

or any of Jeffrey Epstein's girls," the source said. "The duke talked to the lawyers on the phone, and, with the approval of the duke and his office, the lawyers drew up a legal document that was meant as a shot across the bow of the press in Britain." (Buckingham Palace wouldn't comment on the meeting.)

British libel laws are among the most stringent in the world, so when *The Mail on Sunday* and other newspapers ran the story about Andrew's rendezvous with ██████ in Ghislaine Maxwell's London home, they carried strong disclaimers saying there was no suggestion of any sexual contact between Prince Andrew and ██████. That, however, didn't put an end to the furor in the press and the House of Commons, where it's highly unusual to hear M.P.'s criticize the royal family. Chris Bryant, the Labour Party's shadow justice minister, urged Prime Minister David Cameron to "dispense with the services" of the prince. Bryant declared, "It's just unsustainable that he should remain as the public face of British industry abroad."

At first, the prime minister appeared reluctant to throw Andrew a lifeline. Indeed, a government source was quoted as saying, "No one will shed any tears if he resigns." When Andrew visited 10 Downing Street, Jon Cunliffe, the prime minister's senior adviser on Europe and business, reportedly gave him a severe dressing-down. (A Palace spokesman denies this.)

But after Buckingham Palace weighed in, the government rallied around Andrew. A spokesman said that Cameron "fully supported" the prince in his job. Several prominent businessmen publicly praised Andrew's role in promoting British industry. "He is of huge value," Terry Hill, a chairman of Arup, an engineering-design firm, told me. "He's knockout attractive to overseas clients."

Most of Andrew's friends knew better than to get involved in the royal mess. One who didn't was Goga Ashkenazi, an exotic, publicity-seeking beauty from Kazakhstan, who is frequently photographed in barely-there couture outfits. Britain's press has likened Ashkenazi to a James Bond girl, and last summer she threw a lavish party in St. Tropez called "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend." Invitations went out on a diamond-shaped card signed "Madame Goga." According to one partygoer, "A lot of rude Russians showed up."

Ashkenazi, who lives in a multi-million-dollar mansion in London's Holland Park, brokered the sale of Andrew's Sunninghill

Park home to the father of her illegitimate child. Yet, despite her controversial reputation, Goga has made an appearance in the Queen's box at Ascot and paraded Andrew around as the guest of honor at her lavish 30th-birthday party at Tyringham Hall, the Buckinghamshire country home of real-estate heir Anton Bilton and his wife, Lisa B, a model, singer, and actress. In an interview with the *London Evening Standard*, Goga said that after the Jeffrey Epstein story broke Andrew sent her a BlackBerry message asking, "Have you seen the papers?" and saying that he was "very, very upset" about the way he was being portrayed, and "very, very worried" that he would lose his job as Britain's trade envoy.

Blabbing about the private feelings of a member of the royal family is still considered bad form in Britain, and Ashkenazi's claim to have had a BlackBerry exchange with Andrew was dismissed by Buckingham Palace. But the damage was done. When Andrew showed up at an official event, a reporter who in the past might have been deferential asked him outright if he was "an embarrassment" to the royal family.

Andrew didn't respond, but the answer seemed obvious, especially to his handlers in Buckingham Palace, who spotted more serious trouble ahead. Following ██████ allegations that she had been flown across state lines and international borders to commit the criminal act of prostitution, the F.B.I. set the wheels in motion to reopen its investigation of Jeffrey Epstein. As a result of a controversial plea bargain that Epstein struck with prosecutors in the U.S. Attorney's Office in southern Florida, he escaped more serious charges such as statutory rape, which could have sent him to jail for life. Instead, he served only 13 months in prison—most of that time on work furlough. If the F.B.I. decided to file new charges against Epstein, it seemed likely that Prince Andrew would be subpoenaed to testify in the United States.

With the prospect of even further humiliation to her and her son, the Queen decided to intervene by employing the most potent instrument at her command: royal symbolism. She summoned Andrew to Windsor Castle and in a private ceremony invested him with the insignia of a Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order, the highest possible honor for "personal service" to the Queen. From now on, Prince Andrew will be entitled to use the letters G.C.V.O. after his name and wear a red-white-and-blue sash complete with the order's star-shaped insignia, made from sterling silver, silver gilt, and enamel.

Under the protection of the Queen, Prince Andrew was untouchable.

Spoiled but Loyal

Her subjects have a deep reverence for the Queen, who recently turned 85 and in 2012 will celebrate her 60th year on the throne, making her the second-longest-serving British monarch, after Queen Victoria. As things turned out, her symbolic intervention on Andrew's behalf produced its desired effect. When I arrived in London, two weeks after Andrew's investiture into the Royal Victorian Order, the British press had fallen all but silent about his murky connections. As for Buckingham Palace, which had been thrown into a state of frenzy by the ██████ story, it appeared to have regained the customary stiffness in its upper lip.

"The duke has a record of being loyal to his friends," a royal source explained when I asked him about Andrew's display of poor judgment. "Take his feelings for Sarah Ferguson. If you are a prince and you bring a woman into the royal life and, for whatever reasons, she's spit out, you might have feelings of debt toward her. The duke feels that she's been spattered and rejected. His close relationship with the Duchess of York is problematic, and there have been many problems over the last 5 to 10 years, all of which stem from the duchess. Some of the behavior of the duchess is inconsistent with being married to, or an ex-wife of, the duke. There's no question but that Sarah's been a financially self-destructive element in the duke's life."

A Buckingham Palace spokesman elaborated on this analysis of the prince's personality. "The same kind of loyalty manifested itself last December, when the duke visited Epstein at his home in New York," he told me. "Epstein was a friend of the duke's for the best part of 20 years. It was the first time in four years that he'd seen Epstein. He now recognizes that the meeting in December was unwise." A royal source added, "Don't expect to see a photo of the two of them together."

"Does that mean that Andrew has broken off all contact with Epstein?" I asked.

"Hereinafter," the source said, choosing his words with care, "we won't see a photo."

That seemed to leave open the possibility that Andrew intended to carry on his friendship with Epstein, but out of public view.

"I remember when Andrew and Jeffrey Epstein first became friends," said someone who knows both men well. "Jeffrey had Andrew put on a pair of sweatpants for the first time in his life. He had him wear blue jeans for the first time. It was Jeffrey who taught Andrew how to relax."

"But the major reason Andrew hung out with Jeffrey was to get money for Sarah