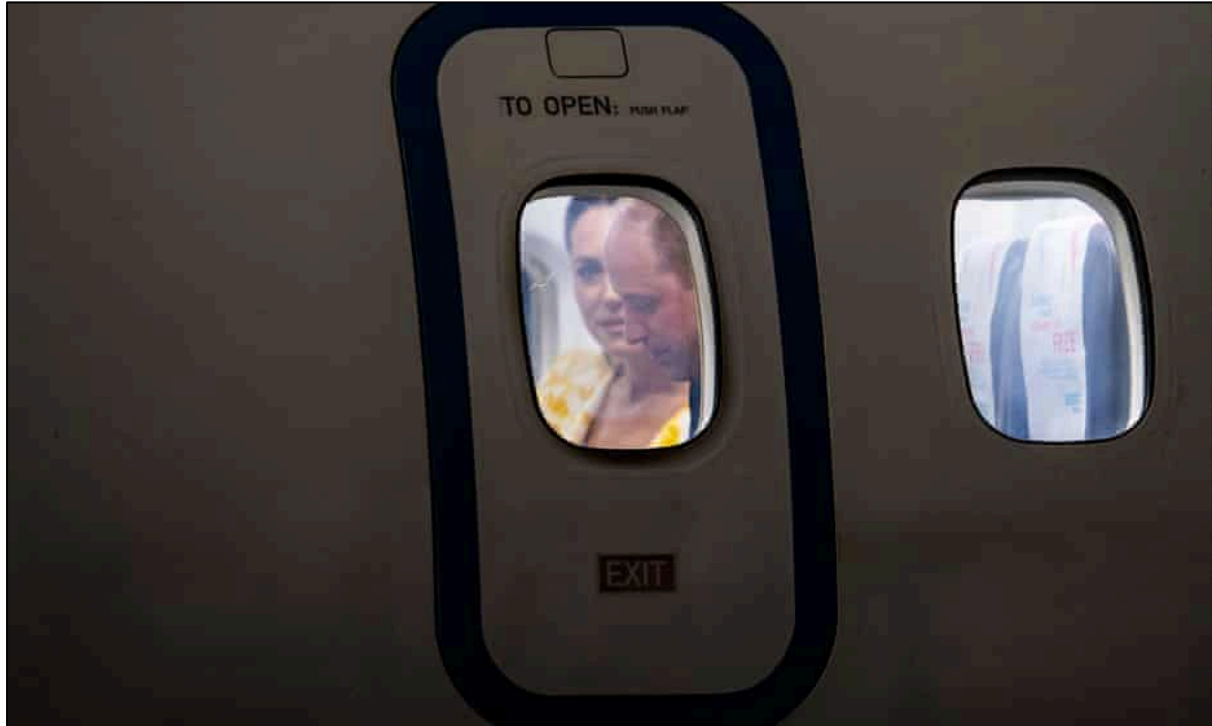


## After that disastrous royal tour, is the sun finally setting on the Commonwealth realms?

*A reckoning with those countries that have held on to Queen Elizabeth as their head of state is long overdue – as William and Kate's trip to the Caribbean made clear*



*'The signs weren't looking good for William and Kate from the outset.'* The Duchess of Cambridge and Prince William arrive in Nassau.

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Just how long has the British monarchy been in crisis? This time – after “Megxit”, after Prince Andrew – it was the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge’s disastrous trip to the Caribbean. What was supposed to be a “charm offensive”, drumming up enthusiasm in the year of the Queen’s platinum jubilee, ended up looking more like a long goodbye, with the headlines spotlighting anti-royal protests, failures to address legacies of slavery, and the news that Jamaica is planning to ditch the Queen as head of state.

It may well be time for the royal family to face up to the fact that the sun is setting on those final remnants of the empire that they once embodied – and not a moment too soon.

For Britons, it can be easy to forget that the Queen’s realm and territories stretch far beyond these isles. Out of the 54 “independent and equal nations” that make up the Commonwealth of Nations, 15 (including the UK) still count the Queen as their head of state. Becoming a republic doesn’t necessitate surrendering membership of

the Commonwealth itself – it simply means a symbolic rejection of British rule. And with Barbados finally taking the leap last year, longstanding debates about republicanism have been reignited in the remaining realms.

