

# [***UK Conservatives say their biggest donor made racist comments, but they're not giving back his money***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJ6-BPW1-DYMD-610S-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** JILL LAWLESS, Associated Press

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**Body**

LONDON — Britain’s Conservative government said Wednesday that the party does not plan to give back 10 million pounds it received in the past year from a donor who made [*comments about a Black lawmaker*](https://apnews.com/article/britain-conservative-tory-party-donor-racist-comment-5264db60da7adf44a1237ece5b167e20) that have been condemned as racist.

The government is under pressure from some of its own lawmakers to return the donation from IT entrepreneur Frank Hester, who said during a 2019 company meeting that Diane Abbott, Britain’s longest-serving Black legislator, made him “want to hate all Black women” and that she “should be shot.”

Hester, chief executive of healthcare software firm The Phoenix Partnership, was the Conservative Party’s biggest donor in 2023. His company has been paid more than 400 million pounds ($510 million) by the National Health Service and other government bodies since 2016, according to The Guardian, which broke the story of Hester's comments.

Hester acknowledged that he had been “rude about Diane Abbott" but denied being racist. In a statement on social media, he said racism “is a poison that has no place in public life.”

[*Prime Minister Rishi Sunak*](https://apnews.com/hub/rishi-sunak) initially criticized Hester’s comments — first reported Monday — as “unacceptable,” but it was almost 24 hours before the prime minister's spokesman labeled the remarks racist. The shift came after Cabinet minister Kemi Badenoch, who is Black, broke ranks and decried Hester’s racism.

Sunak told lawmakers in the House of Commons on Wednesday that “the alleged comments were wrong, they were racist.” He added that Hester had "rightly apologized for them, and that remorse should be accepted."

Business Minister Kevin Hollinrake told broadcasters that the Tories would not give back the money Hester had given to the party. He told Sky News that “clearly” the comments were racist, but that it was right to keep the donation because Hester “is not a racist, and he has apologized for what he said.”

Asked by the BBC whether the party would take more money from Hester, Hollinrake said: “As I now understand the situation, yes.”

But Andy Street, the Conservative mayor of England’s West Midlands region, told BBC radio that if it were up to him, “I would think about the company I kept and I would give that money back.”

Nus Ghani, a senior Conservative lawmaker and junior business minister, said on social media: “Zero tolerance on racism is just a slogan in today's ***politics***.”

Opposition politicians lambasted Sunak over Hester's remarks during Prime Minister's Questions in Parliament Wednesday.

“Is the prime minister proud to be bankrolled by someone using racist and misogynist language?" asked Labour Party leader Keir Starmer.

Scottish National Party lawmaker Stephen Flynn accused Sunak of “putting money before morals.”

Sunak defended taking money from Hester, saying “ultimately he has been donating to the most diverse Cabinet in history, led by the first non-white prime minister.”

Britain’s political parties are trying to build up funds for election campaigns later this year. Figures from the Electoral Commission show the Conservatives received 9.8 million pounds ($12.5 million) from individual and corporate donors in the final three months of 2023, and the main opposition Labour Party 6 million pounds ($7.7 million).

Hester and his company gave the Conservatives 10 million pounds in 2023, the Electoral Commission said. The party received a donation of the same size as a bequest from the late supermarket tycoon John Sainsbury, who died in 2022.

Parliamentary records show Hester's firm also loaned Sunak a helicopter to use for a trip in December, at a value of 15,900 pounds ($20,000).

The controversy does not immediately threaten Phoenix Partnership’s contracts to supply medical-records software to the state-run national Health Service. In an interview with the Daily Telegraph last month, Hester denied his Conservative donations were linked to his firm's securing of government contracts.

He said many of the deals were with individual hospitals and doctors’ offices and the national government had no say over them.

He said family doctors “decide which software they’re using, not Rishi Sunak.”

The Guardian published further alleged remarks by Hester on Wednesday. It said he’d told a crowded staff meeting that Indian employees could sit on the roof of a nearby train if there wasn't enough room.

Abbott, 70, was elected to the House of Commons in 1987 representing an area of east London, becoming Britain's first Black woman member of Parliament. She sits as an independent after being kicked out of the Labour Party caucus last year for comments that suggested Jewish and Irish people do not experience racism “all their lives.”

She called Hester’s comments “frightening,” especially since two British lawmakers have been murdered since 2016. The government said last month it would [*step up politicians' security*](https://apnews.com/article/uk-lawmakers-security-threats-gaza-israel-war-21c8f306528adc71040a5c6ddc937370) because of rising tensions over the [*Israel-Hamas war.*](https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war)

Police in London said they were assessing the matter after their parliamentary liaison and investigation team was contacted about the Guardian’s initial report.

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