



*Viceregalism: The Crown as Head  
of State in Political Crises in the  
Post War Commonwealth*

**H. Kumarasingham (ed.)**

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**Review by: Carolyn Harris**



*Viceregalism: The Crown as Head of State in Political Crises in the Post War Commonwealth*. Edited by H. Kumarasingham. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. xix + 373. £89.99.

In the introductory chapter of *Viceregalism*, H. Kumarasingham discusses George VI's observations on the popular perception of the sovereign. George VI was the first monarch to formally hold the title of Head of the Commonwealth and yet he was colloquially described as the "King of England," just as his daughter Elizabeth II is often called the "Queen of England," a title that had not existed since 1707. As Kumarasingham notes, "George VI even suggested that the UK itself should have a governor-general to 'remind people of the United Kingdom that he was King of other places beside the United Kingdom'" (8).

In the past decade, Elizabeth II's global role has been the subject of both scholarly works such as *Monarchy and the End of Empire: The House of Windsor, the British Government and the Postwar Commonwealth* by Philip Murphy and popular works such as *Queen of the World* by Robert Hardman. Nevertheless, the full extent of the Queen's global diplomatic role and the variety of political crises navigated by her viceregal representatives over the course of her reign do not receive as much attention as the Queen's role in the United Kingdom. For example, numerous media outlets in the United Kingdom and the United States described Boris Johnson as the Queen's fourteenth Prime Minister, which is accurate in a strictly British context, but Kumarasingham reminds readers that British Prime Ministers comprise only 8% of the total number of Prime Ministers serving the Queen around the world (9).

Between her accession on 6 February 1952 and January 2020, "the Queen has had 179 prime ministers across the globe formally serving under her in an independent country ... She has also had 159 men and women represent her as Head of State (not including the many that have acted temporarily in this role)" (9). *Viceregalism* brings together leading scholars in the fields of history, political science, and law to examine post-war political crises involving the crown in various regions of the world as well as little known aspects of the history and duties of viceregal representatives.

The wide geographical range of the chapters in this volume allow for insightful comparisons of the similarities and differences between the powers of viceregal representatives in different regions of the Commonwealth. Kumarasingham notes examples of Governors General from various regions of the world who appear to have had little in common but shared a background as former party politicians who had enjoyed active political careers (20). Kate Quinn discusses nine different Commonwealth realms in the Caribbean, examining both the characteristics that they share, including how viceregal representatives serve their terms on the recommendation of the Prime Minister without a required outside consultation process, and individual examples of political upheaval such as the American invasion of Grenada in 1983. Anne Twomey compares a 2013 political crisis in Tuvalu where the Governor General and the Prime Minister attempted to dismiss one another to the dismissal of the government of Gough Whitlam in Australia in 1975. Donal Lowry notes in his chapter on the Governorship of Northern Ireland from 1922 to 1973 that the Irish Free State, which existed from 1922 until 1937 was modeled "on the

constitutional template of Canada, with a Governor General of its own” (95). Mark Kerr observes in his analysis of recent Australian Governors-General, “Significantly, Australian Governor-Generals [sic] since 1975 have come from less diverse backgrounds than comparable countries such as New Zealand and Canada” (293). Indeed, the book would have been enhanced by the inclusion of chapters about Canada and New Zealand. These two countries receive comparative analysis in Kumarasingham’s opening and closing chapters and are mentioned elsewhere in the volume but are not the subject of individual chapters.

In addition to the analysis of the decisions made by viceregal representatives during political crises, the case studies in the book provide evidence concerning the Queen’s own perspective on her global role and how she is perceived both personally and constitutionally in different Commonwealth nations. The Queen’s determination to undertake a controversial royal tour of Ghana in 1961 is discussed in both Pippa Catterall’s and A. J. Stockwell’s chapters. James Mitchell notes the Queen’s support for the United Kingdom in his chapter concerning Scotland. In addition to the chapters concerning Elizabeth II’s Commonwealth realms, there are chapters analysing other monarchies within the Commonwealth including Andrew Harding’s study of Malaysia’s “unique rotating federal monarchy” (255) which is “flourishing” in the twenty-first century (257) and Kevin Y.L. Tan’s discussion of the struggle to reform Brunei’s monarchy over the course of the twentieth century.

While the analysis of post-war political crises is nuanced and detailed, there is the occasional historical inaccuracy in the early chapters of the book, most notably Mitchell’s claim that “There has been no King Charles of Scotland” (79), despite that fact that two of the seventeenth-century Stuart Kings of England and Scotland were named Charles, and Charles I even had a Scottish coronation in 1633. Since the chapters in the volume discuss current events as well as historical ones, there are a few points that are out of date despite the book having been published just last year. For example, Mark McKenna notes that the letters between Sir John Kerr and the Queen “will not be released until 2027 at the earliest” (301), but following an appeal to the High Court of Australia by Australian political scientist Jenny Hocking, these documents were released in full and online on 14 July 2020, just days before the publication of *Viceregalism*.

*Viceregalism* is an excellent resource for understanding how the role of Head of State has evolved in constitutional monarchies in the Commonwealth from end of the Second World War to Brexit. The contributors draw upon a wide range of sources, including newly accessible archival material, to analyse how viceregal representatives responded to political crises around the world. The book will be of interest to historians, political scientists, and general readers interested in learning more about the Crown and viceregalism throughout the Commonwealth.

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