

The Duchess of York

A “SHODDY AND GRUBBY” DUCHESS was the response of Lib-Con Home Office Minister, Lynne Featherstone, reacting to revelations that the Duchess of York was peddling access to her former husband for hundreds of thousands of dollars. My initial thought about duchesses in general and this one in particular was, “Is there any other kind, aren't they all rather shoddy?” Then, after a moment's thought, I wondered, “Why would anybody pay half a million dollars for access to the Duke of York?” Has the world gone mad? Well not entirely, His Royal Highness The Prince Andrew Albert Christian Edward, Duke of York, Earl of Inverness, and Baron Killyleagh is, among many other things, the UK's Special Representative for International Trade and Investment. As such, His Royal Highness, or rather ‘His Office’, knows a great deal about international trade deals, and special relationships with ‘most favoured business partners’ from The Gulf to Central Asia and back again. He plays a lot of golf with a lot of influential people and he flies about from place to place at public expense.

Consequently, he is a typical member of the British Royal Family. Like his brother, Charles, the Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall, etc., etc., etc., he knows a little about a great many things. Another thing Andrew has in common with Charles was the good fortune to marry into the English aristocracy where the bloodstock book established a reassuring pedigree for his wife, Sarah, The Duchess of York, and of course for Diana, The Princess of Wales; on their Wedding Days both were fully certified virgin girls who had worked for brief periods in a public relations office, an art gallery and a crèche. They were thoroughly posh, thoroughly modern young women.

However, as is well known, it all went horribly wrong. The girls were not to know that the family they were entering had established a pattern of life, which in all essentials had remained unchanged since the reign of Edward VII in the early years of the twentieth century. The young princes didn't know either; after all, they thought that their Edwardian ways were the norm and couldn't see anything wrong with a bit of swashbuckling in the armed forces, a lot of dressing up in dress uniforms, and the enthusiastic pursuit of country pursuits which, of course, in time honoured fashion, included a mistress or two.

The modern girls on the other hand, became celebrities in the modern manner, and perhaps inevitably collided with Elizabeth II, her officials, and 'The Palace's' protocol. The girls had to go and, in one-way or another, they went. The melodrama of Diana's fate stands counterpoint to the comedy of Sarah's. Sarah, The Duchess of York's children, the Princesses Beatrice and Eugenie, had money settled on them, but their mother was awarded a mere £15,000 a year. This sum, if we take Housing Benefit into account, is barely three thousand more than a single mum on benefits with two kids might be expected to manage with. But, for a Duchess royal or otherwise, it is a paltry sum. The fact that their Royal Highnesses, Andrew, Charles, The Duke of Edinburgh, The Queen – multi-millionaires all – and the Palace officials, and John Major (the Prime Minister of the day), regarded the divorce settlement as sufficient reveals exactly how incompetent and foolish they all are.

Instead of suing The Duke of York, The Duchess, gamely set off for America to make her fortune on the speaking circuit and by writing a series of children's books. Of course, she has to travel first class everywhere she goes and she has to maintain a staff of twelve as befits a modern celebrity duchess. Inevitably, the millions she has raised have failed to keep pace with her spending – she is caught in a vicious circle – she has to maintain a celebrity lifestyle

in order to earn money as a celebrity. Like any 'good time girl' the money earned from 'good times' has to be spent on good times – this is the conundrum that has faced prostitutes down the ages; only rarely is it possible to break the cycle of high fees and the correspondingly high costs associated with the profession. It is very difficult indeed to stay ahead in such a game.

So, the Duchess is in the *News of the World* again tricked into revealing her need for cash and her preparedness to charge for introductions to her former husband, the UK's Special Representative for International Trade and Investment. Predictably, all and sundry have denounced her greed and stupidity and have roundly condemned her for involving the Royal Family in her sordid carryon. Even members of the new government, representatives of the new politics, Liberal-Conservatives all, have broken with protocol by attacking the Duchess. Apparently, 'by tradition', politicians do not criticise their Royal Highnesses and although the Duchess lost her royal status in the divorce settlement of 1996, she has until now been accorded some royal protection as the mother of Beatrice and Eugenie who are fifth and sixth in line of succession to the throne.

So, I suppose the bold initiative of Lib-Con Minister, Lynne Featherstone, in attacking the hapless Duchess is to be welcomed. However, in all the *hoo-hah* over the political and constitutional reforms promised by the Coalition government the Royal Family have not been mentioned. Now, I know that Cameron's Government has got its hands full with everything from staunching rebellion on the Back Benches, planning the sacking of hundreds of thousands of public employees, to resolving the West Lothian Question, but I really think that the Lib-Cons have missed a trick when it comes to Elizabeth Windsor, her constitutional position, her poor financial management, and her poor parenting.

Reforming the monarchy would have considerable benefits. We could remove all the powers of patronage and other arbitrary powers held by the

Executive, and particularly by the Prime Minister, by severing the link between the monarch and the government because it is in his role as the person who exercises *de facto* the *de jure* powers of the Crown that the Prime Minister of the day can appoint Peers to the House of Lords, declare war, and do much else without reference to Parliament. Surely, during the process of replacing the Lords with a fully elected second chamber or Senate the opportunity to cut all the constitutional links between the Monarchy and the democratic state could be taken.

Coutts Bank and the Queen's fund managers could, I'm sure, manage the vast 'private' investments and real estate owned by her family, efficiently enough to ensure that none of her offspring or their families need ever haunt the public speaking circuits, or be forced to hawk their services for celebrity fees. They could all live in splendid seclusion in Kensington Palace and in a Palladian mansion or two – as long as they were well-equipped with gardens and horses and pheasants I can't imagine that we'd ever see any trouble from that quarter again. Occasionally, Parliament could even vote them a lavish fee for fronting a royal procession or two – after all most of the costs of a periodic pageant could be borne quite easily by the Ministry of Defence.

This would free up Buckingham Palace, Clarence House, Windsor Castle and a number of other royal residences. Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle would make excellent art galleries and museums, which in these straightened times, could also double as venues for meetings with foreign dignitaries and Heads of State. We, if we really felt the need for a Head of State, could see if one of the Windsors was interested in the job (with duties clearly spelled out in a contract of employment), for a strictly limited fee. That way we might be able to satisfy the monarchists amongst us and simultaneously ensure that the Queen was merely an ornament of our constitution rather than an obstacle to fully democratic government. *Now, that really would be "New Politics"*.