Stephen: Hinting at real issues in murder of Stephen Lawrence without getting at them

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On April 22, 1993, 18-year-old Stephen Lawrence and Duwayne Brooks were attacked by five racist white youths in Eltham, south east London. Stephen was stabbed to death.

The case is a running sore in public anger against the police and judiciary, the focal point of outrage at injustices and oppressive policing, particularly against black youths. The latest exploration of the case is three-part ITV drama series *Stephen*, written by Frank Cottrell-Boyce and his son Joe, and directed by Alrick Riley.

It follows on from ITV's 1999 film, *The Murder of Stephen Lawrence*, written and directed by Paul Greengrass. Greengrass is one of *Stephen* 's executive producers, alongside Jed Mercurio, creator of the popular police corruption drama *Line of Duty*. The quality of the *Stephen* production and the warm welcome it has received provide further evidence of the anger that continues over the case, and the sympathy for the Lawrence family's struggles for justice. The performances are uniformly excellent, with Sharlene Whyte and Hugh Quarshie outstanding as Stephen's parents, Doreen and Neville Lawrence. (Quarshie also portrayed Neville in the 1999 film).

The series focuses on the cold case investigation launched by Detective Chief Inspector Clive Driscoll (Steve Coogan) in 2006. Coogan's performance is clearly committed, and speaks to the sympathies that abound. It is not without problems, although these are not his doing.

The Cottrell-Boyces have based their script extensively around Driscoll's own 2015 memoir, *In Pursuit of the Truth*. The effect is to push the real issues of police corruption and injustice into the background by focusing on Driscoll's quest for truth.

Driscoll was "compulsorily retired" in 2014, following his success, at last, in securing two murder convictions in the Stephen Lawrence case. There is some evidence that he was forced out by senior officers—he told press the decision had been "made above me".

His honesty made him a useful investigator of high-profile cases, but clearly came at a cost. He was disciplined and his 1998 investigation into paedophile abuse at a south London care home scrapped, after he expressed interest in interviewing an MP for corroborating evidence. He has attributed his compulsory retirement to speaking out about that case.

The real Driscoll seems to be that staple of British fiction, the honest copper. This is hardly representative of the reality of the police. Making him the linchpin of the drama allows his own good intentions to obscure the real issues.

Stephen Lawrence's murder triggered a travesty of justice. No formal crime scene was established at the time. Police had the names of the murder suspects—Gary Dobson, David Norris, Luke Knight, and brothers Neil and Jamie Acourt—within hours, but made no effort to interview them. They were not arrested for a fortnight.

In the programme, Neville (Quarshie) explains bitterly of the police investigation, "It's us they harassed, not the racists." Duwayne Brooks's phone was bugged, while undercover Metropolitan Police officers spied on the family's campaign for justice as soon as it was established.

The delayed arrests meant vital evidence was lost, and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decided there was insufficient evidence for a trial. At a private prosecution in 1996, the judge directed acquittal on the same grounds.

Attempting to restore the credibility of the widely discredited police in the eyes of the public, the incoming 1997 Labour government ordered an inquiry into Stephen's death, under Sir William Macpherson. It confirmed the police's failure to abide by elementary procedures and raised queries about possible collusion between local criminals and police to cover-up what took place on the night of Stephen's death.

David Norris's father, Clifford, was a well-known local convicted armed robber and drug dealer. One month before Stephen's murder he tried to pervert the course of justice over another stabbing involving his son and Neil Acourt. Close relations were repeatedly suggested between Clifford Norris and police, especially Detective Sergeant John Davidson, leading to obstruction of the investigation.

Macpherson examined none of this. Instead, Macpherson's calculated act of "catharsis" was to find the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) guilty of "institutional racism," thereby concealing the racism and possible malpractice of individual officers.

No one was to be held to account. Officers under investigation were allowed to retire early. Brooks was compensated for his mistreatment by police, but this was not accompanied by any reprimand of the officers responsible. The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) said no action would be taken against officers accused of withholding information from the investigation.

Macpherson also recommended a review of the double jeopardy principle, whereby a person cannot be tried for the same offence twice. Public revulsion at the crime and the impunity of Stephen Lawrence's known killers gave Labour a convenient figleaf for abolishing this cornerstone of English law as part of the 2003 Criminal Justice Act.

The same Act extended stop and search powers and began enabling non-jury trials, among other repressive provisions, but the 2012 convictions of Dobson and Norris were used to give this a liberal air. The overturning of double jeopardy is taken at face value in *Stephen*.

The Macpherson inquiry and its conclusions were a deliberate attempt to defuse public anger, but the case did not go away.

The drama begins with Driscoll finding the case files and re-opening the case. Cottrell-Boyce shows a deeply held lack of trust in the police among those campaigning for justice, with Neville expressing no confidence at all in the CPS.

Driscoll's decision to take the case is presented as a personal choice by an honest and earnest copper. "It's not right, is it? A case like this needs solving," we see him say. He talks about "commonsense coppering," because "We [the MPS] failed to do our job." After all, "If we can't solve a murder like Stephen's, what's the point of us?"

That really is the central question, but not one the series can address.

Despite showing the residual lies about Stephen and his family that

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continued to circulate among police officers and more widely, and hinting at the political sensitivity of senior officers, the series takes in good faith a changed MPS post-Macpherson.

It pulls no punches on the state of the police before then, but this is put into the mouth of Driscoll—the "one good apple." Pondering the delay in making arrests when everyone knew who was responsible, Driscoll is seen explaining that "This was the '90s." Officers would make arrests for fun, he says, and the fascist British National Party (BNP) would be more welcome in south London police stations than innocent black youth.

