

Inquiry into racist murder of Stephen Lawrence

Macpherson report leaves major questions unanswered

Tony Hyland
10 March 1999

A form of "catharsis" was how Lord Macpherson described the public inquiry he headed into the racist killing of Stephen Lawrence. But not a single one of the gang of white youths who stabbed the black teenager to death on April 22, 1993 in Eltham, south-east London has been brought to justice.

Macpherson's choice of words is significant, if one bears in mind what the satirist Dario Fo said on the subject in his play, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. He described scandal as "a liberating catharsis of the system": "The indignation of the good democratic citizen grows and threatens to suffocate him. But he has a sense of satisfaction when he sees, in the end, these same organs of this rotten and corrupt society, pointing the finger at this selfsame society, at its own 'unhealthy' parts, and this gives him a sense of freedom throughout his whole being. With his spirit suitably decongested, he shouts: 'Long live this bastard shit society, because at least it always wipes its bum with soft, perfumed paper, and when it burps it has the good manners to put its hand in front of its mouth'."

Discussion of the Macpherson inquiry report has focused almost entirely on its declaration that the police service is "institutionally racist", along with most other major institutions in Britain. Far less has been said on its actual findings regarding the Lawrence case. In this respect, the report is a careful balancing act. It admits much of what was already public knowledge about the police role in ensuring that Stephen Lawrence's killers were never prosecuted. At the same time, it defends the force when it comes to the actions and motives of more senior officers. Above all, it rejects any charge that overt racism or corruption played a part in the events. In the end, all that is acknowledged is a mixture of "unwitting" racism and ineptitude.

This hardly does justice to the facts. Throughout the inquiry, police witnesses were at a loss to explain why standard procedures were contravened all the way up the chain of command. As well as a collective amnesia, virtually every document relating to police conduct at key points of the investigation had "disappeared". These included a log used to record the number of persons moving in and out of the murder scene; the record of all the policemen present; documents on meetings with an informant who named eyewitnesses; a policy file kept by senior police officers to prioritise or eliminate suspects and record decisions over arrests.

A wealth of information contradicted the claim by the police that they had met with a "wall of silence" in the local community. Within three hours of the murder, one anonymous phone caller identified three of the primary suspects, Neil and Jamie Acourt and David Norris. In the following days there was a steady stream of information identifying two others, Gary Dobson and Luke Knight.

The treatment by the police of Duwayne Brooks is highlighted as an example of how "unwitting racism" contributed to the failure to bring

Stephen Lawrence's killers to justice. Brooks was with Lawrence the night they were attacked, but managed to escape. He returned shortly, to help his friend as he lay bleeding and called for an ambulance. Rather than regard him as a victim and a valuable witness, the first two police officers on the scene treated Brooks as a primary suspect. Police Constable Bethel did not ask for a description of the assailants or show any interest in the information Brooks gave about the direction in which they fled. Instead he asked Brooks if he was carrying any weapons.

Although both officers were trained in first aid, neither sought to stem the flow of Stephen's blood. They did not even ascertain the severity or nature of his wounds. Brooks had mistakenly thought that the weapon used in the attack was an iron bar. In fact, Stephen had received two stab wounds in the chest, severing auxiliary arteries. Even by the time Stephen arrived at the hospital, medical staff were left under the impression by the police that he had suffered head injuries from an iron bar.

Both officers, and others at the police station where Brooks was taken, commented that they could not believe this fatal assault was an unprovoked racist attack.

The next group of policemen on the scene were travelling in a Territorial Support Group vehicle. These included several constables, sergeants and an Inspector, Stephen Groves, the most senior police officer at the scene. Despite having responded to a radio call that had described an "assault", Groves immediately assumed that there had been a fight. It was deduced that this was because he saw that the victims were black.

In contravention of standard procedures, Groves left the scene of the crime without ascertaining the nature of the injuries or securing a description of the assailants and the direction in which they had fled. His "search" of the area was therefore futile. At no time was it deemed necessary to consult with Brooks.

The report goes on to detail what it glibly describes as the "Red Astra Saga". This is a crucial aspect of the murder inquiry that was not followed up, particularly regarding the racist motive for the killing. Within an hour of the attack, police saw a red Vauxhall Astra car driving up and down the road where the fatal attack had taken place. The car's occupants were seen laughing and pointing to the site of the murder. Despite this behaviour, and the fact that around five young white men fitting the general description of the attackers given by Brooks were in the car, no attempt was made to stop it.

Instead, the police officer merely recorded the registration plate. When action was suggested to check on vehicles of this description and registration in the locality, this was terminated by the Senior Investigating Officer--who deemed it a "non-priority" and said that "no further action be made at this time".

