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THEY haven't quite ruined the festive season but it's been close.

One after another, news of their exasperating behaviour has thudded on to the nation's breakfast tables.

Princess Anne behaving boorishly towards an elderly lady handing her a flower decoration.

Prince Andrew cavorting endlessly and aimlessly in the sunshine of the Far East.

And even Princess Margaret, ill as she is, evoking the unsympathetic observation that she is a victim of a royally excessive lifestyle.

All this week at Buckingham Palace, while the family's principal figures have been away at Sandringham on their annual New Year break, senior courtiers have been becoming more and more concerned.

Every day seems to have brought a new piece of unwelcome news about what certain other members of the family are up to. Little of it brings good cheer.

Mostly, they know, it has provoked anger among the public.

To the people whose lives are committed to the welfare of the monarchy, this has been one of the worst periods of public disapproval since the death of Princess Diana.

No, it is not a crisis. Not quite. Or as one senior official muttered with distinct discomfort yesterday: 'Not yet.' The constant stream of uncomfortable news reopened the debate at the Palace this week about the future direction of the monarchy.

The question is about the size of the official Royal Family and who should formally feature as its members. Prince Charles has believed for some time that a 'downsized' slimmer Royal Family is a more secure and successful Royal Family.

He feels that any behaviour that attracts criticism weakens the monarchy.

Some at the Palace already believe that the monarchy should consist only of the sovereign, his or her heir, and the heir's children.

Were this arrangement to be in position now, this would automatically displace the Princess Royal, Prince Andrew and Princess Margaret from their centre-stage positions and banish them to the wings.

This would leave a front-rank Royal Family consisting of the Queen and Prince Philip, Prince Charles, and his sons William and Harry.