

Britain: Labour Home Secretary supports reinstatement of racist policeman

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A London police constable sacked for calling a 14-year-old suspect a "black bastard" was reinstated December 21 by a Home Office disciplinary appeals tribunal.

PC Steve Hutt, who had served 19 years in the force and was once part of the royal protection squad guarding the Prince and Princess of Wales, was sacked last February after an internal police appeals board rejected his claim he had been treated unfairly. Prior to his appeal, Hutt had been suspended on full pay for one year after he admitted making the racist slur against a black youth suspected of robbing parking meters in Fulham, south-west London.

Hutt told the 14-year-old, who was never charged, to "sit down you black bastard," while being transported in a police van.

The Home Office tribunal said there were "exceptional circumstances" in Hutt's case and that it was anxious that he "should not be used as a scapegoat to demonstrate the desire to root out racism in the police."

Endorsing the ruling, Labour Party Home Secretary Jack Straw said that the comment, "sit down you black bastard" was "spontaneous" and "not an indication of racism." Whilst Hutt admitting making the remark, he denied that he is a racist. The appeal tribunal overruled Hutt's dismissal and instead ordered that he pay a fine equivalent to 13-days wages.

Hutt's reinstatement comes after a year of discussion on racism within Britain's police service. The Macpherson Inquiry into the police handling of the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1999 found that "institutional racism" in the Metropolitan Police had seriously hampered the investigation and prevented the prosecution of Stephen's killers.

Right wing supporters of Hutt, foremost among them the Conservative *Daily Telegraph* claimed that the officer was a victim of the Macpherson Inquiry, which had pressurized the Metropolitan Police to be seen to do the right thing.

Hutt's case became a *cause célèbre* with other police officers and conservative newspapers. A petition to the Home Office collected the signatures of 16,000 police officers. News reports drew attention to the fact that a black police officer had been involved in the petition drive to try and give some legitimacy to the reactionary campaign. The officer, Detective Constable Pope, who works in Hounslow, west London, said that the punishment handed out to Hutt was "disproportionate to the harm caused". Pope said that she was convinced that Hutt was not a racist and she believed that he was a casualty of the "political climate" in the wake of the Stephen Lawrence affair. "Racist remarks are never acceptable, but people make mistakes," Pope said.

The decision to reinstate Hutt was condemned by the Metropolitan branch of the Black Police Association. Its chairman, Inspector Leroy Logan said, "This decision unleashes a license to be racist. It undermines the good work done since the Lawrence inquiry, giving a clear signal that it is acceptable to be racist with justification and a good lobby."

Hutt's defence campaign is part of a backlash by the right wing and sections of the establishment against police reforms proposed in the wake of the Macpherson Inquiry, which was convened almost immediately Labour took office in 1997. Concerned at widespread anger at the police's handling of the Stephen Lawrence murder investigation, the Blair government saw the Macpherson Inquiry as a way of placating such hostility and restoring confidence in the police. If the Inquiry was to have any credibility at all, Macpherson

had to address widespread racism within the force. But far from maligning the force, the term “institutional racism” was used to absolve individual officers.

Whether or not Hutt's dismissal was a product of the "political climate" in the aftermath of the Lawrence inquiry, his reinstatement by the Labour Home Secretary is certainly a product of the political climate two years on.

With a general election predicted for May 2001 at the latest, Conservative Party leader William Hague has chosen to play the race card in an attempt to muster the support of the extreme right. In a speech last month, Hague blamed Britain's “liberal elite”, supposedly represented by the Blair government, for creating an atmosphere of “political correctness” that has “allowed crime to flourish”. Hague singled out the Macpherson report as an example. The Inquiry's findings had created apprehension in the force when dealing with ethnic minorities and hampered the ability of the police to fight crime, Hague claimed.

For its part, the Blair government now finds that measures it sought to implement in an earlier period have fallen foul of substantial sections of the establishment on whose support it relies. Rather than deal with a clear-cut case of police racism in the appropriate manner—by upholding the decision of the disciplinary board—Straw's response to the Hutt case effectively endorsed Hague's claims.

Labour's capitulation to the right wing has not gone unnoticed. In its editorial of December 22, the *Daily Telegraph* stated, “Jack Straw deserves high praise for reinstating Steve Hutt... At last the Home Secretary has shown a degree of common sense in his handling of an accusation of racism against the police.” Encouraged, the editorial concluded by urging Straw to go even further: “If only Mr Straw would apply the same sense to the idiocies of the Macpherson report.”



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