

John Profumo: A dedicated volunteer and tireless campaigner for over 40 years

By Callum Scowen

TOYNBEE HALL



John Profumo CBE (1915-2006) was a politician and social worker who resigned from the Macmillan government following a scandal in 1963 and devoted the last forty years of his life to voluntary work supporting numerous projects at Toynbee Hall.

Popularly known as 'Jack', he was the fourth child of Baron Albert Profumo KC, descendant of a family of Italian businessmen, and was brought up in Warwickshire. Although never academically inclined, he was educated at Harrow School and Brase Nose College, Oxford, where he developed his lifelong enthusiasm for riding, aviation, and horticulture. He also became passionate about politics, canvassing on behalf of the Conservative party during his teenage years.

In 1940, he was elected MP for Kettering, becoming the youngest member in the House of Commons at just 25. He fought a 'khaki election' in Army uniform, having the previous year enlisted in the Northamptonshire Yeomanry. During the Second World War he served with distinction in North Africa and Italy, and was awarded a military OBE. In 1946, he was made a Brigadier and went to work with General Douglas MacArthur in Japan. Despite losing his seat in the post-War General Election, he re-entered Parliament in 1950 as the MP for Stratford upon Avon, a constituency where he remained popular for the rest of his political career. First joining the Tory Front Bench in 1952, he held several junior Ministerial posts under Churchill and Macmillan, was made a Privy Councillor, and in July 1960 was appointed Secretary of State for War.

(Cover photo) 'Jack' Profumo



Jack and his wife, Valerie Hobson at Toynbee Hall in 1991

Dancing at the Royal Albert Hall in 1947, Jack had met the actress Valerie Hobson, star of Great Expectations and Kind Hearts and Coronets. They married in 1954, whereupon she gave up her career to support his political commitments.

In 1961, Jack had a brief affair with a young model named Christine Keeler, whom he met at the Astor family's house, Cliveden. When it was rumoured that she had apparently been having a relationship with Russian official Eugene Ivanov, Jack ill-advisedly denied any impropriety with her. This lie to the House of Commons led to his resignation in June 1.963. The so-called 'Profumo Affair' was a heady mix of politics, race, class, hypocrisy and espionage, and is seen as one of the turning-points in British society during the Sixties. Despite the media furore, and years of unwelcome intrusion, Valerie stood loyally by her husband until her death in 1998.



Jack chatting with guests in the older people's Wellbeing Centre

> "Without him, we should never have got anywhere"
>
> Walter Birmingham, Warden of Toynbee Hall between 1964 - 72

Jack's involvement at Toynbee Hall

Jack Profumo quietly began work at Toynbee Hall in 1964, helping to raise its profile and increase charitable income. It became his second vocation, and in 1975 he was awarded a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours. Ingenious, charismatic, and compassionate, he worked tirelessly for many causes at Toynbee Hall until the week prior to his death in March 2006, aged ninety-one.

Profumo's early days at Toynbee Hall are the subject of hyperbole and myth. Contrary to tales of cleaning toilets and peeling potatoes, Profumo quickly took on responsibility at Toynbee Hall. In August 1964, mere weeks after arriving at the Settlement, it was noted that "Mr Profumo would be prepared to run' a committee dealing with day to day problems linked to the staging of a high profile Royal Premiere to benefit the charity"[1]. Toynbee Hall's warden, Walter Birmingham, went further, in 1965 saying 'without him (Jack), we should never have got anywhere' and the journalist Oliver Pritchett went as far as to say 'he is essentially deputy warden'[2]. By this point, in December 1965, Profumo was already heavily involved in Toynbee Hall's work, particularly focused on fundraising.

