



2020_03_09_The Trial: the strange case of Trevor Phillips
How the accusation of Islamophobia is used to stifle free speech
NU General Secretary defends British anti-racism campaigner

Longest-serving Muslim Member of Parliament concurs:
“The Labour Party... seems to be intent on wielding [accusations of Islamophobia] as a weapon for rooting out ‘difficult’ voices.”

LONDON, United Kingdom: On March 9, 2020, Nahdlatul Ulama General Secretary and co-founder of the global [Humanitarian Islam](#) movement, KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf (“[Gus Yahya](#)”), defended one of the UK’s most respected anti-racism campaigners from accusations of Islamophobia, in the epilogue to a comprehensive report by premier British think tank Policy Exchange. In doing so, the Indonesian Islamic scholar added his authoritative voice to that of prominent center-left and center-right UK figures in confronting the political weaponization of Islam, which threatens to drag Muslim communities into the highly polarized and increasingly lethal “culture wars” roiling much of the West.

Trevor Phillips—who personally commissioned and launched a 1997 report on Islamophobia that first introduced the term into the UK’s political discourse—was [suspended](#) from membership of Britain’s opposition Labour Party after himself being accused of using language “which targets or intimidates members of ethnic or religious communities, or incites racism, including Islamophobia”; in addition to conduct that allegedly involved “Islamophobic actions, stereotypes and sentiments.”

Writing alongside Trevor Phillips; Sir John Jenkins, former UK ambassador to Saudi Arabia; historian Dr. Martyn Frampton; and Britain’s longest-serving Muslim Member of Parliament, Labour’s Khalid Mahmoud, Mr. Staquf warns in the afterword to a 39-page Policy Exchange [report](#) that:

“The commencement of disciplinary procedures against the Honorable Trevor Phillips by the UK Labour Party—on the grounds of alleged racism and Islamophobia—perfectly illustrates the political weaponization and abuse of these terms.

“In today’s caustic political environment, it is both seductive and easy to hurl accusations, rather than present reasoned arguments concerning issues that are of the utmost importance to our respective societies. However, facts do not cease to be facts, when those who highlight their existence are subjected to a political inquisition and/or social ostracism. Character assassination is not a legitimate form of argument. Nor will denying that problems exist cause them to miraculously vanish.

“Mr. Phillips’ inquisition is occurring against the backdrop of a far larger socio-cultural and political movement in the West, that seeks to deny one’s fellow human beings ‘the right to freedom of opinion and expression; a right which includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, impart and receive information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’ (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 19).”

Gus Yahya—a prominent leader of the world’s largest Muslim organization, Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama—is highly critical of a de facto political alliance between Muslim supremacists and the far left in much of the West, whereby Islamists and their allies weaponize religion, and [accusations of Islamophobia](#), to stigmatize opponents and prevent honest discussion of Islam—including the crystal-clear links between jihadist doctrine, goals and strategy and certain problematic tenets of Islamic orthodoxy and its historic practice.

In the aftermath of a devastating terror attack on Muslims at prayer in Christchurch, New Zealand, Mr. Staquf [urged](#) “people on both sides of the political divide in the West, of all faiths and none, to renounce the practice of weaponising Islam for partisan advantage,” pointing out the dangers of a vague yet sweeping definition of the term “Islamophobia” proposed by an informal grouping of UK parliamentarians, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (APPG).

Trevor Phillips—a Labour Party member for over 30 years—read a [statement](#) on Gus Yahya’s behalf at the 2019 annual conference of Britain’s governing Conservative Party. In his statement, the Indonesian religious leader warned Western political leaders that:

“The continued targeting of Muslims and Muslim places of worship—as witnessed with the Christchurch and Finsbury Park attacks—comes after nearly two decades during which Islamist atrocities have been a pervasive feature of daily life around the world. Horrors such as the massacre in New Zealand would likely be inconceivable if divorced from this wider context in which Islam has become synonymous with terror in the minds of many non-Muslims.

“Among both Muslims and non-Muslims, there is an urgent need to address those problematic elements of Islamic orthodoxy that underlie the Islamist worldview, fuelling violence on both sides. The truth, we must recognise, is that jihadism can be traced to specific tenets of authoritative Islam and its historic practice. This includes those portions of Shariah that promote Islamic supremacy and encourage enmity towards non-Muslims.

“There is a desperate need for honest discussion of these matters. This is why it worries me to see Western political and intellectual elites weaponize the term ‘Islamophobia,’ to short-circuit analysis of a complex phenomenon that threatens us all. It is factually incorrect and counter-productive to define Islamophobia as ‘rooted in racism,’ as proposed by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims. In reality, it is the spread of Islamist extremism and terror that primarily contributes to the rise of Islamophobia throughout the non-Muslim world.”

Gus Yahya’s 2019 interventions helped to [derail](#) a concerted campaign aimed at pressuring the UK government into adopting the APPG definition of Islamophobia as “a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.” Were it to be adopted, this definition could strip British society of the freedom of speech required to challenge ethnic and religious supremacism; undermine counterterrorism policy; empower Muslim extremists; enable media censorship; and open the door to criminalization of frank discourse about Islam. This is due to links between the wording of the APPG definition of Islamophobia and provisions of the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, which criminally sanctions “insulting and abusive” behavior on the basis of race.

