

Finding Freedom book reveals mistrust behind Harry and Meghan's departure

The first of three days of exclusive extracts from Finding Freedom: Harry and Meghan and the Making of a Modern Royal Family

Omid Scobie and Carolyn Durand | Saturday July 25 2020, 12.01am BST, The Times

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/finding-freedom-book-meghan-markle-prince-harry-7w0q8jnw7>

Accessed July 29, 2020

As the Range Rover pulled up the driveway to Sandringham House, Harry was nervous. The estate, where the Queen was in residence and so many Christmas memories had been made, was now the setting for the most important meeting of his royal life.

It was also the hardest. He found himself more at odds with his family than ever. It wasn't an easy decision to stand up to the age-old rules of the monarchy, but for Harry, this was his only option in "making things right for his own little family", a source close to the couple said. "This is tearing him apart. He loves the Queen, but his wife feels aggrieved, and he adores his son. Harry's whole world is Archie."

Harry was facing the Queen, Charles, and William for the first time since he and Meghan had released their full plans to step away from their official roles in the royal family to the world. (Although Prince Philip had been expected to participate in the meeting, he left for his farmhouse located on the estate shortly before discussions got under way.)

In the days since Harry and Meghan launched their website, sussexroyal.com, Buckingham Palace's dismay had turned to resolve in repairing the situation and moving on as quickly as possible. While the hybrid model of royalty that Harry and Meghan suggested posed a huge challenge that few thought could be overcome, one source said: "The drama and division is doing the most damage."

Prior to the meeting, aides had assured Harry that the Queen wanted to help the Sussexes find a resolution, even if they might not get everything they wanted. Despite the reassurances, Harry wasn't sure who to believe any more.

Since getting married, Harry and Meghan had enjoyed calling their own shots. "Harry and Meghan liked being in control of their narrative," a source said, which is why originally agreeing

to fold their household into Buckingham Palace, instead of creating their own independent court, had proved a big disappointment to them.

Harry and Meghan had wanted to create their own individual household in Windsor, meaning their own office staffed with their own team, who would be separate from all others. But senior officials quickly ruled out that option.

The senior courtiers whom Diana used to refer to as “men in grey suits” were concerned that the global interest in and popularity of the Sussexes needed to be reined in. In the short time since their fairytale wedding, Harry and Meghan were already propelling the monarchy to new heights around the world.

As their popularity had grown, so did Harry and Meghan’s difficulty in understanding why so few inside the palace were looking out for their interests. They were a major draw for the royal family. According to a press reports that compared the online popularity of the Sussexes with the Cambriges from November 2017 to January 2020, “Harry-and-Meghan-related searches accounted for 83 per cent of the world’s curiosity in the two couples”.

The Sussexes had made the monarchy more relatable to those who had never before felt a connection. However, there were concerns that the couple should be brought into the fold; otherwise the establishment feared their popularity might eclipse that of the royal family.

Increasingly Harry had grown frustrated that he and Meghan often took a back seat to other family members. While they both respected the hierarchy of the institution, it was difficult when they wanted to focus on a project and were told that a more senior ranking family member, be it Prince William or Prince Charles, had an initiative or tour being announced at the same time — so they would just have to wait.

For months the couple tried to air these frustrations, but the conversations didn’t lead anywhere. Worse, there were just a handful of people working at the palace they could trust. Outside this core team, no information was safe. A friend of the couple’s referred to the old guard as “the vipers”. Meanwhile, an equally frustrated palace staffer described the Sussexes’ team as “the squeaky third wheel” of the palace.

Highly emotional and fiercely protective of his wife and son, Harry was drained by the unique circumstances of his family, which, as a source described, “doesn’t have the opportunity to operate as an actual family”. While politics are part of every family dynamic, they are at a whole other level for William, Harry, and the rest of the royals. “Every conversation, every issue, every personal disagreement, whatever it may be, involves staff,” the source said of the aides who invariably send and receive messages between the royal households. “It creates a really weird environment that actually doesn’t allow people to sort things out themselves.”