1 Memorandum on Royal Film Premiere, LMA/4683/CEN/10/18
2 Pritchett, 'Profumo brings skill to good works'

A formidable fundraiser

Although Jack's past meant that he was always going to attract some criticism, those who worked with him at Toynbee Hall found that his profile did not hold the organisation back. 'I think we must bear in mind that it is common knowledge in Fleet Street that Mr. Profumo is working at Toynbee Hall'[1]. In fact, Profumo's organisational skills, determination, and high-profile contacts were an asset to Toynbee Hall.

For example, in 1964 Profumo launched an appeal to raise £185,000 to reconstruct some of Toynbee Hall's buildings; 'Toynbee Hall today is in a sad state of disrepair… war ravaged the structure of the old buildings'[2]. Profumo was key to its success, raising £160,000 'with the help of his wealthy and titled friends'. Warden Walter Birmingham called him 'the most tremendous asset' due to his 'administrative skill and contacts'[3]. As part of the appeal the charity staged a Royal Premiere of Laurence Olivier's Othello attended by the Queen among others. 'Mr. Profumo organised the premiere from the Toynbee Hall end, and it was due to his knowledge and wide experience that everything was coordinated so smoothly and efficiently'[4]. The event was a huge success and raised an additional £20,000.



The Social Care and Leisure Centre minibus in 1998 was one of many projects Jack helped fundraise for.

1 Letter from Roger Braban, Director of Benson Public Relations Ltd to Sir Alick Stevens, [July 6th 1964], LMA/4683/CEN/10/18 [Toynbee Hall Archives]
2 Papers from February-May 1964, LMA/4683/CEN/10/17 [Toynbee Hall Archives]
3 Sunday Express, 'I just want to help people says John Profumo' [March 23rd 1969]
4 Annual Report 1966, [Toynbee Hall Archives]



Attlee House was completed in 1971 thanks to the success of Jack's appeal and was officially opened by Queen Elizabeth II.

> "the most tremendous asset"
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> Walter Birmingham, Warden of Toynbee Hall between 1964 - 72

Thanks to the success of the appeal, work quickly began to rejuvenate the Toynbee Hall estate, which had suffered greatly during the Blitz[1]. On 24th April 1965, Prime Minister Harold Wilson attended a ceremony to mark the start of building work and made a point of shaking Profumo's hand in front of the gathered crowd. This gained both Profumo and Toynbee Hall positive headlines[2]. In the following decade, three major new buildings were erected thanks to the successful pairing of Warden Walter Birmingham, an economist, and Profumo, a brilliant fundraiser and administrator. Namely, the new Gatehouse, Attlee House - built at Profumo's suggestion to house the Attlee Foundation as a memorial to former President of Toynbee Hall and Prime Minister Clement Attlee - and Sunley House which opened in 1976 to provide accommodation for local older people and a family centre.

Profumo's fundraising skills were further demonstrated by a Radio Appeal undertaken on Toynbee Hall's behalf in July 1978. It raised £34,000[3]. Given that Toynbee Hall was struggling financially is this period, Profumo's positive fundraising ability was invaluable, 'in 1978 Toynbee operated with a deficit of £22,521… the next year we ended our operations with a surplus of £13,524[4].

1 The Radio Times, BBC 'Week's Good Cause Appeal'.
2 N. Banks-Smith, 'Profumo Yesterday… As he Rebuilds his Life', Sun [July 24th 1965]
3 Toynbee Hall Report 1979-80, [Toynbee Hall Archives]
4 Ibid.

Jack's devoted service to Toynbee Hall

In 1975 Profumo was awarded a C.B.E for his dedicated and successful work at Toynbee Hall. In the spirit of the cooperative ethos of Toynbee Hall, Profumo insisted that his C.B.E. was an accolade for all of Toynbee Hall, rather than just himself.



Jack presents an award to young artist in the Lecture Hall

Nevertheless, the evidence proves Profumo had an undeniable personal impact on the Settlement, and by 1980, he was taking on formal responsibilities as a member of Toynbee Hall Council. By 1982, following the death of Toynbee's chairman Lord Blakenham, Profumo – by then an eighteen-year veteran of the Settlement - was unanimously voted in as the council's new chairman[1].

