

The Stephen Lawrence inquiry

Police cover-up of racist killing unravels in Britain

By Tony Hyland
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The inquiry convened into the racist killing of Stephen Lawrence has been in progress for two months. The 18-year-old black student was stabbed to death in April 1993 when a gang of five white youths set upon him and his friend whilst they were waiting at a bus stop in Eltham, South-East London.

The tireless efforts of Doreen and Neville Lawrence, Stephen's parents, to secure the conviction of those responsible have been constantly obstructed by the police and the legal system. The Labour government promised to rectify this injustice and convened the Lawrence inquiry hoping thereby to restore the credibility of the police and judicial system. However they have chosen an inquiry mechanism that ensures that no-one in authority will be held accountable, whatever incriminating evidence emerges.

Stephen Lawrence was killed at a time when the previous Conservative government was mounting a series of legal attacks on the rights of immigrant workers, which were given the full support of the Labour Party. It was this racist consensus between the main political parties that encouraged the fascist elements who killed Stephen Lawrence. There had been an increase in racial assaults in the area where Stephen died since 1989, when the far-right British National Party (BNP) established their headquarters in nearby Welling.

The racist killing was the fourth in the area in as many years. None of those involved in Lawrence's murder have been tried by jury, despite incriminating forensic and circumstantial evidence, including eyewitness identification of five youths: Luke Knight, Gary Dobson, Neil Acourt, Jamie Acourt and David Norris.

Stephen's parents were forced to take out a private prosecution in 1995 after the Crown Prosecution Service claimed there was insufficient evidence to try the five youth. The Lawrence case was only the fourth private prosecution in Britain in 130 years. The family made a public appeal to raise the £100,000 to pay for the case. When the trial was finally convened in April 1996 the judge, Justice Curtis, threw out the case.

Decreeing that the evidence of one of the main eyewitnesses was "contaminated and flawed", Justice Curtis prevented the jury from hearing damning evidence against the accused. This included: the matching of fibres from Lawrence's jacket with Dobson's; the discovery of the suspected murder weapon under the bed of Dobson's girlfriend; and the finding of other weapons at Acourt's

home, including a knife and a revolver. Police were also in possession of 80 minutes of footage from a hidden surveillance camera which showed the accused discussing how to mutilate black people and practising how to administer a fatal knife blow, reminiscent of the over-arm action that killed Stephen Lawrence.

In 1997, a Coroner's Court ruled that Stephen's death was an unlawful killing caused by "a completely unprovoked racist attack by five white youths." The court can only determine the circumstances of death and has no power to prosecute, but its findings directly contradicted the conclusions of the police and Justice Curtis. The Coroner's Court decision prompted Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw to establish the inquiry that he promised would, "allow the concerns of the Lawrence family and others to be fully addressed."

From its inception the credibility of the Lawrence inquiry has been compromised. It was convened under the provisions of the Police Act 1996 and undertaken by the Police Complaints Authority (PCA). This ensures that public complaints against the police are investigated by the police themselves. The PCA has never charged a single police officer, even when deaths have occurred in police custody and Coroners' inquests have concluded an unlawful killing was the cause.

The presiding chairman of the Lawrence inquiry is retired judge Sir William Macpherson. According to *The Observer* newspaper, he has a reputation for refusing appeal applications from immigrants facing deportation. He once refused to appear at a High Court hearing on a racial attack, explaining that he was attending the Ascot races with his wife. The first day of the inquiry was adjourned when the Lawrence family opposed Macpherson's appointment.

The integrity and independence of the inquiry has been compromised by several other factors:

- * Although Macpherson has the power to subpoena witnesses, those who give testimony will be guaranteed immunity from criminal prosecution, and in the case of the police, disciplinary charges.

- * The results of the internal police investigation have not been made accessible. The inquiry's proceedings have been kept private on several occasions when legal disputes emerged.

- * Transcripts of the proceedings are available only for those who can afford a large fee, and then only for "inspection." Some

documents have been censored before release to the Lawrence's lawyers.

* Cross-examination of police witnesses has been restricted. The Chairman of the inquiry adjourned the hearing when the issue of police racism was raised.

