

# AFRICANA

Gateway to the Black World

Search:

Welcome Guest

[Home](#) > [Heritage](#) > [Racial Profiling and Police Brutality in Britain](#)

## heritage



### Racial Profiling and Police Brutality in Britain

Photo: Neville and Doreen Lawrence, parents of murdered teenager Stephen Lawrence, whose racially motivated stabbing in 1993 highlighted racism in the British police force.

Courtesy: AP Photo (Adam Butler)

[Email](#)    [Letter to the Editor](#)

As many African-Americans attempt to make sense of the acquittals of four white policemen who killed an unarmed black man, and as U.S. presidential candidates Al Gore and Bill Bradley debate ways of dealing with racial profiling, a similar discussion on racism and the police is taking place across the Atlantic, in Britain. The unsolved case of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager stabbed to death by white youths in South London in 1993, is once again dominating British headlines. Last week the one-year anniversary of the Macpherson Report, a scathing assessment of police mishandling of the Lawrence case and of "institutional racism" within the Metropolitan Police, reopened old wounds.

Sir William Macpherson's speech on the anniversary of his inquiry triggered a war of words between government and opposition, and generated considerable discussion on racism in Britain. In his address Macpherson said he was unimpressed with supposed advances in eradicating racism in the police department. And in an interview he went even further, saying that not only the police, but also the army, the fire service, the judiciary and even the Parliament were guilty of "unwitting" prejudice. "There are other institutions in Britain which suffer from the complaint [institutional racism] -- for example, the fire service and the Army," the former High Court Judge told *The Daily Telegraph*. "Probably the Judiciary has to examine itself, so do magistrates. It is undoubtedly there in Parliament too."

Macpherson's accusations drew a sharp retort from Home Secretary Jack Straw, who pointed to the "significant progress in a number of key areas" and stressed that of the 39 recommendations the Report made to the police force, 25 had been implemented and an "action plan" put in place for the other 14. Straw said the Home Office had established quotas for hiring ethnic minorities, and that the number of minorities on the force had reached a record 1,000. Similarly, Police Commissioner Sir John Stevens emphasized the "immense progress" made, and took issue with the "institutional racism charge," saying it demoralized the police and undermined public trust in the force.

Many critics, however, are unmoved by the defensive explanations of the police. Many recall that a year ago Home Secretary Straw attempted to ban leaks of the Macpherson Report, and statistics suggest that British police disproportionately target minorities. According to the Commission for Racial Equality, for example, although blacks comprise less than 2 percent of Britain's total population, blacks make up 46 percent of those arrested for robbery in Britain compared to 42 percent who are white. Similarly, in 1999, black people in Greater Manchester were four times more likely than whites to be stopped by the police.

Although the British police have a poor record on race, the past year saw a number of police leaders step forward and speak out against racism in their ranks. Greater Manchester Police Chief Constable David Wilmot publicly admitted that his force had "overt" and "internalized" racism. And a police official recently confirmed the fears of Doreen Lawrence, the mother of the black teenager who was murdered in 1993, who had accused the police of being more interested in investigating her son than his killers. Peter Moorhouse, the Chairman of the Police Complaints Authority, said a culture of racism within the Metropolitan Police was partly to blame for the failure to prosecute Stephen Lawrence's murderers. Police chiefs are now saying that they are close to building a complete picture of what happened the night Lawrence was murdered, although they deny speculation that they are close to catching the killers.

Recommendations made by Macpherson's inquiry included measures to ensure ethnic diversity within the force and procedures to report racist incidents, but the most controversial item was a proposal to make "stop-and-search" procedures "fully accountable." According to the 1996 British Crime Survey, 14 percent of blacks reported being stopped by the police more than once, compared to 5 percent of whites. Under Macpherson's proposed procedure, officers would have to file reports on each stop-and-search case, detailing the ethnicity of the individual and presenting a copy of the report to the person involved. In the past year, stop-and-search cases have declined considerably, and critics have used this to explain the rise in violent street crime. The Police Federation has publicly accused Macpherson of undermining police morale, and saying that for fear of being branded racists, police are simply afraid to stop blacks and Asians, which has led to a surge in crime. Macpherson retorted, "If stop-and-search has reduced and if crime has thereby increased that's the fault of the police, not of the inquiry."

According to Misan Akporiaye, a Nigerian-born architect who has long lived in London, "There is police brutality but not as bad as the US, probably because the British police are not armed. But incidents such as the Lawrence murder point to police racism. The police did not question the youth who was with Stephen for months! And now the police have set up an inquiry committee, made up of themselves to investigate themselves. How can they be unbiased?"

