

**INSTITUTIONAL RACISM AND POLICE SERVICE DELIVERY**

1. The published report of the Police Complaints Authority states that the investigation by Kent Police into the murder of Stephen Lawrence did not produce any evidence of racist conduct by police officers who dealt with the incident and with the case subsequently. Many commentators have found this conclusion unconvincing. A key issue is what would constitute 'racist conduct' in such a situation, and how it might be identified. The aim of this note is to set out an alternative understanding of 'racist conduct' from that which seems to be implied in the PCA report, an understanding which hopefully can illuminate more clearly the challenge facing the police service in the aftermath of Stephen Lawrence's death.

2. The notion of 'racist conduct' that became established following the Scarman Inquiry was one of overt acts of discrimination or hostility by individuals who were acting out their personal prejudices. Racism was therefore a problem specifically of individual officers, of 'rotten apples' within the service who 'let the side down'. On this diagnosis, the solution to the problem would lie (a) at the selection stage, at which prejudiced individuals should be identified and weeded out, and (b) through the application of disciplinary sanctions against those who display such behaviour on the job. This conception of racism appears still to be the normal understanding in police circles, and appears also to have informed the conclusion reported by the PCA.

3. Is this analysis adequate to identify the challenge faced by the police of meeting the needs of minority communities and of providing a fair and effective service to members of all ethnic groups? Does it sufficiently explain the visible

minority communities' experience of policing over recent years? Is it reasonable to attribute the problems that have arisen to just a small number of individuals, given the fundamental shift that has taken place towards a multi-ethnic society in Britain over this period? To raise such questions is not to doubt the policy commitment of the police service to address issues of racial equality, but is to focus instead on presumptions which may underlie the policy's implementation.

4. First of all, it is quite unrealistic that minority concerns about differentials in stop and search, about the police response to racial attacks, and about police demeanour towards visible minorities generally, could be the result of actions solely of a small number of individuals. At the very least, they must be the result of tendencies among a much larger number of officers, if not the outcome of 'normal policing'.

5. Secondly, when all other major institutions are facing the need to adapt to an increasingly multi-ethnic society, it is not credible that the majority of police officers could be immune from the challenges posed. Understanding and developing respect for other cultures, recognising the pitfalls of cross-cultural communication, appreciating the impact of racism on people's lives – these together with an awareness of how one's own prejudices and ethnocentrism can affect one's behaviour are all fundamental challenges that affect every police officer in the land. They are normal challenges which are not peculiar to the police, and they affect other public service providers also.

6. For the police service, however, there is an additional dimension which arises from the nature of the policing role. Police work, unlike most other professional activities, has the capacity to bring officers into contact with a skewed cross-section of society, with the well-recognised potential for producing negative

stereotypes of particular groups. Such stereotypes become the common currency of the police occupational culture. If the predominantly white staff of the police organisation have their experience of visible minorities largely restricted to interactions with such groups, then negative racial stereotypes will tend to develop accordingly.

7. The specific challenges identified above are all challenges that potentially affect all police officers. Failure to address them is liable to result in a generalised tendency, particularly where any element of discretion is involved, whereby minorities may receive different and less favourable treatment than the majority. Such differential treatment need be neither conscious nor intentional, and it may be practised routinely by officers whose professionalism is exemplary in all other respects. For these reasons, such tendencies - although extensive - may be both uncomfortable to acknowledge and difficult to detect in the individual case. By comparison, the overt acts of racism by bigoted individuals are relatively easy to identify and respond to at this level.

8. There is great danger that focussing on overt acts of personal racism by individual officers may deflect attention from the much greater institutional challenge that has been identified above. This challenge potentially manifests itself in the daily activity of each member of staff. It was potentially *ó* though not necessarily actually *ó* manifest in the actions of every officer involved in the events following Stephen Lawrence's murder. What were the images of Stephen as a young black person in the minds of those who attended the scene, and did they check out any possible tendencies to make assumptions of a racial nature? Did they routinely consider and also prioritise the possibility that racism could have been his attackers' motivation? Did they appreciate and respond to the concerns that a black family in particular might have when dealing with the police in these kinds of circumstances? Regardless of whether conscious or

intended, any shortfalls in professional standards in such situations (such as delays, omissions, or biases) may easily be translated by others as visible manifestations of a more subtle form of racism on the part of the police.

9. It would be appalling to suppose that police officers would attend the murder scene, and work on this case, and while doing so engage in overt and deliberate racist conduct. To this extent the conclusion of the Police Complaints Authority report offers little surprise. Whether there should be confidence that no racially discriminatory treatment of any kind took place, e.g. of a more subtle and unintended nature as indicated above, is an entirely different matter. In general, there are sound reasons to suppose that biased actions could have occurred, on account of the kinds of institutional factors which have been identified.

10. The above analysis sets out a form of racism which was not conceptualised clearly in the Scarman Report, since it is usually covert rather than overt, unintended so far as motivation is concerned, acted out unconsciously by individuals, and an expression of collective rather than purely individual sentiment. Particularly on account of the latter characteristic, this may be appropriately referred to as a form of institutional racism. However, by restricting the term institutional racism to explicit manifestations at policy level, Scarman failed to address the more subtle and concealed form that organisational-level racism may take. This is not to say that this more covert form of institutional racism may not be expressed overtly at times, e.g. through use of racial epithets or generalisations about particular ethnic groups. Its most important and challenging feature, though, is its predominantly hidden character and its inbuilt pervasiveness within the occupational culture.

11. It could be said that institutional racism in this sense is in fact pervasive throughout the culture and institutions of the whole of British society, and is no

way specific to the police service. However, because of the nature of the police role, its impact on society if not addressed in the police organisation may be particularly severe. In many other public services the challenge of institutional racism has already been acknowledged and acted upon by senior management. In the police service, despite the extensive activity designed to address racial and ethnic issues in recent years, the concept of 'institutional racism' has not received the attention it deserves. The recent report from HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (*Winning the Race: Policing Plural Communities*) moves further in this direction than before. There is a need, however, to present the challenge in the clearest and most forthright terms possible, and a need also to demonstrate how a more subtle form of 'racist conduct' may manifest itself at the level of service delivery on the street. The nature of the Stephen Lawrence Murder Inquiry provides a unique opportunity for these two needs to be met.

12. Although tackling racism in general is the responsibility of every individual officer, tackling 'institutional racism' in the above sense is particularly the responsibility of police management and supervisors. It is the responsibility of the organisation to identify and then remove these potential barriers to professional good practice, and to ensure that front-line staff have the necessary awareness, understanding and skill to deal with racist incidents and to provide an effective service to minority ethnic communities as well as to the majority group.

13. In some respects, the solutions to these problems are already well-known, and numerous initiatives have already been taken by the police. However, by comparison with the efforts made to address equal opportunities in employment, the organisational response in addressing race issues in service delivery has tended to be piecemeal. For example, the essentials for a training strategy on racial issues were set out by an excellent Police Training Council Working Party

report as long ago as 1983, yet such a strategy still remains to be fully and systematically implemented.

14. Training, however, cannot be the solution alone or any more than could reliance on selection and discipline. As in any large organisation, an overall strategic approach to tackle the problem of institutional racism must be formulated and then implemented at all levels, with the lead coming visibly from the top. However, this should not be done by the police in isolation, but by means of a fully developed partnership approach in which the police service works jointly with the minority ethnic communities. Such a partnership approach is essential, both to identify and address community needs, and also to build mutual confidence and trust. Seventeen years after Scarman, the Stephen Lawrence Murder Inquiry provides a unique opportunity to get things right.

Robin Oakley

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#### References

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