

UK: Families of Hillsborough disaster victims placed under police surveillance

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The families of some of those killed at Hillsborough football stadium, Sheffield, in April 1989 have alleged they were the subject of a police surveillance operation following the disaster.

A formal complaint has been sent to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) by Solicitors Broudie Jackson Canter, representing the Hillsborough families. Elkan Abrahamson, a solicitor at the firm told the press, “I have taken instructions from clients and I am making a formal complaint on their behalf of police surveillance including phone tapping.”

The tragedy, the greatest loss of life at a British sporting event, resulted in the deaths of 96 men, women and children, 94 on the day of match played at Sheffield Wednesday’s ground and two subsequently.

Most of the deaths were the result of crushing which occurred when police opened a gate to let in fans still trying to get into the ground. The police then corralled the fans into two already overcrowded pens, where the victims were crushed to death. In an attempt to escape, many fans had to spill out onto the football pitch, climbing over fencing. At first many police tried to prevent the fans escaping, treating it as a pitch invasion.

Shortly after the match had started, it was called off and the dead, injured and shocked were laid out on the pitch where other fans attempted to help those in distress.

In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, the state and the media began a campaign of vilification of the fans, blaming them for the tragedy rather than the mishandling of the events by the police and the inadequate response by emergency services. Police accused the fans of being drunk, with the *Sun* newspaper playing a particularly dirty role, accusing Liverpool fans of robbing the dead and urinating on police trying to help the dying and injured.

This was compounded by the verdict of a Coroner’s Inquest led by Stefan Popper, after the longest-running inquest on record. He set an arbitrary cut-off of 3:15 p.m. and announced that all those who had died were dead before this time, returning a verdict of accidental death on all the victims. This cut-off time served to leave unexamined the failure of the emergency services.

The families of the victims did not accept the slandering of the Liverpool fans or blaming them for the incident. They also rejected the inquest result of accidental death, which left unanswered their contention that, with proper medical attention, some of the victims could have been saved.

For years the Hillsborough Families Support Group and the Hillsborough Justice Campaign, together with their supporters, fought for a new inquiry. For more than two decades, successive Conservative and Labour governments would continue the cover-up.

In January 2010, as a result of the persistent campaign by the families, the then Labour government agreed to establish the Hillsborough Independent Panel and release previously confidential documents relating to the disaster.

The Independent Panel issued a report in September 2012. It vindicated the fight of the families, showing how police statements were changed to remove any references to police mistakes or culpability. It discredited the verdict of the coroner, Stefan Popper, and his 3:15 p.m. cut-off. Dr. Bill Kirkup, the panel’s medical advisor, explained that the report had established that 41 people “had the potential to survive after the period of 3:15 ... the potential was of that order.”

Following the report of the Independent Panel, two investigations have been instigated into the disaster and

new inquests on the 96 who died will be held beginning at the end of March.

Last year the *Guardian* published a series of articles exposing the role of police spies in the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), implanted into radical, mainly left-wing groups and campaigns. One such campaign was the Stephen Lawrence campaign, set up to fight for justice for Stephen, murdered in a racist attack in April 1993. The subsequent police investigation, hamstrung by police racism and corruption, failed to bring the known culprits to justice.

The *Guardian* investigation included testimony from one of the former SDS officers, now turned whistleblower, on how the police spy infiltration of the Justice for Stephen campaign had been an attempt to smear the Lawrence family and undermine the campaign.

In January of this year the satirical magazine *Private Eye* revealed that it had been refused a Freedom of Information (FOI) request on whether the Metropolitan Police held any files on the Hillsborough Family Support Group or the Hillsborough Justice Campaign. The Metropolitan police refused to confirm or deny whether they held such information.

A similar FOI request was put to the South Yorkshire Police force, which also refused to confirm or deny surveillance. Their response was posted on the whatdotheyknow.com web site on February 7.

One paragraph read with extraordinary cynicism, “Your request basically asks whether Hillsborough ‘victims’ have been under surveillance... We would classify ‘victims’ of Hillsborough as being those who died, anyone injured, people who were present suffering trauma and stress and the family members of those involved. The law of statistics for such a large group means that it is possible that some of them may, at some time, or even currently, be linked to some sort of surveillance, but not because of their links to Hillsborough. The police’s use of surveillance is strictly monitored and regulated and is not an activity taken lightly. The reasons for doing so are always linked to an investigation and the type of crimes involved can range from theft to more serious matters such as organised crime or even terrorism.”

FOI requests have also been submitted to the Merseyside, West Midlands and West Yorkshire Police, who have yet to respond. Speaking in parliament in early February, Conservative Home

Secretary Teresa May said that if the current Independent Police Complaints Commission investigation into the Hillsborough tragedy and subsequent police cover-up were to “discover any evidence in their investigation that suggests surveillance may have taken place ... then they will of course pursue the evidence.”

A January 10 *Liverpool Echo* article reported Sheila Coleman of the Hillsborough Justice Campaign saying members of the group had had suspicions that they had previously been under surveillance. She told the press, “If individuals were under investigation at any level it needs to be in the public domain... If they can’t deny it, it will be assumed that they were investigating people involved in the campaign...”

Hillsborough family campaigners strongly believed their phone calls were being monitored in the aftermath of the disaster. The same article quoted Hilda Hammond, who lost her 14-year-old son Phillip in the disaster, recalling that while on the phone in 1990 to a friend in Liverpool she could simultaneously hear a second conversation involving Jenni Hicks making a phone call from her Middlesex home. Jenni Hicks lost her two daughters at Hillsborough.

Mrs. Hammond explained, “We heard a crackling noise. All of a sudden I heard a voice which I immediately recognised as Jenni Hicks, as hers is very distinctive... I sat there dumbfounded. It’s too much of a coincidence. For two mothers, both who lost children at Hillsborough, at different ends of the country; to have a crossed line ... we strongly believe someone was listening.”



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