

THUNDER ON THE THAMES

The British Press and the Profumo Case

By JOHN TEBBEL

LONDON.

ON THE fateful afternoon of June 17, when Prime Minister Harold Macmillan stood at bay in the House of Commons, the typically British weather forecast read: "Sunny periods; showers." It was an apt description of the emotional climate in which the nation's greatest political crisis in many years came to its unhappy yet enlightening climax.

Mr. Macmillan and his Tory government had come to this turning point by a road so devious and unlikely that the British public, wavering between titillation and indignation, could scarcely believe it was happening to them instead of the Americans. Indeed, at least one paper, the *Sunday Telegraph*, talked gloomily about "the Americanization of British life."

In a sense, the beginning of the affair bore out the *Telegraph's* melancholy observation, for it was in a swimming pool, a standard fixture in the American *dolce vita*, that the Right Honorable John Dennis Profumo, Her Majesty's Privy Councillor and Secretary of State for War, met a twenty-one-year-old redhead of enchanting proportions named Christine Keeler. The place was Cliveden, the four-story gray Astor mansion which the Scottish *Sunday Mail* refers to as "the stateliest and craziest of English country houses." The time was July 1961.

What happened after these two weekend guests contemplated each other is now engraved in the memory of the remotest peasant. Miss Keeler, who was currently the friend, as the French say, of Commander Eugene Ivanov, Assistant Naval Attaché of the Soviet Embassy, became the friend of Mr. Profumo, who is married to a British cinema star, "the good Valerie Hobson," as the *Sunday Mail* tenderly described her. The Profumo-Keeler friendship ripened for six months in the London flat of Dr. Stephen Ward, a society osteopath, who was thoughtful enough to provide it since he had after all shared the Cliveden pool with them.

There the matter might have ended pleasantly if another friend of Miss Keeler's, a jealous West Indian named John Edgecombe, had not tried to force his way with a gun into her



—UPI.

John Profumo and his wife, Valerie Hobson—a strain on the press.

Wimpole Mews flat. At this point the British press entered the drama in a way characteristic of the press everywhere this side of the Iron Curtain. The London *Mirror* tried to buy Miss Keeler's life story for its sensational tabloid pages. At the same time it came into possession, by means not yet disclosed, of a Profumo letter beginning "Darling" and concluding "Love, J."

In America there would have been no hesitation about publishing such a letter, if it were believed authentic. In Britain, however, the relationship of the press to government and courts is significantly different. The libel laws are harsh and restrictive; privacy is protected to a degree unknown in America. The *Mirror* evidently weighed its story against the possibility of a libel action and decided not to print it.

This remarkable restraint must be viewed against the background of the recent bitter struggle between the press and the Establishment, as represented by government and courts. Two royal commissions have investigated the press and raised the prospect of even more restrictive legislation to govern it. These and other actions, both official and unofficial, have created a public opinion climate in Britain which has

resulted in heavy punitive libel damages being assessed against newspapers by British juries. The depressing frequency of these verdicts recently has made publishers feel like ducks in a shooting gallery.

In its hesitation over the Profumo letter, the *Mirror* also reflected, as the other papers were to do later as the case developed, a fear of what the government might do. Fresh in the memories of these publishers was the rough handling given them by the Macmillan government in the recent Vassall spy case, when a tribunal was set up to pry out the sources of information the press had used in developing a story which proved to be damaging to the Conservatives' shaky control. The hand-picked tribunal gave the newspaper witnesses harsh treatment, and two reporters went to jail for refusing to divulge their sources.

Small wonder, then, that the press approached the burgeoning Profumo affair last December with all the frustrated ardor of a man about to open a can of beer on a lonely beach and who finds he has left the opener at home. Everyone on Fleet Street soon knew most of the details about Mr. Profumo's indiscretion, but not a line

appeared in print. In such a situation, the inevitable rumors grew and spread until they reached Westminster and Mr. Macmillan himself, who asked the Security Service, known as M15, if there was anything irregular about the situation. M15 gave a "negative" reply. Meanwhile, Commander Ivanov, no doubt feeling a certain apprehension, left the country. In March, Edgcombe appeared at Old Bailey and got a seven-year sentence. Miss Keeler, who had been scheduled as a witness, turned out to be visiting friends in Spain. The *Daily Express* reported that Profumo had offered to resign; it was denied with restrained indignation.

