

Britain: Macpherson inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence provokes right-wing backlash

Julie Hyland, Chris Marsden
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The report of the public inquiry into the racist killing of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, published yesterday afternoon, had already provoked a bitter reaction from the British establishment and its media, after it was leaked to the *Daily Telegraph* on Sunday.

What drew their fire was not the catalogue of police incompetence and deliberate obstruction that had enabled the killers of the black student to walk free. The pro-Conservative newspapers--along with the Conservative opposition in Parliament--levelled their wrath at the chairman of the inquiry Lord Macpherson's statement that "institutionalised racism" exists in the police force.

The sections of the report leaked in advance warn that there "must be an unequivocal acceptance of the problems of institutionalised racism", which it defines as "the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin".

This goes against earlier claims by Metropolitan Police Commissioner Paul Condon that no such racism exists in the London force. Macpherson stresses that institutionalised racism must be addressed and that any police chief "who feels unable to so respond will find it extremely difficult to work in harmony and co-operate with the community in the way that policing by consent demands". One of the 70 recommendations made by the inquiry is for the police to be brought under the remit of the Race Relations Act, from which they are currently excluded, making them liable to compensation claims for discrimination.

The *Daily Telegraph* spearheaded the media backlash, characterised by its overt appeals to right-wing sentiment and demands for law and order to be

preserved. They denounce conservative judge Lord Macpherson as a radical, and his report as a concession to those with an "anti-police" agenda. All the major papers insisted that Condon should not be forced to resign.

Macpherson "seems set to produce a document that could have come from a Looney-Left London borough circa 1981," railed the *Telegraph*. The issue of police racism, they wrote, is "too important to be left to the zealots of political correctness ... the Lawrence report now threatens to destroy the effectiveness of the police."

The *Evening Standard* cited an anonymous Queens Counsel (barrister) who said the police should have told Macpherson, "because of the extreme pressure on you to appear to be even-handed, thus intensifying the pressure on you to go against the police, you really ought to excuse yourself from the inquiry."

The *Times* said the report was in danger of producing "a defensive passivity among the police", whilst the *Daily Express* declared, "The idea that the entire Metropolitan force should be made to grovel in public, and be compelled to sit through racial re-education classes and sensitivity seminars, is monstrous." The police, they added, "are hamstrung by a criminal law designed to make their job harder and a Home Secretary who is more interested in persecuting newspapers than in building the dozens of new prisons we need."

The severity of this reaction even prior to the report's publication is striking.

The Lawrence case provoked outrage amongst wide layers of the population. Stephen's parents, Neville and Doreen, 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 suspected of his murder: Luke Knight, Gary Dobson, David Norris, Neil and Jamie Acourt. But the case was thrown out by the judge without being put to a jury, on the basis that evidence central to the case was "contaminated and flawed".

It was in an attempt to placate the deep feelings of injustice and to restore confidence in the police and judicial system that the incoming Labour government convened the Macpherson inquiry in 1997. The opposite effect, however, was achieved.

Despite its limited remit, the public inquiry confirmed that the police had failed to act on eyewitness accounts of Stephen's murder for several days, had failed to arrest suspects, had failed to secure forensic evidence and reacted with hostility to the Lawrence family. Subsequently, the police had sought to cover up their failings. Questions were also raised regarding connections between police officers and the criminal father of one of the accused.

All of this served to reinforce anger against racist thuggery in general, and fed a growing distrust in the police--due to their constant harassment of black people and a large number of the black deaths in police custody, including Joy Gardner, Brian Douglas, Wayne Douglas and Shije Lapite.

For months the same media, which now denounces the inquiry, solidarised itself with the Lawrences' plight. The *Daily Mail*, a paper infamous for its support for fascism in the 1930s, took the unprecedented step of naming the five suspects as murderers, challenging them to sue. It described this gesture as an example of "crusading journalism" and its commitment to put right an injustice. In contrast, yesterday it issued a full-page comment warning that the Lawrences' "cause may now be overtaken by a kind of politically correct McCarthyism".

How does one account for the outrage provoked by the charge of institutional racism in the police? The *Mail* portrays Macpherson's report as a challenge not only to the police, but to the very fabric of British society. "If the police are institutionally racist," it asks "must not the same be true of the Home Office, which controls the Force? And of the Government, which controls the Home Office? And indeed of the British people, who elect the government? The logic of Sir

William's assessment is that the whole country is institutionally racist."

The police force is neither a public service nor a representative of society. Its fundamental purpose is to defend the social and political interests of the ruling class. To do that it must stand above society and outside of its control. The police are not accountable to Parliament, let alone the British people. Not only are they exempt from race discrimination legislation, but only they have the power to investigate themselves regarding any other violation of civil and democratic rights. Every attempt to change this has been fiercely resisted by the British establishment, and it will continue to do so.

The pervasive racism within the police force cited by Macpherson is not simply a reflection of a general phenomenon within society. In a nation such as Britain with an imperial past, racism is an essential means through which workers are divided and their oppression is maintained.

When it was thought that the public inquiry would primarily concentrate on the actions of a few racist thugs, the establishment and its media were happy to lend their support. However, they will not tolerate anything that throws a question mark over their most cherished institutions. Labour has already made clear that no such challenge will be made. Within 24 hours of the media and Tory campaign to back Condon, both Prime Minister Tony Blair and Home Secretary Jack Straw assured Parliament that his position was safe.



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