UK: Racial Equality chairman calls for compulsory teaching of “a core of Britishness”

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Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), the publicly-funded body which monitors anti-discrimination law in the UK, has called for an abandonment of Britain’s traditional “multicultural” approach to race relations.

In a marked shift to the right, Phillips has said that in its stead the commission must assert “a core of Britishness.”

His remarks follow the publication of an article by *Prospect* magazine’s editor David Goodhart, in which he argued that it is impossible to maintain a welfare state in an ethnically diverse society and that ethnic minorities must be obliged to adopt British “values.”

Initially Phillips denounced Goodhart’s views and compared them to the ideas of Enoch Powell, the Conservative MP who whipped up a racist anti-immigrant campaign in 1968. But Phillips has shifted his position with breathtaking speed. His remarks on “a core of Britishness” came in an interview with the *Times* newspaper on April 3. His interview indicates that he now espouses the same views that he denounced as Powellite only weeks ago.

So great has the change in Phillips’ views been that he found himself coming in for praise from Lord Tebbit, the notoriously right-wing member of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative cabinet popularly known as the “Chingford skinhead.” Tebbit notoriously proposed what he called “the cricket test” to determine whether someone was truly British, i.e., did they cheer for Pakistan, India or the West Indies rather than Britain in a test match. Phillips earned this praise for explicitly rejecting the longstanding approach to race relations which has come to be known as multiculturalism and which is particularly identified with the CRE.

The *Times* asked him, “But is not multiculturalism the whole point of the Commission?”

He replied, “The word is not useful, it means the wrong things.”

“Shall we kill it off?” the reporters asked.

“Yes, let’s do that.” Phillips agreed, “Multiculturalism suggests separateness. We are now in a different world.”

The different world in question is the world dictated by the right-wing social and economic nostrums of the Labour government, its warmongering and attacks on democratic rights in the name of the so-called fight against terror. Phillips is hurriedly swinging race relations policy into line with a regime that systematically persecutes Muslims, who make up the majority of those detained merely on suspicion of involvement with possible terrorist offences.

Multiculturalism is a vague word that means different things to different people. But it has come to indicate a whole range of policies that have been developed since the Race Relations Act of 1976 that set up the CRE. The official literature of the CRE does not specifically mention multiculturalism, but the organisation is very much identified with it.

At the most basic level the 1976 Act made it illegal to discriminate in employment and other areas of public life on the basis of race. The task of the commission is to monitor the implementation of this act and its subsequent amendments, to advise the government generally on the race relations implications of legislation and to help individuals bring court proceedings in cases of discrimination in addition to advising companies and local councils on equal opportunities policies. It is in this latter area that the commission has done most to sponsor multiculturalism.

Increasingly local authorities have adopted explicitly multicultural policies, which have encouraged every ethnic group in a city to develop its own cultural identity. Mosques, churches and temples have become a conduit for funds to community projects which have become identified on an ethnic and religious basis.

These measures indeed have a detrimental impact on the working class, in that while stopping short of positive discrimination they encourage those seeking local authority funding for community facilities, whether youth clubs or day care for senior citizens, to do so on an explicitly ethnic basis. The result has been greater segregation of ethnic groups and the emergence of a relatively privileged layer of community leaders, whose interests lie in preserving ethnic exclusivity because it gives them control of the purse strings.

The net effect of multicultural funding has been to fragment the most deprived sections of the working class and make them unable to defend their common interests. A privileged layer of community leaders has benefited by gaining jobs in race relations while the majority of these deprived communities have continued to suffer poor housing conditions, perfunctory educational services, job discrimination and low pay.

But this critique is not what is motivating Phillips, whose own career is a product of the 1976 legislation. His argument echoes that of the right wing, whose argument against multiculturalism comes from a disdain and hostility towards cultural differences and an espousal of nationalism.

Phillips’ espousal of teaching “a core of Britishness,” replete with references to Shakespeare and Dickens and “the common currency of the English language,” borrows from the arsenal of every right-wing, anti-immigrant demagogue. His target is Britain’s Muslim population, who are rapidly being identified as the scapegoat for every social ill and an Al Qaeda fifth column.

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Until recently, multiculturalism has been holy writ for both liberals and Labourites in Britain. Yet with this apparently casual exchange in a weekend paper, a major shift in government policy and thinking within the political elite was given official blessing.

