

Toynbee work

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By [Kerry Underwood](#)

In these days when legal advice is reduced to a commodity, Kerry Underwood says we must keep the Toynbee Hall spirit alive

Last week I went to Toynbee Hall for an event celebrating the life of John Profumo – a very special man being remembered in a very special place.

Toynbee Hall says of itself: “Based in Tower Hamlets in the East End of London, Toynbee Hall produces practical, innovative programmes to meet the needs of local people, improve conditions and enable communities to fulfil their potential.”

That is something of an understatement.

This remarkable place, now 122 years old, gave birth to the Citizens’ Advice Bureau, the Youth Hostels Association, the Workers’ Educational Association, the Children’s Country Holiday Fund, the Child Poverty Action Group and Legal Aid. Its free legal advice centre – the first in the world – is still going strong and lawyers still play a key part in the work of Toynbee Hall.

It nurtured Lenin, Attlee and Beveridge – author of the report that led to the creation of the Welfare State. Indeed Toynbee Hall, modest, as the above quote shows, rightly regards itself as the birthplace of the Welfare State. Less well-known is the fact that Marconi was a Toynbee Hall protégé. The first public demonstration of radio broadcasting was from Toynbee Hall, accompanied by the immortal words: “My name is Guillermo Marconi and I’ve just invented the wireless.”

Perhaps even less well-known is that Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, was involved with Toynbee Hall. So it can lay claim to inventing the modern Olympic Games, the Welfare State and the wireless!

Regarded as on the left of the political spectrum, it has a beguiling effect on all who cross its threshold. John Profumo was of course a Conservative Cabinet

Minister, and one of the speakers last week was Iain Duncan Smith, the former leader of the Conservative Party.

Toynbee Hall is classless and all-embracing. The lawyers who give their time come from different types of firms. A Linklaters partner is the chairman. In an increasingly polarised legal world, it is one of the few opportunities that lawyers from High Street firms and City firms get to meet each other. Its legal advice service has operated without a break since 1898.

Toynbee Hall can even claim to have been involved in the introduction of conditional fees. In the beginning there was a delay while the issue of payment of the other side's costs in a lost case was resolved. The answer was the Law Society's cheap and available Accident Line 'after-the-event' insurance – a completely novel concept at the time. That was run by Abbey Legal Protection Ltd, a company chaired by Lord Westbury, who was heavily involved at Toynbee Hall – his main motivation was to provide access to justice to people who could not afford to risk an adverse costs order. Abbey Legal certainly did not get rich on Accident Line Protect. Indeed my first substantial involvement with Toynbee Hall arose through my contacts with Lord Westbury when we were working to introduce conditional fees.

As the legal profession faces annihilation by the Legal Service Bill, legislation more suited to totalitarian regimes than the UK Parliament, involvement with Toynbee Hall is both sobering and comforting. It is a reminder that lawyers, especially when working with others, can make a real difference to real people. It is an escape from time-recording, billable hours, Practice Rule 15 and all of the other things that get in the way of being a lawyer.

Specialist advice sessions deal with housing, debt, employment and general advice sessions deal with anything and everything, including medical negligence, wills, probate, criminal injuries compensation, consumer affairs, immigration and family law.

Recently there was a competition for a name to replace 'pro bono work'. 'Toynbee work' would be a good replacement. If ever an institution worked for the public good, it is Toynbee Hall. It is the complete antidote to the current brigade of politicians and administrators who know the price of everything but the value of nothing.

It is said that you go there to give but always receive more than you give. That is entirely true.

I have a strong feeling that when the current madness ends, and it will, the solution, like so many others, will have its roots in the philosophy, thinking and members of Toynbee Hall.

It is not the most beautiful of buildings, but it is the most beautiful of places.

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Readers' comments

- **Richard Barr** 11 July 2006

I thoroughly enjoyed Kerry Underwood's piece on Toynbee work. Particularly telling was his comment that lawyers can make a real difference to real people. How many, these days, feel frustrated at our apparent powerlessness to make any difference at all to anything; so a Toynbee movement gets my vote.

Kerry mentioned that the occasion of his visit to Toynbee Hall was to celebrate the life of John Profumo. As a young law student in the 1970s I was privileged to meet John Profumo at Toynbee Hall. You could not find a more caring, sensitive and intelligent man. He was immensely helpful in a project I became involved in, both at my meeting and in correspondence afterwards.

John Profumo had an affair with a call girl and lied about it. For that, he left politics and devoted the rest of his life to charity work. What he did was far less serious than many politicians have done since (but have not resigned), but what he subsequently gave to society was probably far more worthwhile than anything we see from most modern politicians.

Richard Barr