

NOTES ON A SCANDAL

Call girls, wiretaps and Wall Street
How Eliot Spitzer survived

*Tim Teeman meets the disgraced
former governor of New York State*

PORTRAIT Henry Leutwyler



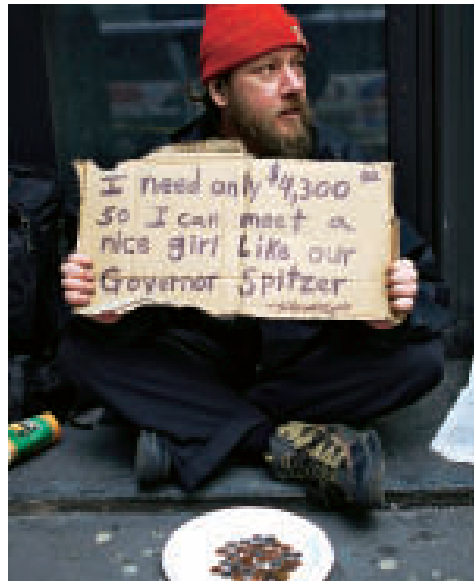
It's hard to complain, says Eliot Spitzer, gazing out over the coppery autumnal carpet of Central Park from the 22nd-floor office he occupies at his father Bernard Spitzer's real-estate firm. But despite the vista, Spitzer shouldn't be bunking in this office building in New York City, with its reception-area scale models of the many impressive buildings his father owns. Had things gone according to Spitzer Jr's plan – of being a two-term governor of New York State – he would still be at his office in the state capital, Albany. He could, a former colleague says, have made it to the White House.

Instead, in March 2008, Spitzer, who with his wife Silda has three daughters, was exposed as having paid \$4,300 in cash to a prostitute using the name “Kristen” in a Washington hotel. The payment included \$1,100 as a deposit for her agency towards future services; she was just the latest in a string of such encounters.

As is so often the way with these political scandals, he didn't immediately step down, instead making a brief appearance to apologise for his behaviour and describing it as a “private matter”. But the inevitable was not long coming. Within four days of the revelations, Eliot Spitzer had resigned, and any kind of political career, let alone one as prospective president of the United States, was dead.

So, I ask him, for the sixth time, “Why did you do it?” Instead of repeating, as he has done five times already, that he won't tell me, he replies earnestly: “I think we are all flawed. The human species has this remarkable capacity to create a moral system unlike any other species. The problem is we can't live up to it. That tension, gap, between what we understand and what we can do creates the problems.” And your flaw was sexual, I say. “You work at it,” he says tightly. Have you resolved it? “I think so.” Are you confident you won't make a similar mistake again? “I hope so.”

Why is it always powerful men are so often caught erring? “Certainly there is that history, that litany, but it's not limited to men,” he replies. “Other personal lives in other domains don't get as much attention.” He sounds airily dismissive, I say, given that his sexual



Homeless Ronald Martin, Times Square, 2008

misconduct destroyed his own career. “No, not in any way,” he replies. “You've got to deal with it in a straightforward way and move on. I'm a very lucky guy to have had what I view as a fascinating and rewarding stretch in government doing things I believed in, fighting for the public. It came to an end. My family's in great shape and that is the most important thing. Life goes on.”

Here, though, was a story that was more than just one of morally dubious assignations in hotel rooms. In his career as assistant district attorney in Manhattan and New York State attorney general, the Democrat politician targeted white-collar crime and corruption using wiretaps and e-mail. Now he was to be undone by the very methods he used to hunt down suspected miscreants. He was put under surveillance twice in 2008 and investigators, according to published reports, believed he paid up to \$80,000 for prostitutes over several years.

All this is addressed in a documentary, *Client 9*, made by Oscar winner Alex Gibney (*Taxi to the Dark Side*), to be broadcast on BBC Four next week. “Client 9” is the code name ascribed to Spitzer when investigators

wiretapped the phone lines of the Emperors Club VIP escort service in New York. While “Kristen” – later identified as Ashley Alexandra Dupré – doesn't speak to Gibney, another prostitute who had sex with Spitzer recalls that she tried to relax this “pushy” customer with chitchat.

There is a suggestion that the enemies he had accrued in high-profile battles with Wall Street and in Albany were plotting Spitzer's downfall. Indeed, in the documentary Spitzer says, “CEOs began to take everything they could, and ultimately that was going to destroy our economy.”

