

Labour suspends race pioneer Trevor Phillips over Islamophobia claims

by Dominic Kennedy | March 9, 2020



Trevor Phillips, the first chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, says Labour was becoming a “brutish, authoritarian cult”

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Trevor Phillips, the former head of Britain’s equalities watchdog, has been suspended from the Labour Party over allegations of Islamophobia, *The Times* can disclose.

A pioneering anti-racism campaigner, Mr Phillips, 66, now faces expulsion from the party for alleged prejudice against Muslims. He first alerted Britain to the problem of Islamophobia in the 1990s but is now being investigated for public statements that include expressing concerns about Pakistani Muslim men sexually abusing children in northern towns such as Rotherham.

Comments by Mr Phillips about the failure by some Muslims to wear poppies for Remembrance Sunday and the sympathy shown by a substantial proportion in an opinion poll towards the “motives” of the *Charlie Hebdo* killers also form part of the complaint.

He told *Today* on BBC Radio 4 that he had been suspended with immediate effect and accused the party of “shutting down genuine debate”.

“They say I’ve accused Muslims of being different — Muslims are different, and in many ways I think that’s admirable . . . We cannot continue to simply say differences don’t matter — it’s a form of disrespect,” he said.

Many of his statements date back years but Jennie Formby, Labour’s general secretary, suspended Mr Phillips as a matter of “urgency to protect the party’s reputation”, he was told. He has not been given the identity of any complainant. The suspension pending investigation means he cannot attend party meetings or run for office.

Mr Phillips was the inaugural chairman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which is investigating Labour for alleged antisemitism. He was among a number of anti-racists who wrote to *The Guardian* last year and said that they were refusing to vote Labour at the general election in solidarity with Jews.

[In *The Times* today](#) Mr Phillips says he is a victim of Labour’s adoption of a cross-party group of MPs’ definition of Islamophobia as a “kind of racism” hostile to “Muslimness”. Labour said the party “takes all complaints about Islamophobia extremely seriously and they are fully investigated”.

The accusations are based on his public statements about how to integrate Muslims. As chairman of the Runnymede Trust think tank, Mr Phillips in 1997 published a report on Islamophobia. He successfully lobbied Tony Blair for a law protecting Muslims from incitement.

Khalid Mahmood, England’s first Muslim MP and a Labour backbencher, said in a paper called *The Trial: the strange case of Trevor Phillips*, published by the Policy Exchange think tank today, “the charges were so outlandish as to bring disrepute on all involved in making them”. Mr Phillips has said there is no suggestion that he has done anything unlawful and “no one inside or outside the Labour Party has ever suggested that I have broken any rules”.

A draft charge sheet cites Mr Phillips’s remarks to a Conservative Party conference fringe event. He said: “I don’t know if I’m the only one here who’s been nominated by a UN body as the Islamophobe of the Year. You might have been, Peter, no?” To laughter, Peter Tatchell, the veteran gay rights campaigner, joked: “I’m jealous!”

The draft charge sheet accuses Mr Phillips of using language “which targets or intimidates members of ethnic or religious communities, or incites racism, including Islamophobia”.

There is speculation about the motives for trying to expel him now. He has been a leading voice denouncing Labour’s antisemitism problems under [Jeremy Corbyn](#)’s leadership. He is also a member of the same Holborn & St Pancras constituency Labour party in north London as Sir Keir Starmer, the favourite to win the leadership election who is suspected of having designs to move away from a hard-left agenda.

The Tory event last autumn was exploring a new definition of [Islamophobia](#) proposed by a cross-party group of MPs. The wording has been widely denounced by religious, secular and free-speech campaigners, including Mr Phillips, who chairs the non-profit organisation Index on Censorship, for being a backdoor ban on blasphemy. Labour and some local authorities have adopted it, however.

Mr Phillips' reference to being nominated as "Islamophobe of the Year" refers to a mock awards ceremony run by the [Islamic Human Rights Commission](#), a Tehran-supporting, London-based pressure group recognised by the United Nations. The annual event was condemned as tasteless after the commission gave a posthumous award in 2015 to the cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, several of whom had been murdered by terrorists in Paris for drawing the Prophet Mohammed.

Mr Phillips is formally accused of breaking Labour rules forbidding conduct prejudicial or grossly detrimental to the party. The allegations cite extracts from a pamphlet he wrote for the Civitas think tank, an article for the Unherd website and quotations in news reports in *The Times* and *Daily Mail*.

In his 2016 pamphlet *Race and Faith: The Deafening Silence*, he wrote: "The most sensitive cause of conflict in recent years has been the collision between majority norms and the behaviours of some Muslim groups.

"In particular, the exposure of systematic and longstanding abuse by men, mostly of Pakistani Muslim origin in the north of England."

He went on to describe attending an Islamic conference before Remembrance Sunday where only one Muslim attendee wore a poppy. The same day he visited an industrial site, the workplace of many African and eastern European immigrants. "Poppies were everywhere," he wrote. "One group had clearly adapted to the mainstream, the other had not."

Labour has demanded to know why he wrote in the pamphlet that Enoch Powell's 1968 "rivers of blood" speech had been "lauded as an epic example of the use of political rhetoric".

Mr Phillips' full quotation shows he was emphasising that Powell's career was ended by the speech. The lesson learnt by people in British public life, he said, was to say nothing about race or religion "that is not anodyne and platitudinous", resulting in a failure to address anti-immigrant sentiment.

He is also criticised for being quoted in *The Times* in 2016 referring to "the unacknowledged creation of a nation within the nation, with its own geography, its own values and its own very separate future".