

UK: Trial begins of police commander in 1989 Hillsborough football disaster

By Thomas Scripps
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The prosecution began its case against David Duckenfield and Graham Mackrell on Tuesday, for charges relating to the deaths of 96 Liverpool fans following the disaster at Hillsborough football stadium in Sheffield, on April 15, 1989.

Duckenfield was the South Yorkshire Police match commander in charge of policing the stadium on that day and faces 95 counts of gross negligence manslaughter. Mackrell was Sheffield Wednesday Football Club's designated safety officer at the time and is charged with contravening the stadium's safety certificate and a health and safety offence.

Retired police officers Donald Denton and Alan Foster, and police solicitor Peter Metcalf, are due to stand trial later in the year for acts tending and intending to pervert the course of justice.

The Hillsborough families have worked for decades to achieve justice for their loved ones. The trial of Duckenfield and Mackrell, who will now be properly cross-examined, is a welcome landmark in their campaign.

Addressing Preston Crown Court, Richard Matthews QC outlined the prosecution's case against Duckenfield. In addition to failures to plan for the crowds beforehand, he said, "Sadly, there were also many collective and individual failures to intervene effectively once the disaster unfolded." Duckenfield failed to declare a major incident or use emergency measures to help those in danger. "Nor did he make any attempt to even monitor what was occurring, let alone avert the tragedy." He also failed to provide "emergency medical attention, particularly attempts at resuscitation" in a timely fashion.

Duckenfield, the court was told, had "ultimate responsibility" for the police operation. "It is the prosecution's case that David Duckenfield's failures to discharge this personal responsibility were extraordinarily bad and contributed substantially to the deaths of each of those 96 people who so tragically and unnecessarily lost their lives."

Mackrell, Matthews said, "[E]ffectively shrugged off all

responsibility" for arrangements for admission to the ground and the drawing-up of contingency plans—"important aspects of the role he had taken on as safety officer." By "agreeing to, or at the very least turning a blind eye to" the fact the fact that the club had failed to agree methods of entry to the stadium with police, he is alleged to have breached the conditions of the club's safety certificate.

More than 20 family members of those killed at Hillsborough sat in the public gallery and other relatives watched from Liverpool via a video link.

What the events at Preston Crown Court highlight above all is the immense scale of the state cover-up carried out over the Hillsborough events—presided over by successive Conservative and Labour governments alike. It has taken fully 30 years of tireless campaigning, at great personal cost to those involved, in the face of vicious media lies and government opposition, for the bereaved families to see anyone finally held to account for the worst sporting disaster in British history.

The government and the press initially responded to the deaths caused by actions of various institutions of the state by blaming a "tanked-up mob" of Liverpool fans and lauding the actions of "brave cops." The first official report, carried out by Lord Justice Taylor in 1989, was forced to admit some of the truth, pointing to police mismanagement of the event and criticising South Yorkshire police for blaming Liverpool supporters instead of accepting responsibility themselves. However, no one was charged or even disciplined as a result of these findings. An inquest ruled that the 96 deaths were "accidental."

In 1997, due to mounting pressure, the incoming Labour government ordered the scrutiny of new evidence, which had been brought to light by campaigners and documentary makers in the previous eight years. It emerged that South Yorkshire police changed 164 officers' accounts of the disaster before sending them to the Taylor inquiry. Prime Minister Tony Blair refused to call a new public inquiry, however, writing "What is the point?" Blair's Home Secretary Jack Straw claimed that nothing significant had

been added by the new evidence.

It took more than a decade's campaigning and protests by the families and their supporters for the Labour government to finally establish the Hillsborough Independent Panel (HIP), in 2009. The HIP published a report in 2012 which demolished the official police narrative and established that it was not the fans who were responsible for the deaths but the police and the authorities. Then Home Secretary Theresa May was forced to order a criminal inquiry. Now, six years later, and nearly 30 years after the event itself, the first trials of those involved have begun.

This is despite all the evidence and materials for a prosecution of the real criminals being available within the first days and weeks after the disaster. The tortured process leading to the first trials is entirely the result of the state's efforts to deceive and delay the Hillsborough campaigners' pursuit of the truth and justice—a deliberate strategy to render a proper accounting for the disaster impossible.

So long has the fight for justice taken that many individuals involved in the events that led to the deaths and their cover-up—including the filthy slander campaign against Liverpool fans which followed it—have died without ever facing investigation or being asked to testify.

Chief amongst these is former Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Her government defended the officials at Hillsborough to the hilt and supported the right-wing media and Tory MPs in smearing Liverpool supporters. The leading role was played by Irvine Patnick, then MP for Sheffield Hallam, who contributed to the *Sun* newspaper's disgusting lies about the behavior of Liverpool fans—published under the now infamous headline, “*The Truth*.” Patnick died in 2012, still holding a knighthood.

Peter Wright, chief constable of South Yorkshire police at the time of Hillsborough, came under suspicion for diverting blame from members of the police but died in 2011. Stefan Popper, the coroner who oversaw the original and thoroughly discredited inquest into events at the stadium, died in 2016. Bernard Murray, the ground commander and Duckenfield's immediate subordinate on the day, is also deceased.

The passing of time has also made it increasingly difficult to prosecute still-living suspects. Sir Norman Bettison, former chief constable of West Yorkshire Police, is a case in point. He was originally charged alongside the other five defendants, in his case, for lying about his part in South Yorkshire police's response to the tragedy and about his views on the role fans played in it. But the prosecution was forced to drop proceedings against Bettison when a key witness died and the evidence of two other witnesses changed.

As it stands, just five people—aged between 68 and 80 and

having since retired from their positions of responsibility—are standing or due to stand trial. Duckenfield himself is 74 years old, having been retired for almost three decades on a full index linked pension of £23,000 a year.

The lesson of these events is that the ruling class will not allow its representatives to be held to account for the crimes they inflict upon the working class and will fight tooth and nail to prevent justice from prevailing. This is especially significant considering their response to the Grenfell Tower fire, where a similar cover-up operation is underway. This is despite the ongoing struggle by local residents, who angrily denounced the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea council in the immediate aftermath of the fire and insisted that the fight for justice for the victims of social murder at Grenfell not end up going down the same path as Hillsborough.

However, the fact is that the Grenfell public inquiry being held under Sir Martin Moore-Bick is designed to be a whitewash. From day one, it was specifically barred from discussing issues of a “social, economic and political nature” and “limited to the cause [of the fire], how it spread, and preventing a future blaze.” The first phase of the inquiry took nearly 18 months to complete. The next phase has been delayed until at least 2020. This was confirmed by Moore-Bick at the very end of the first phase of the inquiry in December, at the same time as the Metropolitan Police confirmed its investigation is expected to “take years” to complete.

The author recommends:

Criminal prosecutions finally brought 28 years after 96 Liverpool fans killed at Hillsborough stadium
[30 June 2017]

Second phase of Grenfell inquiry delayed for a year
[14 December 2018]

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