



Opinion Stephen Lawrence

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Politicians who demand inquiries should be taken out and shot

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From Stephen Lawrence to Bloody Sunday, an inquiry serves as the establishment's get out of jail free card

Tue 25 Jun 2013 20.30 BST



📷 Neville Lawrence, Stephen Lawrence's father, at a press conference responding to the publication in 1999 of the report of the Macpherson inquiry into the Stephen Lawrence killing. 'The call for yet another inquiry into the Stephen Lawrence murder - by some counts the 17th - must make it the most interrogated death in history.' Photograph: Sean Smith for the Guardian

There should be a public inquiry. Indeed there should be a judicial inquiry, a veritable "judge-led" inquiry. Into what? That does not matter. An inquiry has become the cure-all for any political argument. Whether the subject is a dud police force, a dud hospital, a dud quango or a dud war, only a judicial inquiry will atone for wrongdoing and do penance for public sins.

An inquiry defers blame. It throws the ball into the long grass and kicks the can down the road. This week's call for yet another [inquiry into the Stephen Lawrence murder](#) - by some counts the 17th - must make it the most interrogated death in history. As with [Bloody Sunday](#) and [Hillsborough](#), a British scandal is measured not in deaths but in juridical longevity.

Politicians who demand inquiries should be taken out and shot. In almost every failure in a public service - run by or regulated by ministers - we know perfectly well what happened and who was in charge. Guilt should lie at the top, or at some recognised cut-off point. An inquiry merely replaces the straight, sure arrow of accountability with the crooked line of pseudo justice. It is the establishment's get out of jail free card.

For a minister to set up an inquiry - or his opponent to call for one - is like a bankrupt board of directors calling in consultants. The hope is that it may soften the line of blame, fog the argument, postpone the day of reckoning. A minister declares, "I have asked the distinguished Lord Justice So-and-So to leave no stone unturned." By the time he does, the minister prays he may have moved on. The furniture of blame will have rearranged itself.

Almost all public inquiries are nowadays political. In 1998 Tony Blair, eager to push forward his Ulster peace process, set up yet another inquiry into Bloody Sunday. [The Saville inquiry](#) became a scandal of judicial extravagance and delay (into which, of course, there was no inquiry). In 2009 Gordon Brown wished to take the heat out of the Iraq war before an election. He set up the [Chilcot inquiry](#), now so dormant it can be of use only to scholars of latter-day Blairism. Two years later David Cameron, under attack for his links to News Corporation, sought a judge known to be eager for higher office and chose Lord Justice Leveson to investigate press ethics. From the resulting shambles Cameron escaped scot free.

In the [Victoria Climbié inquiry](#) of 2001, thunderbolts of damnation were hurled on to the heads of hapless social workers. Trials and inquiries cursed officials, police, councillors and local managers. Lord Laming's subsequent report came up with 108 recommendations, so many as to allow responsibility to disperse like seeds from a dandelion. When a minister says "we are all to blame", he means no one is.

The recent bevy of inquiries into the [Staffordshire](#) and [Cumbrian hospital scandals](#) has shone a mesmerising light on modern quangocracy. Highly paid officials with ill-defined jobs that are nothing to do with health argue over who said what, when and to whom. The row cannot save a single patient, while the resources diverted must jeopardise thousands. The salaries and fees roll on.

Government by retrospective inquiry is not government at all. It is a first rough stab at history. Its strangest feature is the deference shown to lawyers and legal process. All professions have their biases and the law is no exception. The sanctity of court process, important in trying a criminal case, is hardly relevant to the politicised context of a modern public inquiry. Judges, for good reason, do not speak the language of politics. As we can see from their hysteria over legal aid, they certainly have no comprehension of budgetary priorities.

Those attending the [2003 Hutton inquiry into the death of David Kelly](#) found it an eerily legalised process. It led to a whitewash so unconvincing it had to be repeated, in effect, a year later by [Lord Butler](#). The Leveson inquiry was likewise conducted as if it were a trial of the press for the mass murder of celebrity reputations. No attention was paid to the ethics of the electronic media, let alone to those of lawyers who were equally assiduous users of hacking services. The reality is that inquiries set up to get politicians off a hook usually do so by finding some other individual or group to hang on that same hook.

De Tocqueville remarked that the intrusion of lawyers into every corner of government meant that "scarcely any political question ... is not resolved into a judicial question". A lawyer is to a modern politician what a priest was to a medieval one - someone on hand to help in a scrape, to dispense indulgence for wickedness.

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