Despite the authorities' precautions a damning picture of the role of the police has surfaced from evidence at the inquiry. Even the Police Complaints Authority conceded that there had been "serious weaknesses, omissions and lost opportunities" in the investigation.

The police have consistently maintained that prosecution witnesses had been reluctant to come forward. However, testimony revealed that one key witness was only approached by police last month to do an "identikit" picture of the killers. Another witness, Roy Westbrook, was asked at the time to attend identity parades, but left the police station after he was forced to wait nine hours.

Doreen Lawrence said after the murder she was inundated with phone calls offering information about the killers. But when she gave these details to two senior police officers, Detective Chief Superintendent William Ilsley crumpled up his notes.

One senior officer, Detective Inspector Philip Jeynes, said the police had enough information to arrest suspects three days after the murder, instead of the two weeks it took. He admitted that the police had received several phone calls naming five local youths as the culprits. One man even visited Eltham police station to urge them to investigate the group in question.

The police waited several days before staking out the suspects' homes. When two suspects were seen leaving one house with two large dustbin bags, possibly containing vital evidence, the police did nothing to intercept them.

Detective Superintendent Brian Weeden, who headed the investigation for 18 months, claimed he did not know that police could arrest people on suspicion alone. Weeden, who retired in 1994, also claimed his officers never informed him that a 17-year-old youth had witnessed the murder from a passing bus and was willing to identify the killers. The youth's statements could have corroborated another witness's statements and made arrests possible within hours. Instead he was only interviewed much later.

The police have even attempted to deny that Stephen's murder was racially motivated. Detective Sergeant John Davidson said, "I believe this was thugs who were out to kill, not particularly a black person but anybody." In a statement read at the opening of the inquiry, the Chief Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Paul Condon, also refused to describe the assault as racist. Later he reacted to the charges of racism by condemning the Lawrence's legal representatives for pursuing this line of questioning.

The cover-up of the racist nature of the attack has been a major factor in preventing the conviction of those responsible. One police officer at the scene of the crime failed to stop a Red Vauxhall car whose occupants, a group of white youth, drove up and down within hours of the murder, pointing and making gestures. The same officer finally stopped the car a week later and passed the names of its occupants on to the investigating team. Their identity was only finally revealed at the inquiry.

The driver and one of the passengers had both been convicted for their part in the racist killing of Rolan Adams two years earlier. One of the others, Kieran Highland, was described as "a leading light in the NTO's, the Nazi Turn Outs, a racist organisation in the Eltham area." Whether those suspected of killing Stephen had direct connections with this organisation has not been established.

Duwayne Brooks, Stephen's friend and a key witness, explained how one of the attackers shouted "What nigger?" Brooks managed to escape but returned to help Stephen as he lay bleeding on the pavement, and then called for an ambulance. The police were the first to arrive, but instead of following Brooks's directions as to where the assailants had fled, the police interrogated him. Moreover, one of the police officers admitted that they failed to use first aid to stem Stephen's bleeding until the ambulance arrived, by which time his heart had stopped.

Brooks was later arrested by police at a demonstration outside the BNP headquarters shortly after the killing. Charges were dropped, but only after the Crown Prosecution Service announced it was dropping the case against two suspects in Stephen Lawrence's murder. At the inquiry Brooks said, "It was devastating. I had no convictions at the time of the murder. It felt like the police and prosecutors decided to get at me to ruin my reputation--and a chance of any future prosecution of the murderers."

The failure of the police to convict those responsible for racist attacks contrasts sharply with the treatment of anti-racist campaigners. When a demonstration of 40,000 people calling for the closure of the BNP centre took place in October 1993, partly in response to the killing of Stephen Lawrence, riot police were called in. Later, nine protesters were sentenced to a combined total of 20 years in prison. Within three months of Stephen's murder Joy Gardner, a Jamaican immigrant and mother, died from suffocation after deportation police strapped her in three body belts and gagged her with 13 feet of tape. The three officers who later stood trial at the Old Bailey were all acquitted. This was only one of a number of deaths of immigrant workers while they were in the custody of the deportation police.

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