

Britain: London judge expresses sympathy for vigilante-style killing

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In a move calculated to strengthen the "law and order" campaign of Britain's main political parties, a London man who bludgeoned to death a 15-year old alleged car thief had the charge against him reduced from murder to manslaughter last week. Sentencing Richard Matthews to six years' imprisonment, Judge Hubert Dunn described the case with obvious sympathy as "the perfect example of what happens when there are not enough police on the street".

On August 28 last year, in the New Cross Gate area of south London, 15-year old Steven Docherty and a friend broke into a car belonging to Richard Matthews. When they realised they were being watched they ran off. Matthews, with his 19-year old son Shaun and a 16-year old friend, climbed into the car and chased the boys through the streets. In the words of the prosecuting lawyer Richard Horwell, "The plan was not only to find the thieves but to administer punishment".

Shaun Matthews hit the other boy around the head with a metal bar, but he was able to escape. Richard Matthews, whose car had been vandalised before, was said to have "lost all control" as he repeatedly beat Docherty with a wooden truncheon. Witnesses heard Docherty pleading for his life as Matthews shouted, "That will teach you not to mess with my car and my family".

Docherty was then bundled into the car and driven back to Matthews' home, where he was beaten again. Matthews then drove him to nearby Lewisham hospital. They told ambulance crews that someone had "given him a slapping". Docherty did not regain consciousness, but died two days later. Matthews dumped his car and set fire to it in an attempt to destroy any evidence.

Clearing Matthews of murder, Judge Dunn said that there was "an element of provocation in Steven

Docherty's interference with your car on that particular night". Though the men had taken the law into their own hands, the Judge said that he had taken into account Matthews' decision to take his victim to the hospital after the beating. Shaun Matthews and the other youth involved were given two-year community rehabilitation orders for the charge of affray.

It is not the first time that such vigilante action has been treated with compassion by trial judges. In April last year, farmer Tony Martin was convicted of shooting 16-year-old Fred Barras in the back as he attempted to flee from a failed burglary at Martin's home, and of wounding his accomplice. Martin claimed that he had acted in self defence, but the jury heard that the farmer had lain in wait for the two burglars and then shot them "like rats in a trap" with a pump-action Winchester shotgun as they tried to leave the house.

An eccentric, extreme right winger with a propensity for guns, Martin had shot Barras in the back as he tried to climb out of the window. Nonetheless, the trial judge at the time had gone as far as possible to solidarise himself with the farmer, arguing that the case was a "dire warning to all burglars who break into the houses of other people".

The juror's decision to convict Martin of murder led to an outcry from the media and the Conservative Party adopted the trigger-happy sociopath as the figurehead for a law-and-order campaign. Following the Matthews trial, Martin—who remains in prison—was sought out for his views on the case. Interviewed on Radio 4's *Today* programme, Martin proceeded to berate the political parties for not being tough enough on crime.

Judge Dunn's remarks were gratefully seized upon by the Police Federation to support its call for more police officers. Earlier this month, the Police Federation had organised a public display of protest at the Labour

government's failure to increase police power sufficiently—heckling and slow hand clapping Home Secretary Jack Straw. The police complain that Labour's rhetoric on law and order has not been matched with the necessary resources.



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