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SESSION 2020

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Move by Prince Harry and Meghan signals a slimmed-down future

The announcement by the Duke and Duchess of Sussex that they are to step back as senior members of the royal family follows a year of stress and uneasiness about their current roles.

The couple's ambition to plough a unique, untested and unconventional path comes after much speculation that the two were not completely comfortable with the status quo.

This new route, it appears, will allow them to capitalise on their international celebrity, while retaining their HRH¹ status.

The recent portrait of the Queen, with the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Cambridge and Prince George, was a tangible reminder of the couple's role as the "spares" of the family.

Prince Charles is a supporter of a slimmed-down monarchy. The message this photograph conveyed was very clear – this is the nucleus of the modern royal family going forward.

The statement by Prince Harry and Meghan followed "many months of reflection and internal discussions", according to the couple's website. And plans are very much in their infancy.

Buckingham Palace immediately stressed that the couple's proposals raised "complicated issues that will take time to work through". The palace response raises the question of just how advanced those discussions were, and to what extent the Queen and her senior advisers were consulted, before the remarkable announcement by the couple on Wednesday.

Frogmore Cottage, the couple's home, will now remain empty for a considerable part of the year as they split their time between the UK and North America. Some claim their actions have blurred the lines between royalty and celebrity.

Quite how they intend to become financially independent has not been explained. But it is evident the couple feel constrained by the restrictions they currently face.

As well as carrying out their charitable endeavours, they said, in addition "they value the ability to earn a professional income, which in the current structure they are prohibited from doing". Future financial autonomy would give them the freedom to "work externally", they said.

At present 5% of their costs are met by the sovereign grant – the annual funding mechanism that covers the cost of the monarchy and replaced the civil list in 2012. This is the public money they intend to relinquish. Charles funds the remaining 95% from his income from the Duchy of Cornwall.

The biggest clue that the Sussexes were set to redefine their position came in the TV interview they gave to ITV's Tom Bradby during their tour of South Africa late last year.

Meghan's unhappiness was evident when she said, very candidly, of her role: "It's not enough just to survive something, right? That's not the point of life. You've got to thrive, you've got to feel happy.

"I really tried to adopt this British sensibility of a stiff upper lip. I tried, I really tried. But I think that what that does internally is probably really damaging."

In their new role, they say, they remain "dedicated to maximising Her Majesty's legacy both in the UK and throughout the Commonwealth".

Graham Smith, of campaign group Republic, said it showed the couple "wanting to have your cake and eat it".

It raised serious questions for the monarchy, he added. "The Queen and Prince Charles appear comfortable with all the trappings and formality of royal duties but it's increasingly clear that the younger generations are not so keen."

¹ HRH = His (and Her) Royal Highness

Article by Caroline Davies for The Guardian Online, 8 Jan 2020