The issue is just as hotly debated in the likes of Australia (54% of people there would support becoming a republic) as it is in Jamaica, but packing William and Kate off to the Caribbean has inevitably focused minds in that region. Though republican camps in the Caribbean have long cited the impact of colonialism and slavery on the contemporary fortunes of their countries, a new reckoning is afoot, against the backdrop of the global Black Lives Matter movement and renewed conversations about the legacy of empire. Thanks to the attention the royals command, the disintegration of British overseas rule is being documented in real time.

The signs weren't looking good for William and Kate from the outset. The couple's first official engagement, in Belize, was unceremoniously cancelled after protests from the Q'eq'chi Maya people over a land dispute with a charity that William patronises. Heading to Jamaica, they were met with more demonstrations, this time calling on the royals to address the issue of reparations for the several hundred years they directly profited from the slave trade. Government officials backed up the sentiment, with Jamaica's prime minister, Andrew Holness, informing a solemn William and Kate that the country was "moving on" and wanted to be "independent", seemingly following the example of Barbados. It's no wonder the royals were gracing Sunday's front pages in damage-limitation mode, with William offering a half-apology for the tour.

As ever, sometimes opening their mouths only makes things worse: in a speech given in Kingston last week, Prince William expressed "profound sorrow" for the transatlantic slave trade, but people were quick to point out that he stopped short of an apology or acknowledging the monarchy's direct interests in slavery. At one point in history, enslaved Black Africans arriving in the Caribbean via the Royal African Company were branded with the initials "DY", marking them as the property of the then Duke of York. Royal profiting from slavery continued apace – the future William IV even personally argued for the continuation of the trade in the House of Commons in 1799, a move that, according to historian Brooke Newman, helped "delay" abolition for a few more years but "misjudged the mood of the nation" – and damaged the reputation of the royal family as a result.

For the royals, the trip has been a sharp lesson in how people in the Commonwealth now perceive Britain and its institutions. As the Jamaican dancehall artist Beenie Man put it during an interview with ITV News: "We are just here, controlled by the British, ruled by the British law when you go in the court. It's all about the Queen ... but what are they doing for Jamaica? They're not doing anything for us." The Jamaican writer Ashley Rouen Brown summed up the grounds for resentment succinctly: Jamaicans, he wrote, are "currently the only citizens within the Commonwealth realm that require a visa to visit the land of their head of state". Meanwhile, requests for financial reparations, in recognition of the impact centuries of plunder had on economic prospects, have been met with egregious responses, like David Cameron's 2015 offer for Britain to finance a £25m prison to hold Jamaican "criminals" in lieu of compensation for slavery.

In Jamaica, republicanism has been part of the political conversation since the 1970s, and there is cross-party support for the move. But now, debate has been replaced by decision. Emancipation is in full swing. It's no coincidence that it comes as the Queen – who “made the Commonwealth central to her life when she became monarch” – reaches the twilight of her reign. But nor can it be a coincidence that this is all happening after several years of governmental and monarchical misrule in London. The aftermath of the Windrush scandal still leaves a bitter taste. And, albeit on a different scale, it's worth taking account of some more of Beenie Man's words: “If Harry was coming, people would react different,” he said. “People are going to meet Harry.” In that sense, the royals really are the authors of their own misfortune.

But with or without the Sussexes, there is an air of historical inevitability to all this. So, what happens next? Ahead of Kate and William's visit, the Windrush campaigner Patrick Vernon said: “If Jamaica decided it did [want to become a republic], there would be a domino effect on the rest of the English-speaking Caribbean.”

His words may well be prescient. The royal couple flew into the Bahamas, the last leg of their tour, to be greeted by protests on the ground and opposition from the likes of the Bahamas National Reparations Committee. Belize has announced a constitutional review, and late last year leaders including the St Vincent premier were urging fellow Commonwealth realms to attain republican status. The wheels seem firmly set in motion, with the royals' open-backed Land Rover left spinning in the sand.

This kind of reckoning with reality is long overdue, and, who knows, it may even be a long-term positive for Britain if it helps disabuse our political class of its globe-trotting, Empire 2.0 fantasies. At the very least, now is the time to admit that for many parts of the world, the benefits of sovereign British rule are most heavily felt by the home nation itself. Within our own borders, we may kid ourselves that the monarchy is still a glittering jewel in our crown. But for many people overseas who wish to escape the long shadow of empire and exploitation, the shine has well and truly rubbed off.

- ***Moya Lothian-Mclean*** presents Human Resources, a podcast about the legacies of Britain's slaving history