

Speech by PAUL WILSON

McGowan Memorial Rally

Saturday 1st July 2000

When I was first approached by Clifton McGowan and asked if I would speak at today's Rally, there was absolutely only one answer I could give. 'With pleasure'. For some people it may seem rather odd that I, a police officer, would consider not only attending today's event but also actually agreeing to speak on a platform. Well, for those of you that still think it rather strange, I would refer you to a reasonably familiar publication entitled 'The Stephen Lawrence Report. And I would draw your attention to the chapter entitled 'Black Police Association'.

It must be nearly two years ago now that I also recall a number of people thinking it rather odd that the Black Police Association should make a written submission to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, but to accept an invitation to address the Inquiry was surely going too far.

However, address the Inquiry we did and many senior police officers were visibly taken aback by the fact we had articulated, with some passion, just why Institutional Racism was a central issue for the police service.

Well, here I am again, today, as a Black guy, a police officer, but most of all someone, just like you, who cares enough to want to speak out,

someone who wants to add weight to the all too often silent voices. Someone who wants to speak about the unspeakable. I'm not here today to speak about the latest police recruitment policies, as important as they may be, or tell you how difficult it is for Black police staff to get their complaints dealt with, an issue very close to my heart.

No, I suppose I'm here today because I have two young children. And I cannot accept the fact that for the remainder of their lives, their colour, their appearance, will lead others to make assumptions about their behaviour, their morality, their honesty and integrity, their education, their nationality, their sexual prowess, their athletic ability and their suitability for employment, job promotion and credit facilities.

It's now nearly two years since I addressed Sir William MacPherson. I'm still passionate about institutional racism, much to the despair of some colleagues – both Black and White. The issues are still with us. Of course they are. We are talking about values and beliefs that have become ingrained as a result of 400 years of slavery and colonialism. To make inroads into that mindset, into that value system, will take years of commitment and resilience.

That is why we are assembled here today?

We are here today because of race

The real thing, the most important issue in this country that we try not to talk about.

That is, race.

"The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the colour line,"

summed up the great African American academic W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903.

How dispiriting to realise it is the problem of the 21st century as well.

But in truth there are really no public discussions of race. There are discussions of positive action, single parenthood, and race hate crime, social exclusion and, in the wake of human tragedies like the Stephen Lawrence murder, of police training and procedures.

These are discussions that appear to cause the least amount of discomfort to the smallest possible number of people.

But the fact is race changes everything, often in subtle or unconscious fashion. Introduce race into any equation and you suddenly get a different answer. That is a fact. It is an astonishing dissonance in a nation allegedly based on equality, that there is a group of the Queen's subjects who are assumed, simply by virtue of appearance, to be less trustworthy, less educated or educate able and less moral. We currently have a Race Relations Act, that Act is shortly to be amended and that is good news for many of us. We can all pore over the new amendments and make our observations in favour or against. Many of us will do just that.

Late night TV and Radio discussions will flourish. You might even hear me speaking about the ramifications of the new 'Public Duty' clause. But will the new amendments address the thoughts and views of the man and woman in the street?

What we need to talk about candidly is something more difficult to comprehend than whether the new Bill goes far enough.

It is the unconscious racial shorthand that shapes assumptions so automatic as to be a series of psychological tics:

that the black University undergrad must be on scholarship, that the black woman with a clutch of kids is careless instead of devoted to the vocation of motherhood.

Not the shouts of racist abuse but the conclusions about everything from family background to taste in music, based on colour alone, which blunt the acceptance of individuality and originality that is the glory of being human. Some of this is easy to see, and to deride. A black electrician gets on the train at night and there is the barely perceptible embrace of purses on the laps of women around him. A black lawyer stands with upraised hand and watches the cabs whiz by. A department security guard trails the only black customer through a store.

When police officers recently stopped Neville Lawrence, Lord Taylor and Bishop Sentamu is it unreasonable to assume they became suspects by

virtue of colour?

On the highways, being stopped because of race is so commonplace in the United States that there's even a clever name for it: DWB, or "driving while black."

Surveys in our Black newspapers often indicate a great gap in understanding, between a white community that believes things are ever so much better and a black community that thinks that is delusional. And that gap mirrors a gap more important than numbers, between what many of us believe we believe, and the subtle assumptions that creep into our consciousness, and which many are often unwilling to admit are there.

So the ability to skirt around the issues and in the margins continues, the discussions of the latest diversity strategy or the foster-care system or the failure of black leadership, the lack of Black political representation.

The flagrant bigotries are discussed; the racial attacks -the psychology of how we see one another and what that does to us too often is not.

One of the most talkative nations on earth falls silent in the face of the enormity of the failure to effectively address the colour line of

incomprehension and subtle assumptions. A few years ago I was involved in the police promotions exam procedure. I would either assess officers in role play situations or be the role actor. One day I received a letter from the police promotion board advising me that my services were no longer required. In fact all Black officers involved in the examination process received similar letters.

Apparently, we were told, the presence of Black people in the assessment procedure provided misleading stimuli to some police officers. What was really being said to us in effect was that the presence of Black people in some of the exam assessment scenarios was a cause of confusion for some of the officers undertaking the exam.

So, rather than address the values and stereotype views held by these officers, it was thought acceptable to remove all the Black officers.

Only after widespread media coverage was the decision reversed, but to this day as far as I know the issues as to why officers when in the presence of Black people behaved in this manner has not been addressed. And isn't this central to the whole problem we have today.

Why are we treated so differently? Lets for once sit down and discuss it. Oscar Wilde once called homosexuality "the love that dare not speak its name."

But we speak its name all the time now. Sex.

Religion. Politics. We talk about them all. But what race means, in all its manifestations large and small, is too often a whisper, our great unspoken issue.
