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Subject:

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Inline-Images: Dominic_Lawson_15587a.GIF

Dominic Lawson: I stayed at Epstein's so don't hound Andrew

Prince Andrew has been damned for his choice of friends, but he is blessed in his enemies, like Labour MP Chris Bryant

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Guilt by association is a conveniently elastic property for the press, when it is engaged in a manhunt. In this case the man is Prince Andrew, Duke of York, and he has been associating with a sex offender named Jeffrey Epstein.

In 2008 Epstein was sentenced to 18 months in jail, having pleaded guilty to the charge of soliciting an underage girl for prostitution.

Last December Prince Andrew was snapped by a paparazzo while walking in Central Park with Epstein and the shot was duly published in the News of the World.

The Prince and Epstein were old friends, and the fourth in line to the throne had been staying at the billionaire's New York mansion.

This occasioned only mild scandal at the time; but a fortnight ago The Mail on Sunday published the account by Virginia Roberts of her employment as a 17-year-old masseuse by Epstein, in which she repeated in bowdlerised form her previously pseudonymous court deposition — as “Jane Doe 102” — that she had been “sexually exploited by Epstein's adult male peers including royalty”.

The story was accompanied by a photograph of Prince Andrew with his arm around Ms Roberts, taken in 2001. Although the newspaper went out of its way to emphasise that there was no suggestion that the Queen's second son had engaged in any improper or illegal sexual conduct, headlines such as “Prince Andrew and ‘naked pool parties’ at his paedophile friend's house” had the desired effect of portraying a royal duke wallowing in sleaze.

As is usual in such circumstances, other papers, not wanting to be left behind in the cross-country pursuit of hunt the royal fox, have laboured mightily to be the next to draw blood from the prey. Thus, The Daily

Telegraph — perhaps to the consternation of older readers accustomed to more respectful treatment of the House of Windsor — ran the following headline across the full width of last Thursday's front page: "The duke, his paedophile guest, and the most unusual use of an RAF base"; it went on to assert: "The Duke of York is facing renewed questions about his friendship with Jeffrey Epstein after it emerged that the convicted paedophile landed his private jet at an RAF fighter base during a visit [to see the duke] at Sandringham." Cor!

However, a closer reading of the body of the story yields the fact that the visit occurred back in 2000, many years before Epstein's trial and conviction; and a Ministry of Defence spokesman admitted that civil aircraft are "routinely granted permission" to land at RAF bases. So, not exactly "Cor!"; in fact, barely "Well, I never".

Yet the Telegraph's story was a model of understatement compared with the Daily Mirror's grotesque effort on the same day: "Prince Andrew was dealt a fresh blow last night after it was revealed pervert friend Jeffrey Epstein met his girls as children. Papers show the paedophile, jailed for luring a young girl into prostitution, mingled with Princesses Eugenie and Beatrice in the Bahamas in 1998. A palace insider said: 'It was a fleeting meeting with Epstein, but it is still a great worry.'" That's it; that's the whole story, in full. Read it and weep — with laughter at the outrageous contrivance of it all.

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I suppose, before I am outed by the Mirror as a paedophile at one remove, I had better confess all. In January 1999 we enjoyed a brief family holiday at Epstein's now notorious Florida home. My wife had known Epstein since the mid-1980s; when she told him in the winter of 1998 that our younger child had been most unwell for a long period, he said that what she needed was some sunshine and insisted we stay at his Palm Beach home.

The place was empty, apart from us and the housekeeper; but, yes, I did notice a photograph in it of Epstein and his then girlfriend Ghislaine Maxwell with Prince Andrew. This, of course, was before Andrew took on the job of being Britain's "special trade representative" — and long before the world knew of Epstein's involvement with teenage girls (not the same thing as "paedophilia", by the way, since none of the girls was pre-pubescent, but undeniably both sordid and exploitative).

I do recall thinking the friendship between Epstein and Andrew rather surprising, but only because of the vast gulf in interests and intellect. Epstein is not interested in golf. The Coney Island-born son of a New York park attendant, he began his career as a teacher of physics and calculus, later putting his remarkable mathematical abilities to more profitable use as a financial trader and adviser.

As a billionaire he retained a consuming fascination with science, being a member of the New York Academy of Sciences and a visiting fellow at Harvard: his biggest charitable donations are in the fields of particle physics and artificial intelligence.

On the one occasion I had a conversation with him, it was about the development of chess computers and how they could be made to simulate human methods of calculation; it soon became embarrassingly clear that I could not grasp a fraction of what he understood. As I said, it was impossible to see what he had in common, intellectually at least, with the Duke of York. On the other hand, the notionally republican Americans have a perennial obsession with the British royal family — the impending wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton seems almost bigger news there than here — and I suspect Epstein, an avid collector of objects and people, wanted to add a part of the House of Windsor to his fabulously expensive portfolio of exotica.

Unfortunately, Andrew, trade ambassador or not, seems blithely unaware of when he is being bought: it was this newspaper that revealed he had accepted an offer of £15m for his former Sunninghill home — £3m over the already ludicrous asking price — from a Kazakh oil and gas billionaire purporting to be “a friend”. This is a classic case of the “unsolicited gift”, given in the hope of a later return of a favour. His negotiation last year of a \$24,500 (£15,000) loan from Epstein to help pay down his ex-wife’s wearily habitual debts is on a very different scale; but, to put it at its most cynical, why risk the scandal this would cause for such a trivial sum?

Doubtless, Andrew would argue that Epstein was a genuine friend, and one who had served the prison sentence for his crime; certainly his loyalty, however naive or ill considered for a representative of the crown, is morally preferable to █████ Ferguson’s emetic effusion: “I personally, on behalf of myself, deeply regret that Jeffrey Epstein became involved in any way with me. I abhor paedophilia and any sexual abuse of children ... whenever I can, I will repay the money and will have nothing ever to do with Jeffrey Epstein ever again.” Bear in mind that she knew of Epstein’s record when she asked her former husband to negotiate the loan, and you realise what self-serving, hysterical drivel this is.

Yet the week’s prize for hypocritical conduct in this most competitive field must surely be awarded to Chris Bryant, the former Foreign Office minister, who argued that Prince Andrew’s indiscretions over Epstein and the sale of his home were so ill befitting a person in his position that he should be given “the honourable order of the boot”. This from an MP who posed in his underpants on a website, advertising his desire for a “good, long f***”, who was a serial “flipper” of his second, “parliamentary” home to claim additional expenses and who in 2004 submitted a demand so exorbitant that even the dozy and emollient House of Commons fees office disallowed it.

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