

UK: The murder of Sarah Everard and police impunity

Julie Hyland
15 July 2021

London Metropolitan Police firearms officer Wayne Couzens pleaded guilty to the abduction, rape and murder of 33-year old Sarah Everard last week. It is thought that Couzens, who will be sentenced next month, used his warrant card to abduct Everard on March 3 en route from visiting friends to her home in Tulse Hill, south London.

Alarm at her disappearance turned to horror when Couzens, with a career in the elite Parliamentary and Diplomatic Protection Command, was arrested.

This was followed by widespread anger when hundreds attending a vigil for Everard on Clapham Common on March 13 were brutally manhandled by police. Citing coronavirus regulations, several women were assaulted by police, and four were arrested.

It was subsequently revealed that police had evidence Couzens was a sexual pervert, but failed to act on it. An Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) investigation is underway into allegations that Couzens had been identified as responsible for indecent exposure in a McDonald's outlet just four days before Everard's abduction, but was not arrested or removed from duty while this was investigated. A separate inquiry is ongoing into allegations that Kent police—where Couzens served as a volunteer Special Sergeant between 2005 and 2009—failed to investigate an incident of indecent exposure in 2015.

By all accounts Couzens carefully prepared the abduction and rape of a random female, hiring a car specially for the purpose, and buying heavy duty adhesive tape, tarpaulin and a bungee cargo net. The hired car registration was caught by a passing bus camera, stopped on the side of the road, with its doors open and two people alongside. The registration was traced to a Kent hire firm, and through that to private land owned by Couzens in the county where Everard's remains were discovered.

Questions have been raised as to how someone described as a “gun and porn-obsessed weirdo” was cleared to work in areas of high-level national security and could remain on the job despite evidence of sexual offences.

Couzens, now 48 years old, was working at his father's

garage when he signed up to the Territorial Army in 2002 before joining Kent Police as a special constable. In 2011, he was accepted by the Civil Nuclear Constabulary, the armed police force guarding the UK's atomic power stations and nuclear materials. Issued with a Heckler and Koch G36 rifle, Couzens was part of a team protecting Sellafield and later Dungeness nuclear power stations.

According to the *Daily Mail*, “The Met Police hired Sarah Everard's killer despite him being disturbingly nicknamed 'The Rapist'... Couzens' ex-colleagues at the Civil Nuclear Constabulary (CNC), where the 48-year-old joined in March 2011, reportedly gave him the nickname because he made some female officers feel uncomfortable.”

Having reportedly failed an annual fitness test in September 2018, he transferred to the Metropolitan Police, before moving to the elite Westminster squad, guarding MPs, VIPs and foreign embassies, which enabled him to carry a firearm and Met Police warrant card.

The Met Police has referred itself to the IOPC and 12 officers from several forces have been served with gross misconduct or misconduct notices, with multiple investigations underway. Many involve sharing information, including an “inappropriate graphic” linked to the case, via messaging apps and social media. Up to 30 police and staff reportedly face disciplinary action for accessing sensitive information on the case without authorisation.

In May, a Freedom of Information request by the *Sunday Mirror* disclosed that 84 police and staff from 42 forces had been formally disciplined for “misusing” messaging services between January 2019 to April 2021. This included “joking” about raping and murdering a crime victim and circulating confidential information. Just nine were kicked out of the police.

On May 27, two Met officers pleaded guilty to a charge of misconduct in a public office for taking and sharing selfies of themselves at the murder scene where sisters, Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry were stabbed to death while celebrating Ms Henry's birthday on June 8, 2020.

That same month, West Midlands police finally barred PC

Oliver Banfield from the force, several months after he was found guilty of assaulting a woman while off-duty. The drunken PC grabbed Emma Homer from behind, placed her in a headlock and kicked her, calling her a “f***ing slag”. At his trial in March, Banfield was only given a community order and a £500 fine.

Protestors at the Clapham vigil for Everard claimed the problem was one of “institutional misogyny” in the police, and that this should be added to “institutional racism”. Both certainly exist. In February, Sgt. Geraint Jones were cleared of misconduct charges for sharing an “offensive mocked-up picture” of George Floyd, whose brutal murder by US police in May 2020, led to international protests. The *Mirror* reported three Peterborough officers also kept their jobs and were not prosecuted despite “posting racist bile”.

But police brutality is far more all-encompassing than can be categorised by race and gender, as highlighted by the Independent Panel Investigation into the murder of private investigator Daniel Morgan on March 10, 1987. After almost 35 years, an inquest, a failed trial and four previous investigations/inquiries, the panel found what Daniel Morgan's family have long argued—that police were involved in his murder and covered it up. The panel on this occasion found “institutional corruption” to be responsible.

In June, West Mercia PC Benjamin Monk was convicted of the manslaughter of former footballer Dalian Atkinson. He had kicked the 48-year-old in the head twice after what the judge called an “excessive” 33-second use of a Taser.

Monk's conviction is highly unusual, however. The overwhelming majority of instances of police brutality go unpunished. In April, the IPOC finally announced it was investigating for “gross misconduct” the officer who killed unarmed Sean Fitzgerald during a raid on premises in Coventry on January 4, 2019.

In April also, it was revealed that a police officer, known only as W80, has been posted to the Met's specialist firearms command as a national firearms instructor, despite facing misconduct proceedings over the shooting of Jermaine Baker in December 2015.

The most notorious case of promotion after the police killing of an unarmed civilian is none other than Met Police Commissioner Cressida Dick. It was Dick who, as Gold Commander, oversaw the so-called “anti-terror” operation that led to the shooting of Brazilian immigrant worker Jean Charles de Menezes, hit at point blank range 11 times on July 22, 2005. Even though de Menezes was entirely innocent, no police officers have been held to account for his murder and Dick rapidly made her way up the career ladder to Commissioner.

This is institutionalised impunity, and it arises not primarily from the actions of individual officers but is

conferred by the capitalist state on the “special bodies of armed men” that protect class rule.

Especially under conditions of entrenched and widening inequality and growing social and political opposition, the police must find its most “able” recruits among those prepared to defend the indefensible, which makes it a magnet for sociopathic personalities.

In April, 22-year-old Met police recruit Benjamin Hannam was jailed for more than four years after he was found guilty of membership of the banned neo-Nazi National Action. Among the items found in Hannam's possession was the “manifesto” written by Norwegian Neo-Nazi Anders Breivik, who killed 77 members of Norway's Labour Party youth movement in bombing and gun attacks in 2011.

The jailing of the first British police officer for involvement in far-right terrorism largely passed without comment, much less scrutiny. Hannam was presented as an aberration, whose jailing had removed any danger.

Far from it. The ruling elite in the UK, as the world over, is responding to the economic, social and health catastrophe it has created by adopting ever more authoritarian methods of rule and strengthening the state apparatus.

The murder of Sarah Everard coincided with the passage of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill through parliament. It passed its third and final reading by 365 votes to 265 on July 5, just four days before Couzens pled guilty to murder.

It extends and consolidates police impunity as part of the turn to dictatorial forms of rule, giving police extraordinary powers to criminalise peaceful protests, and creates a new category of “aggravated activism” targeting the left and strikes. The fight against this authoritarian turn requires above all an understanding of the *class* nature of the police force and the state it serves.



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