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Doreen Lawrence: 'police resources were used to monitor our campaign'

Murdered teenager's mother responds to claims by a former undercover officer that the Met wanted to discredit her family



📷 Stephen Lawrence's mother Doreen said she was 'surprised and shocked' by the testimony of Peter Francis, who worked undercover to monitor her family and their campaign for justice. Photograph: Dave J Hogan/Getty Images

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Doreen Lawrence always wanted to know why police family liaison officers were so keen to note down the names of grieving friends and relatives visiting her home.

The murder of her son Stephen in April 1993 was becoming a major controversy for the [Metropolitan police](#). Detectives were accused of failing to properly investigate the racist killing of the 18-year-old.

"The people in our house were all black," Doreen Lawrence said years later. "The people who killed my son were white. Why should the police be so interested in who was in the house?"

Now she believes she has an answer. Guests at the home of the murdered teenager were being secretly monitored, according to a police whistleblower.

Peter Francis, a former undercover officer, said he was the frontline of a mission to monitor and at times even smear the campaign for justice for Lawrence.

"The family liaison officer who was in Stephen Lawrence's house was taking all the details of all the family members who were there," he said. He added that the list was then passed through Special Branch, to undercover officers in the his undercover unit, who were asked to provide intelligence on people visiting Lawrence's grieving parents.

He believes that "the purpose was to be able to formulate intelligence on who was going into the house with regards to which part of the political spectrum, if any, they were actually in. It would determine maybe which way the campaign's likely to go."

There is no suggestion the family liaison officers knew what the list of names would be used for. But a number of senior officers would have known how the intelligence was being used.

Francis, who posed as an anti-racist campaigner between 1993 and 1997, said he was one of several undercover police embedded in leftwing political groups at the time. All were members of the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS), a top-secret unit tasked with spying on political groups.

Since 2011, Francis has been a confidential source for the Guardian; he was previously referred to by his undercover alias, Pete Black. Disturbing details about the officer's deployment are revealed in the book *Undercover: The True Story of Britain's Secret Police*, [published this week](#), and in a joint Guardian and Channel 4 [Dispatches documentary](#) broadcast on Monday.

Having graduated top of his year at the police training college at Hendon, north [London](#), Francis soon gained access to the Metropolitan police's elite Special Branch unit in 1990.

Three years later, he was recruited into SDS, a unit so secret that many senior officers were unaware of its existence. Set up to combat protests against the Vietnam war in 1968, the SDS was funded by the Home Office to operate under the radar for four decades. It was later replaced by the National Public Order Intelligence Unit, which still operates today.

Both units required police operatives to adopt entirely new identities so they could live for years spying on activists deemed "subversive" or "domestic extremists". "Your police identity is taken off you," Francis said. "You actually give away your warrant card and anything to do with the police. Your association with the police is just wiped off the earth."

Francis became one of 10 SDS spies deployed in protest groups across the political spectrum. They met twice a week - in character - at safe houses dotted around the capital.

Initially told he would need to become an anarchist, Francis said his mission changed weeks before he was due to go into the field.

"The shift in my potential posting that took place can be summarised in two words: Stephen Lawrence," he said. Lawrence had been stabbed to death in south London months earlier and the campaign around his death was fast becoming a national concern.

Many leftwing and anti-racist groups were taking to the streets to call for justice and police reform. It was happening against a backdrop of frequent and sometimes violent clashes between the far right and anti-fascist groups.

Francis said that he considered that senior officers perceived a febrile mix. They feared that anger over police failings in the Lawrence case could spill over into the kind of rioting that had blighted Los Angeles the previous year, after footage emerged showing cops beating Rodney King.

Francis said that he and three other SDS officers were tasked with gathering intelligence on groups campaigning for justice for Lawrence. He compares the pressure to gather intelligence to "a bomb going off".

"There was no campaign that the Met police were literally as scared of," he said. "Every single time that Stephen Lawrence was mentioned in any arena at all there were always requests for public disorder intelligence. You can see it by the amount of requests we were getting in."

Francis infiltrated the Hackney and Islington branch of Youth Against Racism in Europe, a front for the leftwing group Militant. He said he was also tasked with monitoring the so-called "black justice campaigns" - protest groups led by relatives of mostly black men who had died in police custody in suspicious circumstance.

The former officer said there was always an appetite in the SDS for information that could be used to discredit political groups - and his superiors were particularly hungry for information about campaigning around Lawrence.

"They just wanted it to end, they wanted it to stop," he said. "Throughout my deployment there was almost constant pressure on me personally to find out anything I could that would discredit these campaigns."

