

Barbados: empire, commonwealth, republic



The phrase “the sun never sets on the British Empire” is often ascribed to Peter North, a journalist writing in the 1830s. It was used as an image to portray the vastness of the Empire, which at its height covered 25 percent of the world’s land mass, all ruled by the British royal family. Although the Empire had mostly disappeared by the middle of the last century, the Commonwealth, a group of countries that can be found on every continent, largely continued to recognise the head of the British royal family – currently Queen Elizabeth II – as their *head of state*. These countries were almost all former British colonies.



There are now 54 member countries in the Commonwealth, and only 15 of them continue to recognise the Queen as their head of state. Until November 30th 2021, that number was 16. On that day, 55 years to the day after achieving its independence, Barbados replaced the Queen with a president and became, for the first time in its history, a republic.

First colony, first code

While historically and culturally connected to the Caribbean Islands, Barbados is actually located in the Atlantic Ocean and was England’s easternmost possession in the Americas. After its discovery by the Portuguese, Barbados was settled by the British starting in 1627 and became the British Empire’s first overseas colony. The original inhabitants of the island, the Arawaks, were completely annihilated, and the island was soon populated not only by its British rulers, but also by white indentured servants¹, enslaved Indians and, increasingly, black slaves brought there from Africa. In 1661, the Barbados Slave Code was enacted, making it the first British territory to inscribe slavery into law.



¹Until the late 18th century, indentured servitude was common in British America. It was often a way for Europeans (usually from Ireland) to immigrate to the colonies in America.

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un chef d’État
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to annihilate
le plus à l’est
(ici) colonisé
outré-mer
annihiler

increasingly
to be enacted
de plus en plus
être promulgué,
être décrété

In 1833, Britain used 40% of its national budget to buy freedom for all slaves in the Empire. Britain borrowed a large sum of money for the Slavery Abolition Act which was fully repaid only in 2015, due to the type of financial instrument that was used then.

By the end of the 17th century, practically all the country's *workforce* was made up of slaves. These slaves, and the plantations they worked on, generally belonged to British *landowners* who *had been gifted* their lands by the Crown. While profiting richly from the production and exportation of sugar on the island, many of these landlords never actually visited the island.

By the time the Slave Trade Act² was passed in 1807, approximately 387,000 enslaved Africans had been brought to Barbados. Although no further slaves could be imported into Barbados after 1807, slavery *remained* legal there until 1833's Slavery Abolition Act³. Today, 90 percent of Barbados's 290,000 citizens can trace their ancestry partially or entirely back to Africa.

Rihanna and the prince

Barbados's separation from the Crown has been debated for over 40 years, and its current prime minister, Mia Mottley, won a *landslide election victory* in 2018 on the platform of replacing the Queen as head of state, and distancing the country from its colonial past. The international Black Lives Matter movement had an impact on *moving* the date of separation *forward*, as did the Covid-19 pandemic. Many have suggested that the prime minister was looking for a distraction from the economic *hardships* that the disease had brought to the country.



Mia Mottley



Parliament Buildings in Bridgetown, Barbados

In a ceremony that was attended by both Prince Charles and the Barbadian singer Rihanna, the prince acknowledged the "*appalling* atrocity of slavery" that was part of the island's *legacy*. The Queen sent her "warmest good wishes for happiness, peace and prosperity for the future". A month earlier, Dame Sandra Mason, until then the country's governor-general, *was sworn* unanimously by the Barbadian parliament as the country's first president and new head of state. ■

²Officially "An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade", it was an act by the British Parliament prohibiting the slave trade in the British Empire. It did not abolish slavery, but ship captains who continued to trade slaves were fined, which led to some captains throwing slaves overboard to avoid said fines.

³This is the act that abolished slavery in most of the British Empire territories. It came into effect on January 1st, 1834.

After Barbados became a republic, Queen Elizabeth II continues to rule as sovereign over 15 nations. They are the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Belize, Grenada, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea, Saint Lucia, the Solomon Islands, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Tuvalu. Countries that were once ruled by the Crown and later became republics include Mauritius in 1992; Dominica in 1978; Trinidad and Tobago in 1976; and Guyana in 1970. There have been discussions in recent years in both Jamaica and Australia about *removing* the Queen as head of state, but she continues to rule those lands to this day.

to remove (ici) destituer

the workforce
a landowner
to be gifted
la main-d'œuvre
un propriétaire terrien
(ici) se voir attribuer
gracieusement

to remain
a landslide victory
to move forward
rester, demeurer
une victoire écrasante
avancer

hardships
appalling
a legacy
to be sworn
des épreuves, des privations
épouvantable, effroyable
un héritage
être adoué