Police brutality is particularly a problem in England's ghettos, such as Manchester's Moss Side and London's Deptford and Southall districts. Sub-standard schooling and housing, coupled with high unemployment (20 percent), often lead to high crime rates and a heavy-handed police presence. Authorities have often justified ruthless police tactics as a way to control "yardies," Jamaican-born gangsters infamous for their merciless violence and glamorous lifestyles. The notorious murder of Mark Burnett, who in 1991 was gunned down in a London nightclub for stepping on the shoes of a "yardie," was highly publicized and used to support calls for tougher policing and anti-immigration legislation. But according to Tony Thompson, author of *Gangland Britain* (1995), a study of the "yardie" underworld, media hype has blown the "yardie problem" out of proportion. While the gangsters certainly exist, they are not organized and number less than 200, committing 57 murders between 1986 and 1995.

Britain's ghettos have repeatedly erupted in riots in response to police brutality or police indifference to horrifying hate crimes. In 1981, in the predominantly black London neighborhood of Brixton, 13 young blacks died in a fire many felt was caused by racist arsonists, but which the police dismissed as an accident. Anti-police riots raged in Brixton, and later spread into thirty cities across the country, including Manchester's Moss Side District, where a thousand youths besieged a police station, and Liverpool's Toxteth district, where 780 policemen were seriously hurt in clashes with demonstrators.

Despite the outbreaks of violence, the government's attitude towards racism has historically been dismissive. In 1976, for example, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher attempted to justify and excuse British anger at immigration from the Caribbean and Asia. "If we went on as we are, then by the end of the century there'd be four million of the New Commonwealth or Pakistan here," she said. "Now that's an awful lot, and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people of a different culture. And you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law, and has done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped, people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in." In a similar spirit, Peter Lloyd, Minister of State at the Home Office, reported to a House of Commons Committee in 1993 that the findings of the British Crime Survey documented 130,000 to 140,000 racist attacks a year – however, he reassured the Committee, "only a minority are serious acts of violence."

A study released by the Trade Unions Congress in January argued that blacks and Asian professionals "face a glass ceiling," and that the number of black or Asian managers has declined over the past ten years. Akporiaye agrees. "There are definitely glass ceilings in certain industries," she said. "Architecture is dominated by middle-aged white men, and there isn't much room for females...forget about black females. In other industries, such as the 'new media,' I think there's more opportunity for non-whites to progress. There are less preconceived ideas."

It was in the period following World War II that large numbers of West Indian immigrants began to arrive in Britain, where the war-ravaged economy was crippled by a labor shortage. The Nationality Act of 1948 granted citizenship to subjects of British colonies, who were entitled to enter Britain freely and stay for as long as they wanted. British employers such as London Transport and the British Hotels and Restaurants Association lured "guest workers" from the Caribbean with paid fares and other incentives. By the mid-1950s, with immigration from Asia and West Africa increasing, the tide turned against black immigrants. In the general election of 1964, a Conservative candidate from Birmingham based his

campaign on "coloured repatriation" and the unforgettable slogan "If you want a nigger neighbor, vote Labour." Today, West Indian and African immigrants are still the targets of daily scorn, and even when born in Britain are not always regarded as full citizens. As Abimbola Omoniyi, a British woman of Nigerian descent now living in New York, put it, "Lennox Lewis is [considered] a Brit now because he's heavyweight champion. If he was a criminal, he'd be [considered] a West Indian, a yardie."

Although such attitudes continue to prevail, there is evidence of a greater sense of racial tolerance growing among the British public. A recent opinion poll suggested that Britons have become less racist in the past five years. More than half the whites questioned (53 percent) said they "would not mind" if a close relative married a black or an Asian, up from 21 percent in 1995.

Because it has brought the issue of racism and discrimination to the center of public discourse, the Macpherson Report has been hailed by many as a landmark in the British civil rights movement. Even Home Secretary Straw, who bristled at Macpherson's accusations, has called the Report "a watershed in not just policing, but in the attitudes of society as a whole." But he added, "Full delivery of the action plan can only be a start on the road to delivering a truly multi-cultural Britain, where diversity becomes a cornerstone of our modern society."

[Email](#)   [Letter to the Editor](#)

[About Us](#) | [Your Privacy](#) | [Careers](#) | [Newsletter](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#)

Africana.com web site © Copyright 1999-2003 Africana.com Inc.

Microsoft® Encarta® Africana content © Copyright 1999-2003 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved to media owners