The Metropolitan police said it recognised the seriousness of Francis's allegations, which would be investigated by Operation Herne, an internal inquiry that has been continuing since 2011. "The claims in relation to Stephen Lawrence's family will bring particular upset to them and we share their concerns," the force said.

"At some point it will fall upon this generation of police leaders to account for the activities of our predecessors, but for the moment we must focus on getting to the truth."

Within weeks of being deployed in September 1993, Francis earned his spurs as an SDS spy at a demonstration involving 50,000 protesters against the British National party in Welling, south London. The march was partly motivated by anger over the death of Lawrence and a widespread feeling among black people that police were ignoring racist attacks in the area.

Francis and his SDS colleagues predicted serious unrest, allowing the riot squad to respond with a huge show of force. As predicted, the Welling demonstration did descend into violence, but senior officers believed the advance intelligence gleaned from Francis and his colleagues allowed them to prevent more serious rioting.

Francis recalls how the SDS officers were visited a few weeks later at a Marylebone safe house by Paul Condon, then the commissioner of the Metropolitan police. He said the Met chief gave each SDS officer a bottle of whisky to thank them for their work on this demonstration.

Lord Condon says he had "no recollection" of visiting the SDS safe house, but could not rule out having met Francis and his colleagues. The former commissioner disputed any suggestion he "authorised, condoned or was aware" of the activities alleged by Francis.

Referring to other revelations about how the SDS adopted the identities of dead children and routinely developed long-term sexual relationships with their targets, Condon said: "The cloak of secrecy and need to know ethos ... which surrounded that unit, was clearly not in the public interest, if it masked unethical behaviour which should not have happened."

Francis said the SDS, which had the motto "By any means necessary", functioned like a "black operations" unit within the Met. He said he was particularly concerned by how he and other officers ended up undermining legitimate and peaceful protest.

He said his superiors wanted intelligence "that could have smeared" the Lawrence campaign. "Could I find out anything else that can be used to maybe get the public to not have as much sympathy for the Stephen Lawrence campaign?"

Through his contacts in anti-racist groups, Francis did pick up what he calls "hearsay, tittle-tattle" about members of the Lawrence family and reported it back to his handlers. "There was rumours and conjecture that the family itself may have not been sort of a loving caring home," he said. However, he never got close enough to Doreen or her husband, Neville, to glean more - and, in any event, the Lawrence family largely steered clear of political campaigns and demonstrations.

Duwayne Brooks - Stephen Lawrence's close friend and the main witness to his murder - did become politically active. Since 2009, he has been a Liberal Democrat councillor.

According to Francis, in 1993 Brooks confided to the leader of an anti-racist group that he was present during one of the disorderly protests at Welling. For the SDS, that intelligence was a breakthrough.

Francis said he and another SDS officer were ordered to trawl through hours of footage in the hope of finding evidence of Brooks' involvement in any perceived criminality.

They eventually discovered footage of Brooks in the crowd, standing near a vehicle that was overturned. Five months after the protest, police charged Brooks with criminal damage.

A judge later threw out the case, concluding that the delayed prosecution constituted an abuse of the legal process. Francis now believes the whole prosecution was designed to "tar" the Lawrence campaign by association.

Doreen Lawrence said she was "surprised and shocked" by Francis's testimony. "They put all the resources into monitoring what the family and what the campaign was doing rather than investigating Stephen's murder," she said.

It was not until January last year, 20 years after Lawrence was killed, that Gary Dobson and David Norris were found guilty of his murder. The delayed justice was down to the bungled police investigation into the teenager's death, which is now considered one of the most shameful episodes in the Met's history.

Back in 1997, when Francis's deployment was coming to an end, there was mounting pressure for an investigation into how police handled the murder inquiry. The retired judge Sir William Macpherson was appointed to conduct a public inquiry - two years later he concluded the Met was "institutionally racist". When the inquiry was first announced, Francis claimed he told his bosses that the SDS role in obtaining intelligence about the Lawrence campaign should be disclosed to Macpherson.

"I was convinced that the SDS should come clean," he said. Francis said he discussed the matter with managers in his unit as well as more senior officers in Special Branch.

He says he was told that it would be too risky to reveal the details of SDS surveillance operations. "The remit of the SDS was to prevent disorder," he said. "The overall consensus was if my role had been made public, the streets of London would have erupted all over again."

For his part, Condon, who was the commissioner of the Met between 1993 and 2000, said he was not aware any information had been withheld from Macpherson.

"Such action, if it took place, would have been clearly wrong and in direct contravention of my instructions to the Metropolitan police to co-operate fully with the inquiry," he said.

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