

The persecution of British daytime TV presenter Phillip Schofield

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For weeks, Britain's media has been dominated by a cruel and degrading moral crusade against daytime television presenter Phillip Schofield. His public downfall has highlighted the role of #MeToo accusations in creating a right-wing political climate.

The 61-year-old co-host of ITV's *This Morning* resigned last month after admitting to a workplace affair with a 20-year-old crew member whom he had earlier helped gain work experience.

Schofield's professional and personal destruction has played out before an audience of millions. Amid a NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and an inflationary crisis that has plunged millions into economic distress, the media has fixated on Schofield's alleged "abuse of power" and "deception" in initially concealing his relationship with a younger man.

The campaign against Schofield began in February 2020, when he announced on *This Morning* that he is gay. His coming out sparked an avalanche of prurient media coverage, with journalists raking over his 27-year marriage and speculating whether his announcement was to prevent his outing by others.

Then came "Queuegate", with Schofield and co-presenter Holly Willoughby accused of jumping ahead of the public at Westminster Hall for the Queen's Lying-in-State. The facts of the matter—that the pair attended as journalists via an official media entrance—counted for nothing. They fell victim to a vicious dousing of populism and nationalism for which Britain's tabloids are infamous.

No one appeared more stunned by their overnight freefall than Willoughby and Schofield. An online petition, "Axe Phillip Schofield and Holly Willoughby from TV", was promoted by the tabloids. The *Daily Mail* hired body language experts to interpret the pair's declining on-air chemistry.

On May 19, Schofield's brother was convicted of child sex offences and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment. From this point, the campaign against Schofield became unstoppable. No matter that he publicly denounced his brother's "despicable crimes," insisting, "As far as I am concerned, I no longer have a brother."

On social media, fascistic demagogue Katie Hopkins incited a public mobbing of "Phillip Savile", a reference to television personality Jimmy Savile who sexually abused children and was protected for decades by the British state. Hopkins accused Schofield of having a close personal relationship with a young runner on the show, claiming that he had groomed him since childhood. *GB News* conducted its baiting of the presenter, accusing ITV of a cover-up.

With the far-right's witch-hunt spilling onto mainstream media, Schofield resigned from *This Morning* on May 20, saying, "I understand that ITV has decided the current situation can't go on, and I want to do what I can to protect the show that I love." On May 26, he resigned from ITV, apologising for having lied about his affair with a 20-year-old showrunner, a relationship he described as "consensual" and "unwise but not illegal."

The BBC's "investigative journalism"

The media flogging of Schofield reached its nadir last Friday with an extended interview on the BBC. Schofield, looking broken, his initial words barely audible, told Media Editor Amol Rajan that he had chosen to speak, "Because there is an innocent person here who didn't do anything wrong. Who is vulnerable and probably feels like I do."

Schofield refuted accusations he had groomed the showrunner from childhood, explaining he had followed the 15-year-old on Twitter at a friend's request after visiting the school. Aged 19, the young man had contacted Schofield to ask for help finding work experience, later securing a job as a showrunner on his own merits, "I'm best friends with the people who got me into television, and I've always believed in paying it forward".

A brief sexual relationship began several months later, with Schofield telling Rajan, "I know it's unforgivable, but we weren't boyfriends; we weren't in a relationship. I was really in a mess with my own sexuality at the time, and it just happened." Rajan extracted dozens of painfully gratuitous apologies from Schofield throughout the 43-minute interview.

Rajan, a former editor of the *Independent*, approached his assignment with nauseating sanctimony. His interrogation featured questions such as: "When you met him in person, was there a little moment of sexual attraction?"; "When did you know you were gay?" and "Do you mind me asking if that was your first gay relationship, or have you had gay flings or sexual experiences before?" The appropriate response to these questions is "None of your business".

In 2023, the BBC offers a forensic investigation of the private lives of daytime television celebrities. But when reporting Britain's role in NATO's proxy war in Ukraine, which threatens any day to escalate into World War III, the state broadcaster is prostrate, serving unadulterated propaganda from the Ministry of Defence, the CIA and the Pentagon.

Schofield pushed back against suggestions he had groomed the showrunner from a young age. He added that "I've never abused my power anywhere. I'm not a bully... I'm not rude on the studio floor. I don't bully people. I don't lord it around. We're all [a] very one-level team, and that's been the important thing for me in 41 years of television."

"How much are you supposed to take?" Schofield asked. Only his two adult daughters, remaining by his side since the scandal erupted, had stopped him from committing suicide. Of his career, Schofield said, "I am done." He described the media attacks: "relentless... day after day after day after day... Do you want me to die? Because that's where I am. I have lost everything."

"A kind of Puritan fascism"

Christine Flack, whose daughter Caroline took her own life in February 2020 under similar circumstances, spoke in defence of Schofield and the young showrunner last Friday, telling BBC *Newsnight*, “They’re not commodities, they’re people. I hate the thought that Phillip and this young man are going through such an awful time. It’s bad enough when it’s in private, but when it’s in every single paper and first thing on the news, it’s just ridiculous... I send my regards to Phillip and the young lad and hope they get over this.” Her humane comments were warmly received by large sections of the public.

Actor Rupert Everett also spoke for many, asking Channel 4 News, “What’s he done? He’s married and has had an affair with someone that’s legal to have an affair with. Unless there’s something else that we haven’t heard about, they should drop it.”

