# New York Governor Eliot Spitzer forced to resign in sex scandal

**David Walsh**
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New York's Democratic Party governor, Eliot Spitzer, announced his resignation Wednesday, effective March 17, in the wake of allegations that he had consorted with a high-paid prostitute at a hotel in Washington, DC on February 13.

The removal of the governor of New York State in a sordid sex scandal is a major political development. In a matter of days, as the result of a government sting operation and the connivance of the media, the outcome of the November 2006 election, which Spitzer won with 69 percent of the vote—the largest margin of victory in a New York gubernatorial race and the second-largest for any statewide race in New York history—has been overturned.

The New York State governorship is one of the leading political positions in the US. The state, with a population of some 20 million people, is home to powerful industrial and corporate interests, and remains one of the centers of world finance. The New York governorship has proved a springboard for the campaigns of four US presidents, six vice presidents, two Supreme Court chief justices and three secretaries of state.

It was well known that Spitzer had ambitions for higher office. In his brief statement of resignation Wednesday, he announced his intention to leave political life entirely.

Spitzer is—or was—a big business politician, a multi-millionaire, and no friend of the working class. There is no indication that he had any concern for democratic principles, or that he was an amiable person—he referred to himself as a "steamroller." In his short time in office, the New York governor proposed or carried out hundreds of millions of dollars in budget cuts to social programs.

However, this does not alter the fact that there are immensely important issues raised by his departure.

The real concerns in this episode center on the methods used by the Bush administration's Justice Department and their implications for the entire political system. What the facts and the context strongly suggest is that Spitzer was targeted by powerful enemies in the government, who act without restraint and on behalf of a definite political agenda.

With its enormous financial and technological resources, and new-found powers under laws enacted in the name of the bogus "war on terror," the federal government has the means to "get the goods" on its opponents and either intimidate them into silence, destroy their careers, or have them locked away in prison. Political scores are settled in this manner and prominent figures eliminated in bloodless "hits."

How many others are under investigation? What kind of impact will the set-up of Spitzer have on American political life, where those who live "blameless lives" are few and far between?

Spitzer was clearly not alone in his patronage of the Emperors Club VIP and similar "escort services." Considering the prices it was charging, business must have been booming at the Emperors Club. The New York governor was "Client -9," and we still have no information on clients 1-8, reputed to be wealthy lawyers and other important "players."

Spitzer's apparent predilection for prostitutes expresses deep and unresolved problems in his own psychological make-up, and, beyond that, the psychological make-up of a certain social layer whose vast personal wealth has assumed pathological dimensions. To put the matter simply, Spitzer and the people in his social milieu have far too much money for their own good.

For all his wealth and power, and to some significant degree because of them, Spitzer is clearly a seriously disoriented individual. Despite his apparent arrogance, one has the sense that he reserves his deepest loathing for himself. This is a man who needs help.

There are, of course, serious social issues raised in the purchase of the services of a human being for purposes of personal gratification. But there is no indication that the media, or the political establishment it serves, is particularly interested in approaching the Spitzer case from that standpoint. Rather, in this case as in so many others, the use of a sex scandal is inevitably bound up with the degradation of official political life and its shift ever farther to the right.

Many questions remain about the affair. Contrary to the claims by various commentators that the authorities were investigating a prostitution ring and merely "stumbled" on Spitzer, the inquiry seems clearly to have begun with him.

According to the *Washington Post*, "The criminal investigation into Spitzer began when North Fork Bank notified the Treasury Department's financial crimes network about suspicious activity in one of the governor's personal accounts, another source familiar with the case said. ...

"In this case, the bank's report was triggered by Spitzer's attempt to structure a $10,000 cash transaction into three parts, according to a senior law enforcement official familiar with the evidence. When investigators looked more closely at the transactions, they learned that the recipients were apparent shell companies associated with the Emperors Club [the alleged

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prostitution service]."

ABC News reports: "The federal investigation of a New York prostitution ring was triggered by Gov. Eliot Spitzer's suspicious money transfers, initially leading agents to believe Spitzer was hiding bribes, according to federal officials.

"It was only months later that the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] and the FBI determined that Spitzer wasn't hiding bribes but payments to a company called QAT, what prosecutors say is a prostitution operation operating under the name of the Emperor's Club."