Whilst Britain’s government and ruling Conservative Party refused to adopt the APPG definition of Islamophobia, the opposition Labour Party did, opening the way for the targeting of Mr. Phillips. The shock suspension of a life-long anti-racism campaigner from the Labour Party for alleged racism was heavily covered by Britain’s online, print and broadcast media, going viral amidst wall-to-wall coverage of the coronavirus crisis. Many [interpreted](#) the suspension as part of

an internal Labour Party power struggle or [retaliation](#) by its hard-left leadership for an ongoing investigation by the Equality and Human Rights Commission—which Mr. Phillips used to chair—into Labour’s failure to tackle widespread anti-Semitism among party members.

In a poignant column for preeminent center-right newspaper *The Times* titled “How I fell victim to Labour’s inquisition” Mr. Phillips hit back, accusing the party of “becoming an authoritarian cult”; “weaponizing Islamophobia to attack political opponents”; and “pure political gangsterism.”

The full text of Trevor Phillips’ rebuttal to the charges may be read below:

Tyranny is often represented as the pounding of a fist on the door in the middle of the night. In fact, in my short time as chairman of the free speech charity Index on Censorship, I have learnt that many people living under authoritarian regimes first encounter it in the dry language of a bureaucrat’s warning: recant, repent, denounce your fellow deviants and you may save your livelihood. Your soul may, just, escape damnation.

When I glanced at the 11-page letter sent to me recently by the Labour Party, the phrase “administrative suspension” grabbed my attention. These words signal banishment from a community that I have inhabited for decades: friends, colleagues, even family may be compelled to shun me. Significantly, my indictment concerns matters of faith, doctrine and dissent. It is written, not in the language of a democratic, open political movement but in the cold-eyed, accusatory prose of the zealot. In essence, after more than 30 years of promoting the Labour cause, I am accused of heresy, and threatened with excommunication.

Last year a cross-party parliamentary group proposed that “Islamophobia” should be defined in broad terms as a “kind of racism” hostile to “Muslimness”. In a pamphlet for the Policy Exchange think tank, I responded that Islam is not owned by any ethnic group and that Muslims are not a race. Worse, the undefined concept “Muslimness” implies that all adherents agree on doctrine, dress and behaviours: it’s the far-left equivalent of the racist cliché “they all look the same to me”. It was therefore only a matter of time before this “definition” would lead to the persecution of dissidents. But I never imagined that I would be one of its first victims.

Labour’s threat to expel me has been drawn up in secret and my fate will be decided in absentia. I am forbidden from repeating the charges but I can reflect on what is not alleged. There is no suggestion I have done anything unlawful or offended any individual. All my “sins” can be seen by anyone who can use Google.

It doesn’t take much effort to accuse anyone who has tried, like me, to expose the poison in identity politics. Each year, an Iranian-backed, LGBT-hating extremist group publishes a list of alleged “Islamophobes”. It has featured Barack Obama, the journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, the slain staff of Charlie Hebdo — and me. Peter Tatchell, the human rights campaigner, joked that he was offended at being left out.

My 2016 essay “Race and Faith: The Deafening Silence” observed that many men involved in the grooming and sexual abuse of children in towns such as Rotherham, as exposed by *The Times*, came from Pakistani-Muslim backgrounds. This was branded prejudice by some — but surely honest journalism, unburdened by fear of causing offence, should be beyond contention? And even though I described Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech in the same essay as “a ghastly testament to the power of unbridled free speech”, I was accused of racism by some for merely mentioning his name.

Readers will appreciate my perplexity. I am a person of colour, with a family heritage of Fulani and Mandinka Muslims going back 1,000 years until ripped apart by transatlantic slavery. Some of my relatives have made the return journey to embrace Islam. It also seems peculiar to make an example of someone who introduced the term “Islamophobia” to British politics by commissioning the Runnymede Trust’s 1997 report on the issue; and who then, as head of the Commission for Racial Equality, worked closely with Labour on the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 that protects Muslims from incitement.

No one inside or outside the Labour Party has ever suggested that I have broken any rules. I have never been “no-platformed”. In the final week of the 2019 election campaign, I even celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Sickie Cell Society alongside one of Jeremy Corbyn’s closest allies, Dawn Butler. She has known me for decades — would she really have agreed to appear on stage with a bigot?

So what accounts for this extraordinary turn of events? Some will see it as payback by Corbynistas for public criticisms I made of the leadership’s failure to tackle antisemitism in the party. Another possibility is that it’s an attempt to scare the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which I used to lead and which is investigating Labour’s handling of antisemitism. Weaponising Islamophobia to attack political opponents may seem like clever tactics but trying to intimidate a legally independent organisation is pure political gangsterism. Perhaps someone in Labour HQ has been reading up on the Inquisition’s methods; in 1578, one official defined its purpose thus: “That others may become terrified and weaned away from the evils they would commit.”

I accept that I may not share all the views of Labour’s current leader or even of the majority of members. But I have never belonged to any other party and I have stuck by it through thick and thin. If this is how Labour treats its own family, how might it treat its real opponents if it ever gains power again? It would be a tragedy if, at the very moment we most need a robust and effective opposition, our nation had to endure the spectacle of a great party collapsing into a brutish, authoritarian cult.