonwealth countries](#)

Saint Lucia	Pakistan	Rwanda	
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Samoa	Seychelles	
Solomon Islands	Sierra Leone	Singapore	
Tuvalu	South Africa	Sri Lanka	
	Tanzania	Togo	
	Trinidad and Tobago	Vanuatu	
	Zambia	Uganda	

Major Countries and Organisations involved:

Commonwealth of Nations: The Commonwealth of Nations is a voluntary organisation of 56 countries that promotes cooperation and development in areas such as freedom, democracy and trade, and hosts several events such as the Commonwealth Games. It has its origins in the vast colonial empire of the United Kingdom, but today also includes countries that haven't been part of the British Empire.

United Kingdom: As the colonial power that created the British Empire, the United Kingdom wields a large influence in the Commonwealth, and is one of the most important members of the organisation.

The dominions: The now obsolete term "dominion" was used to denote the independent members of the original British Commonwealth. Today independent, these countries – Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand – are highly developed and major players, both in the Commonwealth and on the global stage. They retain good relationships with the United Kingdom and, with the exception of South Africa, are Commonwealth Realms with the king as head of state.

The British Monarchy: Charles III became king after his mother, Elizabeth II, died on September 8th 2022. Charles III is the King of the United Kingdom as well as 14 other Commonwealth Realms, and he acts as the ceremonial head of the Commonwealth.

Relevant UN Resolutions:

This section outlines a number of existing UN resolutions that display relevance to the topic at hand, and as such, are integral to understanding the actions taken by the UN in the past. These resolutions have either had a direct effect on the course of history of the issue or outline some of the values of the UN that may be relevant.

The overall order that these resolutions are listed in generally, but not necessarily, correspond to the importance of the resolutions and relevance to the topic at hand respectively. Each instance of a UN resolution also includes the title of the resolution and the date it was passed, followed by a short outline of the resolution as a whole, and why it is relevant to this topic.

- General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV), adopted on 14th December 1960, “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples”¹⁶

Following the second world war, many countries began taking action to end the colonial era, particularly in the period of 1945-1960.¹⁷ This resolution was passed as direct action to grant independence to colonially governed states, with added clarification of how this action aligns with fundamental human rights and the values of the UN.

- Security Council resolution 2250, adopted on the 9th of December 2015, “Maintenance of International Peace and Security”¹⁸

The two main focuses of this resolution are the participation and protection of youth (established as the general age group: 18-29). For the clauses regarding participation, it focuses on increasing the role of youth in government and society as whole, particularly in the areas of representation and consideration when passing further resolutions. For clauses regarding protection, the importance of the protection of civilians, ending of discrimination and prosecution of those responsible for war crimes is stressed within the context of youth. The reason this resolution has been included is because the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth issued a statement, commending this resolution and its importance, establishing their belief in the importance of the inclusion and consideration of youth.¹⁹

- Security Council resolution 1325, adopted on the 31st of October 2000, “Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security”²⁰

This resolution is similar to that of UN resolution 2250 included above, sharing most of the same values and justifications within human rights, instead with the focus on women and increasing their role in government and society, also within the aspects of representation and participation. It is also the first resolution that was recalled within resolution 2250, establishing it as a fundamental resolution to be considered in other resolutions of the same nature. The reasoning for its inclusion in this section is also the same as above, in that it was officially supported by the Commonwealth of Nations after being passed.²¹ Therefore, UN

¹⁶ [Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples | OHCHR](#)

¹⁷ [Decolonization of Asia and Africa, 1945–1960](#)

¹⁸ [Maintenance of International Peace and Security, UN resolution 2250, UNSCR](#)

¹⁹ [The Commonwealth welcomes UN Security Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security](#)

²⁰ [Women, Peace and Security, UN resolution 1325, UNSCR](#)

²¹ [The UN and its impact in the Commonwealth: A View from the Speaker of India - Issuu](#)

resolution 1325 and 2250 serve as prime examples for the cooperation between the UN and the Commonwealth of Nations.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue:

In the past, there have been multiple attempts at reaching some conclusion in this issue, and numerous showcases of opinions, but the way that people and organisations attempt to solve this debate/situation with the Commonwealth depends on one's approach to the issue. Either, as an organisation or individual, one would be against the idea of the Commonwealth continuing to exist, or completely support the existence and growth of the Commonwealth, or at some point in between. To elaborate, being 'in between' could either mean being completely or mostly impartial/neutral, or that one would rather advocate for a major or minor restructuring of the Commonwealth.