No one could deny the fact that the couple were emotionally exhausted, whether they had brought it on themselves or were victims of a merciless machine. “They felt under pressure,” a source said. “They felt that they were alone.”

For Harry especially, it was all getting to be too much. “Doesn’t the Queen deserve better?” screamed one newspaper headline, which the prince read online. “These people are just paid trolls,” he later told a friend. “Nothing but trolls . . . and it’s disgusting.”

Scrolling on his iPhone, he sometimes couldn’t stop himself from reading the comments on the articles.

“H&M disgust me.”

“They are a disgrace to the royal family.”

“The world would be a better place without Harry and Meghan in it.”

The last comment had over 3,500 upvotes. Harry regretted opening the link. His stomach tied into the same knot every time he saw these sorts of comment. “It’s a sick part of the society we live in today, and no one is doing anything about it,” he continued. “Where’s the positivity? Why is everyone so miserable and angry?”

It wasn’t just the press or online trolls getting to Harry. It was also the institution of the monarchy. Barely a week went by without an aspect of their internal affairs or matters of private discussions being twisted and leaked to the press. They felt as though there were very few members of the palace staff they could trust. Harry’s relationship with William, which had been strained for a while, was getting worse.

As the autumn had worn on and tensions with certain sections of the palace grew, Harry and Meghan decided they needed to get out of the country for a while. Christmas was right around the corner, and spending it at Sandringham surrounded by members of the royal family did not sound like a holiday.

The couple decided that for the second half of November and all of December they would base themselves in Canada. They headed for an \$18 million Vancouver Island estate that their friend Ben Mulroney helped secure through the music producer David Foster. Foster was close friends with the wealthy investor who had put the property up for sale and was willing to let it to the couple for far below market value.

With two private beaches on four acres of land, it provided a haven for the shell-shocked couple. Meghan’s mother, Doria, visited for the Thanksgiving holiday.

Away from the courtiers and all things royal, they could think for themselves. They went over the events since the wedding and talked about how and if they could create a situation that would make for a better future. “I don’t need to have that movie moment where we get out of a car and wave to a hundred photographers before going into a building,” Harry told a friend. “It should just be about the work happening inside. Let’s focus on what really matters.”

Before leaving the UK, Harry had spoken a handful of times to his grandmother and father and a number of key aides about the urgent need to change things for him and his wife within the palace structure. He felt at once used for their popularity, hounded by the press because of the public’s fascination with this new breed of royal couple, and disparaged back within the institution’s walls for being too sensitive and outspoken. He and Meghan didn’t want to walk away from the monarchy; rather, they wanted to find a happy place within it.

But as the weeks went by, the couple had realised they couldn’t go back to the way things had been at home. As hard as the decision was to make, they came to a conclusion: Harry and Meghan were going to step back from their roles as senior royals — and cut themselves off from access to the sovereign grant.

Despite the change, they still wanted to carry out their duties for the Queen. That was the one thing that they did not want to end — not just because of Harry’s love and respect for his grandmother, but also because Meghan felt she had given up so much to take her life down a path of service to the monarchy. She didn’t quit when she signed up for a task.

They knew there would be hurdles, such as discussions over the security that was provided by the Metropolitan Police for “internationally protected people”. But they were confident enough that before Christmas, Harry emailed his grandmother and father to say that he and Meghan had come to the decision to change the way they worked — to step back and spend more time abroad. He didn’t get into much more detail, worried that the news might leak via a member of staff. The rest, he said, they would discuss in person.

With both family members informed, Charles’s private office was requested to schedule a time for the two to meet the Queen, who was based at Sandringham for the holiday, as soon as the Sussexes returned to the UK on January 6. Their trip to London was going to be short, but Harry was keen to ensure that by the time they returned to Canada at the end of the week, their new chapter had been secured.

