

*From the UK*

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## **20 YEARS AFTER MACPHERSON - WHAT HAS CHANGED?**

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**by Professor Gus John**

*“The state exemplifies the failure to understand how structural, cultural, institutional and personal forms of racism and discrimination intersect and manifest in black people’s experience of everyday life.”*

Professor Gus John, on the aftermath of the Macpherson Inquiry

The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, chaired by Sir William Macpherson, has gone down in British social and political history as a watershed moment in British race relations. For one thing, the 1999 report drew attention to the existence and extent of institutional racism in institutions of the state, public organisations more generally, and most of all the police. Twenty years later, how has that report impacted upon state institutions, their policies and practices, and black people’s experiences of them?

### **Whatever happened with race awareness training?**

Macpherson made 70 recommendations covering matters from policing to education. Following the publication of the report, the then Home Secretary Jack Straw mandated race awareness training for the 43 police forces across the country with Ionann Management contracted to deliver that training.

In 2002/2003, I was commissioned by the Home Office to evaluate the training and what my team and I found, as we went from police area to police area observing training being delivered and interviewing senior police officers, was truly shocking.

Most officers resented being compelled to attend the training and set about making life hell for the trainers. In fact, some trainers were so traumatised by their experience of doing this work that they had to go into therapy, or at least seek clinical counselling, something that their employers did not provide.

The response of police commanders and chief constables to such conduct by their officers was mixed. Some were as appalled as I was, and pledged to do something about it, others pleaded that such conduct was to be expected,

for if it did not exist or was not anticipated, there would be no need for the training in the first place. Yet others were complicit, with one assistant chief constable telling a chief inspector who was passionate about police/community relations that this area of policing was a ‘career graveyard’ and that someone as bright and ambitious as he was should avoid it at all costs if he wanted to ‘rise up the ranks’.

Crucially, however, none of the police forces had put in place measures for assessing the extent to which the training their officers (of all ranks) were receiving was having any impact on their operational performance or decision making. Astonishingly, discussing the mandatory nature of the training, some senior officers protested that they could not see what relevance such training had for their firearms officers, or for their highway patrol officers. Needless to say, those whom they line-managed and deployed into those roles were less than happy to be made to ‘endure’ such training. But then, I suppose some would argue that this was before Mark Duggan, before Tasers and before spit hoods.

Some trainers pointed out that communities were convinced that racial profiling and police abuse of power were largely responsible for the disproportionate number of black people stopped and searched and those who die while in the custody of the police. They suggested that those numbers would be even higher if police were given more powers to stop and search and especially if more police were issued with firearms. Such assertions were met with howls of abuse and accusations of slander and police bashing.

My evaluation report reached many conclusions and made many recommendations, not least about a competency framework for police managers. The overall conclusion I reached was that the entire, nationwide training operation was a costly and wasteful exercise in ‘dipping sheep’.

### **The police and the state: inseparable partners in institutional racism**

In my view, the police as a public institution and a key apparatus of the state, epitomised the weakness in Macpherson’s analysis of racism in the society and in policing. Macpherson failed to situate police failures in the Stephen Lawrence murder investigation within the general context of state expectations. What does the state expect and require of the police in our society if not keeping black people as unwanted immigrants and ‘dark strangers’ in check and under control?

The institutional racism in the police cannot be separated from the structural racism of the state, as manifested in its immigration laws, border control practices, civil service, its failure to tackle the legacy of empire through schooling and education and its failure to guarantee black people's rights by ensuring compliance with anti-discrimination legislation. The list could go on.

In other words, the state exemplifies the failure to understand how structural, cultural, institutional and personal forms of racism and discrimination intersect and manifest in black people's experience of everyday life. Following the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report published in February 1999, there was much public debate about institutional racism, with many public and corporate organisations resisting the label. Macpherson defined institutional racism as:

*The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.*

More recently, Macpherson's construct of unwitting prejudice, has been translated into 'unconscious bias' that gives rise to attitudes and behaviours which people with protected characteristics (as defined by the Equality Act 2010) experience as discrimination, or exclusion on account of discrimination. The problem with 'unconscious bias', however, is that it is more often than not assumed to relate to the actions, behaviours and decision-making of individuals, as distinct from institutional structures, policies, processes and practices. It is for this reason that the late A Sivanandan, then director of the Institute of Race Relations offered this alternative definition of institutional racism:

*Institutional racism is that which, covertly or overtly, resides in the policies, procedures, operations and culture of public or private institutions - reinforcing individual prejudices and being reinforced by them in turn.*

To expect that Macpherson was going to have any impact upon how the British police treated black people was to fail to understand the British state and its institutions, and crucially the positioning of black people in

Britain, British born or not. Since 1999, there have been at least double the number of black deaths in police custody than ever before. Yet, it remains the case that 50 years after David Oluwale was hounded and murdered by officers in West Yorkshire Police in May 1969, not one police officer has been successfully prosecuted for the killing of a black person while in police custody.

### **Normalisation**

And 50 years after activists like myself campaigned about police carrying out ‘fishing expeditions’ to find suspected ‘illegal immigrants’, it has been normalised that the police round up the Windrush generation who have lived here for more than 50 years and cart them off to Yarl’s Wood to await deportation and a woeful existence until death.

So, let us not make Macpherson’s institutional racism our measure of ‘the progress we have made’ since the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. In this regard, it would be negligent and dishonest not to mention that Macpherson led that inquiry because of the collusion of the police with the visceral racism of Stephen’s murderers. This is something which highlighted the fact that they, the police, were on the same spectrum as those racist murderers. One innocent young man lay dead and his murderers were strutting around the place as if they were invincible, only because the police failed to do their duty by Stephen and his family.

Since Stephen was murdered, hundreds of other young black men (and fewer women) have been murdered and buried in London, Manchester and elsewhere, and their murderers are still strutting around the place. In too many cases, having committed even more murders of young black men, enjoying the protection of people no less black than those who have lost sons, fathers and daughters.

### **Black lives matter**

In typical fashion, the state has appropriated and canonised Stephen Lawrence and crowned his mother, but how many more of the likes of Stephen have we lost at the hands of young people like themselves in the last 20 years? If the Metropolitan Police failed Stephen Lawrence and his family on account of racism, too many of us have blood on our hands and can know no peace because we are complicit in the murder of too many young people, not least by harbouring known killers and hiding

guns and knives for them. A mother's grief, a family's grief is no less accentuated by the knowledge that their loved one was killed by a black youth and not a white racist.

If those young people whom we have buried in such alarming numbers since 1999 had been white, we would have had a Macpherson type inquiry every couple of years, coupled with calls for national action, because white lives matter. We must never fail to speak truth to power, fearlessly but we as a community too seldom speak truth to ourselves.

If 'Black Lives Matter' and they clearly do, we have a responsibility to defend black lives and 'save the children', irrespective of who it is that renders them worthless and dispensable. Given the rate at which our young people are slaughtering one another in our communities, why has the 'Black Lives Matter' movement been so silent on the issue? Is it because we are possessed of such a 'victim' mindset that we have no praxis for dealing with the phenomenon of victims taking on the mantle of our murderous oppressors, thus heaping more grief, trauma and misery upon us?

We expect the police to be racist and to see our lives as meaningless. But we are demonstrating to them, to the state and to the entire nation, that we, too, see our young people's lives as redundant and dispensable. There is surely no more urgent challenge facing us just now than that.

That is why I want to see us focusing relentlessly on what we are doing about it, rather than worrying about whether Macpherson and his report changed relations between the police and Black Britain.

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