

London nail-bomber found guilty of politically motivated murder campaign

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Last week David Copeland was convicted for the London nail-bomb attacks in April 1999 that killed three people and injured 139. Rejecting his manslaughter plea, made by the 24-year-old engineer on grounds of diminished responsibility, the 12 jurors pronounced Copeland guilty of murder and he was given six life sentences.

The three nail-bomb blasts occurred over a period of 13 days in Brixton, Brick Lane and Soho, and were targeted at ethnic minorities and gays. On his arrest Copeland immediately claimed responsibility, stating that he had selected his targets for political reasons. Describing himself as a Nazi, Copeland said that his aim was to cause “murder, mayhem, chaos and damage” and “set off a racial war”.

Official commentary on the trial and its outcome has largely ignored Copeland's politics. The numerous articles that have appeared simply regurgitate a version of the legal arguments of the defence—that Copeland's murderous attacks were the result of social ineptitude, sexual confusion and “religious, grandiose, persecutory delusions”.

On the surface such explanations appear comforting, depicting Copeland as just a deranged individual and a one-off case. One could, however, find similar deficiencies in the biography of virtually any fascist. History has demonstrated that identifying feelings of personal inadequacy, grudging resentment, the desire for power—Copeland admired both Hitler and Stalin—may give a psychological insight into why certain individuals are attracted to right-wing politics. But simply reducing Copeland's actions to some apparently innate character defects obscures more than it clarifies.

One of the difficulties for official commentators is that Copeland does not fit the traditional image of the fascist as a lumpen, unemployed youth. The *Times* noted with bemusement that even the team of eight psychiatrists who examined Copeland after his arrest could not “fully explain why a boy brought up in an affluent, respectable middle class family home in the Home Counties developed such a murderous revulsion for blacks, Asians and homosexuals, fantasies of being an SS officer who could rape and kill women, and a belief that he was God, sent to earth to start a

British race war.”

Personalities are shaped not only by close family relations, but also by the broader social and intellectual environment. Only by understanding this is it possible to begin to uncover why Copeland's damaged psyche and emotional instability expressed itself in a murderous hatred for particular groups of people.

Copeland is very much one of “Thatcher's children”, born just three years before her Conservative government came to power in 1979. His consciousness developed against the background of a right-wing offensive launched against the social gains of working people coupled with a drive to enrich a privileged section of the upper middle class and secure their support for Thatcher's pro-business agenda. The privatisation of former state-owned industries and attacks on welfare provisions was accompanied by measures strengthening the repressive powers of the state, undermining longstanding democratic rights.

In seeking to justify these measures, the Tories appealed to the most backward prejudices. They described the gutting of social services as part of their efforts to “roll back the frontiers of socialism” and deemed workers' opposition to be the actions of “the enemy within”. Thatcher pronounced that there was “no such thing as society”. All that counted was rising share values and personal enrichment. Anything that could jeopardise this was to be swept to one side. Racist and anti-gay propaganda was so much a feature of this ideological onslaught—Thatcher claimed that Britain was being “swamped” by immigrants—that the National Front and other fascist groups all but liquidated into the Conservative Party.

It is not possible to know how Copeland might have developed had he grown up in a more healthy social environment, let alone under conditions where there had been a genuine socialist opposition to the Tories. But the Labour and trade union bureaucracy sought to prevent precisely such a development, and within a few years had themselves adopted much of Thatcher's free-market credo. Acts of resistance by working people were betrayed and

defeated and it appeared that there was no credible alternative to the right-wing agenda of the Tories.

By his early teens Copeland, already something of a social misfit, was an open racist who boasted loudly of his hatred for blacks and gays. Yet he was not politically active at this stage. It appears that, having successfully graduated from school, Copeland choose to internalise his frustrations at this point, becoming more and more socially withdrawn.

This makes all the more striking his decision to join the British National Party (BNP) in May 1997. It is necessary to place this action in its wider political context in order to appreciate its significance. The 1990s were marked by the impoverishment of ever-broader social layers. Fully one-third of the population was officially deemed as poor, whilst many more teetered on the brink of poverty. Public sector cuts—both in terms of services and employment—also had their impact on the middle classes, whilst global developments in communications and markets led to company rationalisations and downsizing, particularly hitting professional and managerial workers.

The result was a spectacular collapse in the social base of the Conservative Party. In the May 1997 general election the Tory government suffered one of the largest electoral defeats in British history, as many of its traditional supporters deserted it in droves.

This met up with widespread anti-Tory sentiment amongst working people, expressing the inchoate desire of millions to put an end to policies that in the course of 18 years had produced a social catastrophe. Working people wanted change—to rebuild health and education, restore democratic rights and begin to reverse the social inequalities of the last decades.

Copeland evidently regarded such aspirations with deep hostility and responded by entering into fascist political activity for the first time. By the end of the summer in 1997 he had already passed through the BNP, considering them not extremist enough for his liking, and joined the predominantly skinhead British National Socialist Movement, which has been linked to paramilitary fascist groups.

In court the jury heard that Copeland told police that the Labour government was full of blacks and gays and that he had intended to shoot Prime Minister Tony Blair. Along with swastika flags, an arsenal of weapons was found in his home. Copeland also said that if God did not rescue him from the trial, he was confident that within five years an extreme right-wing government would replace Labour and immediately release him from prison.

Since coming to office, the Blair government has carried out measures that Copeland and his ilk view as tantamount to treachery, such as the holding of an inquiry into the racist

murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence, its pledge to root out “institutionalised racism” and end discrimination against gays. There are parallels to the extreme right in the US, who view Clinton, the most right-wing Democratic Party president in history, as a virtual communist. Copeland had apparently been studying material from the American right wing. He was reading the “Turner Diaries”, the fascistic novel also found in the possession of Timothy McVeigh when he was arrested for the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people and wounded 600.

To view Copeland's actions as those of an aberrant individual would be dangerously complacent. They constitute a stark warning regarding the diseased intellectual and social climate produced by two decades in which the British ruling class made common cause with racists, homophobes and extreme right-wingers in its drive to undermine the social position of the working class.

Labour's election has done nothing to lessen these dangers. Having rejected any claim to represent the interests of working people against big business, Labour has pledged instead to create the capitalist “meritocracy” the Tories promised but failed to deliver, by eliminating social prejudices. But while Blair mouths liberal rhetoric against racism and sexism, his government continues to impose further public spending cuts and tax breaks for big business and the rich while scapegoating immigrants and asylum-seekers for the social problems this creates.

Under conditions of growing social deprivation, moreover, Labour's championing of identity politics plays directly into the hands of the far-right—by encouraging the idea that white, black and Asian workers must compete against one another for education, health provision, housing and jobs. For these reasons, though Labour may be viewed with enmity by the extreme right, its policies can only provide fertile ground for the growth of fascistic forces.



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