The Labor M.P.s in Commons were not willing to let the opportunity pass, however, and on the night of March 21 they succeeded in getting Profumo summoned to the House, where he was, as the tabloids usually put it, grilled. Next morning the Minister of State for War appeared before the House and made his now famous statement that he had nothing to do with Miss Keeler's disappearance, and that "there was no impropriety whatsoever in my acquaintanceship with Miss Keeler." Then he threatened the press directly: "I shall not hesitate to issue writs for libel and slander if scandalous allegations are made or repeated outside the House."

Some allegations had already been made, by two non-British magazines, *Paris Match* and *Il Tempo Illustrato*. Mr. Profumo had libel writs issued against both. The magazines carrying the stories were banned from Britain, and their British distributor publicly apologized in open court, meanwhile giving the plaintiff a substantial sum in lieu of possible damages that might have been assessed had the case been tried. In a fit of conscience, Profumo

gave this money to an Army charity. Only a few days before, the *Sunday Mirror* had returned Profumo's "Daring" letter to his solicitors, thoughtfully keeping a copy for themselves. A few days later, Miss Keeler was attacked by another of her West Indian friends, one "Lucky" Gordon.

But now the affair moved rapidly to its first dramatic climax. Early in May, Dr. Ward told the Prime Minister's principal private secretary, T. J. Bligh, that Profumo had misled the House. Charged with it, the Secretary denied his guilt a second time. There was further backstage maneuvering by the government, ending in an order to the Lord Chancellor, Lord Dilhorne, to investigate the security aspects of the affair, and Profumo was summoned home from Italy to face his accusers once more.

IN all this time, Profumo had not issued any libel writs against a British publication. It was not necessary. They were treating the developing story as though it were a carefully kept secret, and it may be true, as the *Sunday Express* recently charged, that Profumo thought he would "get away with it" because the libel laws would prevent the press from digging into the story and exposing him. So they might have, but government pressure was now too much for Profumo. He admitted his lie, and resigned. Three days later Dr. Ward was arrested at high noon, while walking abroad in his carpet slippers, and charged with living from immoral earnings. Next day the *Mirror*, feeling itself safe, published Profumo's letter, and the *News of the World*, most sensational of the Sunday tabloids, began to publish Miss Keeler's own story.

With these developments the press was unleashed and in full cry. It was

a spectacle quite foreign to American eyes. What was different in Britain was the press's examination of itself, of its position in the affair, of its own editorial viewpoints. Such candid criticism is virtually unknown in the private club which is American newspaper ownership.

The *Mirror* was sharply criticized for not showing its precious letter to the government, but this was a minor matter compared to the great debate over a *Times* editorial, written by its editor of the past decade, Sir William Haley. Once known as "The Thunderer," the *Times* had not thundered much for some time, but the Profumo affair outraged Sir William.

Sir William was already on record as believing that people ought to make less money and work more, and that a newspaper should be a moral force. During the Vassall case he had written a fairly thundering editorial asserting that "It is happening here," and sounding an ominous warning of unlimited executive power if the press were muzzled by restrictive laws. Now he thundered again in an editorial which contained a sentence soon much quoted: "It is a moral issue."

That was the core of the debate, and the division of the newspapers represented the division in British opinion. Some papers followed the *Times* in taking a high tone of moral indignation. The tabloids, with ill-concealed glee, recalled past public scandals in gaudy detail. There was talk of a British *dolce vita*, incongruous as it might sound. America was blamed for the decay of morality. But then came the clear, acidulous voice of the *Observer*, Britain's and possibly the world's best paper: "To lump Miss Keeler, as the *Times* seemed to do, with the decline of religion, the faults of the affluent



society and the failure of the economy is ludicrous."

Should the libel laws be changed? Oddly enough, the papers did not agree on that point either. "The libel laws must never again be allowed to become a weapon for suppressing the truth," the *Sunday Express* declared in its grandest manner. "... There cannot be a free Press unless newspapers are given much wider latitude for fair comment and reasonable deduction." But on the same day the *Observer* was observing testily: "Should these laws be relaxed in order to enable the Press to act as public watchdogs and hound delinquent public figures? The answer must surely be negative since it is no part of the duty of the Press to spend its time ferreting out the sexual weaknesses of individuals. . . ."

Perhaps the most surprising development, however, was the way even the Conservative press turned against Macmillan in his hour of trial. The defection of the newspapers was a prime factor in the subsequent events which seemed to lead inevitably, as these words were written, to the Prime Minister's early resignation.

THE astonishing leader in this retreat was that stern upholder of Conservatism, the *Times*. Sir William seemed to feel that the Prime Minister, while not personally suspect, was the man responsible for the deplorable weakening of British moral fiber. He printed two and a half columns of approving reader reaction to his "It is a moral issue" editorial, but as the *Sunday Times* (no relation) pointed out acidly, many of these letters "had addresses suggesting the squirearchy and urban middle-class . . . the very people who three months ago were castigating the Press in the same columns, to the alarm of *The Times*."

