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Stephen Lawrence: family smear campaign was complete police betrayal

Joseph Harker



Infiltrating a grieving family shows the depths to which the Met had sunk. Only a new public inquiry can root out this racism

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It was worse than we thought. When the [1999 inquiry into Stephen Lawrence's death](#) heard of the lack of interest and willful incompetence of senior murder detectives investigating the case, most of Britain was shocked. For black people, though, it was merely confirmation of what we'd known all along: that the police weren't interested in black lives, or providing justice for black people. Years of abuse and harassment had taught us this; the only difference was that, after the Macpherson inquiry evidence had been heard, at last white people too realised what was going on.

The [latest revelations, though, are of a different order](#). That officers were not only not interested in finding Stephen's killers, but also actively trying to smear his family, will come as a shock to all but the most hardline conspiracy theorists. That in the days after the murder, family liaison officers - who are meant to support victims of crime and help them cope with their trauma - could be taking down family visitors' names (albeit with no knowledge of the purpose of the information they collected) and passing them on to those trying to undermine their credibility, is a complete betrayal of everything the police service is supposed to stand for.

Duwayne Brooks too - Stephen's friend who'd fled for his life on the night of the attack - was targeted. He was treated first as a suspect, not a victim, then later had trumped-up charges made against him over an anti-racist protest, and [was in the following years repeatedly stopped and searched by police](#).

Almost certainly, the roots of this infiltration into Stephen's family began in 1991, two years before his death. In April that year, the US civil rights campaigner Rev Al Sharpton made a controversial visit to Britain. He had made his name in New York on high-profile cases and his trademark slogan, "No justice, no peace" had

infuriated the city's media, police and political establishment. The British press followed suit. "Preacher of hate", they called him; "the most odious man in America". I was with him, reporting for black newspaper The Voice, as the press pack trailed him around [London](#).

But what Sharpton did, despite the bile vented in his direction, was successfully raise the case of 15-year-old [Rolan Adams](#), who had been stabbed to death by a gang of up to 12 white youths in south-east London two months previously, but whose murder had registered no mainstream media attention. Many felt his case was not being properly investigated, and even today only one person has been jailed for his murder. By raising the profile of Adams' case, Sharpton's visit acted like a rallying call to British black equality campaigners. Within months, groups such as the Anti Racist Alliance and the National Black Caucus were active, organised, and drawing attention to other racist murders such as [Rohit Duggal](#) and [Ruhullah Aramesh](#).

While most welcomed these calls for action to end racist murders and for bringing killers to justice, it seems that the [Metropolitan police](#) had other ideas. In this activism they saw only the possibility of more trouble, more threats to the established order. Hence, when Stephen was murdered in April 1993, as undercover officer Peter Francis says: "I had to get any information on what was happening in the Stephen Lawrence campaign." His bosses "wanted the campaign to stop. It was felt it was going to turn into an elephant. Throughout my deployment there was almost constant pressure on me personally to find out anything I could that would discredit these campaigns."

A grieving family being spied on during their most vulnerable days? Information being given to people with no interest in their welfare? This is the Metropolitan police's version of Milly Dowler's phone hacking - though it's far worse because this is the state agency of law enforcement doing the snooping, rather than a downmarket tabloid. A body which is meant to look after victims of crime - and no victims are more in need than the families of the murdered - turned them into suspects and tried to denigrate their name. How rotten, how toxic, had our justice system become?

Prime minister David Cameron has called for an immediate investigation, and former home secretary Jack Straw has said the Independent [Police](#) Complaints Commission should look into the matter. This doesn't go far enough.

The original case required a public inquiry; the Milly Dowler phone-hacking required one too. These new revelations - which were withheld from Macpherson - are of such a shocking and more profound order that his finding of "institutional racism" no longer does them justice. Nothing less than a new public inquiry can hope to address the cancer within our police, and try to rebuild the trust we all need in the institutions that enforce the law.



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