When, by chance, the vehicle was stopped eight days later, the addresses and dates of birth of its two occupants were taken. Yet there was no

follow-up inquiry until 39 days later. When they were questioned, both admitted to being in the vicinity of the attack only 10 minutes before it took place. The two, together with another passenger on the evening in question, gave conflicting accounts of who else was in the vehicle. One said, "There were five of us altogether, but I don't want to say about the other two." The others claimed that they were the only ones present.

All of them said that up until about an hour before the incident they had been drinking in a local pub frequented by a gang of local racist youth. However, the detective who conducted the interview eliminated them as suspects and no further inquiries were made.

Two of those interviewed, Kieran Hyland and Daniel Copley, were convicted for their part in a racist attack in nearby Thamesmead two years earlier, which resulted in the death of Rolan Adams. Hyland had also been convicted separately of another racist attack. All three were members of an organisation calling itself *Nazi Turnout*.

Detective Sergeant Davidson was the most vocal in denying that the killing was racist. Much of the information received by the police about the suspects was from anonymous sources. It was Davidson's job to turn this information into evidence by bringing forward reliable eyewitnesses. He joined the murder investigation on the second day. From then on he had constant and regular meetings with a police informer, whose pseudonym was James Grant. No official records remain of any of these meetings. Grant was the first person to offer the police the possibility of obtaining direct evidence by naming two eyewitnesses.

In the case of one, known as K, the witness had visited the Acourt's home on the night of the murder. The Acourts appeared to be in an agitated state. One was wearing no shirt, as if he had just been washing. This was corroborated by other reports, some of which also claim that the suspects had been seen washing knives. This was never followed up. Witness K was only interviewed once and Detective Sergeant Davidson could not even remember if he had conducted it.

Davidson's approach was described as "counterproductive" when interviewing other people who came forward to offer information. His role also proved detrimental when he interviewed a leading suspect, Gary Dobson, after the police eventually made an arrest on May 6. Detective Sergeant Mould, an expert in the field, subjected his interview to criticism. He described the questioning as "confirmatory" rather interrogatory. During the interview Davidson even suggested to Dobson that the killing was not racist.

For these reasons, Duwayne Brooks became the sole eyewitness in the investigation. The inquiry is forced to concede that he was mistreated, but denies accusations of "criminalisation" and "demonisation" by the police for the purposes of discrediting his testimony. The "mistreatment" identified includes being falsely accused by the police on several occasions of petty offences such as breaking a window in a police station and stealing a can of drink at an identification parade.

Most significant is the prosecution brought by the police in October 1993 in connection with an offence that occurred while Brooks was taking part in a demonstration outside the headquarters of the British National Party (BNP) two weeks after Stephen's death. A Crown Court judge threw this out because Brooks had been diagnosed as suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The eagerness of the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to prosecute Brooks was in stark contrast to their dropping of murder charges against the five suspects in the Lawrence case only months before.

Due to this and other evidence, the inquiry acknowledged that at least half of all officers involved had refused to recognise the killing as being racially motivated, even though it had, by then, been officially classified as such. This is again dismissed in the Mcpherson report as the product of "unwitting racism". This trait is, moreover, only acknowledged regarding officers of lower rank. The more senior officers are all exonerated, despite being responsible for directing and ratifying police actions every step of

the way. It was enough to state under cross-examination that it was a racist murder for them to be given a clean bill of health.

It is instructive to compare this record with the police operation mounted in the wake of the mass demonstration called to close down the BNP headquarters in October. The police made numerous horse charges into protesters. Afterwards they used footage from 35 video cameras and two helicopters in order to identify those accused of violent conduct. Intelligence was gathered not only nationally, but also on the Continent. In the first three months of the investigation, 18,000 man-hours were spent scanning pictures alone. As a result, in 1995 nine anti-fascists were imprisoned for a combined total of 20 years.

Another issue skirted over by the inquiry is the possible role of police corruption in the Lawrence case. In his final remarks to the first part of the inquiry, Michael Mansfield, QC (barrister) for the Lawrence family, asked the panel to consider the issue of collusion between certain criminal elements and police officers involved in the case. He did so because the quantity and nature of serious and elementary errors made by senior policemen could not be explained on the basis of mere accident or oversight; blatant efforts had been made by senior policemen to conceal the truth about vital events; and what he described as the "Norris factor".

This was a reference to the possible involvement of David Norris's father, Clifford, in ensuring that his son walked free. Clifford Norris and his brother Alexander were known in the area since the 1980s as notorious drug pushers and violent criminals. Alexander Norris received a long prison sentence in 1989, while Clifford remained at large until 1994, when he was finally arrested.