Harry was right to be worried about leaks. Details from the email soon ended up in the hands of a tabloid reporter who began inquiring about the couple’s plans to spend more time in Canada. But that was the least of his worries. Despite repeated follow-ups with his father’s office, he was unable to secure time with the Queen. She would not be available, he was told, until January 29. “He felt like he was being blocked,” a source close to the prince said.

As their Air Canada flight made its early morning touchdown at Heathrow, and still with no appointment to see Her Majesty, Harry and Meghan toyed with the idea of driving straight to see the Queen. Not wanting to cause problems for themselves (arriving unannounced would have ruffled feathers), the couple instead called for a team meeting at their home, Frogmore Cottage. With senior aides Harry and Meghan revealed details of their plans to the team. Whether their speedy approach was right or not, Harry and Meghan were more determined than ever. "At this point they felt like they had brought up the subject enough times with family members over the past year and they were fed up of not being taken seriously," a source close to the couple said. "Everyone had their chance to help but no one did."

Few things remain secret between royal households and it didn't take long after Harry's initial email for the Sussexes' grand plans to be the topic of conversation among most of the aides and family members. Worried about losing control of the situation, Harry contacted his grandmother to explain his concerns, and she signed off on putting together a jointly agreed statement. The couple hesitated about involving the other households, not knowing if everyone involved would have their best intentions, but agreed for aides to meet up the next day and get on the same page.

With a plan in place, Harry and Meghan put on big smiles the following day as they chatted to dignitaries at an engagement with the high commissioner of Canada to the UK. But privately they were both nervous about what was about to happen. They had seen a draft of what Buckingham Palace planned to put out in a statement that would follow theirs and its "lack of warmth" was a clear sign that not everyone supported their decision.

But there was little time to dwell. Just a few hours after leaving Canada House, a story about their plans to stay in Canada broke. Details were missing, but it was clear that someone within the palace had briefed the newspaper. A royal source absolutely denied the charge, blaming the couple for the leak, "because they were frustrated at the palace in the talks that were going on . . . They wanted to force the decision, to break it open." The couple deny this claim.

With the news out and media organisations contacting the palace for comment, a statement needed to be issued fast. On January 8, the couple took to Instagram to share their news with the world. Alongside their announcement, they launched sussexroyal.com, which was no longer a landing page for their new foundation but a road map of the "new working model" they hoped to espouse. It offered clarity on their decision to be financially independent, which was not only to have more freedom in their work but also to remove the tabloids' justification in having access to their lives.

The website took everyone, even their communications team, by surprise. Aides and family members knew the couple wanted to step back, but the website, which laid out the details of their half-in-half-out model as if it were a done deal, put the Queen in a difficult position.

Flustered Buckingham Palace aides ditched their original statement and put out a short media release 15 minutes after the Sussexes released theirs: “Discussions with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex are at an early stage. We understand their desire to take a different approach, but these are complicated issues that will take time to work through.”

The aides, including the Queen’s private secretary, Edward Young, were furious. “The private offices don’t like that type of behaviour,” a source familiar with the negotiations said. “It is deeply unhealthy and unwelcome.”

More unsettling, however, was the reaction from the family to the website they had launched. “The element of surprise, the blindsiding of the Queen, for the other principals who are all very mindful of this, rightfully, it was deeply upsetting” according to a senior member of the household. Several in the family shared that both the Queen and Prince Philip were “devastated”.

“The family is very private and bringing it into the public domain, when they were told not to, hurt the Queen,” the source continued. “It was laying out what the Sussexes wanted in a statement without consulting with Her Majesty first — and she’s the head of the institution.”

The palace scrambled to figure out if all of the requirements in the couple’s manifesto could even work logistically, including having the “future financial autonomy to work externally”. This was very different from the simple idea of spending more time abroad that had originally been presented. There were security and funding issues, tax implications, and visas. How could they legally take on commercial endeavours and still represent the Queen? “It was a huge headache,” an exasperated aide said.

