

# Stephen Lawrence murder convictions used to exonerate UK police

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Gary Dobson and David Norris were sentenced this week to 15 and 14 years in prison, respectively, for the racist killing of 18-year-old Stephen Lawrence in Eltham, south east London on April 22, 1993.

There is a poignancy to the fact that it has taken 18 years—Stephen’s own lifespan—for anyone to be held to account for his brutal stabbing by a gang of five white youth. Dobson and Norris were sentenced as juveniles, as both were below 18 years of age at the time of the attack.

The Metropolitan Police, the judiciary, media and the political establishment proclaim as one that justice has finally been done. Their self-congratulation is not only nauseating, but also misleading. As Stephen’s mother, Doreen, said outside the court, “Had the police done their job properly back in 1993, I wouldn’t have had to spend 18 years fighting.”

The actions of the Metropolitan Police effectively sabotaged any real investigation of Stephen’s murder from the start.

Police officers called out to help Stephen made no attempt to attend to his medical needs, though he was losing large quantities of blood. No formal crime scene was established at the time. Even though the names of the potential assailants had been given to the police within hours, no effort was made to interview them. Instead, it was the Lawrence family and Stephen’s friends—including Duwayne Brooks, who was with him at the time of the assault—who were questioned.

It was two weeks before five white youths named as suspects—Dobson, Norris, Luke Knight, Neil and Jamie Acourt—were arrested, by which time vital evidence had been lost. Police inaction meant that the Crown Prosecution Service vetoed a trial on the grounds of insufficient evidence. When the Lawrence family raised £100,000 to pay for a private prosecution in 1996, the judge directed the defendants be acquitted on similar grounds.

These events increased public anger against the police and judiciary, under conditions in which a series of miscarriages of justice and oppressive policing, particularly against black youths, meant their standing was at an all-time low. One

year after the failed private prosecution, this sense of injustice found broader political expression in the virtual electoral wipe-out of the Conservative government that had held power for 18 years.

It was to assuage this anger and try to restore the credibility of the police that the incoming Labour government ordered an inquiry into Stephen’s death, chaired by Sir William Macpherson.

The inquiry, which reported in 1999, confirmed that the police had failed to abide by the most elementary procedures. So systemic was their failure that Michael Mansfield QC told the inquiry it could not be put down to mere accident or oversight, and queried whether collusion between criminals and police officers to cover over the truth of that night’s events was involved.

His remarks were in reference to relations between police officers in the South London area and the father of David Norris. Clifford Norris was a locally well-known convicted armed robber and drug dealer. Police were aware that he had attempted to pervert the course of justice in another stabbing involving his son and Neil Acourt just one month before Stephen’s murder.

None of this was addressed by Macpherson. His determination that the Metropolitan Police were guilty of “institutional racism” was a means by which the racism and possible malpractice of individual officers was concealed. No one was to be held to account for their actions.

The only officer to have faced disciplinary charges over the failed investigation, Detective Inspector Ben Bullock, was allowed to take early retirement instead. Four other officers involved in the original investigation had also retired earlier.

Just one month after Macpherson’s report, Detective Superintendent Albert Patrick was removed as head of the re-investigation into Stephen’s murder because of allegations of corruption in the Flying Squad, which he had commanded.

In 2006, the Metropolitan Police paid Duwayne Brooks compensation of £100,000 for his mistreatment following

Stephen's murder. This included false accusations, including one of stealing a can of drink at an identification parade. There is no report of any officer being reprimanded.

In 2010, the Independent Police Complaints Commission reported that no action would be taken against two Metropolitan Police officers who had been accused of withholding information from the original police investigation.

The Macpherson Inquiry served its purpose in other ways. Under the guise of "institutional" reform, quotas were set for the recruitment of ethnic minorities to the police, while self-appointed spokespersons for the "black community" were now in demand to liaise with police on race relations, sit on various "advisory" bodies, and so on.

In the meantime, the Labour government pressed ahead with its assault on basic democratic rights. The Macpherson inquiry had recommended a review of the double jeopardy principle, by which a person cannot be tried twice for the same offence. This centuries-old principle was considered a cornerstone of English law. But, by 2003, the government of Tony Blair had joined with Washington in an illegal, preemptive war against Iraq, while at home it was overturning fundamental liberties such as habeas corpus, the right to remain silent and the presumption of innocence.

The Criminal Justice Act of 2003 abolished the double jeopardy principle, establishing that the Court of Appeal could quash a jury's acquittal verdict and order a retrial on the basis of new evidence. It also extended police stop and search powers, abolished a prisoner's right to apply to the High Court for bail, introduced measures to enable non-jury trials, and allowed evidence of a defendant's "bad character" to be introduced at trial.

It was on this basis that Dobson was recommitted for trial, despite being acquitted in 1996. It was also the basis on which the jury in the recent trial was shown surveillance footage made covertly by police in 1994 of four of the suspects brandishing knives and fantasising about killing black people.

In the end, Dobson and Norris were convicted on what has been described as the smallest forensic sample on which a criminal prosecution has ever been mounted. Despite the passage of 18 years, contamination was ruled out and the pair were found guilty.

The claim has been made that it has been necessary to "sacrifice" certain civil liberties to make up for police ineptitude and compensate the Lawrences for the wrongs they have suffered. Justified revulsion at Stephen's killing, and the racist profile of the accused, should not blind people as to the import of these events for the democratic rights of everyone.

Yet again, so-called liberals are leading the way in

dismissing such concerns. The *Guardian* editorialised that the verdicts "vindicate" the overturning of defendants' rights. Trevor Phillips, chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, proclaimed that "over the past two decades Britain has become a very different country" thanks to the Stephen Lawrence case—citing that the number of ethnic minority MPs had grown from four in 1993 to 28 today.

Sure, there "are still too many racial hate crimes", racial "disparity in the use of stop-and-search remains a national scandal", and there are "three times as many young black men ... in prison as there are in our better universities. But on balance, the story since 1993 is more good news than bad."

Thus speaks a representative of the privileged middle class "minority" leaders, whose bank balances and public profiles have risen in stark contrast to those they claim to represent.

Almost half of black people aged between 16 and 24 are out of work, and black youth are almost 30 times more likely than white youth to be stopped and searched by police. In August, it was the police killing of Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old black father of four that sparked inner-city disturbances across London and other cities in England.

These statistics are only the most extreme expression of the huge rise in social inequality over the last decade that has hit working class youth of all racial backgrounds. But the impoverishment of broad layers is a matter of complete indifference to the self-styled liberals and fake "lefts", whose championing of identity politics is used to divert from the fundamental issue of class oppression.

It is the growth in social inequality that accounts for the unprecedented powers granted to the police over the same period.



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