Another major defector was the *Daily Telegraph*, which had long upheld Conservative Prime Ministers but now could be seen sharpening its ax, meanwhile giving approving signals to its favorite, Lord Hailsham, presumably standing in the wings. The motivating force in this switch was said to be Lady Pamela Berry, wife of the *Telegraph's* editor-in-chief, a no-nonsense girl, daughter of Lord Birkenhead, whose drawing-room salon in Cowley Street, in the very shadow of Westminster, occupies somewhat the same position in British political life as Pearl Mesta's parties once did in Washington. Lady Pamela inspired the *Telegraph's* frontal assault on Anthony Eden in 1956, it was recalled, and had recently been priming the guns for a bombardment of Macmillan, whom she was said to describe to her influential

friends as a man who had lost control of his party and would have to go before any further disgraceful developments could take place.

In the process of defecting during the crisis week before Macmillan's June 17 confrontation with the House, the British papers put on a small show of their own, invisible to the man in the street but indicative of life on Fleet Street.

As Macmillan approached his hour of crisis that week, the primary speculation was whether he could hold his Cabinet together as a united front. By the Wednesday night before, neither press nor radio had hinted at any revolt in Cabinet ranks, and when the *Telegraph's* first Thursday edition appeared on the streets shortly after press time, 10 P.M., the headline read: "A Cabinet Rallied by P.M.—No Resignations at Profumo Meeting—Silence Before the Commons Storm."

Almost simultaneously the *Daily Express* and the *Times* emerged with startling stories that Enoch Powell, the Minister of Health, was not satisfied with Macmillan's explanation and might resign. Three other resignations were more or less freely predicted.

There was a frantic burst of activity up and down Fleet Street. The *Telegraph's* next edition appeared after midnight with a new headline: "Cabinet Divided on Profumo—Four Ministers Question Leadership—Mr. Powell Gravely Disturbed." Meanwhile the other papers were busy pursuing these Cabinet doubters and succeeded in getting denials from two of them. One, Sir Edward Boyle, Minister of Education, had disappeared into the fastnesses of the Carlton Club where he could not be followed without revolutionizing British club life.

The other papers could not understand how the *Times* and the *Express* had got their story. At first it was surmised that it had come from a Tory backbencher, Nigel Birch, who had long been after the Prime Minister's head. Mr. Birch denied it. It was also hinted darkly that those publishers with club connection had used their proximity to fellow members in high places for commercial purposes. It was recalled that the *Times* had been noted for this kind of reporting in past years, when whatever was being said by the Establishment in the privacy of their clubs would inevitably appear in the editorial columns of the *Times*, where it could be regarded as official.

Subsequent speculation has been



abundant, but the sources of the story on the Cabinet split have not yet been revealed and may never be. There is no doubt that whether it was true or not, and apparently it was not, it was a final nail in the Prime Minister's coffin at a critical hour, driven there by two newspapers that had supported him in the past.

If all this turmoil sounds rather grim, it was not without its humor. One commentator, for example, remarked that the Profumo case proved conclusively that a girl could get into British politics. But it was the *Observer* that capped the story.

One of its caps appeared in an unusual place, the real estate advertising columns in which there runs regularly, to the constant delight of its readers, the offerings of E. H. Brooks & Son, whose proprietor, Roy Brooks, has brought utter candor to real estate advertising, usually innocent of it. ("This sordid affair is on 4 flrs each with 2 rms," he wrote recently of one offering. "The lavatory pan in the grnd flr back addition is the solitary concession to the mad rush of our mechanized civilization.")

Mr. Brooks's column of ads is often preceded by an editorial paragraph of his own pungent observations. The Profumo affair moved him to write: "With the hand of conscience reaching for the first stone, who knows what further revelations will continue to rock the Stock Market & tumble house prices? Over tea at the Athenaeum recently a friend told me that another member had sent anonymous, identical telegrams to all the Bishops staying at the time (five, I believe): *All is discovered—leave Town at once*. Without saying anything they all left immediately. If *you* want to sell before the rot sets in please let us know."

The other comment came from the *Observer* columnist Michael Frayne, whose work was introduced to American audiences late this spring in a book of collected essays. "The Government," said Mr. Frayne, "has made small slips before, of course. It has made minor errors of economic policy. It has occasionally deported the wrong people. It has gambled on the wrong defence system. It invaded the wrong country. All these peccadilloes could be forgiven—none of them involved anything worse than the loss of a few hundred lives, or the waste of a hundred million pounds, or putting half a million men out of work. But now a member of the Government has *slept with the wrong woman*, and as a consequence severely strained this country's newsprint resources."