Even a source close to the couple admitted that while Harry and Meghan had put a lot of thought into this immense transition, they could also be “impatient and impulsive”. “They run hot, in a way,” the source said. “The reactions in individual moments are definitely not the same, a month, a few weeks, down the line.”

Despite her sadness at the thought of losing the Sussexes as working royals, the Queen could see it was necessary for the couple to completely separate from the institution. No one should be forced into something they don’t want to do. But if Harry thought that their public proposal would result in their getting exactly what they wanted “he was sorely mistaken”, a senior courtier said. “The Queen understood the difficulties they faced, but the rules don’t bend for anyone.” Buckingham Palace issued a statement stating that a solution to Harry and Meghan’s requests would be reached “within days, not weeks”.

After three days of discussions between the royal households and government officials, including the Canadian government, the Queen requested that Harry travel up to Sandringham to meet her, Charles and William.

At the “Sandringham summit”, the four of them would sort out the future once and for all.

What a source described as a “practical workmanlike approach” permeated the room as the royals set out to form a deal. Harry felt as though he and Meghan had long been sidelined by the institution and were not a fundamental part of its future.

One didn’t have to look further than the family photos displayed during the Queen’s Speech on Christmas Day. In the Green Drawing Room at Buckingham Palace, where the Queen delivered her address, viewers glimpsed photos of the Cambridges and their children, Charles and Camilla, Prince Philip, and a black-and-white image of George VI. Noticeably absent was a photo of Harry, Meghan, and their new baby, Archie. Palace sources insisted that the photos were chosen to represent the direct line of succession, but for Harry and Meghan, it had been yet another sign that they needed to consider their own path.

Charles made it clear to Harry that he and Meghan were very much part of the future for the royal family despite calls for a “slimmed-down monarchy” with fewer senior working royals. “The Prince of Wales’s vision always included Harry as part of a slimmed down monarchy,” a source close to the family shared. “His vision included both his sons. William will always be more important than Harry but that’s a fact only because of birthright.”

Though William had not taken the original news of his brother’s plan well, his fate was up to the Queen, and she was very aware that the outcome of the meeting would set the standard for generations to come.

Finally, she made it clear that their quasi-royal vision would not work. “It was untenable,” a palace source said. “If Harry and Meghan had been semi-working royals, there would have had to have been oversight in everything they did in their independent sphere, a committee to approve events and deals.”

When the meeting was over, Harry immediately debriefed Sussex aides before sending a text to Meghan. That evening, the Queen put out a candid and personal statement. “My family and I are entirely supportive of Harry and Meghan’s desire to create a new life as a young family,” the statement read. “Although we would have preferred them to remain full-time working members of the royal family, we respect and understand their wish to live a more independent life as a family while remaining a valued part of my family.”

The official communication also announced that Harry and Meghan no longer wanted to rely on public money during the coming period of transition, during which time the couple would live in both Canada and the UK. “These are complex matters for my family to resolve, and there is some more work to be done,” the Queen stated, “but I have asked for final decisions to be reached in the coming days.”

“More work” was an understatement. Harry spent the next several days holed up in intense meetings and conference calls with top aides from all three royal households, Buckingham Palace, Clarence House, and Kensington Palace, which were led by Charles’s private secretary, Clive Alderton. William was more than happy to leave the matter up to staff. He was reported to have told a friend: “I’ve put my arm around my brother all our lives and I can’t do that anymore; we’re separate entities.”

That held true for Meghan and Kate as well. The two duchesses’ relationship had struggled to move past the distant politeness of when they first met. Their cordial but distant rapport was apparent when the pair appeared alongside each other at the King Power Royal Charity Polo Day the previous summer. While the doting mothers were photographed next to each other with their children, the two appeared to barely exchange a word.

