

British Labour Party continues coverup of Hillsborough football disaster

Robert Stevens
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Nine years after 96 Liverpool football club supporters died in the worst disaster in British sporting history, the Labour government has ruled that there will no new public inquiry into the event. This decision comes in the face of a mass of new evidence refuting the original verdict, which absolved the South Yorkshire police of all responsibility.

Relatives of those crushed to death on April 15, 1989 at Hillsborough stadium, the home of the Sheffield Wednesday soccer club, have called Home Secretary Jack Straw's decision a "cynical betrayal." Some of the families have resolved to take out private prosecutions against those they consider to be responsible for the disaster. Relatives have also threatened to stand their own candidates against Labour MPs in the Liverpool Merseyside area, including George Howarth, a Home Office minister.

Last June, Straw ordered an investigation into new evidence that had emerged over the past 3 years, much of which is contained in Jimmy McGovern's TV drama-documentary, *Hillsborough*, broadcast in December 1996. But in his announcement to the House of Commons, Straw said that the review of new evidence had not added "anything significant" to what was available to the previous inquiry at Sheffield in 1989.

The new investigation, headed by Lord Justice Stuart-Smith, produced a 222-page report entitled *Scrutiny of Evidence Relating to the Hillsborough Football Stadium Disaster*. Despite his claim to have looked at the more recent evidence "dispassionately and objectively," Lord Justice Smith has adhered rigidly to the official version of events, which defended the role of the South Yorkshire police and blamed the Liverpool supporters for their own deaths.

Among the evidence essentially dismissed by Lord Justice Smith was the following:

¶The testimony of Roger Houldsworth, a video camera technician at Hillsborough at the time. Houldsworth states that he looked at CCTV video camera five and clearly saw that pens 3 and 4 of the Leppings Lane end of the stadium were dangerously overcrowded. This was at 2:52 PM, the moment the police ordered Gate C of the ground to be opened and directed even more fans into these pens. This action ultimately caused the crush in which 96 people died.

The police have always maintained that this camera was faulty. Houldsworth said this was a case of deliberate suppression of crucial evidence. Disregarding the Houldsworth evidence, Smith said its importance "has been exaggerated out of all proportion."

•An allegation that two tapes were stolen from the control room at Sheffield Wednesday in order to hide video evidence from the inquiry that was conducted soon after the disaster. Smith admitted that the theft took place, but said these tapes would not have shown anything significant! Smith claimed the police did not conceal their video recordings from the initial inquiry or the coroner. He also maintained that the police had not tried to force witnesses to change their evidence, despite statements to the contrary.

The lord justice rubbed further salt into the wounds of the relatives when he insisted that the original inquiry was correct not to consider or take evidence about anything that happened after 3:15 PM on the day of the disaster. This was originally justified on the grounds that the purpose of the inquiry was *only* to find out how and by what means the deceased came to their deaths, and that after 3:15 the victims were already brain dead.

The real purpose of this cutoff was to clear the police and other authorities at the stadium of any wrongdoing in the period after the fans were crushed to death. At

that time, the police sought to prevent fans from escaping from the pens and onto the field. They also kept fans elsewhere in the ground from coming to the aid of the dying.

This arbitrary cutoff was reimposed despite clear evidence that some of the victims did not die until well after 3:15 PM. Dr. Ed Walker, an anaesthetist, had rushed to Northern General Hospital in Sheffield, where most of the victims were taken, upon hearing that a major disaster was unfolding. He arrived just before the first casualties were brought in.

Walker worked for the next six-and-a-half hours trying to resuscitate some 12 injured fans. He stated, "From my own experience I am as sure as I can be that when I arrived at 3:30 PM a good number of victims had signs of life. Some were breathing and some had a heart beat. Some of the patients were still breathing of their own accord after 4 PM."

Tony Edward, a paramedic, was in the sole ambulance able to reach the field after the crush. He stated in December 1996, "Every other disaster of the 1980s has been forgotten--all except Hillsborough. And that is because there was a huge cover-up. I believe my own ambulance service--South Yorkshire--was involved in the cover-up. The coroner said that everyone was dead by 3:15 PM. But I didn't get onto the field until 3:35 PM, so if Tony Bland [one of the victims] was still alive then, so were others."

Trevor Hicks, chairman of the Hillsborough Families Support Group, said that Straw's decision was "a case of New Labour, new betrayal. In very simple terms there is nothing for the families. Mr. Straw has published the report and as you can tell from our reaction we are totally devastated. There is not a shred of comfort in it at all. It is a better whitewash even than last time."



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