Great Britain: from Monarchy to Democracy

On July 22, 2013, Prince William and his wife, Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge, became the parents of a new baby, Prince George. The boy will be third in line to British throne, behind only his grandfather, Prince Charles, and his father. The current monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, has reigned for more than 61 years. Throughout much of the media and among fans of the royal family, George’s birth generated an enormous amount of excitement. At the same time, the fanfare over the royal baby raised some important questions for Britain, and, by extension, for the many other countries around the world that still support monarchies.

What exactly is the British monarchy and why does it still exist today?

Historians trace the origins of the British monarchy to the reign of Alfred the Great of the Kingdom of Wessex in the late 9th century. Prior to the unification of England under a single ruler, the country was made up of a number of smaller kingdoms, which suffered frequent Viking raids. Alfred the Great succeeded in defeating the Vikings and building Wessex into the most powerful of the English kingdoms. His grandson Athelstan, in the early 10th century, became the first monarch to rule over a unified kingdom roughly resembling present-day England.

The process through which England became a democracy proceeded slowly over the following centuries. Tensions came to a head in the early 13th century when a group of barons, unhappy with rising taxation and the loss of their possessions in unsuccessful wars, rebelled against King John. As a result of negotiations between the King and the rebels, the Magna Carta (or Great Charter) was issued in 1215. The document represented one of the first formalized checks on royal power. Clause 61 of the Magna Carta provided for the creation of a committee of 25 barons who could overrule the King and confiscate his possessions if he defied other clauses of the Charter.

The committee of 25 barons would ultimately comprise the basis for an English Parliament. The centuries that followed saw Parliament continue to develop and, slowly, assert more political authority. The English Civil War, which lasted from 1642 to 1651, pitted Parliamentarians (people who wanted the democratic Parliament to have more power) against Royalists (people who wanted the king to have more power) and culminated in the overthrow and execution of King Charles I. From 1649 through 1659, England had no king, but the Monarchy was restored—albeit in a weakened form—in 1660.

Tom Chivers of the Telegraph summarizes the significance of this event: “The Civil War [of 1642] had removed the monarchy, and then reinstated it in a weakened form, setting the stage for the constitutional monarchy that we have today.”

In the years following the Glorious Revolution, the Kingdoms of England and Scotland merged, and the Parliament of England became the Parliament of Great Britain. Although the monarch maintained some influence over political affairs, its power slowly eroded. Despite retaining the official title of “head of state," the monarch today occupies a purely ceremonial and diplomatic position.

Today, the House of Commons is a democratically elected body of 650 members, each representing a geographic constituency, similar to Congress in the United States. Elections must be held at least every five years. Members of Parliament are divided into political parties, with the leader of the party holding the majority of seats serving as Prime Minister—the effective head of government in the United Kingdom.

Although the United Kingdom has been a democracy for many years now, the royal family continues to garner a great deal of attention, both in Great Britain and around the world. Millions of people tuned in to watch the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in the spring of 2011 and closely followed news of a royal birth in the summer of 2013. Despite being citizens of a country that fought a war of independence specifically to be free from the rule of the British crown, many Americans were also enthralled by these proceedings.

In the United Kingdom, popular support for the monarchy has been strong and remarkably stable over the last several decades. In a May 2012 article for the BBC, journalist Mark Easton summarized a recent poll:
Whatever republicans [those who wish to eliminate the monarchy and replace it with a formal republic] might wish, less than a fifth of the Queen's subjects in the UK say they want to get rid of the Royal Family—a proportion that has barely changed across decades.

According to polling data, support for a republic was 18% in 1969, 18% in 1993, 19% in 2002 and 18% last year. Three-quarters of the population want Britain to remain a monarchy—a finding that has been described by pollsters as "probably the most stable trend we have ever measured."

Despite the limited support for republicanism in the UK, whenever there is a major royal event, it reopens debates about the place of the monarchy in modern British society. The British people have been electing their government representatives for many years now, they argue, so it makes very little sense for them to still have a king or queen as an official head of state. Moreover, they contend, it is wrong for the British people to have to support the monarchy with millions of pounds in tax revenue every year.

The financial side of the British monarchy is no less quirky. Governing for payment is standard, but the queen reigns, which appears mostly to mean visiting things. Strange as this looks from a practical standpoint, it's even stranger in theory. In 2012, why would the people of a Western state pay someone to subjugate them?

Supporters of the monarchy, on the other hand, argue that public support for the monarchy delivers a large economic return in the form of the tourist revenue it generates. In addition, they say, the royal family provides the British people with a sense of national identity. As Gerald Warner of the Telegraph stated in a June 2010 commentary:

_The monarchy costs 69p a year for every person in Britain, or £1.33 per taxpayer [about $2.14]. In return, besides the Crown Estate profits, there is the unquantifiable, but enormous, tourist revenue it generates. Claims that a republican head of state would be less costly are absurd. The German presidency costs about the same as the Queen, but how many tourists line the streets of Berlin to catch a glimpse of her?_

Although the monarchy undoubtedly represents value for money, its true worth cannot be expressed in financial terms. It is the personification of the nation, the embodiment of our national identity. The monarchy is living history, a pageant of our past that remains relevant in the present and will continue to do so in the future. Constitutionally, it is the guarantor of stability: during the political impasse that followed the general election and the protracted negotiations, our governmental process did not miss a beat, since the Queen remained as the constitutional authority, ensuring continuity.

Despite these considerations, republicans such as George Danker of the Cambridge Union Society believe that the monarchy should be eliminated as a matter of principle. Danker wrote in a March 2012 article for the Huffington Post:

_[T]he most common arguments for abolishing the monarchy are not economic or political—they are ideological. With an unelected Head of State, our democracy is incomplete, a notion that republicans simply cannot bear, and it is easy to understand why. It doesn’t feel particularly fair that one family has privilege and millions of taxpayers’ pounds thrust upon them, whilst being totally unaccountable to the outside world. Especially as the rest of us are struggling through the worst recession in living memory, it seems illogical that we might refuse the opportunity to decide which person, above all others, represents the nation._

**Guided Reading Questions**

1. What is the role of the monarch today? Who is the effective head of government under the current system?

2. What are "republicans" in Great Britain? How would they like to change their government?

3. Supporters believe that the monarchy creates a sense of national identity, while republicans consider the royal family to be an insult to British democracy. Which position do you agree with more? Why?