The state of affairs between the two women was just an offshoot of the real issue at hand: the conflict between Harry and the institution. Harry likened his meetings throughout the week to standing in front of a firing squad. “There was a lot of finger pointing in both directions with things leaking,” an aide said. “It was all very unhealthy.”

When Harry described how he didn’t feel supported by his family, this was what he was referring to. They did their bit in the family meeting at Sandringham, and then they left him to defend himself against and negotiate with their aides, which is exactly what he didn’t want to happen. “He feels that there were so many occasions when the institution and his family could have helped them, stood up for them, backed them up, and never did,” a source said.

Courtiers viewed Harry’s position as completely unrealistic. While it was easy to say they wouldn’t take money from the sovereign grant, it was quite another thing to follow through. “The biggest row was over money, because it always is,” a source familiar with the negotiations said. One aide made a joke about Meghan launching a line of beauty products.

More accurately, the couple hoped to earn a living through speaking engagements, production deals, and other commercial deals that had social impact. Still, there were some difficult calculations to be made. If Harry and Meghan did some official work, they would have to figure out how much of their expenses were private rather than subject to tax relief. “They’ve created a complete headache for everyone,” an exhausted aide complained on the fifth day of meetings.

More difficult were the hurt feelings on both sides. Even sources close to Harry and Meghan had to admit that the way the couple were forced to approach the situation (mainly in the act of keeping the family and their team in the dark about their website) “created a lot of ill will in the household and especially in the family”.

“Harry and Meghan would have reached a more beneficial agreement to allow them to live the life they wanted if they had handled things in a private, dignified way,” a senior Buckingham Palace aide explained. Another courtier added: “They oversimplified what they were asking for.

They thought they'd give Charles their rider, negotiate over email, rock up to London, give three months' notice and fly back to Canada."

Harry and Meghan, however, felt that they had been patronised by other family and staff members for too long. People had humoured them when they brought up grievances, never thinking the couple would actually do anything drastic. The explosive reaction was a direct result of their growing impatience. If other members of the family and those working with the households had taken their requests more seriously, it wouldn't have reached that point.

Either way, the source said: "The courtiers blame Meghan, and some family do."

The media speculated that Meghan was behind the decision for the couple to step back, but few knew how much she sacrificed to try to make it work. As Meghan tearfully told a friend in March: "I gave up my entire life for this family. I was willing to do whatever it takes. But here we are. It's very sad."

While the British media often blamed royal wives, in Harry's case, he was very much on board with distancing himself from the public eye. It's why he gravitated toward the military, had always avoided the pomp as much as he could, and didn't give his child a title. He long craved a life away from the prying eyes of the media. Meghan simply emboldened him to make the change. She supported him no matter what. "Fundamentally, Harry wanted out," a source close to the couple said. "Deep down, he was always struggling within that world. She's opened the door for him on that."

Five long days after the original meeting, the Queen issued a statement that a plan had emerged for "a constructive and supportive way forward for my grandson and his family" to take effect in the spring of 2020. This was followed by a statement from Harry and Meghan. Both outlined the terms of the deal, which stipulated that the couple would completely step back from royal duties. No longer working members of the royal family, they would not be able to use their HRH titles or the word "royal" in any of their future endeavours. Harry would lose his military honours, and his role as Commonwealth youth ambassador was also pulled.

Harry and Meghan were allowed to maintain their private patronages. Although they could no longer formally represent the Queen, they "made clear that everything they do will continue to uphold the values of Her Majesty".

As to the issue of money, Harry and Meghan would no longer receive public funds for royal duties. The couple took it even further, stating: "The Duke and Duchess of Sussex have shared their wish to repay sovereign grant expenditure for the refurbishment of Frogmore Cottage, which will remain their UK family home."

That was £2.4 million of taxpayer money that sections of the British public were furious about when the number was confirmed in the 2018–19 sovereign grant report, released the previous

July. Constant negative press coverage surrounding their renovations did little to help. It felt good to put that behind them. Offering to repay the money was a symbol of how much Harry and Meghan wanted to cut any ties. Privately, Prince Charles said he would help them financially, out of his personal money, if they needed it.

