



Opinion Police

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Undercover policing: an upside down strategy

Editorial

Solidarity with the Lawrences should not cause us to neglect the pattern of police activity of which this was apparently only part

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📷 Stephen Lawrence, who was murdered in 1993. David Cameron says he is deeply concerned by claims a former undercover police officer was part of an operation to smear the murdered teenager's friends and family. Photograph: Family Handout/PA

Twenty years after [the murder of Stephen Lawrence](#), this tragic case still holds up a mirror to the nation. And a deeply unflattering one it still is, too. The Lawrence murder's continuing resonance is largely explained by the fact that it exploded so much complacency surrounding two major connected public issues - racially motivated crime on the one hand and police-community relations on the other. Few cases in the past half-century have had its enduring importance in both contexts. Much has been done in the wake of the terrible killing. But, it is now clear, not enough.

Two of Stephen Lawrence's killers received long-overdue convictions for his murder at the start of 2012. That was a huge, though very belated, moment of justice. But it was not the end of the matter. [The new allegations](#) unearthed by the Guardian and the Channel 4 Dispatches programme - that undercover Metropolitan police officers were tasked with trying to smear the Lawrence family and their supporters - ensure that this case's special saliency has now again been renewed. Yesterday's prompt [official responses from the prime minister](#) and, in the Commons, from the home secretary showed this too - even though they raised almost as many issues as they answered. Compare and contrast how long it has sometimes taken to get even the tiniest official response to many other police abuse allegations down the years.

For all its tragic infamy, the Lawrence case does not stand alone. It has always had a capacity to illuminate much wider issues, which were particularly egregiously highlighted by the Lawrence affair but which were also, as the Macpherson report famously concluded in relation to police racism, structural ones too. These latest revelations about undercover police smear operations are unquestionably in the same category.

It is especially outrageous that the Lawrence family, as well as Stephen Lawrence's friends and supporters, were targeted in this lawless way. According to the former undercover officer [Peter Francis](#), he was under constant pressure to provide material which would allow the police - presumably by enlisting the help of newspapers close to them - to undermine the family and their campaign. But the family and the campaigners were not the criminals in the case. They were some of its victims. To target them was an extraordinary act of racial and institutional vindictiveness.

The Francis allegations show that the most important police force in the country had its priorities upside down. That all of this was happening at the same time that the force was under the Macpherson microscope makes it far worse. That the claims have not come out until now - and only through the agency of a former officer - is almost beyond belief. But it poses very large questions for those who had responsibility for the Met police at the time.

What did they know? And, if they did not know, how could it nevertheless happen?

Yet the allegations about undercover policing in the Lawrence case are part of something much wider. Understandable solidarity with the Lawrences should not cause us to neglect the pattern of police activity of which this was apparently only part. The Operation Herne investigation is looking at a wide range of other abuses of undercover police work over decades. The net was cast well beyond the Lawrence campaign. The means employed, including the use of dead children's identities, were horribly ingenious and exploitative. Dozens of police officers may face prosecution, [says the office in charge of Herne](#).

Politicians must take all these allegations more seriously than they do. Secret work must always be properly monitored and proportionately authorised. The agencies carrying it out must never be allowed to become self-authorising. If that happened in the cases covered by Operation Herne then ministers may have been in the dark. Ministers always claim that they are exercising a firm and proportionate hand over other forms of secret work, so this would be a very disturbing precedent indeed.

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