

Republic or Not - Power, Parliament, and the Unfinished Constitution

While England continues to govern without a single written constitution, most countries that claim adherence to democratic principles have gone through the process of codifying laws, conventions, rights, and institutional arrangements into constitutional form. Constitutions have come to represent order, fairness, accountability, and the promise that all persons governed by them will be treated according to rules rather than according to the will of those temporarily holding power.

Indeed, so central is the idea of constitutional order that even organizations, clubs, associations, and political parties adopt constitutions to regulate their affairs. At their best, constitutions restrain arbitrary power, protect minorities, provide predictability, and ensure that authority is exercised within known limits.

In 2020, the Mottley-led Government announced that Barbados would be repatriating its Constitution by replacing the monarchical framework inherited at Independence in 1966 with a new republican version. The process began with the appointment of the Republican Status Transition Advisory Committee, headed by former Governor of the Central Bank Marion Williams, to help plan and manage the transition from monarchy to republic.

This was not the first attempt to consider republican status. It followed earlier constitutional discussions, including the Cox and Forde Commissions. The Cox Commission opposed a move to republican status, while the Forde Commission supported it.

In June 2022, retired Justice Christopher Blackman was invited to chair the Constitution Review Commission to review recommended amendments to the existing Constitution and provide direction for a new republican constitution. After twenty-seven months of review and consultation with Barbadians at home and across the diaspora, the report was presented to the President of Barbados, Dame Sandra Mason, in October 2024.

Yet, as at June 28, 2026, that proposed Constitution appears to remain locked away somewhere between Bay Street and Sherbourne, unavailable to the people in whose name the republican project was supposedly undertaken.

The control of power has always been one of the central challenges of government. Recent elections in Barbados have placed extraordinary parliamentary power in the hands of the Barbados Labour Party, led by Mia Mottley, without an elected Opposition in the House of Assembly. The defection of Ralph Thorne from the Government benches once created a semblance of parliamentary opposition, but the 2026 General Election again returned a House in which Mottley and her Government became the sole decision-makers in the Lower Chamber.

From the outset, the Government has demonstrated an appetite for limiting opposition to its decision-making. One of its first acts was to change the process for selecting the Speaker of the House, moving away from the previous understanding that the Speaker would be selected from among elected members, and instead allowing for the election of a non-member on the claim that such a person would be independent.

The result was the election of the outgoing former Barbados Labour Party Speaker, Arthur Holder, as an “independent” Speaker. To many observers, this raised obvious questions about the meaning

of independence where the officeholder had so recently served within the political framework of the governing party.

The second significant act was the passage of a resolution forbidding elected members from crossing the floor of the House. That decision deserves serious scrutiny. Twenty-nine members, each elected in his or her own right by a constituency, agreed to reduce their own independence as parliamentary representatives and bind themselves more tightly to the political will of the party and its leader.

This may be one of the most remarkable acts of political surrender by elected representatives in the history of Barbadian parliamentary life.

Rather than strengthening democracy, these arrangements consolidate power—not merely in the party, but in the hands of the Prime Minister. They weaken the representative function of Members of Parliament and elevate party discipline above constituency responsibility.

Neither of these changes appears to flow from recommendations contained in the draft republican constitution. Indeed, from all indications, the spirit of the constitutional reform exercise pointed toward greater citizen engagement, broader participation, stronger accountability, and a more modern democratic framework.

The irony is therefore striking.

While the country was invited to participate in consultations about republican reform, the Government has proceeded with parliamentary changes that appear to centralize power rather than disperse it. The people were asked to contribute to a process promising democratic renewal, yet the resulting constitutional document remains unpublished and unenacted.

The term “banana republic” has often been used pejoratively to describe governments that fail to meet accepted standards of democratic accountability, constitutional restraint, and institutional independence. Historically, the term has been associated with Latin American states marked by monocrop economies, foreign domination, weak institutions, oligarchic interests, and governments that served narrow elites rather than the people.

Barbados has long prided itself on being different. Even during its colonial history, including the period when enslaved labour cultivated sugar and made Barbados the so-called gem of England’s plantations, the island developed a reputation for orderly government and parliamentary continuity, although the franchise was then severely limited and democracy incomplete.

That reputation is now under strain.

A few Barbadians have been calling on the Government to enact the republican constitution promised since 2022 and available since 2024. Their numbers may be small, but the principle they raise is large. A country cannot claim to have completed its republican journey while the document intended to give meaning to that republican status remains hidden from the people.

One view gaining ground is that the reluctance to proceed with the new Constitution may be linked to the reality that enacting it would require the Prime Minister to surrender some of the power she now enjoys. Some have argued that the recent changes involving the Speakership and the restriction on Members of Parliament may not have survived the spirit, and perhaps even the letter, of the proposed republican framework.

Whether or not that argument is ultimately correct, the public is entitled to know.

The evidence suggests, however, that with or without a republican constitution, the present Prime Minister would likely continue to dominate the system, given the weakness and compliance of the current elected members. Constitutional text matters, but democracy depends not only on what is written in law. It also depends on the courage, independence, and integrity of those entrusted with public office.

Parliamentary action may be guided by the Constitution, but its democratic quality is measured by the conduct of each representative. Every Member of Parliament must remember that the oath of office is not sworn to a political party or to a Prime Minister. It is sworn to the country and its people.

If elected representatives surrender their judgment, silence their conscience, and reduce themselves to instruments of party command, then no constitutional reform—however elegantly drafted—can save democracy from erosion.

That is the tragedy of the unfinished republican project.

The Constitution Review Commission consumed public money, public time, public consultation, and public hope. Yet the document remains unused, while the Government proceeds as though republicanism means little more than replacing a monarch with a President and leaving executive dominance untouched.

A true republic is not defined by ceremonial change. It is defined by the location of power, the protection of rights, the independence of institutions, the accountability of leaders, and the active participation of citizens.

Until those principles are honoured, Barbados may be a republic in name, but the deeper question remains unresolved: republic or not?