

Britain: Macpherson report fingers witnesses in Stephen Lawrence murder

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Within hours of its publication, Lord Macpherson's report on the inquiry into the police investigation of the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993, had to be withdrawn. The Home Office was forced to retrieve the appendix section of the report, after it was published with the names and addresses of those who had provided information to the police during the search for Stephen's killers.

Some 20 witnesses were named as having identified the five primary suspects and other members of their gang. By the time the report was pulled, it had already been circulated to the suspects and their solicitors. It had also been widely available through the Internet and hundreds sold at government bookshops. Many of those identified had to be immediately placed under police protection.

The Macpherson report noted that during investigations into Stephen's murder, "young and impressionable witnesses on and around the Brook Estate were holding back" because they feared reprisals from his killers. One suspect's father, Clifford Norris, was a leading drug baron in the area who was on the run from the police at the time. During the Inquiry the Lawrence family solicitors had proven that Norris had contacts in the police and had been involved in "witness nobbling" in a previous knife attack by his son. For all these reasons, the identity of key witnesses in the Lawrence investigation was meant to be closely guarded.

The release of the eyewitness names revealed that Home Secretary Jack Straw had not even bothered to read through the entire report, despite having convened the inquiry and the report being in his possession for at least 10 days before it was released. Straw defended his attitude by claiming that he believed, "it would be wholly wrong for myself or anybody in the Home Office to go through the report checking it."

Almost immediately, the Inquiry chairman, Lord Macpherson was wheeled out to take "full responsibility" for what he described as a blunder. By exhibiting all the documents "my staff and I thought it would...help the public understand this case", Macpherson claimed.

The government and the media also portrayed the incident as yet another regrettable "error", amongst the numerous others that have characterised the Stephen Lawrence investigation.

Yet how does one account for such an error? What does it reveal about the underlying priorities of the Macpherson inquiry?

Above all, the complete disregard for the safety of important eyewitnesses on the part of government, the Home Office and the police is in stark contrast to the pains taken to protect the police themselves from any possible repercussions from the investigation.

The inquiry was only convened due to the tireless campaign conducted by the Lawrence family. For six years Stephen's parents, Doreen and Neville, had complained that the police never properly investigated their son's death and that racism, incompetence and corruption sabotaged any effective case against their son's killers. Their campaign for justice won widespread support. This reflected the hostility of many ordinary people to racism and to the police. The latter's credibility has been greatly undermined over the last years following a number of deaths in police custody--particularly of black people--and the exposure of numerous police frame-ups, such as the Guildford 4 and Birmingham 6, which had led to innocent people spending years in jail. The overt racism of the police in the disproportionate number of arrests and searches of black youth fuelled a growing hostility. But more generally, as social deprivation has grown, the police have increasingly been viewed as an oppressive force directed against working people, particularly in the most deprived areas. Opinion polls revealed that public support for the police and judiciary was at a record low.

Through an appeal for public support, the Lawrences were able to fund a £100,000 private prosecution against Stephen's five suspected killers in 1996. The fact that their case was never presented before a jury--it was dismissed on the grounds of "inadmissible evidence"--deepened public hostility towards the police, the judicial system and the

government itself. Just one year later this mounting sense of injustice found political expression in the virtual electoral wipe out of the Tory government, which had held power for 18 years.

The incoming Labour government was anxious to dissipate such feelings. Yet it was committed to a draconian "law and order" agenda and the further destruction of social provisions. How could Labour reconcile the introduction of ever more authoritarian measures with their promise to be "different from the last lot"?

Labour convened the inquiry into the police investigation of Stephen's killing just two months after its election victory. The nine-month investigation revealed:

- Police officers arriving at the scene of the attack paid no attention to Stephen's medical needs, despite the fact that he was losing large quantities of blood. No explanation of why this happened was ever given.

- No formal crime scene was established, and no effort made to pursue Stephen's assailants. Although eyewitnesses had volunteered the names of a number of potential suspects within hours, no arrests were made for several days, enabling valuable evidence to be lost. Details of a car containing five white youth who drove past the crime scene on several occasions laughing, were not followed up for six weeks. When the car was eventually stopped--for different reasons--the driver and his passenger were found to have been party to a racist attack in the same area two years earlier, which resulted in the death of Rolan Adams. This was never pursued as a further line of inquiry.

- Official police records relating to the evening of Stephen's murder were either not made or have "disappeared", as have other important documents.

- During the course of the Inquiry Michael Mansfield, Queens Counsel (barrister) presented evidence of contact between Metropolitan police officers in the Eltham area and Clifford Norris. He alleged that corruption could have played a significant role in the police's attitude towards the investigation. Macpherson rejected this entirely, largely on the say-so of police officers.

So comprehensive was the evidence presented against the police that Macpherson was forced to criticise virtually every officer involved, including Metropolitan Police Commissioner Paul Condon himself. Yet his report claims that all this was the result of "unwitting racism" or incompetence. The Labour government has also refused to hold a single police officer responsible and, even prior to the reports release, sprang to Condon's defence.

The Macpherson inquiry was intended as a safety valve

that would enable the Lawrences to air their grievances and create the impression that something would now be done to address public concern. Macpherson makes this clear in Section 3.12 of his conclusion. "Inquiries have many purposes", he states. "Some are concerned with establishing simply what happened and why. For example, the King's Cross Fire Inquiry and other railway accident inquiries have focused upon this purpose, the process of learning, and of establishing the facts. Some, such as the PCA (Police Complaints Authority) inquiry in this case, focus upon discipline. Many inquiries, including this Inquiry, involve *catharsis* and close analysis of what may have gone wrong" (emphasis added).

Once this catharsis was completed, it seems the powers that be lost any interests in the inquiry's findings other than those aspects which suited their interests. How else can one explain that no one spotted the "error" of fingering 20 witnesses in the 10 days before the document was released?

Despite the constant professions of sympathy over the past months, further evidence of the real indifference of the police towards the Lawrences was again highlighted on Thursday. Racists were able to deface a memorial plaque marking the spot where Stephen was killed because a police surveillance camera supposedly set up to monitor the site was a dummy. Doreen Lawrence described the incident as the latest insult to her son's memory by both racists and the police. Earlier she complained that the report had "only scratched the surface and has not gone to the heart of the problem."

"My feelings about the future remain the same", she went on. "Black youngsters will never be safe on the streets. The police on the ground are the same as they were when my son was killed. People are dying on the streets and in the back of police vans. It is clear nothing has changed".



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