

Theresa May: Lawrence family 'smear' allegations must add to their suffering

Home secretary reassures Commons 'lessons have been learnt' as predecessor Jack Straw says he knew nothing of the claims



📷 Home secretary Theresa May makes a statement in the House of Commons on allegations that police tried to smear the family of Stephen Lawrence. Photograph: Pa

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The resolute, no-nonsense sentences with which [Theresa May](#) addressed the Commons on a muggy late June afternoon could have been lifted from any speech by any home secretary at any time over the last two decades.

There was talk of "an unspeakable tragedy" and of the "long shadow it had cast over policing"; there were promises of ruthless purges and of "zero tolerance" on police corruption and wrongdoing. And there was, once again, the awed and uncomfortable recognition of a family whose wounds are torn open so frequently and so publicly that they are unlikely ever to heal.

"I know the whole house will want to convey their support for the Lawrence family," said the home secretary, kindly but redundantly. "Their pain was compounded by the many years in which justice was not done and these

latest allegations still coming 20 years after Stephen's murder only add to their suffering."

The enervating sense of déjà vu was deepened by the presence in the chamber of an older and greyer Jack Straw, a slightly heavier [Simon Hughes](#) and an enduringly forthright and angry Diane Abbott.

Despite his involvement in the tortuous case as home secretary - and despite the Macpherson inquiry and its findings - Straw was as surprised as anyone by the latest revelations.

"The Lawrence family," he said, "may be forgiven for believing that they have been punished twice over for the fact that they inconveniently allowed their son to be murdered while standing innocently at a bus stop in south [London](#) in 1993."

Even though he might have been expected to be fully briefed on the police's activities, he added, he had known "absolutely nothing about these allegations".

Not everyone, though, was surprised to learn of the smear campaign. After all, said Hughes, it wasn't just the Stephen Lawrence case that had given rise to "the suspicion that in those days - for quite a long time - the [Metropolitan police](#) had an institutional bias against black minority ethnic communities in London".

Dreadful and famous as that case was, he said, the government had a duty to look beyond it and to find out how many other families may have been denied justice by the very people charged with protecting it.

Diane Abbott, the first MP to raise the case in the Commons, was also finding her incredulity remarkably unstretched. "These allegations are very shocking, but for those of us involved in the campaign ... not entirely surprising," she said as she thought back to her work with the family in the 1990s.

"I remember the reason Doreen was so angry, was so upset and was so determined was that she felt the police weren't even trying. Now it seems clear that not only were they not trying, they were actively trying to denigrate and smear the family".

Twenty years on from Stephen Lawrence's murder, said Abbott, it remained the "totemic case for a generation" - and yet one that still demanded many answers.

David Winnick agreed that the case was totemic - so totemic, in fact, that it fell all too easily into a roll call of similar catastrophes and cover-ups that have haunted British police forces for four decades: the Guildford Four, the Birmingham Six, Hillsborough, the theft of dead children's identities by undercover officers, and now the smearing of Stephen Lawrence's friends and family. Hadn't there been "something rotten at the very heart of policing" for many years, he wondered.

The home secretary replied that the operations of the Special Demonstration Squad were being investigated and pointed out that the house had heard similar debates on the Hillsborough disaster.

"It is right that we do get to the bottom of these matters but what is more important I think - as important - is that we ensure that lessons have been learnt from the ways that things were done in the past," May said. All of which sounded absolutely, unimpeachably sensible - and utterly, depressingly familiar.

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