The series is strong on exploring how the forensics case in Stephen's murder was jeopardised. The delayed arrests led to the assumption there was no forensic evidence, so checks went undone. The MPS, describing the attack as "brief," lowered expectations that there would be any evidence to find. Driscoll declares that phrase was "as good as an alibi."

A complete and thorough new forensic investigation turned up fibres from Stephen's shirt on Dobson and Norris's clothing, and a minuscule but definitive stain of Stephen's blood on Dobson's jacket. This allowed the new murder trial in 2012, where both were convicted.

Stephen continually points to some of the real stories here without being able to pursue them. It hints at the MPS's efforts to limit the investigation and its fallout, without going further. Details of the investigation are leaked to the press. During the trial, negative press stories turn out to be based on statements from MPS Press Office.

Police corruption is a constant presence in the series, and couldn't be otherwise. When former detective Neil Putnam accused Davidson of corruption, the IPCC announced an investigation only into whether Davidson had relations with Clifford Norris. Doreen (Whyte) says contemptuously "I never thought it was *one* detective."

In fact, the recently concluded Independent Panel Investigation into the still unsolved 1987 murder of journalist Daniel Morgan, in nearby Sydenham, pointed to endemic police corruption. The inquiry concluded that, far from the MPS being "not honest in their dealings" on the case, it had been the single greatest obstacle to justice. Morgan's Southern Investigations private investigators firm was described as "a hub of corruption" between serving and retired officers and the media, particularly with Rupert Murdoch's now defunct *News of the World* tabloid.

A 2014 review of "possible corruption and the role of undercover policing" in the Lawrence case raised possible corruption links between the Lawrence and Morgan investigations. It also found that intelligence about police corruption was not disclosed to Macpherson, meaning that his careful "catharsis" was an even more extensive cover-up of reality.

Stephen shows the IPCC saying they found no evidence of Davidson's corruption, despite not even interviewing him. The end text of the drama reports that subsequent investigations found "reasonable grounds" of Davidson's corruption, but no proven connection with Clifford Norris. A National Crime Agency review later concluded there was "no evidence" against Davidson.

Concluding the trial, the judge congratulates Driscoll in this case that has "shamed and humbled" the MPS. As the evidence suggests at least three other killers, he expresses hopes that Driscoll will carry on.

Building on the real Driscoll's honesty, Cottrell-Boyce portrays him as a stubborn thorn in the side of the MPS. When his team wonder aloud whether there is actually any interest in them solving the case, Driscoll states, "We're not doing it for the Met."

Although this may not have been the writers' intention, it raises some false hopes of justice from that quarter. Notwithstanding his personal probity, Driscoll remained dedicated to the MPS, which the writers show. We see him loyally accepting a senior officer taking the credit for responsibility after the successful convictions, telling a colleague, "I'd have been SIO [Senior Investigating Officer] if we'd lost."

He was then ousted from the investigation. As the end credits note, the MPS wound up its inquiry in 2020, with the result that "The rest of the gang who killed [Stephen] may now never face justice."

Joe Cottrell-Boyce's description of *Stephen* as "a story about white terrorism and a police force serving white communities while disregarding black lives" is far from the essential issues revealed. Certainly there was racism, but the cover-up after Stephen's murder was not about police "serving white communities." The essential truth being concealed in all this is that the police are not neutral arbiters in or a reflection of society but an arm of the capitalist state, overseeing class justice.

What change has Macpherson's landmark report and identification of "institutional racism" brought to police since?

Current MPS Commissioner Cressida Dick (Sian Brooke)—a continual background presence in the series, monitoring and advising on the "politically sensitive" aspects of the case and eventually calling Driscoll in to remove him from further investigation—was hailed as the first female Met Commissioner in 2017. She was the senior Met officer responsible for the 2005 shoot-to-kill operation that saw an innocent man, Jean Charles de Menezes, shot seven times in the head without warning at point blank range by Metropolitan Police officers.

In 2011, police shot and killed unarmed black man Mark Duggan in Tottenham, sparking the London riots, suppressed with a draconian crackdown on working class youths. An IPCC inquiry called Duggan's killing "reasonable and proportionate force."

Stephen's end credits note the discovery that the Lawrence family campaign was spied on by undercover police officers. In 2013, undercover officer turned whistleblower Peter Francis revealed that he was told to sabotage a "better investigation" campaign into the murder by digging up "dirt" and "disinformation." Intelligence was fed back to the security services.

As part of police infiltration of the Militant Tendency's Youth Against Racism in Europe organisation in the 1990s, Francis also spied on campaigns by other families protesting the death of their loved ones in custody or at the hands of police. These included Brian Douglas, who died from a police baton blow after his car was pulled over in a stop and search, and Wayne Douglas, whose death in a police cell in Brixton was ruled "accidental."

Post-Macpherson, the MPS continued in its role as a repressive state body. It is not a reformed institution, nor is it reformable. Last year, Doreen's lawyer Imran Khan told the Undercover Police Inquiry that there had been "very little change." In the obstruction of Stephen's murder investigation, "not a single police officer was disciplined or sacked," while the undercover spies "have, to date, evaded proper scrutiny."

Cottrell-Boyce, Coogan et al, as with the vast majority of ordinary people, want to see justice for the Lawrence family, and their sympathetic treatment is welcome, but no hope can be pinned on such institutions to deliver it.

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