

Dominion

Dominion, the status, prior to 1939, of each of the British Commonwealth countries of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, Eire, and Newfoundland.

Although there was no formal definition of dominion status, a pronouncement by the Imperial Conference of 1926 described Great Britain and the dominions as “autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.”

The main characteristics of dominion status were complete legislative authority as provided in the Statute of Westminster (1931) and, in the executive sphere, the right of dominion ministers to direct access to the sovereign (previously advice on dominion matters could be tendered only by United Kingdom ministers). Internationally, it connoted the recognition of the dominions (except Newfoundland) as separate states, entitled to separate representation in the League of Nations and other international bodies, to appoint their own ambassadors, and to conclude their own treaties. At the same time, the dominions were not considered to stand in the same relation to the United Kingdom or among themselves as foreign countries. After 1947 the use of the expression was abandoned because it was thought in some quarters to imply a form of subordination, and the phrase “members of the Commonwealth” came into use.

The definition of 1926 was modified in 1949, when it was agreed that countries could enjoy full Commonwealth membership but were not obligated to recognize the British monarch as their sovereign. The monarch was accepted as the symbol of the free association of the independent member nations and as such was the head of the Commonwealth. India was the first country to enter into such an arrangement, and by the 1990s it had been joined by most of the other Commonwealth nations. *See also* Commonwealth.

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