

Britain: Inquiry into death in custody whitewashes racist police brutality

Marcus Morgan
8 April 2006

On March 27, the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), a government watchdog that monitors the British police, published its review into the death in police custody of 37-year-old Christopher Alder.

On April 1, 1998, Alder, a black ex-paratrooper, had been involved in a fight outside a club in Hull during which he received a blow to the head and was knocked to the ground. By the time the ambulance crew arrived, he was confused and suffering from concussion. He was later discharged from the local hospital to the police, who arrested him for “breach of the peace.”

In 2004, the BBC aired closed-circuit TV footage taped at Hull police station of what had happened to Alder in his dying moments. The video showed officers dragging Alder, unconscious and with his trousers around his ankles, into the custody suite. For 10 minutes he was left face down on the floor, still handcuffed, in his own vomit and blood, gasping and choking to death, whilst officers ignored him. Some made monkey noises and other jibes. At one point an officer is seen throwing one of Alder’s teeth onto the floor.

There had been sustained attempts by Alder’s family to uncover the truth of his death, which had been frustrated at every turn. In 2000, the first inquest into his death concluded with a verdict of “unlawful killing,” but this was overturned in 2001 when a judicial review of the inquest verdict was rejected by the crown court.

Five of the police officers captured on CCTV stood trial in 2002, but the case was abandoned before the officers took the stand on grounds of “conflicting medical evidence.” Since then no disciplinary or legal action has been taken against the five officers. In 2004, four of the five took early retirement on health grounds,

taking lump sums of up to £66,000 each plus a pension.

A court ruling in January added further controversy when Jason Paul, who was involved in the fight with Alder, was awarded £30,000 in damages after he was falsely charged with Alder’s murder by Humberside police. The jury ruled that “more likely than not the instruction to arrest for murder was given to deflect potential criticism of the circumstances of Christopher Alder’s death.”

Although the BBC footage forced the government to order an IPCC review of Alder’s case, its findings contribute nothing to uncovering the truth. The IPCC report exonerates the police officers. IPCC Chairman Nick Hardwick, said, “There is no doubt in my mind that the events leading to and following Mr. Alder’s death represent very serious failings by many of the individuals and organisations involved—but the process that followed did not hold any individual responsible for these failings. No individuals have been held responsible—yet all those involved, family and police officers alike, have, to a greater or lesser extent, been punished by the process itself.”

Crucial evidence—such as blood smeared on the inside of the police van and the clothing of the police officers involved, were not made available for forensic scrutiny. It is still not clear what happened to Alder between the time of his arrest and the appearance of his inert body on CCTV—whether he relapsed into unconsciousness due to the earlier blow to his head, or because of further injuries he may have sustained at the hands of the police. A post-mortem was inconclusive as to the cause of death, but indicated the blow to the head was not a cause.

The IPCC concludes that the police officers present in the station were guilty of “unwitting racism,” but contends this was a systemic failure of the culture

within the police as an institution, rather than the responsibility of individuals.

The concept of “unwitting racism” was first coined by Lord Macpherson during an inquiry into the police’s handling of the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993, which enabled his attackers to escape unpenalised. According to this definition, “unwitting racism can arise because of lack of understanding, ignorance or mistaken beliefs.” Macpherson stated that Lawrence’s death had highlighted “institutionalised racism” within the police force that should be rooted out, but again held no individual officer to account.

The IPCC review into Alder’s death employs similar blatant sophistry to justify the failure to punish any of the officers whose behaviour contributed to his death. It contends that the monkey noises and jokes picked up on the CCTV footage and the failure to provide care flowed unconsciously from an “inflexible police ethos” and “negative stereotyping” that led the police officers to believe that Alder was faking.

Nick Hardwick of the IPCC said of the four officers who dealt with Alder in the custody suite: “I believe they were guilty of the most serious neglect of duty [but] I do not believe ... that any of these officers assaulted Mr. Alder.”

He added, “I cannot say for certain that Mr. Alder would have been treated more appropriately had he been white, but I believe the fact he was black stacked the odds more heavily against him.”

The report outlines unresolved discrepancies in the initial interviews given by the officers and yet fails to make the necessary demands to ensure that fresh interviews are undertaken. It notes a dispute arose between the IPCC and the Humberside Police Authority (HPA), with the HPA undermining the IPCC’s efforts.

The question then arises: Why did a police investigation working under the direct authority of the home secretary lack sufficient powers to overrule a local police authority and demand interviews with the five officers? This would be the first requirement of a review that was serious about investigating Alder’s death.

In the final analysis, the IPCC report serves to shield the police and suppress the Alder family’s attempts to get a full and public enquiry to find out what really

happened. Janet Alder, Christopher’s sister, stressed just one of the failings of the IPCC investigation to the media. “There is 162 hours of police evidence,” she said. “We’ve got six hours. We want the rest of the video to make sure that nothing else has gone on.”

The Alder inquiry is only the latest incident in which the IPCC has been used to protect police officers. In response to a *Sunday Times* story in February, the IPCC conducted an investigation into racist pictures being circulated around the Merseyside police force. The images depicted a black woman in a bikini with a gorilla’s head super-imposed, entitled “Miss Africa,” and sets of teeth and eyes on a black background captioned, “a Harlem night scene.”

The most nauseating image showed a photo of a decapitated black man, his head impaled on a fence with his body lying nearby. Underneath is the caption: “Don’t run from the police.” The photo was taken in 2003 in the US by police in Atlanta, Georgia, after the victim fell or jumped from a bridge to his death whilst attempting to evade arrest.

The images were widely circulated amongst 500 staff via the Merseyside police computer network. Yet those responsible received merely a telling-off in the form of a written warning or a paltry fine. According to a spokeswoman from Merseyside Police, the IPCC had approved the disciplinary action with no further demands.

The IPCC is leading the investigation into the state execution by undercover cops of the young Brazilian worker, Jean Charles de Menezes, in July 2005. After it emerged that police had systematically falsified the events leading up to de Menezes killing, the IPCC was brought in as an “impartial” body in a damage control exercise. A report drafted on the murder was submitted to the Crown Prosecution Service, but has yet to be released.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact