

Public inquiry in Britain

Police officers evade disciplinary charges in racist killing of Stephen Lawrence

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The only senior officer to face disciplinary charges arising from the police handling of the murder investigation into the 1993 racist killing of 18-year-old black student Stephen Lawrence is to retire. The news broke only 20 hours after the publication of a report by the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) which stated that the officer--Detective Inspector Ben Bullock--was to face an internal tribunal over seven counts of neglect of duty.

Those accused of the stabbing death of Stephen Lawrence at a bus stop in Eltham, South-East London--Neil and Jamie Acourt, Luke Knight, Gary Dobson and David Norris--have never been prosecuted due to the police's mishandling of the investigation and the claim by the judiciary of insufficient evidence as a result. Bullock was second in command of the murder investigation. His retirement is due to take effect in May, before the disciplinary hearing is scheduled. The timing of the decision was described as "a coincidence". He was the last serving officer involved in the murder investigation, the other four having retired earlier. A source close to the PCA stated that they too would have faced charges if they had not pursued this course of action.

The PCA was also obliged to criticise other aspects of police conduct. This included the three senior officers having failed to keep a logbook at the scene of the stabbing and that, despite the fact that the victim was losing blood, no one took responsibility for monitoring his condition. The PCA advised that the officers concerned receive "formal advise" on the question of logbooks.

After acknowledging what amounts to a litany of malpractice, the PCA has failed to produce any credible

explanation for such a state of affairs. It is adamant that racism played no part in the police's behaviour.

The authority's conclusions were made before the public inquiry began early last year. In its first phase, based upon oral and written evidence, the police and judicial system have been severely discredited for allowing the perpetrators of the racist killing to enjoy immunity. Both the police claim that they lacked sufficient evidence to apprehend those responsible and that of the prosecution service of a similar lack of evidence for prosecution were proven to be false.

The inquiry heard how:

- Detective Inspector Bullock failed to respond to an informer implicating five white youths in Lawrence's murder, only 24 hours after the killing. His conduct was described as having shown "considerable indifference".

- Detective Superintendent Brian Weeden, who headed the investigation for 18 months, was an officer of 30 years experience. He claimed that he was not conversant with an elementary point of criminal law, saying that he did not think the five white youth involved in the attack could be arrested on the grounds of "reasonable suspicion".

- Detective Chief Superintendent Jeynes threw away a piece of paper on which Doreen Lawrence, Stephen's mother, had written the names of five of the suspects. Contrary to the police version that no one came forward to help with their inquiries, 26 people provided information pointing to the killers between April and May 1993.

- Detective Superintendent Ian Crampton, in charge

of the murder investigation for the first 72 hours, failed to act on numerous tip-offs. The police also failed to follow up the evidence of a young black man who, three days after the murder, was threatened by one of the suspects, "You're next!" Two weeks were allowed to elapse before the five suspects were finally arrested, allowing ample time for forensic evidence to be destroyed.

- Detective Chief Superintendent Roderick Barker, a veteran of more than 200 murder investigations, carried out an internal police review of the initial police investigation omitting any criticisms of its proceedings. For years this was cited against the Lawrence family's criticisms of the police. At the public inquiry, Barker was dismissed by the chairman as "not credible" and his report described as "indefensible".

The final stage of the inquiry is the publication of its findings and recommendations, which is meant to outline proposals to ensure that such an injustice will not be repeated in future. Yet only weeks before this report is due, the police and the PCA have once again utilised early retirement to ensure its officers are protected from prosecution.



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