

The Stephen Lawrence case

London detective cleared on all but two disciplinary charges in cover-up of racist murder

Keith Lee
30 July 1999

The only police officer to face serious internal charges stemming from the Stephen Lawrence murder inquiry was cleared last week of all but two minor breaches of discipline. The hearing—the case was brought by the Metropolitan Police under the supervision of the Police Complaints Authority—found Detective Inspector Ben Bullock not guilty on three charges containing 11 breaches of discipline. Fifteen alleged breaches had been dismissed previously, on the grounds of lack of evidence. In total, Bullock has been found guilty of just 2 of 28 charges.

The three-man tribunal gave Bullock a caution, the lowest punishment available. This is not serious enough to appear on his disciplinary record and will not affect his pension. He retired on July 23, ostensibly without a blemish on his 30-year record as a police officer.

Bullock was second in command of the 1993 murder squad that failed to secure any convictions for the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager who was stabbed to death in Eltham, southeast London by a group of white youths.

The two counts of guilty against Bullock relate to his failure to identify the author of an anonymous letter received by the team investigating the murder. The second stems from his failure to ensure that police officers were specifically briefed to lift floorboards during searches. This particularly applied to searches of the homes of the two principal suspects, Neil and Jamie Acourt. Bullock had been told that the men usually hid knives under the floorboards.

A spokesman for the Police Federation said he was satisfied with the verdict. Speaking on behalf of Mr.

Bullock, Glen Smyth said, "Our reaction is that it reflects accurately the view that the independent tribunal took when they unanimously agreed that Mr. Bullock was not 'wantonly negligent' or 'grossly incompetent'." Smyth said the evidence on Bullock was "tissue thin".

For the Lawrence family this verdict adds further insult to injury. Doreen Lawrence said, "This decision is just about minor things. It is just a whitewash. It seems as if they were only doing this to show they were doing something. It is not as though something will come out of what they have done. The whole thing is a sham. How are they going to punish him? He is going to retire on a good pension. He will never be punished."

Stephen's mother, Doreen Lawrence, pointed out that even William Macpherson (chairman of the Public Inquiry into Stephen's killing) in his report on the murder inquiry said Bullock was "often too passive and not up to his job".

Neville Lawrence, Stephen's father, said the ruling saddened him. "As far as I'm concerned, he's guilty on all counts. If he had done his work in the early days and arrested these people, then they wouldn't be walking the streets," he added.

When Doreen Lawrence was asked if this was the end of the family's struggle for justice, she said, "No, there are things we are going to talk about. You can't allow people to behave like they have. My son was killed for no other reason than because he was black. We have been treated in this way because we were black. Nothing has changed." Mrs. Lawrence and her lawyer Imran Khan have plans to continue a civil action

against the police.

Khan said the verdict reinforced the family's conviction to pursue a civil action. He criticised the police tribunal and said Bullock was not subjected to intense scrutiny. Earlier in the tribunal, Bullock had objected to Khan being present as the legal advisor to the Lawrence family. Khan appealed to the High Court, but in the end was only allowed to attend the hearing as a family friend, whereas Bullock was allowed legal representation.

Bullock retired immediately after this favourable outcome, venting his spleen to the media in a cowardly attack on the Lawrence family and their campaign.

He accused the Lawrences and their lawyer of manipulating the killing for "political reasons" and undermining the investigation. He said, "They were going for maximum publicity which I've never seen before. It wasn't a case of us and them going for publicity together. The first we'd hear of the family's views would be on the news and that can take your eye off the ball because you are distracted by the publicity. The arrival of President Nelson Mandela to demonstrate on behalf of the Lawrence family, for instance, built up a frenzied atmosphere and there were times when we were hemmed in by the throng surrounding the police station."

Bullock had the audacity to claim that the family's use of the media contributed to mistakes made by the police because they were not used to being made accountable for their actions. "The family wanted to know so much and we were not experienced in giving so much information," he said.

He went on to attack the family's solicitor, Imran Khan. "This is the only murder I've dealt with when there was an intermediary in the form of a solicitor introduced. He was very dominant in faxing the senior-investigating officer, constantly demanding very detailed information," Bullock said.

"Militants" had seized on the stabbing for political ends, he added. "There was a political dimension that was gaining in momentum. The Anti-Racist Alliance and the Socialist Workers Party were making capital out of the two other murders they claimed had a racist motive and ours was perfect for their purposes. I saw Imran Khan on a platform next to Arthur Scargill, so you've got to wonder what his political motives are."

Finally free to speak his mind publicly, Bullock has

cut through the official hypocrisy of the past months—during which the police have professed to their self-reform. Aside from the issue of racism, he has revealed the force's essential opposition to the democratic rights of working people and hostility to anyone who dares to challenge its power.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)