

**A Summary of The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (Cm 4262-I)
Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny
Presented to Parliament by the Home Secretary
February 1999**

The Murder

Stephen Lawrence was stabbed to death on 22 April 1993. The incident which led to his murder lasted no longer than fifteen to twenty seconds, was undoubtedly racially motivated, and involved five or six white male youths. No-one has been convicted of the crime. Three of the prime suspects were taken to trial in a private prosecution in 1996, which resulted in acquittal due to lack of evidence. Two other suspects were released at committal for the same reason. These five men continue to be suspects, but cannot be retried under the present system of British law; general publicity and comment about their guilt would prejudice any further trial.

The Inquiry

The Police Complaints Authority engaged the Kent Police to investigate a complaint by the parents of Stephen Lawrence that the first investigation by the Metropolitan Police Service had been botched, and the Kent report confirmed that many aspects of the MPS work could be criticised.

On 31 July the Home Secretary, Mr Jack Straw, asked Sir William Macpherson to chair an Inquiry into matters arising from the death of Stephen Lawrence, in order particularly to identify the lessons to be learned for the investigation and prosecution of racially motivated crimes. Three Advisers were appointed by the Home Secretary to advise and support the Chairman: Mr Tom Cook, retired Deputy Chief Constable for West Yorkshire; the Right Reverend Dr John Sentamu, the Bishop for Stepney; and Dr Richard Stone, Chair of the Jewish Council for Racial Equality. The Report sets out their unanimous views, based on the material and evidence put before them during the course of the Inquiry.

Part I of the Inquiry looked specifically at the Lawrence case; Part II was aimed at the second part of the Inquiry terms of reference i.e. looking more generally at the 'investigation and prosecution of racially motivated crimes'.

The Police Investigation

The police investigation following the crime was found to be 'a sequence of disasters and disappointments'. The MPS have been roundly criticised in both the Kent and Macpherson Reports, and they accept that their investigation of the murder was palpably flawed.

During the Inquiry Mr Neville Lawrence, father of Stephen, concluded his statements by saying "When a policeman puts his uniform on, he should forget all his prejudices.

If he cannot do that, then he should not be doing the job because that means that one part of the population is not protected from the likes of those who murdered Stephen." The underlying cause of the police failure has been found by Macpherson to be, not purely incompetence, but institutionalised racism. Witnesses, including those who were also victims such as Mr Lawrence's friend, as well as Stephen's parents, were found to have been treated badly due to stereotyped assumptions about them and their character based on skin colour.

'We believe that the immediate impact of the Inquiry, as it developed, has brought forcibly before the public the justifiable complaints of Mr & Mrs Lawrence, and the hitherto underplayed dissatisfaction and unhappiness of minority ethnic communities, both locally and all over the country, in connection with this and other cases, as to their treatment by police.'¹

Institutionalised Racism

'The Inquiry was not of course an inquiry into the general relationship between police and minority ethnic communities, and detailed examination of other individual cases would have been misplaced. Inevitably the Inquiry has heard many sounds and echoes concerning, for example, stop and search and the wide perceptions of minority ethnic communities that their cases are improperly investigated and that racist crime and harassment are inadequately regarded and pursued.'²

The Inquiry found that 'Unwitting racism can arise because of lack of understanding, ignorance or mistaken beliefs. It can arise from well intentioned but patronising words or actions. It can arise from unfamiliarity with the behaviour or cultural traditions of people or families from minority ethnic communities. It can arise from racist stereotyping of black people as potential criminals or troublemakers. Often this arises out of uncritical self-understanding born out of an inflexible police ethos of the "traditional" way of doing things. Furthermore such attitudes can thrive in a tightly knit community, so that there can be a collective failure to detect and to outlaw this breed of racism. The police canteen can too easily be its breeding ground.'³

Sir Paul Condon, then the Police Commissioner, stated that "I recognise that individual officers can be, and are, overtly racist. I acknowledge that officers stereotype, and differential outcomes occur for Londoners. Racism in the police is much more than 'bad apples' . Racism, as you have pointed out, can occur through a lack of care and lack of understanding. The debate about defining this evil, promoted by the Inquiry, is cathartic in leading us to recognise that it can occur almost unknowingly, as a matter of neglect, in an institution. I acknowledge the danger of institutionalisation of racism. However, labels can cause more problems than they solve." Sir Paul did not accept that there is institutional racism within his force, as the Inquiry found.

¹ Macpherson Report, para. 2.15

² Ibid., para. 2.16

³ Ibid., para. 6.17

Institutionalised Racism Defined

The Inquiry struggled to find a definition for 'institutionalised racism' and, while they arrived at one workable for the purposes of the Inquiry, caution that it should not be treated as cast in stone:

'The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.'⁴

'It persists because of the failure of the organisation openly and adequately to recognise and address its existence and causes by policy, example and leadership. Without recognition and action to eliminate such racism it can prevail as part of the ethos or culture of the organisation. It is a corrosive disease.'⁵

The Inquiry also acknowledged that 'Racism, institutional or otherwise, is not the prerogative of the Police Service. It is clear that other agencies including for example those dealing with housing and education also suffer from the disease. If racism is to be eradicated there must be specific and co-ordinated action both within the agencies themselves and by society at large, particularly through the educational system, from pre-primary school upwards and onwards.'⁶

