

# Professor Phyllida Parsloe 1930-2021



<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/professor-phyllida-parsloe-warden-19911997-185263>

*16 September 2021*

Inaugural Professor of Social Work at the University of Bristol, first female Pro-Vice Chancellor and Warden of Wills Hall and Emeritus Professor in the School for Policy Studies, Professor Phyllida Parsloe died age 90 on 1st September.

During a long and distinguished career, she made an immense contribution to social work education and research and to the development of social work as a profession. Further, her personal and academic credentials made it impossible for the male culture of the time to sidestep her and led her into senior roles in UK universities.

John Carpenter, Emeritus Professor of Social Work and Applied Social Science, writes: Alongside her close friend and colleague, Professor Olive Stevenson at Nottingham, Phyllida Parsloe was regarded as a doyenne of social work in the UK. Blessed with a formidable intellect and clarity of expression, she would pick apart woolly thinking and challenge specious argument whether in writing about social work or in university committees. More than this, her ability to respect and understand the needs of each person as an individual enabled her to move debates forward and alleviate entrenched positions.

During the 1970s, social work was finding its feet following major developments in social welfare, notably the creation of social services departments in local authorities, the professionalisation of probation and the growth of the voluntary sector. Professor Parsloe's voice carried great authority: unlike many critics of social work, she had been a practitioner herself and with Olive Stevenson, she had researched what social workers at the time were actually doing and thinking (Stevenson and Parsloe: *Social Services Teams: the practitioners' view*, 1978 and *Social Service Area Teams*, 1981).

She very evidently knew what she was talking about. She commanded the room. But her authority derived also from her humanity and quiet generosity to many: she was generous with her time and her ideas, but she wanted first to know what you thought. If your ideas made sense, you would get her full support. If not, she would help you examine them rigorously and fairly and develop them more sustainably. Her many doctoral students from Hong Kong and the UK would attest to this.

Phyllida had great ideas herself. Recognising from her own experience that the lack of good professional cooperation between doctors and social workers was to the detriment of patients/clients,

she persuaded the Bristol University medical school to engage in a short programme of joint pre-qualifying interprofessional education – the first in the world. She brought ‘problem-based learning’, pioneered at McMaster University for the education of medical students, into the education of social workers as ‘enquiry and action learning’. Hers was the inspiration; her colleagues made the ideas a reality, with her support. Determined to develop the pedagogy of social work education and its evidence base, she became the founding editor of *Social Work Education: an international journal* (1981). Under her leadership, Bristol acquired an international reputation as a centre of excellence in social work education. She had a special relationship with universities in Hong Kong and was a visiting professor first at Hong Kong and later at Hong Kong Baptist University.

At a national level, Phyllida Parsloe was a prominent member (1986-2001) of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, then the regulating body for the profession, the Barclay Commission review of social work (1982) and the Wagner review of residential care (1988).

Phyllida combined again with Olive Stevenson to research the notion of ‘empowerment’ (*Community Care and Empowerment* 1993). The incisive introduction to her edited book *Pathways to Empowerment* (1996) remains well worth reading by social workers, counsellors and others who believe that they can ‘empower’ their clients. In her view, pathways to empowerment are those whereby people can increase control over their own lives and the services which they receive.

Phyllida Parsloe had graduated in history at Bristol University and qualified in psychiatric social work at the LSE. She was awarded a PhD by Bristol university and an honorary Doctor of Science degree by the University of the West of England.

Phyllida worked as a probation officer in Devon (1954-1959) and at St George’s Hospital, London as a psychiatric social worker (1959 to 1965). She returned to the LSE as a lecturer in the Department of Social Administration (1965-1970). In 1970 Phyllida was appointed as Associate Professor in Law at the University of Indiana in the United States where she taught law students how to interview. She returned to the UK as the first Professor of Social Work and the first female professor at Aberdeen University (1973-1978) where she established a department.

Professor Parsloe was appointed as the first Chair in Social Work at Bristol in 1978 and only the university’s second female professor. She held this post until her retirement in 1996 when she was appointed Professor Emeritus. A further measure of her stature with the university was that she was the first woman to be appointed as Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University (1988-1991); in that role she once again proved her integrity, clarity and vision. She chaired a review of university halls of residence, seeing them as a place where the whole person was developed, not just their academic credentials. Subsequently, she was an ‘inspired’ appointment as Warden of Wills Hall (1991-1997), the first woman to take this role. She enjoyed it enormously. It was a source of many anecdotes, including repelling an invasion of Viking marauders (conference delegates in fancy dress) who burst into her room at night; she awoke, they fled.

Following her retirement from the university, Phyllida took up senior roles within the health service as chair of the Frenchay Hospital NHS Trust, and subsequently of the North Bristol NHS Trust (1999-2003). She lived in Thornbury, South Gloucestershire for many years, became a town councillor and its mayor three times. She served as a trustee of many local and national charities and was a founder of Dementia Voice which enables people with experience of the disease to contribute to the work of the Alzheimer’s Society.

The School for Policy Studies, the University of Bristol and her many colleagues and friends and students around the world owe her a great debt of gratitude. She once wrote of her concern to prepare social work students for the complex and often hostile world they were about to enter. She wanted to “...help them keep alive their faith in being able to change the world at least a little...”. Phyllida’s life was an inspiration and example.