He held that position for 10 years before being made President in 1992. His involvement with Toynbee Hall continued until his death in 2006. In 2003 he was the point of contact for Bill Deedes from the Daily Telegraph who approached him after the paper chose to include Toynbee Hall in their Christmas charity appeal, which had the potential to yield between a quarter and a third of a million pounds: even in his late 80s Profumo was a valuable fundraising force[2]. Credit must also be given to fellow fundraising volunteer Billie Lancaster who carried out all the administrative work surrounding the buoyant fundraising programme, without whose efforts Profumo's ideas and connections would not have come so easily to fruition.

1 Annual Report 1981-1982, [Toynbee Hall Archives]
2 W. F. Deedes, 'Interview with J. Profumo', Telegraph [Novemeber 17th 2003], accessed via http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3606783/What-Profumo-did-next.html



Jack Presenting Awards at Bengali Music Festival

For over 40 years, 'with the loyal support of his wife… Profumo largely devoted his life to community service at Toynbee Hall'[1]. During this time, the charity regained some of its Victorian and pre-war influence. His presence had an important role in this transformation. Through offering administrative expertise, political connections, and his formidable fundraising ability, Profumo helped Toynbee Hall to pursue a future without poverty for East Londoners. Moreover, Profumo developed personally while at Toynbee Hall. He appreciated Samuel Barnett's original vision of men from high society living and working alongside the poor. He also came to understand that 'poverty isn't about money. It's a whole way of life'[2].

This appreciation for the realities of poverty and devotion to finding ways of alleviating it beyond financial aid is a testament to Toynbee Hall's approach to charity work; even a man of Profumo's experience had his perceptions changed by the Settlement, just as generations of young men and women had before him.

1 Is John Profumo a happy man?
2 Deedes, 'Interview with J. Profumo'

A cockney by adoption

John Profumo is still associated with the 'Affair' that carries his name. However, this hides the reality that he spent forty years at Toynbee Hall, compared to just twenty-three in politics. By the end of his life, he felt justifiably proud to be dubbed 'a Cockney by adoption' and continued working at Toynbee until the week prior to his death, aged ninety-one. Obituaries depict this as 'time spent atoning for his disgrace'. However, as his friend Lord Deedes put it 'if that isn't considered to be sufficient atonement for the mistake he made then there is no such thing as forgiveness'[1].

Indeed, in 2003 Westminster acknowledged Profumo's outstanding work at Toynbee Hall when a number of MPs passed a motion that 'publicly salutes a gallant and honourable gentleman to whom this country owes a huge debt of gratitude'2. Political leaders lined up to pay their respects on his passing. Iain Duncan Smith noted 'his enormous efforts will have changed the lives of many people over the years and he will be sadly missed by them and many of us' and Tony Blair added 'he was a politician with a glittering career who gave support and help to many, many people'[3]. To help many people' is an oft-cited motivation for going into politics. Profumo ultimately fulfilled it at Toynbee Hall.



Jack at children's party at Toynbee Hall in 1980's

1 'Scandal minister Profumo dies at 91', Telegraph [March 10th 2006], accessed via http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/scandal-minister-profumo-dies-at-91-6107030.html

2 'Early Day Motion #1151', House of Commons, [May 7th 2003], http://www.parliament.uk/edm/2002-03/1151

3 'Profumo's Charity Work Remembered', BBC [March 10th 2006], accessed via http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4793130.stm

> "If you define wealth in monetary terms, there's no hope for the future. It's only when you realise what you have to give that you become a real person"
>
> John Profumo CBE, 'Interview with J. Profumo', Daily Telegraph, Novemeber 17th 2003



Jack greets the Archbishop of Cantebury George Carey and wife Eileen at Toynbee Hall in 1992



Jack with Journalist and Broadcaster Jon Snow at Toynbee Hall in 2003

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