But he won't be drawn on that today. “I was brought down by my own behaviour,” he says stoutly. “That was the root of my need to resign, full stop.” Spitzer's stellar career, built on social reform, was left in undignified tatters. A period of withdrawal followed, until CNN made him a chat-show host in 2010. But he reportedly fell out with his co-host, the conservative columnist Kathleen Parker; she was let go, the ratings tanked and it was axed four months ago. Now he teaches a course in economic philosophy at the City College of New York, writes for online political magazine Slate, appears as a political talking head on TV and is in “many talks” for another chat show. Unsurprisingly for a passionate politician whose career was cut short, he wants to find a public role. But what? He stepped down “for the sake of my family”, he tells me. Handsome in a nerdy way, and trim from running, he is weighing the costs of putting himself through the mincing machine of public life again.

The investigation into the politician was initiated after North Fork Bank reported suspicious transactions to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) when Spitzer wanted to transfer more than \$10,000. The FBI was brought in when it was found funds were going to shell companies operating as a front for Emperors Club VIP. In November 2007, a Republican consultant, Roger Stone, sent a

THE SCANDAL SHEET 1963

The Profumo Affair
Dubbed “the yardstick against which all other political scandals are measured” by the *Sunday Herald*, the affair between Secretary of State for War, John Profumo, and call girl Christine Keeler became the stuff of political legend thanks to

Keeler's simultaneous dalliance with a Russian spy. Everyone needs someone to keep them warm during a Cold War. Profumo resigned; Keeler's celebrated nude portrait is now enshrined at the V&A.

1987
The politician doth protest too much
You've got to admire the

fighting spirit of the Democratic presidential hopeful Gary Hart in the 1987 election. Exhausted by the constant rumours of an extramarital affair, he famously challenged the press to follow him around, declaring, “They'll be very bored.” The press were not put off and in their pursuit of Hart caught a woman,

not his wife, leaving Hart's home. A little while later, a photo of him, wearing a “Monkey business” T-shirt with the same woman sitting on his lap, emerged. A week after the story broke, Hart dropped out of the race with a fierce word for the media: “I said that I bend, but I don't break, and believe

me, I'm not broken.” Defiant to the last.

1998
The Lewinsky legacy
“Lewinskygate.” Would a “gate” by any other name smell so scandalous? Well, yes actually. “Monicagate”, “Tailgate”, “Zippergate”, whatever you want to call it, if you don't know the

ins and outs (or the zip ups and zip downs) of this one then you have missed out on an array of political and cultural references for the past 13 years. And you won't be aware of just why a blue dress could be so very important to the business conducted in the Oval Office. Shame.

letter to the FBI saying Spitzer had used the services of “high-priced call girls” in Florida. Stone added that Spitzer wore calf-length black socks while performing the sex act.

As to be expected of a one-time prosecutor, Spitzer, 52, has a habit of choosing his words carefully. “It wasn’t an addiction, it was an outlet,” he says in *Client 9* of his sex with prostitutes. “Twisted” as it may sound, he says to camera, he thought paying for sex was “less damaging” than having affairs “which have an emotional component”.

There were “difficult” discussions with his family, Spitzer admits to me, declining to say if divorce was discussed or make public the details of any therapy that may have followed. Did he fear he would lose his wife? “Sure, you worry about it. Look at the painful dissolution of marriages in public or private. But now my marriage is healthy and my relationship with my children [aged 21, 19 and 17] could not be better.” Did his daughters tackle him on his behaviour? “We have three wonderful daughters who are as mature, smart, bright and demanding as I would want them to be.” (Which I take to mean, yes, they gave it to him with both barrels.) Spitzer learnt “how fortunate I was to have Silda as a spouse. She is giving, loving, wise, thoughtful: all those things for which I am deeply thankful.”

What was public shame like? “Pretty much as you’d expect. On the upside, it’s momentary. The public can forgive certain types of violations if an appropriate sense of learning follows.” What about personal atonement? “Those things never stop. Every day you try to build on what you’ve done and go from there.”

Bernie Spitzer taught his son early that any game was “rough”: playing Monopoly, he would compel Eliot to sell him a property which caused him to lose the game; the lesson, never to defer to authority. Spitzer was “nerdy” as a boy. “I would have given anything away to win one US Open match or be an Olympic skier.” He almost followed his father into real estate, but gravitated towards the oratorical battlefield of the courtroom: the famous lawyer Alan Dershowitz was his teacher at Harvard Law School. Bernie was self-made and emphasised

the creed of “work hard, play fair” to his son. (Spitzer’s rivals say he played far from fair in office, but Spitzer points out his political enemies were themselves guilty of financial wrongdoing.)