Police knew as early as April 25, 1993 that Clifford Norris had attempted to pervert the course of justice in another case involving his son, a stabbing that took place whilst in the company of fellow suspect Neil Acourt, only one month before the murder of Stephen Lawrence.

Stephen Benefield, the victim of this attack, and his friend both gave statements to the police that they had been approached on Clifford Norris's behalf with a bribe in return for not giving evidence. The inquiry report is obliged to criticise the murder investigation for not arresting Clifford Norris, especially as potential witnesses to the Lawrence murder may not have come forward for fear of violence from one of the suspect's father or his criminal associates.

The possibility of corruption playing a part in this failure is rejected, but no alternative explanation is offered. Instead, Macpherson's report declares: "Positive efforts should have been made to remove Clifford Norris because of his obviously malign influence. It is inexplicable that more was not done until the summer of 1994 to arrest Clifford Norris, particularly after the Benefield bribery was uncovered."

The arrest of Clifford Norris was only secured during the second investigation into the Lawrence murder. During cross-examination at the inquiry, the officer in charge, Chief Superintendent Mellish, accepted that this was a relatively straightforward operation.

Then there is the issue of a police officer who was demoted for having corrupt relations with the Norris brothers, but was entrusted with the protection of Duwayne Brooks, when three of the suspects were sent to trial for the murder of Stephen Lawrence in April 1996. This officer is only referred to as Sergeant XX. Significantly, in the recent scandal provoked by the accidental leaking of an appendix to the report containing the identities and addresses of all those who gave evidence regarding the killing, only Sergeant XX's anonymity was preserved.

Sergeant XX served with the Flying Squad when he had secret liaisons with Alexander and Clifford Norris. The claim that he was procuring Clifford Norris as an informant was proven to be a lie. In a surveillance operation by the Customs and Excise department, the Norrises and Sergeant XX were seen exchanging oblong packages and using calculators.

The facts of this association were never pursued in disciplinary hearings.

Instead, Sergeant XX was disciplined for "misconduct" involving false entries on his duty sheet and other matters connected with his absence from duty at the time these clandestine meetings took place. Sergeant XX's subsequent appeal against dismissal was upheld and he was allowed to continue as a Detective Constable in the same area of London in which the Norrises operated.

The report's criteria for establishing whether the course of justice was perverted by collusion between police officers and the Norris family is rigid and exceptionally narrow. It simply states that no actual proof exists of attempts to bribe witness. It does not say that none has ever been sought and no investigation has been mounted.

Sergeant XX is also directly connected to Detective Superintendent Crampton, the Senior Investigating Officer who headed the original murder inquiry. Crampton had written a reference for Sergeant XX when he faced the disciplinary charges in 1989, commending him for his work while serving under him in 1987.

Crampton was taken off the Lawrence case after three days, as he was directly involved in the prosecution for murder of someone supposedly related to Clifford Norris. Crampton asked the inquiry to believe that he made no connection between David Norris and his father, Clifford, even though he accepted that the "Deptford Norrises, with Clifford at their head, were notorious at the time". This is even more implausible, given that Crampton had served in SO11 (Criminal Intelligence Branch), a department concerned with intelligence regarding criminals and their associates.

Crampton played a pivotal role in delaying the arrest of the five suspects. His decision not to make arrests, despite the information available, was described by his successor, Detective Superintendent Weeden, as "strategic". To justify this, Crampton and Weeden stated that a surveillance operation was mounted to gather more evidence of association between the primary suspects. Evidence to the inquiry indicates that this was no more than a cover-up for the inaction of the police. Even though it is claimed that the decision to mount surveillance was made two days after the murder, a full operation was not undertaken for a further three days because the necessary surveillance team was busy observing a young black man suspected of theft. No satisfactory explanation was given as to why this was deemed more important than a murder inquiry.

In the cursory operation that was finally mounted, one of the suspects was observed leaving his house on two occasions with what appeared to be clothes wrapped in plastic bags. The cameraman at the observation point did not even have a radio to contact the police to follow the suspect and make an interception. The evidence eventually used to make the arrests was little different from that disclosed after the first three days of the investigation. Detective Superintendent Weeden claimed that he did not know the suspects could be arrested on the grounds of reasonable suspicion--an elementary aspect of the criminal law.

Macpherson says that catharsis has been achieved by finally admitting that many of the criticisms of the Lawrence family were justified. But to do otherwise was not possible, given the overwhelming evidence available and the fact that previous attempts to prevent the truth emerging had undermined the credibility of the police. Despite this, no one has been held to account for what took place, neither those suspected of carrying out the murder of Stephen Lawrence, nor the police charged with investigating it.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact