

Corruption charges vs. British officers investigating murder of Stephen Lawrence

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Britain's *Independent* newspaper has detailed previously suppressed allegations of corruption by police involved in the investigation into the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence.

Lawrence, an 18-year-old student, was killed in an attack by a gang of white youths in Eltham, southeast London on April 22, 1993.

The police investigation was marked by a failure to observe normal procedure. Despite eye-witness accounts, the main suspects were not arrested for a fortnight and crucial evidence was lost. The lack of sufficient evidence enabled the Crown Prosecution Service to veto a trial, and a private prosecution by the Lawrence family against those allegedly involved failed.

The Lawrence family and their legal team have long charged that corruption played a significant role in the police failures. A secret Scotland Yard file obtained by the *Independent* supports these allegations.

The file details evidence of widespread corruption within the Metropolitan Police (Met), including connections between officers and the father of one of those suspected of the killing. This was concealed from the Lawrence family, its legal team, and the Macpherson inquiry, set up by the Labour government in 1997 to investigate Lawrence's killing.

The files are part of the "Operation Russia" secret internal investigation by senior officers into corruption in the Met in south London in 1998, while the Macpherson inquiry was in session. It outlines "extensive allegations of corruption against John Davidson, a lead detective investigating the racist murder," the newspaper reports. Davidson, who was in charge of questioning suspects and witnesses in the early days of the investigation, was a "major player" in a "ring of bent detectives operating as a professional organised crime syndicate."

Davidson had "corrupt relations with informants, dealt in Class A drugs" and "would deal in all aspects of

criminality when the opportunities presented themselves."

In particular, Davidson is alleged to have admitted a relationship with Clifford Norris, a known criminal and the father of David Norris, jailed in January this year for his involvement in Lawrence's killing. Davidson was responsible for a key informant who had identified Norris and others as suspects. The informant's file was subsequently "lost."

Included in the file is testimony prepared for police corruption proceedings by former Met Assistant Commissioner John Yates, who described Davidson as one of 14 "core nominals" whose "criminality is extensive and, in essence, amounts to police officers operating as a professional organised crime syndicate."

One of those supplying evidence against Davidson was his colleague, Detective Sergeant Neil Putnam, who was arrested by anti-corruption officers in July 1998. Between July and October of that year, Putnam detailed how officers stole and disposed of goods taken in the course of crime investigations, including cocaine. He also supplied information that Davidson had admitted to a corrupt relationship with Clifford Norris. Police officers had "looked after him [Norris]", Putnam reported, and had made "a real little earner out of it."

Putnam claims he was told his information would be passed on to the Macpherson inquiry, but he was never called. His evidence was "brushed under the table," he said, because it would "blow apart" the Met.

In his note to senior officers, Yates, who went on to head Britain's counter-terrorism unit, wrote a list of the "Difficulties/threats" posed by the corruption investigation, including "Lawrence Enquiry [sic]--exposure of ex-DS Davidson as a corrupt officer." Davidson was allowed to retire to Menorca on grounds of ill health.

The *Independent* reports a legal memo written in August 2000 by David Hamilton, then head of legal affairs at the

Met, outlining police “reluctance to disclose intelligence it held on Davidson.”

This was at the time the Lawrence family was pursuing a civil damages claim against the Met. Hamilton wrote, “Disclosures relevant to Davidson’s contact with the Norris family could have an adverse effect on the Commissioner’s position in the ongoing High Court action by Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence.

“Part of their claim is based on misfeasance in public office and alleges wrongdoing in relation to dealings between police and the Norris family.”

The family eventually received compensation from the Met in an out-of-court settlement.

The *Independent’s* disclosures are damning. They make clear that the Met effectively sabotaged any real investigation of Lawrence’s murder from the start. They also confirm the whitewash character of the Macpherson inquiry.

The *Independent* reports that the inquiry was informed about the corruption allegations against Davidson, but was told they “had no connection to the Lawrence murder.” Dr. Richard Stone, a member of the inquiry panel, told the newspaper, “There was a whole lot we were not told.”

The inquiry played a key role in the cover-up. Its conclusion was that incompetence, not corruption, was to blame for police inadequacies. This, together with the claim that the Met was “institutionally racist,” provided the means by which no police officers were held to account for their actions.

More fundamentally, the Macpherson inquiry provided the political justification for strengthening the powers of the police and state, including recommending a review of the principle of double jeopardy, according to which a person cannot be tried twice for the same offence.

This recommendation used one miscarriage of justice to prepare the way for others. In the absence of reliable evidence as to those involved in Lawrence’s killing—due, as is clear, to deliberate obstruction by police officers—it proposed that defendants’ rights be overturned so that a jury’s original “not guilty” finding could be quashed and a retrial ordered, while police gathered the necessary evidence for a successful prosecution.

This was seized upon by the Blair Labour government, which abolished double jeopardy in 2003. It was on this basis that Norris and Gary Dobson were found guilty of Lawrence’s murder in January this year.

The abolition of double jeopardy caused barely a ripple of protest within the media, legal profession or

organisations purportedly upholding civil liberties.

The question was not even posed as to the implications of this strengthening of police powers under conditions where the state, rather than impeding an investigation, might be seeking to fit people up. The record of such frame-ups in Britain is extensive, with the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four among the most notorious.

Simultaneous with the *Independent* revelations, it was announced that lawyers of men wrongly accused of the killing of Lynette White in Cardiff in 1988 are taking action against the refusal of the attorney general and home secretary to allow a judicial review of their case.

Three black men, Stephen Miller, Yusef Abdullahi and Tony Paris (the Cardiff Three), were jailed for life for White’s murder in 1990. Two other men, cousins Ronnie and John Actie, were acquitted after having spent two years in custody.

The convictions of the three men were quashed two years later. A subsequent investigation by the Independent Police Complaints Authority saw 30 people arrested, including 19 former and serving police officers.

In July 2011, the largest police corruption trial in British history commenced against eight former police officers charged with fabricating evidence against the Cardiff Three. The trial collapsed five months later after it was claimed that four boxes of files relating to the case had been destroyed.

Four other former officers due to stand trial later were also acquitted.

In January, the files were “discovered” intact in the possession of South Wales Police. The government has refused an inquiry into the case and there are no plans to retry the officers accused.



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