Part II of the Inquiry

' Wherever we went we were met with inescapable evidence which highlighted the lack of trust which exists between the police and the minority ethnic communities. At every location there was a striking difference between the positive descriptions of policy initiatives by senior police officers, and the negative expressions of the minority communities, who clearly felt themselves to be discriminated against by the police and others. We were left in no doubt that the contrast between these views and expressions reflected a central problem which needs to be addressed.'⁷

One universal area of complaint was to do with the use of police powers of 'stop and search'. Statistics for 1997/98 showed that "black people were, on average, five times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than white people. The use of these powers for Asians and other ethnic groups varied widely." Black people are also "more likely to be arrested than white or other ethnic groups". The Inquiry concluded that ' It is pointless for the police service to try to justify the disparity in these figures purely or mainly in terms of the other factors which are identified. The majority of police officers who testified before us accepted that an element of the disparity was the result of discrimination. This must be the focus of their efforts for the future. Attempts to justify the disparities through the identification of other factors,

⁴ Ibid., para. 6.34
⁵ Ibid., para. 6.35
⁶ Ibid., para. 6.54
⁷ Ibid., para. 45.6

whilst not being seen vigorously to address the discrimination which is evident, simply exacerbates the climate of distrust.⁸

Collective experience was found to be that while senior police officers adopt sound policies and use fine words, there was rampant indifference on the ground at junior officer level to racist incidents. There was also a weight of opinion that the National Curriculum does not adequately reflect or value a diverse multicultural and multiethnic society, and that school exclusions are disproportionately imposed on ethnic minority pupils. Other submissions during Part II asserted that the working definition of 'racial incident' was inadequate; that there was a need for more multi-agency partnerships to combat racism; and that the police complaints system was unsatisfactory and not sufficiently independent.

Conclusions

The main conclusions reached by the Inquiry were:

- 'There is no doubt but that there were fundamental errors. The investigation was marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers. A flawed MPS review failed to expose these inadequacies. The second investigation could not salvage the faults of the first investigation' (para. 46.1).
- 'There can be no excuses for such a series of errors, failures, and lack of direction and control. Each failure was compounded. Failure to acknowledge and to detect errors resulted in them being effectively concealed. Only now at this Inquiry have they been laid bare' (para. 46.23).
- Mr Panton, the barrister acting for Greenwich Council, argued that if the colour of the victim and the attackers was reversed the police would have acted differently. 'We understand why this view is held. We have examined with anxiety and care all the evidence and have heeded all the arguments both ways. We do believe, that institutional racism is apparent in those areas described. But we do not accept that it was universally the cause of the failure of this investigation, any more than we accept that a finding of institutional racism within the police service means that all officers are racist. We all agree that institutional racism affects the MPS, and Police Services elsewhere. Furthermore our conclusions as to Police Services should not lead to complacency in other institutions and organisations. Collective failure is apparent in many of them, including the Criminal Justice system. It is incumbent upon every institution to examine their policies and the outcome of their policies and practices to guard against disadvantaging any section of our communities' (paras. 46.26-27).
- 'First and foremost and fundamentally we believe that there must be a change so that there is genuine partnership between the police and all sections of the community. This cannot be achieved by the police alone. The onus is upon them to start the process. All other agencies, particularly those in the field of education and housing must be involved. Co-operation must be genuine and vigorous. Strategies to be delivered under the new Crime & Disorder Act will provide an opportunity in this respect. Training will play its part. The active involvement of people from diverse ethnic groups is essential. Otherwise there will be no acceptance of change, and policing by consent may be the victim' (para. 46.40).

⁸

Ibid., para. 45.10

Recommendations

These are contained in Chapter 47 of the Report and include:

1. A Ministerial Priority be established for all Police Services to increase trust and confidence in policing amongst minority ethnic communities, using Performance Indicators, the overall aim being the elimination of racist prejudice and disadvantage and the demonstration of fairness in all aspects of policing.
2. The definition of 'racist incident' should be: 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person'. Reporting and recording of racist incidents and crimes should be improved by a new and comprehensive system.
3. The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) should review its Good Practice Guide for Police Response to Racial Incidents and other policies, and that the MPS review their procedures generally.
4. All Police Services should have locally available designated and trained Family Liaison Officers.
5. The Home Office and Police Services should develop guidelines for the handling of victims and witnesses.
6. All 'public contact' police officers should receive ongoing training in First Aid, racial awareness, and the valuing of cultural diversity.
7. Changes to Police Disciplinary and Complaints procedures proposed by the Home Secretary should be fully implemented and closely and publicly monitored as to their effectiveness.
8. the Home Secretary, in consultation with Police Services, should ensure that a record is made by police officers of all "stops" and "stops and searches" made under any legislative provision (not just the Police and Criminal Evidence Act). Non-statutory or so called "voluntary" stops must also be recorded. The record to include the reason for the stop, the outcome, and the self-defined ethnic identity of the person stopped. A copy of the record shall be given to the person stopped.
9. the Home Office and Police Services should facilitate the development of initiatives to increase the number of qualified minority ethnic recruits.
10. Consideration should be given to amendment of the National Curriculum aimed at valuing cultural diversity and preventing racism, in order better to reflect the needs of a diverse society.

**Summary compiled by Rachel Morris
Traveller Law Research Unit
Cardiff Law School**