The change can be traced in the pages of the *Guardian*, the house organ of Britain's liberal intelligentsia. In November 2001, as reports began to come in of British Muslims fighting in Afghanistan, the right wing demanded that they be tried for treason. In response, the *Guardian* ran a leader headlined, "Multicultural values must be defended."

Since then there have been a few changes in the *Guardian*'s editorial line, in keeping with its support for every aspect of Blair's right-wing agenda—support that is increasingly not even shrouded in the mild criticisms and moral platitudes of the past.

In February it ran the Goodhart article attacking multiculturalism and initiated the debate to which Phillips is responding, in order to assist in engineering the necessary shift in official opinion within formerly liberal circles.

The measure of how far to the right this Labour leaning paper has travelled over the last three years is contained in a recent article by one of its columnists in defence of Phillips.

Polly Toynbee wrote on April 7, "Trevor Phillips, chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, has taken a brave stand in this anxious atmosphere. Calling for greater integration of separatist Muslim communities, he proclaims that 'multiculturalism' has had its day."

She continues, "Phillips says it was an error to let alien communities stay in their silos. He wants more teaching of British cultural values, even of Dickens and Shakespeare, and not just to black Britons but to white children, whose heritage is lost in a kind of cultural paralysis. Restore history to something more than a cursory trip around glib moral lessons to be learned from Hitler."

When did it become a bad thing to teach the history of Nazism? At what point did the Nazi genocide become an irrelevance? Liberals and Labourites are abandoning their shibboleths so fast it is difficult to keep up with them.

"The most dangerous divide now is in culture—and that means Muslim," Toynbee continues. She demands that Muslims "Embrace modern British values that include laws on equality for women. Muslim teaching on women staying one step behind will not do."

She describes Islam in hysterical terms as, "an insane and unassuageable cult. No kind of multiculturalism 'understands' this."

There is a remarkable parallel here. Toynbee and Phillips attack Islam in the name of equality and respect for democratic rights in precisely the same way that Pym Fortuyn did in the Netherlands. Fortuyn also sought to dress up his anti-immigrant rhetoric and right-wing economic nostrums as a supposed defence of Denmark's liberal traditions of tolerance and democracy against the supposedly anti-democratic, sexist and homophobic views of Islam, which he insisted had never assimilated the traditions of the Enlightenment. On this basis he demanded that antidiscrimination legislation should be rescinded and immigration curtailed in order to preserve Dutch values and culture. Since his assassination, Holland, which was once one of the most liberal countries in its attitude towards immigrants, has gone on to a policy of forcible expulsions.

In like manner Toynbee and Phillips have concluded that it is necessary to give a liberal veneer to their embrace and espousal of reactionary nostrums.

Effectively they are saying is that British Muslims cannot enjoy political equality with other citizens until they give up their religion.

For people who make such a fuss about the importance of teaching British history in creating a British national identity Phillips and Toynbee seem to be grossly ignorant of its most basic features. They want to make political rights dependent on personal religious beliefs, which would be a historically retrogressive step of monumental proportions.

With the exception of Northern Ireland, civil rights in Britain have not been based on religious affiliation for over a 150 years. Roman Catholics and members of Protestant sects other than the Church of England were barred from public office and membership of the universities until the repeal of the Test and Corporations Act in 1828 and Catholic Emancipation in 1829. At that point the British ruling elite realised that they had better mobilise as many of the respectable middle class members of religious minorities as possible against the rising political presence of the working class.

Phillips is eagerly continuing his campaign to champion a Pym Fortuyn style-agenda. In his latest speech he condemns Manchester Education Authority for attempting to fulfill its statutory duty to educate all the children in its care by providing educational facilities for pupils who make extended visits to Bangladesh. With breathtaking effrontery he blames Britons of African origin for the increase in HIV infections. He goes on to call for St. George's Day to be made a national holiday in England in order to reconnect the nation with its history. That history is particularly relevant in the case of St. George , who was said to have appeared to the crusader armies before the battle of Antioch in 1098. Phillips' remarks are tantamount to calling for a crusade against Islam.

These are statements that at one time could only have come out of the mouth of someone on the far right. But they are being spoken by the CRE. A man whose job is ostensibly to defend members of ethnic minorities from discrimination is inciting racial hatred, with the fully backing of the dominant voices within the liberal and Labourite political elite.

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