Everett said the attacks were homophobic and that similar age differences between heterosexual celebrities are accepted. “It’s outrageous, this kind of Puritan fascism that’s going on... It’s insane. But everything about today is insane... The fact that it’s on the front pages of all of our newspapers, we’ve got so many more important things to talk about.” Everett’s statements went viral, doubtless a measure of the revulsion felt by millions toward the media’s puritanical frenzy.

Responding to Kate Maltby’s vile attack on Schofield in the *Times*—invoking the Book of Genesis no less—one reader wrote, “President Macron was a 15-year-old student when he was taught by his wife who was 40 years old at the time—does Kate Maltby consider that Ms Macron groomed him?” Another commented, “Pure homophobia—our age of consent is 16. At 20 I can attest that most young gay men know what they want. I was one too. There is no victim here—the only damage being done is due to the media pile on heaping puritanical judgements on a man who clearly has struggled with his sexuality most of his life leaving him vulnerable to this sort of scandal.”

One reader responded to Maltby by recalling the words of Thomas Macaulay: “We know no spectacle so ridiculous as the British public in one of its periodical fits of morality.” It is worth citing Macaulay’s passage in full, from his 1831 essay, “Moore’s *Life of Lord Byron*”:

In general, developments, divorces, and family quarrels, pass with little notice. We read the scandal, talk about it for a day, and forget it. But once in six or seven years, our virtue becomes outrageous. We cannot suffer the laws of religion and decency to be violated. We must make a stand against vice. We must teach libertines, that the English people appreciate the importance of domestic ties. Accordingly, some unfortunate man, in no respect more depraved than hundreds whose offences have been treated with lenity, is singled out as an expiatory sacrifice. If he has children, they are to be taken from him. If he has a profession, he is to be driven from it. He is cut by the higher orders, and hissed by the lower. He is, in truth, a sort of whipping-boy, by whose vicarious agonies, all the other transgressors of the same class are, it is supposed, sufficiently chastised. We reflect very complacently on our own severity, and compare with great pride the high standard of morals established in England, with the Parisian laxity. At length our anger is satiated. Our victim is ruined and heart-broken. And our virtue goes quietly to sleep for seven years more.

In Britain, the United States and other advanced capitalist countries, the gap between each “expiatory sacrifice” is practically eliminated thanks to the anti-democratic juggernaut known as #MeToo.

The far-right’s #MeToo moment

Schofield has fallen victim to several reactionary cultural processes. Some of these are longstanding: a “bread and circuses” celebrity culture, fuelled by the tabloids, to deflect attention from fundamental issues and pollute the political atmosphere. But Schofield’s downfall shows a fascistic culture is developing, demanding conformity to family values and God, King and Country, that has been facilitated by a liberal and pseudo-left establishment’s repudiation of any defence of democratic rights via its embrace of #MeToo-style personal vendettas.

Guardian columnist Gaby Hinsliff contributed to the #MeToo pile-on with an article headlined, “The lesson from the Phillip Schofield scandal? A moral grey area is not OK in any workplace”. Hinsliff declared, “In the post-#MeToo era we are much more alert to power imbalances in relationships; it’s time employers started exercising their duty of care.” Nothing progressive can come from this. Indeed, ITV executives were hauled before a parliamentary select committee on Tuesday to answer questions about their handling of the affair!

#MeToo has been invoked by disgruntled “talent” to settle scores and perhaps obtain positions off the back of Schofield’s shattered career. Eamonn Holmes, now at *GB News* and a former *This Morning* presenter has played a leading role in vilifying Schofield. Another former presenter reportedly wrote to ITV executives urging they act against Schofield over his relationship with the showrunner. The contents of that email, evidently leaked months ago, provided grist for a lurid vendetta against Schofield, which has now erupted with such devastating force.

Since 2017, the *World Socialist Web Site* has opposed the #MeToo movement. While its ostensible aim was combatting sexual harassment, WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh wrote, “the repressive, regressive means resorted to—including unsubstantiated and often anonymous denunciations and sustained attacks on the presumption of innocence and due process—give the lie to the campaign’s “progressive” claims. Such methods are the hallmark of an anti-democratic, authoritarian movement, and one, moreover, that deliberately seeks to divert attention from social inequality, attacks on the working class, the threat of war and the other great social and political issues of the day.”

In Schofield’s case, #MeToo has dispensed even with the need for a victim. It is merely sufficient that *x* number of “liberal” journalists or fascist commentators insert themselves in the “victim’s” place, bringing down the alleged “abuser” via unsubstantiated rumour, gossip and other invasive and anti-democratic methods reminiscent of a lynch mob. As we have noted elsewhere, a high proportion of those targeted by #MeToo allegations are homosexual or Jewish: Harvey Weinstein, Woody Allen, Roman Polanski, James Levine and Kevin Spacey, to name just a few.

GB News host Amy Nickell declared last week that Schofield was giving her “the Weinstein vibes”, and she hoped the scandal would prompt “a #MeToo moment in the UK television industry”. She added, with a smirk, “Yes, this is gossip, but don’t forget gossip is good for us, and it bonds people.”

Nickell’s smug remarks and the involvement of social dregs like Katie Hopkins make clear that #MeToo methods have been taken up by far-right forces to further trample and eviscerate democratic rights. Brutalising culture, the purveyors of this neo-Victorian moral hysteria help to deflect public attention from the real crimes of a social and economic order that is rushing headlong to war.



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