When considering the argument against, Ireland and Zimbabwe are very notable in this issue, due to the fact each republic state withdrew from the Commonwealth in 1948 and 2003 respectively.²² These states saw no benefit in remaining in the Commonwealth, or at least saw that the benefits of being a member did not outweigh the drawbacks. This in combination with the view that the Commonwealth is an example of 'Neo-colonialism'²³ could be considered an example where the attempt to solve the issue was declaring the Commonwealth an unnecessary organisation. Ireland in particular had decided to withdraw out of spite to the British.^{24,25}

On the other hand, any member of the Commonwealth that has the status of a realm, which is a monarchy governed by the currently leading monarch in England (currently King Charles III), can be considered to be closely tied to the Commonwealth of Nations culturally. Notably, the United Kingdom, being the most influential member of the Commonwealth and the most prominent realm, sees benefit in strengthening and possibly expanding the Commonwealth. India being the largest and by far most populous nation in the Commonwealth, also displays significant influence in the organisation.

For the 'in between examples' essentially any member of the Commonwealth that has or plans to transition from a monarch to a republic can be considered to be in this category. Australia, New Zealand, Antigua and Barbuda were all realms that had been planning to transition into republic, but have temporarily postponed the idea for consideration to 2025, due to the death of Queen Elizabeth II.²⁶ Otherwise, they are still more oriented towards a less involved position in the Commonwealth as republics instead of monarchies/realms.

²² [Commonwealth countries thinking about becoming a republic under King Charles III after Queen Elizabeth's death](#)

²³ [Neocolonialism | Definition, Examples, & Facts | Britannica](#)

²⁴ <https://www.historyireland.com/leaving-the-commonwealth/>

²⁵ [15 Pros and Cons of Living in a Commonwealth State 2022 - Ablison Energy](#)

²⁶ [After queen's death, Commonwealth countries revive debate on monarch as head of state - CBS News](#)

Possible Solutions:

This section is for direct use by delegates, summarising the different approaches that can be taken to solving this issue regarding the Commonwealth of Nations within multiple perspectives. These are merely suggestions and are meant to serve as general guiding solutions that delegates are free to expand on for the upcoming committee sessions.

The most radical decision against the Commonwealth that could be made as a possible solution would be to call for the complete dissolution of the Commonwealth, meaning that the organisation as a whole would be removed. A slightly less extreme version of this solution would be to significantly reduce the size of the Commonwealth organisation, reducing its influence or perhaps expelling a significant number of its members. This solution is likely to be employed either by a former member of the Commonwealth, or a country against the idea of monarchies or colonialism and who sees the Commonwealth as a symbol for these concepts.

A more moderate solution against the current state of the Commonwealth would be to restructure the Commonwealth so that the monarchy would be removed from all the members of the Commonwealth, so that all members would be republics. This process has already been ongoing as many member states hold referendums to become republics, but especially republicanists, who advocate for the abolition of the monarchy, would like to see it accelerated. Many countries see the Commonwealth itself as a positive, but the monarchy as a symbol of colonialism, and for them this solution is desirable.

The moderate solution is to keep the status quo and retain the Commonwealth as it is in its current form, with only minor changes to it. Those supporting this approach believe that there are no issues with the Commonwealth in its current state and wish to see it continued

A moderately supportive solution to this issue would be to increase the presence of monarchies slightly or considerably in the Commonwealth organisation, meaning that more of the members would be realms instead of republics. This is the opposite of the currently ongoing process, and would most likely be employed by any of the current realms in the organisation. This solution could also increase the influence that the Commonwealth holds.

Focusing efforts to increase the number of members in the Commonwealth organisation, or otherwise massively increase the global influence of the Commonwealth would most likely be employed by the primary members of the Commonwealth, namely the realms or particularly the UK. This solution advocates in complete favour of the Commonwealth, and is the most supportive action that could be taken.

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