

# Tonight programme interviews the Stephen Lawrence murder suspects--the decline of investigative journalism in Britain

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The screening of an interview with the five main suspects in the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence by ITV's new flagship current affairs programme *Tonight* was widely condemned. Stephen's parents, Neville and Doreen, said it was a cynical publicity stunt. Neville commented, "I don't see any way this programme is going to take anything forward." Lawrence was knifed to death on April 22, 1993 in Eltham, south-east London.

ITV defended their decision to broadcast the interviews on the basis that there had been no restrictions on the questions the suspects could be asked. This was in contrast to the recent government inquiry in which the five suspects--Jamie and Neil Acourt, David Norris, Gary Dobson and Luke Knight--were legally protected by a High Court judgement banning any direct questioning of their involvement in the murder.

Though the Lawrence family's legal representatives, Michael Mansfield QC (Queens Council) and Imran Khan, subsequently said the interviews had identified new lines of investigation, the Lawrence's initial assessment proved correct.

There is no basis for opposing broadcasting these interviews in principle, as they deal with a legitimate area of public interest. But the questioning was entirely lacking in rigour. The journalist asking the questions, Martin Bashir, had previously conducted the rather superficial and sensationalist interviews with Princess Diana, and the British nanny Louise Woodward, who was found guilty in a US court of the killing of baby, Mathew Eapen.

Bashir illicitly very little that was not already public knowledge and spent a great deal of time on largely

pointless questions relating to the well-known racist views of the five. It was embarrassing to hear him ask, on behalf of black people, for an apology from one of the suspects.

Commander John Grieve, head of the Metropolitan Police's "Race and Violent Crimes Task Force", said after the screening that a huge public response had raised fresh hopes of a prosecution. The police switchboard "lit up" and had revealed "two more nuggets of gold", as well as a new line of inquiry. He added, "We would like to hear from people who have direct knowledge.... Allegiances change as they have done in other cases. Girlfriends change, friends change, people change their behaviour."

Despite this and other statements, it is difficult to see how the material that emerged from the questioning presents any fresh grounds for investigation--outside of someone deciding at this late stage to positively identify the suspects. Even then, after six years this would be problematic. Under Bashir's questioning there was an admission that the five were in the habit of carrying knives before Stephen's murder. Inconsistencies were revealed regarding how three of the suspects had first heard of the killing and another admission by Norris that he may have been at his girlfriend's home on the night of the murder, as opposed to staying at his parents house, which was his original claim. This would have placed him within half a mile of the scene of the crime.

According to Metropolitan Police sources, however, Norris's whereabouts had already been established and none of the above provides the crucial physical link with the actual killing that would be needed if a prosecution for murder were to succeed. The most that

can be said at this point is that the programme demonstrated once again that the five were petty racist thugs with a propensity for violence, and that circumstantial evidence proved that they are correctly regarded as prime suspects.

The fact remains--once the police failed to conduct a proper investigation into Stephen's death, once no arrests were made for a period of two weeks following the killing, and no forensic or other direct evidence was secured--there was little chance of establishing a case against the five that would hold up in court.

The demand for the five suspects to be brought to justice expresses the sentiments of millions of people throughout Britain. But on the part of the Blair government and the police it serves a definite political purpose: to direct public attention away from the real reason why no prosecution took place.

The Labour government is happy to declare its abhorrence of racism and even to acknowledge "institutional racism" within the police. Regarding the failure of the police to conduct a rigorous investigation, however, no officer of any rank has faced prosecution or even been disciplined. There has been no attempt to rectify any of the other manifold deficiencies identified in the police inquiries, such as investigating a car containing five different white youth who drove by the crime scene shortly afterwards, two of whom were implicated in the earlier racist killing of Rolan Adams.

Also, the possible criminal connection between Norris's father Clifford--a local drug dealer--and a number of police officers has been sidelined. In Bashir's questioning of Norris, he asked why his father had offered a £2,000 bribe to the victim of an earlier stabbing incident in which he was involved. But he did not raise the known connection between his father and an officer, only so far identified as Sergeant X, who was closely involved in the Lawrence investigation. Such genuinely probing questions were ignored in favour of melodramatics by Bashir, as to whether Norris would call him a "paki" or whether one of the Acourt's statements that he would "kill all blacks" included him.

It is for these journalistic failings that the *Tonight* programme should be criticised, rather than for the decision to go ahead with the interviews. This highlights a more fundamental problem that has contributed to the ability of government and police to

contain the political fall-out from the Lawrence case. Many commentators have described the *Tonight* interviews as a new low point in current affairs programming. There are, of course, many other examples, and Bashir has been involved in two of the worst. The Independent Television Commission, the industry's watchdog, recently criticised ITV for an almost complete abandonment of current affairs programming. Up until the launch of *Tonight*, it only screened one and a half hours of such programmes a week. This, together with a largely servile and shallow press, has played a negative role in shaping the political debate, not only on the Lawrence case, but every major social question.

If a serious approach to the Lawrence killing had been taken by the *Tonight* team, the interviews could have provided an opportunity to at least raise some difficult questions. But this would have required careful thought and the mounting of an independent examination of the issue. In the past, ITV won major awards for such investigative journalism in programmes like Britain's longest running documentary series *World in Action*. The long list of this programme's exposes includes Idi Amin, the Asbestos Industry, Rhodesian Oil, the Arms Industry, The Birmingham Six, Combat 18, Breast Implants, BSE and the Nigerian Oil Industry.

Instead, the *Tonight* programme adopted wholesale the government's approach to the Lawrence case and spiced this up with a measure of sensationalism. Instead of illuminating the debate and seeking answers, this approach works as a soporific to dull the public's critical faculties.



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