The Stephen Lawrence case: police credibility slides further into disrepute

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Scotland Yard announced on Friday, January 29 that Detective Superintendent Albert Patrick is to be removed as head of the re-investigation into the racist killing of black teenager Stephen Lawrence. He is currently under scrutiny by officers looking into alleged corruption within the Flying Squad.

Patrick's first disciplinary notice relates to his alleged "lack of supervision" of officers who are now facing investigation for corruption while he was head of the Flying Squad. Two detectives have already confessed to stealing and perverting the course of justice. The second is regarding allegations that £4,000 worth of proceeds from a Post Office robbery were used to fund the 1997 Flying Squad Christmas party. A spokesman for Scotland Yard refused to say whether Patrick had been suspended from duty.

Earlier last year, the public inquiry into the police handling of the Lawrence murder investigation brought to light evidence which compromised the police and judicial system. The official line of a "lack of evidence and witnesses" needed to convict the five major suspects crumbled under serious scrutiny. In addition to the well-grounded charge of police racism, the issue of police corruption has hovered in the background. That neither issue was explored in any depth was due to the narrow parameters of the inquiry and the tight grip on the proceedings exercised by the chairman, William Macpherson.

At one point evidence surfaced of an earlier relationship between one police officer involved in the case and Clifford Norris, a convicted armed robber and drug dealer and the father of one of the five originally charged, David Norris. The officer, David Coles, was demoted after clandestine meetings between the two, where packages were exchanged, were uncovered. Coles claimed that he was procuring an informant, but this had not be given official clearance. This did not prevent him from being placed in charge of "protecting" a key witness to the murder. At the public inquiry Duwayne Brooks, Stephen's friend, spoke of the intimidating effect this had.

The removal of Patrick has all the hallmarks of a damage limitation exercise. It came only a week after the Lawrence family solicitor had written a letter to the Metropolitan Police demanding his sacking. Stephen's father, Neville Lawrence, stated: "The police knew about the allegations against the Flying Squad officers for over a year, but said nothing to us. It is further proof that they do not and have not taken Stephen's murder seriously."

It also follows the debacle regarding the one senior officer to face disciplinary charges over the police handling of the murder investigation. Just 24 hours after the Police Complaints Authority (PCA) announced that Detective Inspector Ben Bullock would face an internal tribunal on seven counts of negligence, the officer announced his early retirement. This meant he would avoid any disciplinary action.

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Deaths in police custody

The issue of police racism and brutality has again been brought to public scrutiny by the death Roger Sylvester on January 18. The 30-year-old black care worker died after being restrained by police officers. Eight police officers turned up to investigate a disturbance outside a block of flats in Tottenham. Sylvester was detained under the Mental Health Act on January 11 and died a week later in intensive care. The police claim that they did not use any force against Sylvester, but his family reported several bruises on his body when they went to visit him.

The same week that Sylvester died, an inquest found

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that restraint by officers had played a part in the death of Nathan Delahunty, a 29-year-old businessman. Delahunty had called emergency services claiming that an armed gang were outside his flat. The coroner's report established that police action had aggravated the delirium and excited state he was in as a result of cocaine intoxication, contributing to his death.

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