

British police face investigation of racist incidents

Paul Bond
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London's Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) is at the centre of a growing storm about police racism. Eight officers and one civilian member of staff have been suspended, as 10 reported incidents have been referred to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) for investigation. These incidents, involving 20 officers and a support worker, include alleged bullying, abuse and physical assault.

The furore has broadened beyond the original complaint, and well beyond the confines of the MPS. Much of the response to this scandal has been from police officials themselves, anxious at how the service is seen by the public. Next Tuesday, MPS commissioner Bernard Hogan-Howe is scheduled to appear before parliament to be cross-examined over the latest allegations.

The cases highlight the stepping up of police repression, particularly since the riots in London and other cities last August.

The scandal erupted over the case of Mauro Demetrio, a 21-year-old man from East London. On August 11, the day after the riots, he was stopped in his car. He was held in the back of a police van by eight officers. Demetrio recorded the proceedings on his mobile phone.

An officer is heard saying he had been strangling Demetrio because he was a "c**t" and "kicking out". Demetrio says that PC Joe Harrington also knelt on his chest in the back of the van. PC Alex Macfarlane was recorded telling Demetrio "The problem with you is you will always be a nigger" and "You will always have black skin colour".

Demetrio was released without charge. That evening, he handed over his phone to Forest Gate police station, reporting that he had been racially abused and assaulted by officers.

Whilst at Forest Gate, Demetrio saw PC Harrington kick a 15-year-old in the back of the leg and, once he was on the ground, knee him in the back. According to

Demetrio the teenager was shouting, "I am on the floor now—you can't do anything to me. I am handcuffed and I am on the floor". Medical staff were called after the teenager's breathing became "strange". The incident was partially captured on CCTV footage.

Barely six hours after he reported the abuse and assault, Demetrio was arrested by Harrington on suspicion of attempting to steal an ATM during the riots. Police removed a suspected stolen plasma television, for which Demetrio was able to provide a receipt. He was later advised that no further action would be taken against him.

Demetrio's recording was passed to the IPCC, which has proved an invaluable line of defence for the police. Only days before, the IPCC had been responsible for circulating misleading and deceptive reports over the killing of Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old father of four, which triggered the riots.

The IPCC was compelled to conclude that criminal offences may have been committed, and referred the cases to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) in January.

It was the CPS that came to the police's rescue, deciding not to bring charges against any of the officers, arguing that the remarks did not cause harassment, distress or alarm.

Demetrio launched a legal appeal against their decision, and released the recording to the press. As a result, the CPS is reviewing its decision. Macfarlane and another officer are suspended from duty. Harrington is on restricted duties. The case has been returned to the IPCC again to investigate the allegation of the assault.

There should be no expectation of justice from this quarter.

In the last seven years, 2,270 MPS officers have been accused of racist behaviour. Two have been dismissed. New figures claim that only 42 of the complaints made by both police staff and the public were "substantiated", while 572 were "locally resolved". Since 1999, in fact,

120 MPS officers have been found guilty of race discrimination.

Other cases being reviewed include an assault on youth in Hyde Park last year by five Territorial Support Group officers, and the conviction for racially aggravated public order offences of an officer who shouted “Go back to your own ****ing country” at a fast-food worker. When the shopworker refused him discounted food, the officer produced his warrant card, saying “Do you know who I am? I’m a police officer”. Other officers later provided character testimony at his hearing.

In response, Deputy Commissioner Craig Mackey stressed that “what is reassuring for me is that in the ten cases that have been referred to the IPCC, six involve other officers who have stood up and raised concerns, showing that we are an organisation that will not stand for any racist behaviour”. Mackey denied that the reporting of officers had been prompted by media coverage.

It has also now emerged that an internal report eight years ago warned that a failure to address racial discrimination in the MPS would lead to “continued and accelerating discontent amongst minority communities and the danger of alienating significant sections of society”.

That report was written by Brian Paddick, then a senior MPS officer.

News of the report has been fortuitous, to say the least, for Paddick, who is standing as the Liberal Democrat candidate in elections for mayor of London on May 3. He is advocating an extension of “community policing” to incorporate police, police community support officers and “local tenants and residents associations and recognised community groups”.

Whilst Paddick denies that this is a proposal for community vigilantism, he is clearly talking about a defined political force, telling the *Guardian* this would not be “self-appointed community leaders”.

Both Conservative and Labour candidates for the London mayoral election have also promised to increase police numbers. Boris Johnson has promised an extra 2,000 officers on safer neighbourhood teams, while Ken Livingstone has pledged a police officer based in every state secondary school.

This strengthening of the police also takes the form of additional technology and weaponry. Last week, it was reported that the police are to be provided with more Tasers. The news came as the family of George Asare alleged that armed officers tasered him four times after they had shot him to the ground. This contradicts the

police version of events that they opened fire only when the tasers failed to control him.

In February, police were called to reports of someone breaking into a car in Forest Hill, south London. Asare allegedly threatened officers with a knife, whereupon armed officers were called in.

Witnesses claim that the police opened fire “almost immediately”. Asare suffered life-threatening wounds to the abdomen, leg, groin and hand. Witnesses have said that “As soon as George hit the ground [the police] surrounded him and started to kick him and then they heard the distinctive pop-pop-pop noise of a Taser”.

Asare clearly has major health problems. His mother, with whom he lives, queried why there had been no attempt to talk to him, saying, “I don’t understand why they had to shoot him. I just thank god that he was not killed”. Since the incident, he has been recovering in a secure psychiatric institution.

Despite this, he has now been charged with attempted Grievous Bodily Harm with intent, and affray, and denied bail.

These cases are compounded by racism, but they reflect a more general escalation of coercive and repressive policing of the working class. Commentators have drawn attention to the fact that several of the cases being investigated by the IPCC took place in Newham, one of London’s Olympic boroughs. Limited investigations by the IPCC are aimed at making the police more efficient, using the Olympics as a convenient justification.



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