Spitzer claims not to dwell on his squandered potential: the anticipated two gubernatorial terms squashed to 14 months. He says he couldn’t have run for the White House, given he’s pro-choice, pro-gay marriage (in 2007 the only US Governor supporting it) and pro-gun control. He knows he couldn’t have staved off the global financial crisis single-handed, but felt his policies would have built more “regulatory oversight” into Wall Street’s practices. He supports the Occupy Wall Street movement for “getting us to talk seriously about the inequity of income and disturbing failure of accountability”. But, “I’ve told them I’m a capitalist who believes deeply that capitalism is the best system to create wealth, though must be run by better rules. We’ve been bought to the precipice by rampant deregulation and an inability by those who lead the market to control their own behaviour.”

Given that he talks as if he’s still a politician of influence, it must be strange for this power player to be out in the cold. “If you want to understand somebody, look at how they play sports,” Spitzer says, so we talk about his love of tennis. When younger, he was a ballboy for Jimmy Connors and Rod Laver (“whose left arm was the size of a leg”) in a US tournament. What are you like as a tennis player? “What do you think?” he replies. Combative serve-and-volleyer, I say. He nods. The best shot he ever saw was by Novak Djokovic in this year’s US Open semi against Federer. It was match point against Djokovic, and using “raw guts” he “crushed” the ball into a match-turning shot.

Spitzer’s love of squash, meanwhile, requires more methodical gamesmanship. So you’re aggressive and methodical, I say – and some say too aggressive, which is why he was so fatally without friends when the scandal broke. “When people think you’re going to lose, they disappear,” Spitzer shrugs. “The two quietest days of my life were when I lost the 1994 primary for New York attorney general and the day after I resigned as governor. There’s a

whole universe of people when you’re on the up trajectory, but you really find out who your true friends are in those other moments.”

He claims to like “getting to the end of any day knowing I have changed something for the better”, so loves teaching, but will “never” rule out a political return. It must be frustrating, not being in the game? “That’s true,” he concedes. He would have liked to have overhauled New York’s education and transport systems as governor. “But I can’t imagine any particular position in politics,” he says, masterfully vague. “People say, ‘Run for this, run for that.’ What happens down the road, I have no idea. There are many different ways to participate.”

The hunger is there, but the ghost of the scandal cloaks Spitzer. Would his family survive round two? Would voters welcome him back? What about those absurd long black socks: did he really wear them during sex with prostitutes? He sighs. “Look, I will say that was absolutely false. There are lots of falsehoods that cannot be taken back, but the pain accrues less to me, because I have thick calluses, than to my family. What causes them pain causes me pain.”

How do you survive a public scandal? “You just wake up every morning and say, ‘I have no choice but to go forward,’” Spitzer says wearily. “You try to do a bit better every day. You learn and focus on what matters. Make sure you apologise and show remorse to those who invested energy and time in you.

“Some days were harder than others, but you’ve got to be an optimist. You can’t give in. It comes back to Djokovic down on match point, hitting that forehand as hard as he ever hit it. He had to.” Sure, but Djokovic was still in the game; your career had imploded. “You just keep going forward,” Spitzer says. As I leave I see on his desk a book of quotes by Churchill, “who said what he wanted to say with eloquence and wit beyond match”. Spitzer wants desperately, tangibly, to be a statesman in the mould of his hero, but can he come back, two sets down, match point against him, the crowd at best indifferent? He’s waiting, wishing, for that improbable forehand. ■

Storyville: *Client 9* is on BBC Four on Tuesday

2002

Currie’s confessions

Former health minister Edwina Currie waited nearly 20 years before hatching her eggs of indiscretion with former Prime Minister John Major, who eventually described their affair, beginning in 1984, as the most shameful event of his life. Revealing the

details in her diaries serialised by *The Times* in 2002, the public were accosted with – and at times haunted by – details of a three-hour sex romp and Currie’s longing for her flat to be “filled with one big man in his blue underpants”.

May 2011

The sexting scandal

Ask any IT technician

and they will say often a computer fault lies with the user. The user obviously blames everything else, as evidenced by New York congressman Anthony Weiner earlier this year, blaming a hack attack when lewd pictures appeared on his Twitter account. In fact, the images of his own penis,

which he was planning to send to one of the six women with whom he was having online relationships, were publicly posted by his very own hand. Despite maintaining he had not broken any laws, Weiner resigned in June.

August 2011

Bunga-bunga

It’s difficult to put a date

on the sex scandals of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi since they have long preceded the start of his trial this summer to answer accusations of paying for sex with a minor. Veronica Lario, his wife of 19 years, filed for divorce and accused her husband of “consorting with minors” in 2009. He

is now synonymous with the infamous bunga-bunga parties. The PM insists such gatherings were normal dinner parties and commented, in true Berlusconi style, “I’m 74 years old and even though I may be a bit of a rascal, 33 girls in two months seems to me too much even for a 30-year-old.” **ABIGAIL RADNOR**