The most demoralising aspect of the deal was Harry being stripped of his honorary military appointments. “That’s been a tough pill to swallow, and one that has been most painful to Meghan witness him go through,” a source close to the couple said. “It’s the one that made Harry emotional.”

“It was so unnecessary,” Meghan later told a friend. “And it’s not just taking something away from him; it’s also that entire military veteran community. You can see how much he means to them, too. So why? The powers [of the institution] are unfortunately greater than me.”

While the hours crept closer to the couple’s final day as working royals on March 31, Harry and Meghan continued working. Commitments that had been made long before their January announcement still needed to be carried out, and for both of them, it was important not to let anyone down. Plus, they were at their best when they were busy.

While Harry spent much of his time in the UK in meetings with palace staff to tie up final details, he did make time for family. He had barely exchanged words with his brother since they had last seen each other at Sandringham, but Harry did enjoy chats on the phone with his father, whose private secretary continued to oversee the final elements of the transition. The line between family and institution was more blurred than ever, but it was perfectly clear who was playing what role when the Queen invited Harry over to lunch on March 1. Though his last time with Her Majesty had been in a more formal capacity, this time it would just be the two of them for Sunday lunch. “No titles,” an aide said. “Just granny and grandson.”

Sitting at the Queen’s dining room in her Windsor Castle apartment, it was just like the old days. While he had lost respect for parts of the institution, and even certain family members at points, the Queen was still one of the most important women in his life. As they tucked into a roast lunch, the Queen made it clear to Harry that she would always support him in whatever he decided to do. Though a 12-month trial period had already been promised to Harry earlier in the year, their conversation was also a reminder that should he and Meghan ever want to return to their roles, they were always welcome.

“It’s been made very clear they can come back whenever they want, when they’re ready,” a source involved with the negotiations said.

One of their final engagements was the Commonwealth service at Westminster Abbey. But if they ever needed confirmation that stepping away from the institution was the right move, the machinations that had preceded it served as a useful reminder. Although they had been part of the procession of senior royals who entered the church with the Queen in previous years, this

year they discovered they had been removed from the line-up. The decision had been made without their consultation, and they were informed long after the 2,000 orders of service had been printed for guests, with their names notably absent. This year it would just be the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, the Prince of Wales, and the Duchess of Cornwall walking through the abbey with the Queen. It felt intentional. “Harry was more than disappointed,” a friend said. “He spoke up, but the damage had already been done.”

To smooth things over, the Cambridges agreed to take their seats at the same time as the Sussexes and the Earl and Countess of Wessex. But if looks were anything to go by, the Cambridges were unhappy with the decision. While Harry and Meghan both greeted William and Kate with smiles, the Cambridges showed little response. It was the first time the two couples had seen each other since January. “Harry,” William nodded, ignoring Meghan. For the minutes before the Queen’s arrival, William and Kate sat with their backs to the couple, only turning around to chat with Prince Edward and Sophie, next to the Sussexes. Although Meghan tried to make eye contact with Kate, the duchess barely acknowledged her.

While the couples had been in a slightly better place after Archie’s birth, relations fell apart again in January as the family negotiated Meghan and Harry’s new roles. William, a Kensington Palace source explained, remained upset that private family matters were made public by the couple. “It’s not anger,” the source explained. “It’s hurt.”

“It should have been the one public moment where the royal family put their arms around the couple for a show of support,” a source close to Harry and Meghan said. “They purposefully chose not to put them in the procession and not to be welcoming. It was most unpleasant.” Buckingham Palace shrugged off the procession change, saying there was “no set format”.

After the service, Meghan flew back to Canada — she had booked the first flight after the service to return to Archie. “Meg just wanted to get home,” said a friend, noting that the duchess was emotionally bruised and exhausted. “At that point she couldn’t imagine wanting to set a foot back into anything royal again.”