

# **The Murder of Stephen Lawrence -** **Institutional Racism in Britain**

Stephen Lawrence was 18 years old when he was stabbed to death by a group of racists on the 22nd of April 1993. Lawrence was waiting for the bus with his friend Duwayne Brooks, when the group of thugs ran towards them shouting racist abuse, before pulling out a knife and stabbing him twice. Despite police arriving at the scene whilst Lawrence was still alive, Brooks recounts that the officers refrained from touching or performing any type of medical assistance/CPR on Lawrence; instead of listening to Brooks telling them where the group of attackers fled - they quizzed Brooks himself, making assumptions that the two had gotten in a fight and that *he* had attacked Lawrence. The suspects of the attack were: Gary Dobson, David Norris and Neil and Jamie Acourt, who the police watched at their address carrying bin bags and throwing them out - yet did not arrest the suspects. The Lawrence family criticised the government and the Metropolitan police for not doing enough in catching the suspects, shortly after this South African humanitarian and president - Nelson Mandela - flew out to London to speak with the Lawrences and show his solidarity. However, despite the suspects being arrested after Brooks identified them in a line-up, the Crown Prosecution Service dropped all charges against them; the beginning of the Lawrences' relentless battle for justice with the law. After more evidence was revealed then again dismissed by the CPS, Doreen and Neville Lawrence held their own private investigation in September of 1994 - which fell apart and the suspects were pronounced not guilty. The years after Stephen Lawrence's death held more inquiries and conferences surrounding the incompetence of the police, and their failings during the case, however the Metropolitan Police insisted that racism - institutional or otherwise - was not the cause of it.

The start of the Macpherson report was announced in 1997 - four years after Stephen Lawrence's murder - and lasted two years. William Macpherson, along with other advisors, found that the investigation of Lawrence's death and the charging of the suspects was ["marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership"](#). It was the first time that the government and the Met formally acknowledged and addressed, that the police's failings against Lawrence were institutionally racist. The report made 70 recommendations, which sought to implement improvements to how the police, the civil service, the NHS and other public bodies - treated race relations and to impose a 'zero tolerance' stance on racism within the system. However the actual impacts on society are debatable.

On one hand, it is said that 67 of the recommendations were used to break down institutional racism in the police force, additionally, the report's bid for the change of the 'Double Jeopardy' rule - which prevented people from being tried twice for the same crime - resulted in its abolition and consequent conviction of Garry Dobson and David Norris in 2012. Conversely, it could also be argued that the Macpherson report was merely a facade for the Met, the justice system and the government, to appear as appeasing the backlash from the BAME community; instead of changing the system integrally, they changed its outer appearance, so that it was perceived by the media as having been improved. An example of this, is the critique of the Met's recent campaign to employ more officers from ethnic minority backgrounds. Although this ploy was

futile - resulting in a minute increase in the number of BAME police officers - ([a 2.4% increase in the number of BAME officers in the last decade](#)) it was still a purely superficial way to silence the public and play to the media's perception of a 'diverse and welcoming Britain'. By employing more non-caucasian officers, the Met aren't 'fixing' institutional racism; in order to correct something *systematically* rooted in British society and history, you have to change and remove those *with power* - who maintain and benefit off of systemic racism. For example, if Britain really wanted to deconstruct institutional racism - then they would be employing and encouraging more ethnic minorities in positions of power such as: the commissioner of met police, high court judges and the highest ranking cabinet ministers - giving those from ethnic minority backgrounds the power to implement their *own* change into the way society is controlled and treats the BAME community. They would be changing the inherent structure of politics and the judiciary system, but it does not benefit them to change how racism is ingrained in power, so they will not change anything - they will only seek to improve their appearance, so that the media sides with them and they come out of every scandal appearing morally enlightened generous. Moreover, the Macpherson report stated that there should be "[No change in the stop-and-search powers of the police](#)" - which is evident of the report being merely a PR stunt - ignoring the frustration that the black community has expressed about [being disproportionately targeted by the police](#), and the effect that this has on [police brutality in the UK](#). If there is still more evidence needed, simply the fact that William Macpherson is a white man, speaks volumes about the fact black people aren't taken seriously in our society; it is always more palatable for the media and white Britain, when white people speak on black issues.

Although Dobson and Norris were eventually convicted of murder in 2012, and are now serving life in prison, Baroness Lawrence still fights for justice to this day. Despite Lawrence's murder happenign in 1993, recent allegations against corruption surrounding detective [John Davidson](#), as well as whistle blowers like [Richard Walton](#) exposing suspicions around the proffesionalism and prejudice surrounding the case. In 2008, Doreen Lawrence set up an architecture centre in the name of Stephen Lawrence - the racially motivated vandalism of the building on multiple occasions, was evident of the fact that her long fight for justice wasn't over. Now, she has been appointed as [the Labour Party's race relations adviser](#), reviewing the impact of coronavirus on members of the BAME community. She is an advocate for exposing racism within the Metropolitan Police, as well as mental health's effect on black men - she has challenged that if Stephen Lawrence was a white man murdered by black youths, that there would have been public outcry, and that the police would have done much more to arrest any possible suspects and ensure that justice was served. Lawrence has also held conferences on [police spies and the alleged cover-up by the Met](#).

I think that Stephen Lawrence day is important because it sheds light on how medieval our society really is. There is often a narrative portrayed by white-washed british history, that racism is something distant and foreign, which has never been acknowledged by the monarchy and the government, as embedded in British history - it is ignored that even as recent as 27 years ago, Stephen Lawrence was murdered for being black, and his case was treated as inferior and mocked by the Met, *for being black*. Stephen Lawrence day is a reminder that racism is still very much rampant in our society; it is merely covered up better than in the past, and maintained by

lords and high-ranking politicians. It is a reminder that black people will not be forgotten, and that the relentless decades of activism will only spur advocacy to be treated as human in a country built upon the historic repression of black people. It sends a message, that is until there is actual, structural change, there will never be an end to fighting for black rights.