

British government exploits death of 10-year-old boy to mount law-and-order campaign

Tania Kent

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The recent death of 10-year-old Damilola Taylor in London, who bled to death after being stabbed in the leg, is a tragedy, especially for his family. The Nigerian boy died on a north Peckham estate, within yards of his home, on his way home from an after-school computer course, near the Oliver Goldsmith Primary School where he was a pupil. The leg wound was only fatal because it had severed a major artery.

The police still do not know whether Damilola was stabbed with a knife or shards of a broken bottle found near the stairwell where he died. Nor do they know the exact circumstances in which he died, nor who was responsible. Yet with scant and inconclusive evidence, the media and the government immediately claimed that Damilola was murdered by three children, aged between 11-14, allegedly seen by one witness near the area where his body was found. The press has speculated on several scenarios—that bullies from the school he attended murdered Damilola, that children who had been excluded from a nearby high school killed him and that children on crack cocaine killed him. Much of the sensationalist coverage portrayed Damilola's death as yet another example of youth being "out of control" and the need for more stringent law-and-order measures. Right wing columnist Peter Hitchens of the *Daily Express* blamed "liberal dogooders" for failing to confront "selfishness, evil and violence".

Several newspapers compared Damilola's death to the killing of toddler James Bulger by two young boys in 1993, an event that had also provoked media hysteria.

Not to be outdone, Labour government spokesmen lined up to denounce youth crime and supposed public indifference to it. Home Secretary Jack Straw said, "We need to create a responsible society where each of us takes responsibility, not only for our own actions,

but also for the way society and our immediate community behaves." Education Secretary David Blunkett claimed, without any proof, that passers-by had left Damilola for dead, and stated, "We have got to create a society where people do not run away from anything, but face up to it".

The police have mounted one of the largest murder investigations in recent years, involving 80 officers and other personnel. Fifty children have been interviewed and three people—two children and a woman—were arrested but then released. Still police appear no nearer to establishing the circumstances of Damilola's death.

So far no concrete evidence has been produced showing that Damilola was murdered by children, yet this has not prevented the mass media whipping up hysteria. Newspapers uncritically seized on the comments of Damilola's distraught father, Richard Taylor, who said his son's death proved that in Britain, "Family values have been bastardised and allowed to go to the dogs. Parents don't care about work any more and instead rely on social security to take care of their children. There's a lack of discipline in this society."

The father went on to assert that Nigerian society was more disciplined and that Damilola's death would not have happened there because of better "family values" and policing. One British newspaper that sent its reporter to Nigeria favourably compared discipline in Nigerian schools with that in Britain.

No one saw fit to point out that Nigeria has been run for decades as a military dictatorship, or that Richard Taylor is a top civil servant in the Ministry of Defence, whose view of Nigerian society is undoubtedly coloured by his privileged background. His previous experience of Britain was as a student in the 1970s in the relatively sheltered environs of academia. In contrast, his family, who came here recently in order to

get specialist medical treatment for Damilola's sister, found themselves living in one of London's most deprived boroughs.

Peckham is one of Europe's biggest regeneration zones. But "regeneration" has only lined the pockets of private property developers, while the stock of decent council (public) housing has diminished. Only last month, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott hailed the Peckham Partnership Project as a "shining example" of what can be done to renew deprived neighbourhoods. At the cost of £260 million, 4,000 apartment blocks will be demolished and replaced with just 2,000 new homes. A major tenants' body recently passed a motion of no confidence in the project's management. Mike Rahman, development manager for the Peckham Partnership Tenants and Residents Forum said, "People still haven't got jobs and health has not improved." About 750 of the 2,000 new homes will be sold to private owners. Rahman commented, "There is the belief that you bring in middle class people into the area their affluence will rub off on ordinary people. But they will not raise the standards of living for ordinary people."

David Page, housing consultant for the charity the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, last week issued a report *Communities in the balance: The reality of social exclusion on housing estates*. Whilst generally supportive of the government's initiative in Peckham, it emphasised that there had been 20 years of under investment in housing and noted the connection between poverty, deprivation and crime.

Home Secretary Straw has flatly rejected any link between poverty and crime—glibly pronouncing that, "It's not the buildings that killed Damilola Taylor, but some people." Blunkett's response was even more facile. He denounced the "me first" society, whose selfishness, he said, was typified by the hit television quiz show *Who wants to be a millionaire?* Precisely how the desire for personal enrichment is connected with the death of a child on an impoverished estate, Blunkett did not explain.

In the end, the young boy's tragic death has been seamlessly transformed into a justification for Labour's proposed introduction of child curfews, keeping children aged nine to 15 indoors after 10pm. "If you get kids racketing around when they're 10, 11 or 12, out of order, not under proper control, not knowing where the

boundaries are and also dealing with all conflicts through fights when they're 17, 18 and 19 that's going to spill out to more violence on the streets," Straw told the BBC.

Ken Livingstone, the newly elected London mayor who had claimed he would redress the "arc of poverty" in London, announced a £60 million plan to boost police numbers on the capital's street by 1,250, in the "fight against the knife culture which killed Damilola."

Many teachers, social workers and others opposed to Labour's repressive response to every social problem will be asking themselves, even if it turns out that children were involved in the death of Damilola, what does this say about the problems and crisis within society as a whole? There is no attempt to delve into such questions in governing circles or the majority of Britain's media. Instead law-and-order demagogy is utilised to divert attention away from a serious discussion of the social conditions that have been created in many working class areas, and those who are really responsible for them.



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