

Sexual Hypocrisy in the United States and Britain

by Michael Curtis



Some lies have consequences, others do not. No real political consequence resulted from the declaration of a well known politician on TV on January 26, 1998, that "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Monica Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie, not a single time, never." It took six months before the manifest admission that indeed "I did have a relationship with Miss Lewinsky that was not appropriate. I misled people. It is time, past time to move on." The problem in American politics is that the time for dealing with sexual hypocrisy and moving on is taking more time than warranted.

The latest case came to a head on December 7, 2017. After a number of allegations of sexual harrassment and mistreatment of women, without admission of responsibility, and under pressure from most of his Senate colleagues, Senator Al Franken announced his somewhat equivocal decision to resign "in the coming weeks." The 66 year old Franken, acknowledging

he was shocked and upset by the allegations against him, explained that "nothing I have done as a Senator, has brought dishonor on this institution."

By coincidence the question of honor and dishonor in politics 50 years ago has been evoked by the death on December 4, 2017 of the once notorious model Christine Keeler who has earned a place in British history as a high class "call girl." The sordid case in which she was key figure had everything, unrestrained sex, scandals, class privilege, the role of Soviet spies, fear of possible espionage, echoes of the Cold War, sexual hypocrisy, and lying to political colleagues.

The events involved Keeler, the hapless uneducated young former topless dancer, a figure in the sleazy sector of London society at the time, indiscriminately sexually promiscuous. On July 8, 1961 at the Cliveden estate of Lord Astor, the very rich aristocrat, she was spotted swimming naked in the pool by John Profumo who had the misfortune and bad timing to see her as she got out of the pool. Within a few days the 46 year old Profumo, the husband of famous actress Valerie Hobson began an affair with the 19 year old Keeler that lasted a few months.

It was Profumo's misfortune that the sexually promiscuous Keeler was simultaneously having an affair both with Profumo, then Secretary of State for War, and with the senior Soviet naval attache and GRU official in London, Yevgeni Ivanov. No one genuinely believed that secrets or military information were divulged by Profumo in pillow talk in Keeler's encounters with the two men. But though not directly connected with Keeler's relationships the years of these events were those embracing the Cuban missile crisis. In London, Soviet officials were attempting to persuade UK politicians to avert developments in Cuba during the crisis.

It took a series of events, some violent and criminal, concerning other lovers of Keeler before the Profumo relationship came to public light in a court case. When it

did, Profumo, like Bill Clinton in 1998, denied that the relationship with a his mistress was anything more than an innocent social friendship.

This was Profumo's downfall. Descendant of a Sardinian background and a wealthy family, educated at Harrow and Oxford, he rose to the rank of Brigadier in World War II. He had had a successful political career, starting at age 25, when as a young man on May 8, 1940, after the fall of Norway, he had refused to support the government of Neville Chamberlain, voted against him and thus helped bring Winston Churchill to power as prime minister. Profumo became Secretary of State for War in July 1960. But on March 22, 1963 he made his mistake. To lie in the nude may be terribly rude, but to lie in the House of Commons is obscene.

In a statement on that day, in what is known as a "personal statement" when MPs can make a point of a personal nature, Profumo lied to the House of Commons. He stated there was no impropriety whatever in "my relationship with Miss Keeler." He would not hesitates to issue writs for libel and slander of scandalous allegations that were made or repeated outside the House of Commons.

His explanation was inadequate, not accepted as true, and he resigned his ministerial post and his membership of the House on June 5, 1963.

Profumo was brought down, not on any moral or ethical issue. The Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in his speech in the House on June 17, 1963 explained to the House that Profumo had lied to his wife, to his legal advisers, to ministerial colleagues, and above all to the House of Commons. He had undermined one of the very foundations on which political life must be conducted.

Profumo never again participated in politics, but spent the rest of his life, 40 years, as a voluntary worker and chief

fund raiser in Toynbee Hall, a charitable organization helping poor residents in the East End of London.

Profumo had violated the high standards, the set of expected values of parliament, honest speaking, and sought to make amends. By contrast, nothing in the Al Franken 11 minute speech of December 7 resembled this. There was no profuse apology to women who had made allegations against him. Rather, he asserted that "some of the allegations against me are simply not true. Others I remember very differently." At first, Franken, though embarrassed and ashamed by his behavior, said he would not resign. But in the present climate of revulsion over allegations of sexual harassment, he was obliged to bow to pressure from his own Democratic colleagues in the Senate.

Finally, what is disconcerting is that after Franken's speech, those fellow members who had urged him to resign lined up to hug him, behavior that smacks of hypocrisy. Franken said he is going to try to learn from his mistakes, but he should take his cue from John Profumo and do so outside the realm of politics. True feminists should insist on this.