

The chequered legacy of Prince Philip's notorious 'gaffes'

He could be disarmingly funny, but the Duke of Edinburgh's erratic quips often caused genuine offence



Prince Philip meeting Indigenous Australian cultural performers in 2002.

Prince Philip's off-the-cuff remarks have become part of the knotty fabric of national life, provoking amused indulgence from some and genuine hurt among others. His gaffes were legendary. Some critics believe they were not gaffes at all but rather unforgivable slurs. His supporters preferred to brush them off, saying his comments were well intended, if imperfectly delivered.

One thing everyone can agree on: he was a serial offender.

Since his death on Friday, at the age of 99, the media has reprised Philip's comments made in the course of his long royal duties. It is an extensive list. His targets have included the opposite sex ("British women can't cook", said in 1966) and celebrities ("What do you gargle with? Pebbles?", addressed to the singer Tom Jones after a 1969 Royal Variety Performance).

There were other contentious quips. Speaking to a Scottish driving instructor, the prince remarked: "How do you keep the natives off the booze long enough to pass the test?" When asked to stroke (or possibly hug) a koala during a visit to Australia in 1992, he said: "Oh no, I might catch some ghastly disease." And during a 1969 visit to Canada there was the boorish: "I declare this thing open, whatever it is."

Philip could also be brusque and short tempered. During a lengthy photocall at an event marking the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, Philip was seen grimacing, before snapping: “Just take the f*****g picture.” Or, less forgivably, “Bloody silly fool”, said in 1997 to a University of Cambridge car park worker who failed to recognise him.

But it is the accusation of racism which provoked controversy and inevitable tabloid headlines. The most notorious of the Prince’s comments was made in 1986 during his first and only state visit to China. Philip met with British university students who were studying Mandarin in Xi’an, telling one of them: “By the time you go back home you’ll have slitty eyes.”



The student, 21-year-old Simon Kirby, explained that the UK students didn’t live with their Chinese counterparts. Philip continued: “So [the Chinese] don’t want to mix with the barbarians.” A comment made in Australia in 2002 to an Indigenous Australian entrepreneur came a close scandalous second. Philip asked: “Do you still throw spears at each other?”

His defenders pointed out that Philip’s interlocutors were rarely offended. Rather, it was the liberal middle class that expressed outrage – whether real or faux. Writing in the Guardian, Stephen Bates, the author of *Royalty Inc*, noted that a few of Philip’s “gaffes” were based on misreporting, blown up in the interests of an eye-catching story.

But critics believe his comments were offensive, unforgivable, and could not ultimately be excused on the grounds of Philip’s age or senior status. They were tolerated only because of his role as the Queen’s husband and an untouchable royal. Amid the exhaustive and overwhelmingly positive media coverage of Philip’s death, the question of racism and sexism has scarcely been raised.

After Philip asked a group of East End women: “Who do you sponge off?”, the Guardian columnist Owen Jones pointed out that if a politician or MP expressed similar sentiments it would sink their career. Jones argued that it was “perfectly right” to hesitate before condemning Philip. He then noted: “At the same time, he’s one of the chief representatives of the nation.”

Jones continued: “He’s the man who once asked Lord Taylor of Warwick: ‘And what exotic part of the world do you come from?’ That’s because Lord Taylor is black. When he once visited an electronics factory in Scotland and came across a “messy fuse box”, he exclaimed it looked ‘as though it was put in by an Indian’.”

In a further example, when Philip spoke to British businessman Atul Patel at a palace reception in 2009, he said: “There’s a lot of your family in tonight.”

Philip was evidently aware of his misfiring wit and reputation as a bloody-minded dinosaur. Frequently he turned this humour on himself. Approaching his 90th birthday, Philip observed mordantly: "Bits are beginning to drop off." There was also his famous remark "I'm just a bloody amoeba", said after the Queen decided their children should be called Windsor, not Mountbatten.

At times he could be self-deprecating. And funny. Speaking in 1990 to the National Press Club in Washington, Philip recalled his first visit to Washington in 1951 with the future Queen during the presidency of Harry Truman. "It makes you realise how old I am," he quipped. He recounted how an elderly lady congratulated the Queen on the victory of her "father" – Winston Churchill – in the recent general election.

Amid laughter, Philip said that he had been present in Tokyo when Japan surrendered at the end of the second world war. At the time this was "splendid", he said – but subsequently was a source of embarrassment when he returned to Japan several years later with the Queen on a state trip. Asked by his hosts if this was his first visit to the country, Philip said he diplomatically replied: "Yes."

"I'm not always as tactless as people make out," he said.