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Prince Charles's old-school push to free Aussies in Dubai

CAMERON STEWART THE AUSTRALIAN FEBRUARY 26, 2013 12:00AM



Matthew Joyce, with his wife Angela and children Clancy, Jack and William, has been detained in Dubai since January 2009. Picture: Siddarth Siva Source: The Australian

PRINCE Charles has become personally involved in Australia's most sensitive consular case, lending his weight to the push to save two Australian businessmen trapped in Dubai for four years on discredited bribery charges.

One of Australia's top barristers, Jack Rush QC, has visited the heir to the British throne's London residence to brief Charles's advisers on the case of businessmen Matthew Joyce and Marcus Lee, who have been detained with their families in Dubai since January 2009 after a property deal went sour.

Charles's interest in the case is highly unusual and has been sparked by his old-school-tie links to Victoria's elite Geelong Grammar School, which he attended in 1966 and where Mr Joyce was also educated.

The fate of Mr Joyce and Mr Lee hangs on a knife edge after Julia Gillard appealed this month to the Dubai royal family to review the case against the men, who have been proven innocent in an Australian court but could still be jailed for a decade in Dubai.

The unresolved case threatens to undermine relations between Australia and the United Arab Emirates, including the much-touted forthcoming alliance between Qantas and the Dubai-based Emirates airlines.

Charles is understood to have become quietly involved in the Joyce-Lee affair last year after receiving a request for help from a senior Geelong Grammar identity and a close friend of the prince since he attended the school. Charles's friend told him Mr Joyce was a Geelong Grammar old boy who was being held in Dubai despite charges against him having been dismissed in a parallel case last year in the Victorian Supreme Court. The Australian has been told the prince has since made behind-the-scenes representations to authorities in Dubai on behalf of the men, although his office has declined to confirm this.

"His Royal Highness has been made aware of the case and we would not comment further," a spokesman for Charles said. One insider told The Australian that the prince "has not been inactive" in the case, adding that the men were also members of the British Commonwealth.

Charles retains close friendships with several people from his days at Geelong Grammar's Timbertop school.

He was approached because Mr Joyce's supporters had become disillusioned with what they saw as a lack of action by the Gillard government. Mr Joyce and Mr Lee served nine months in a Dubai jail, including in solitary confinement, before being placed under house arrest after false claims were made against them by the Gold Coast property developer Sunland in 2009. Mr Rush subsequently visited Clarence House to brief the prince's advisers, taking with him a copy of the court judgment that exonerated Mr Joyce and criticised Sunland. Mr Rush has declined to comment. The Gillard government has been under pressure to do more to free Mr Joyce and Mr Lee after the Supreme Court judgment last year found that the men were being detained in Dubai on trumped-up charges based on false evidence from a Sunland executive who was also under investigation for bribery.

The Victorian Supreme Court found that Sunland had "commenced and continued the present proceedings in wilful disregard of known facts and law" and with a willingness to implicate Mr Joyce unjustifiably. Sunland denies this and is appealing against the judgment.

Ms Gillard this month telephoned the ruler of Dubai, Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, to ask that he review the case in light of the Victorian Supreme Court's findings. The sheik has agreed to review the case.