

Prince Andrew's link to sex offender Jeffrey Epstein taints royalty in US

The Duke of York's friendship with billionaire convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein has put him on American front pages



Paul Harris in New York
The Observer, Sunday 13 March 2011

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Prince Andrew is finding his friendships under international examination. Photograph: Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA

The British press has a new admirer. Spencer Kuvin, a Florida lawyer who has fought several cases for young women alleging sexual abuse by the disgraced billionaire Jeffrey Epstein, is delighted – and relieved – that newspapers are now examining Prince Andrew's relationship with the convicted paedophile.

"I am glad the British press has picked this up," Kuvin told the *Observer*. "The British people have a right to ask why he [Prince Andrew] is hanging out with a convicted paedophile. I think that is a very good question to be asking."

Kuvin has been asking it for a while. He believes Epstein has in effect got away with most of his crimes because of his wealth and his connections with the powerful and well-connected across America and the world.

"He's fine. He has a great life," he said of the man who spent less than two years in jail after pleading guilty to child sex offences.

That is probably true. Florida law allows anyone to find out the whereabouts of a convicted sex offender via an online database. According to the website last week Epstein's location was St Thomas in the US Virgin Islands in the Caribbean. He owns a private island there: one that Prince Andrew has visited. "Epstein is probably sunning himself on a beach right now," Kuvin said.

The same cannot be said for the Duke of York. This weekend, as he considers the parlous state of his international reputation, he is likely to feeling a lot less comfortable than his one-time party friend.

It was not meant to be this way for the prince. America is supposed to be a happy hunting ground for the British royal family. It is a place where the people see them as exotic celebrities to be feted, admired and placed alongside the homegrown "royalty" of Hollywood.

American citizens and politicians – freed from the burdens of paying for a civil list of their own – can indulge in the sort of innocent worship of monarchical "glam" that typified Britain in the 1950s.

So recent headlines in the US media have come as a bit of a shock. "Seen around town: Prince Andrew and Perv Billionaire," blared the *New York Post*. "Duchess of York apologises for accepting money from sex offender," read the *New York Daily News*. So much for the eager anticipation of a slew of good publicity around the marriage of Prince William and Kate Middleton.

It was not just the American tabloids. Even the *Wall Street Journal* ran a lengthy piece last week prompted by the fallout from Prince Andrew's long friendship and close relations with Epstein, 58, who served 18 months for sexual offences involving underage girls. No wonder *New York Post* columnist Andrea Peyser weighed in on the controversy about what she called a "bromance" between the pair. Prince Andrew, she concluded, was an "idiot prince".

It is hard to fathom the depths of the PR disaster that continues to unfold around the prince because of his links to Epstein. After he was snapped walking side by side with Epstein through Central Park last December, Andrew has seen his entire globetrotting existence as a trade ambassador put under the microscope. It has not borne up well.

Suddenly his life and times partying with Epstein have become public knowledge, complete with sordid details of being surrounded by young women and being present at topless pool parties. A woman, [REDACTED] who provided sexual services for Epstein and his rich friends while underage, saw the photograph and decided to speak about her experiences. Another picture rapidly surfaced, of [REDACTED] side by side with the prince. To cap it all, Andrew's links to a whole series of unpleasant developing world autocrats and dictators have also come under fresh examination.

None of it has made a pretty picture and the royals – perhaps typically – have been slow to react in any meaningful way. First, the problem was ignored. Then it was dismissed. Only now, belatedly, have they begun to address it with reports that the Queen has talked to Andrew privately. It feels too little, too late.

Like many Europeans, perhaps, Andrew enjoyed the US because of the freedom and opportunities it afforded. The social scene in glittering hotspots like Manhattan and Florida's Palm Beach allowed him to free himself from the stuffy world of aristocratic Britain. He was courted and won over by the rich elite and he repaid the compliment.

No one knows why the prince carried on such a close friendship with a figure like Epstein for so long or why he refused to end it after Epstein went to jail. The facts alone should have been a warning sign. Epstein, a working class Brooklyn boy who became a super-wealthy money manager, was one of the world's most renowned playboys. But in 2008, after a three-year investigation into the young women he and his entourage procured, he wound up in jail. Nor was it an isolated incident. Epstein's case was ended via a plea bargain where he admitted guilt on a charge of felony solicitation of prostitution involving a minor. Yet as many as 40 young women had made allegations against him and, unusually, his plea deal allowed other accusers to sue him in civil court. So far at least 17 of them have settled civil cases against him.

The American drama is far from over for the prince. Instead the legal wranglings around Epstein and his exotic lifestyle threaten to drag the royal family right into the US court system.

Epstein is now suing Brad Edwards, a lawyer for some of the girls from the original investigation. In turn Edwards is counter-suing Epstein, alleging that the billionaire is using his vast resources to pursue expensive legal cases and thus intimidate other victims and their legal representatives. Either way, Andrew could be pulled into the mess as a witness. Edwards's lawyer, Jack Scarola, said last week that his team intended to try and get a statement from the prince about what he may or may not have seen while attending parties with Epstein.

Though the prince is likely to claim diplomatic immunity, that step will not keep his name out of the court papers or the headlines: it will just keep his presence out of the courtroom.

The same thing goes for previous cases involving Epstein. They amount to a potential source of PR torture for the royal family as media scrutiny continues. Recently released documents from a different case showed that two of Epstein's closest confidantes – his PA Sarah Ellen and an on-off girlfriend, ██████████ – were repeatedly questioned by Kuvin about whether the prince had been involved in sexual acts with any of Epstein's entourage of young women. Both Ellen and ██████████ declined to answer the questions and instead took the Fifth Amendment, which allows their legal silence.

Of course, there is no evidence or suggestion that Andrew was involved. But in PR terms there does not need to be. There is even a small chance that the FBI will use some of the new revelations emerging in the media to reopen the criminal case against Epstein, though legal experts think it unlikely.

Even the hint of a possibility of a federal probe is another reason for the headline writers to start sharpening their pens for those with links to Epstein.

Prince Andrew is not the only one. Epstein has partied in New York with numerous people since he left jail, including big names and celebrities like Katie Couric, George Stephanopoulos and Woody Allen. Perhaps they too should have known better.

ROYAL CONNECTIONS

■ **Ghislaine Maxwell, 49**, youngest daughter of Robert Maxwell, the former *Daily Mirror* proprietor, is considered one of Prince Andrew's more controversial friends. A decade ago, he was reported to have accompanied her to a "hookers and pimps" party in New York. Ghislaine moved to the US in 1991 after the death of her father and became a fixture on the Manhattan party circuit, where she befriended Jeffrey Epstein.

■ **Goga Ashkenazi, 31**, a glamorous Kazakh oil tycoon, claims to be a "close friend" of Prince Andrew. Ashkenazi, an Oxford-educated socialite and entrepreneur, said: "Britain is very lucky to have him." She was introduced to Andrew in 2001 and they have been friends since. She was his guest at Ascot in 2007, although she denies rumours that they have ever been a couple.

■ **Tarek Kaituni**, a convicted Libyan gun smuggler, is an old friend. In 2008 he and Andrew enjoyed a four-day holiday to Tunisia. Kaituni was convicted of buying a machine gun in 2005 and secretly attempting to transport it from Holland to France.