There was no rejoinder from the *Times*.

Madison Avenue



The Restive Researchers

MORE than three decades ago one of the pioneers of advertising, Albert D. Lasker, defined market research as "something that tells you that a jackass has two ears."

Since Mr. Lasker's blunt pronouncement, market research has mushroomed into a vast industry commanding the talents of thousands of psychologists, sociologists, and statisticians. But every once in a while something happens to remind people that research is eminently fallible and that maybe there is a germ of truth in his remark.

Back in 1948, for example, after all the pollsters picked Dewey over Truman, many businessmen wondered whether the researchers' marketing forecasts were as far afield as their political prognostications.

A couple of months ago, long after researchers had put most of these doubts to rest, a Congressional subcommittee set loose still another storm. This time the main target was the TV and radio rating services. The Congressional investigators turned up serious flaws in the rating services' research procedures. Samples were poorly designed, interviewers faked their interviews, and even the automatic monitoring devices were providing distorted information (e.g., some monitored radios and TV sets were left on all day to pacify children or family pets).

Once again, many businessmen were prompted to inquire: If the research companies are so inaccurate in their broadcast research, are their other findings any more reliable?

Indeed, the ratings controversy has led many companies to reassess their market research operations and to ponder anew whether or not they aren't placing too much faith in what some critics have called "the Great God Research."

Though the professional researchers have stoutly defended their methodology, some have confided candidly a periodic "reassessment" such as the present one does have its therapeutic effects. Like any industry that has grown fast, they note, the research business has more than its share of charlatans. Leading researchers are convinced, however, that their field will

emerge stronger than ever from the present "bloodbath."

It's hard to pinpoint when market research got its start. Archibald Crossley was actually conducting formal field surveys as long ago as 1919. But it was not until the 1930s that the demand for systematized marketing data began to widen, and not until the late 1940s that a major influx of scientists (and pseudo-scientists) into the field got under way. Membership in the American Marketing Association soared from 1,500 to 6,500 in the decade following 1945, and ad men who never took a semester of psychology were casually dropping terms like random sample, image profile, and depth interview.

The newly formed research firms provided a vast spectrum of research activities. On the one extreme were the straight "nose-counters" who could marshal hundreds of interviewers to find out how many people were using Brand X or watching Program Y. At the other extreme were the "motivation researchers" whose manipulation of Freudian psychology led semanticist S. I. Hayakawa to label them "harlot scientists."

Whatever their specialties, the researchers could pretty well make what-

ever claim they wanted for their various services. There were no prescribed professional standards to measure up to, no professional society to rule on unethical practices. "It has always been true of this business that anyone could say anything," observes William Capitan, president of the Center for Research in Marketing. "A research firm can interview two people and sell its findings as scientific research."

Given this absence of standards, many businessmen quickly fell into two bad habits. First, they tended to accept any "study" at face value, without proper examination of methodology. Second, though risking considerable capital on the research findings, businessmen budgeted ridiculously little money for the studies themselves.

The effects of this bargain-basement approach were made vividly apparent in the ratings investigation. When confronted with evidence of faked interviews and falsified data, the research firms acknowledged that their research was weak but claimed that it was all they could provide at existing prices. The immensely profitable radio and TV networks, they noted, spent only \$1,500,000 on ratings during 1962—a rather pitiable sum considering the sweeping decisions that are based on the data provided.

THERE are signs that this penny-pinching situation may be corrected. Several trade associations have announced extensive research projects to probe ratings methodology. Proposals are being evolved to provide industry-wide audits of research procedures. All this will cost money—but suddenly the money has become available, thanks to the pressure from Washington.

Meanwhile, throughout the business world, executives are starting to exhibit a healthy skepticism toward research in general. Advertising copy writers, who long have had to tailor their ads rigidly to the findings of the research department, are being given some creative latitude—and the quality of the ads is showing a commensurate improvement.

Businessmen are recalling that, despite the reputed magic of research, no one successfully forecast the latent demand for compact cars. No researcher was able to tell Ford that the Edsel wouldn't sell. No researcher predicted the present popularity of gourmet or diet foods or the recent collapse in the market for most makes of foreign cars.

Indeed, it is now widely recognized that research can do more than count jackass ears. But business has learned that buying research is like buying any other service—at best, you get what you pay for.

—PETER BART.