Legal analyst Scott Horton on the *Harper's Magazine* web site notes: "The Justice Department has yet to give a full account of why they were looking into Spitzer's payments, and indeed the suggestion in the ABC account is that it didn't have anything to do with a prostitution ring. The suggestion that this was driven by an IRS inquiry and involved a bank might heighten, rather than allay, concerns of a politically motivated prosecution.

"All of these facts are consistent with a process which is not the investigation of a crime, but rather an attempt to target and build a case against an individual."

Indeed, and one needs to ask, at what level did this sting operation receive approval? Was it approved by Attorney General Michael Mukasey? Was George W. Bush involved?

The affair became the property of the Department of Justice's Public Integrity Section, notorious under the Bush administration for its investigation of 5.6 times as many Democrats as Republicans. According to its web site, the Public Integrity Section "oversees the federal effort to combat corruption through the prosecution of elected and appointed public officials at all levels of government." The investigation of Spitzer had nothing to do with corruption, or with conflict of interest, another of the section's supposed concerns.

Consorting with a prostitute is a misdemeanor in most jurisdictions in the US, but the Justice Department launched an expensive sting operation. According to the *Washington Post*, the FBI began "staking out Spitzer" in January, placing a "surveillance team" at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington.

When Spitzer allegedly paid a call girl to travel from New York to Washington in February, law enforcement officials brought in the infamous Mann Act, the "White-Slave Traffic Act" of 1910, which bans the interstate transport of females for "immoral purposes" and has been used numerous times for reactionary purposes, including the cases of black boxer Jack Johnson, Charlie Chaplin and musician Chuck Berry.

None of the Public Integrity Section reports for 2006, 2005 or 2004, which cite dozens of cases of bribe-taking and influence-peddling, have a single reference to prostitution or the Mann Act.

This is all about politics and the way in which politics is conducted in the US at present. With great fanfare, amid endless claims about the need to protect freedom and democracy, the US government launched the "war on terror," tightened banking regulations to fight "terrorist financing," and what has it accomplished? Involving the governor of New York in a sordid sex scandal!

The response of the gutter press was predictable, a combination of salaciousness and moralizing. Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* managed to run on its front page, "I Slept with Spitzer," complete with a photo of a blonde woman in scanty lingerie, along with pieces headlined, "How Horndog Set the Mood" and "Traveling Tarts Put Gov in Infamous Company," while editorializing that Spitzer's behavior was "so tawdry, so demeaning to the office he holds, so disqualifying of the public trust, that words fail."

The response of the liberal and left-liberal media was perhaps equally predictable. The *New York Times* broke the story, adding to its record as facilitator of right-wing scandal-mongering. The *Times* lent its credibility to the Whitewater affair in the 1990s aimed against the Clintons, embraced the Monica Lewinsky scandal and legitimized Kenneth Starr's sex-based inquisition, and later witch-hunted Los Alamos nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee. The *Times* is repeatedly involved in these kinds of operations, out of opportunism and political blindness.

The left-liberals of the *Nation* reacted to the Spitzer scandal with their usual superficiality. Columnist John Nichols could write about the affair only from the point of view of its supposedly harmful impact on the presidential aspirations of New York Senator Hillary Clinton, whom Spitzer was supporting against Illinois Senator Barack Obama. The *Nation* editorial staff largely supports Obama.

Nichols crowed: "Last year, Clinton talked and talks [sic] about how very much she wanted Spitzer's backing, and how important she thought it was to her presidential campaign...

"Clinton got her man. After some serious prodding, he endorsed her candidacy.

"Now, he's another headache for Clinton...

"Ouch.

"Ouch for Spitzer.

"Ouch for all New York Democrats, including a certain New York senator."

The politically-directed demise of the New York governor is a significant incident, part of the transformation of the American political scene. Nichols's response is entirely unserious. Do these people think about what they write? This piece and the following one, in which Nichols makes a virtue out of necessity by praising the incoming governor, David Paterson, a hack Democratic politician, as an "activist" and a "progressive," are banal responses to certain immediate political concerns of the *Nation* editorial board.

The Spitzer affair is terribly American, reflective of a country where social and class issues are not yet fought out openly, but through coded messages, metaphors and scandals. Meanwhile, the working population is disenfranchised and forced to choose between one or another millionaire politician.

The increasing resort to police-state methods to regulate political differences demonstrates that those social and class issues are threatening ever more insistently to burst through to the surface.

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