

Prince Harry and Meghan Quit The Royal Family. End of the Monarchy as We Know It?

By [Johanna Ross](#)

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When the Queen gave her annual speech at Christmas, she spoke of the 'bumpy path' that she and her family had been on over the past year. She was of course referring to one of the worst scandals ever to have hit the royal household – that of Prince Andrew's relationship with convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein and his flawed attempt to conceal it. In the most damaging interview given to the media since Princess Diana famously revealed all regarding her relationship with Prince Charles back in the 90s, Prince Andrew gave a car-crash interview to the BBC last year which sealed his fate; he would never again play the same active role in public life.

But the Queen it seemed was not quite prepared for the announcement that Harry and Meghan, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, were to cut their ties with the Royal household and 'carve out a progressive role', becoming financially independent. It was reported by The Times on Thursday that the Queen was not even aware of the statement, which was released on Wednesday by the Duke and Duchess' communications team.

The press release expressed Harry and Meghan's desire to have 'space' for family life and detailed plans to split their time between Britain and the US, Meghan's home territory. Buckingham Palace nevertheless issued a swift, brief, and rather terse response 90 minutes later, trying to play down the explosive nature of the news and stressing that there were 'complicated issues that will take time to work through'. Not exactly praising her grandson's decision.

Indeed there have been signals of late which indicated that all was not rosy between Harry and the family. The obvious omission of Harry and Meghan from the family photos pictured next to the Queen on Christmas Day spoke volumes, as did the decision by the Duke and Duchess to spend Christmas not at the palace, but with Meghan's mother in Canada. Then there was the photograph depicting the four generations of the family: the Queen, Prince Charles, Prince William and his son George which reportedly upset Harry and Meghan as they had been excluded. But it would be naive to say that their decision to break with the royals has come as a complete shock.

In fact we have to be honest: Harry has always been, as his mother was, a bit of a rebel.

From being photographed dressed as a Nazi at a party in his youth to being captured on camera naked inside a Las Vegas hotel room, he has brought his fair share of controversy to the door of the Palace in the past. He has never quite toed the line when it came to royal etiquette and his marriage to Meghan Merkle was in itself testing the boundaries of the Queen's tolerance. For the 21st century it may be, but for Prince Harry to marry a working class girl from LA, of African descent, would have been unthinkable only a few years ago and

we'd be extremely foolish to think that Her Majesty and Prince Phillip looked on this match favourably. She was never going to be fully accepted into the Royal family; she would never be 'one of them'. But on the other hand, clearly Meghan doesn't want to be; she's had a flavour of royal life and it's clearly not the life she envisages for her new family. The court case she and Harry announced last year against the Daily Mail for 'untrue stories' demonstrates the extent to which they are now calling the shots; they won't be at the mercy of the powers that be any longer.

It's important however to see this move also in the wider context of pressures on the monarchy. For another incident last year demonstrated more than any other the obsolete nature of what many people now consider an outdated institution. The prorogation of parliament by Boris Johnson, for which he had to seek to the Queen's permission, but which was ultimately ruled as illegal by the courts, showed just how pointless Her Majesty's role is. For if even the Queen herself is at the mercy of the underhand scheming of a dishonest Prime Minister, what is the value of such a head of state? Her position is purely symbolic and constitutes nothing more than an anachronism. Increasingly, people are asking if the millions of taxpayers' money is worth it, particularly the amount they receive has been increasing year on year.

And so this could be the beginning of a downsizing of the British monarchy. The UK wouldn't be alone either - the King of Sweden announced last year that he would be removing five of his grandchildren from the royal house. It makes sense to do this: the monarchy's survival as an institution could depend on it...

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Johanna Ross is a journalist based in Edinburgh, Scotland.

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