

The Police Service – post ‘Lawrence Inquiry’

A Speech by Paul Wilson

You can hope for many things in your life.

You can hope that people will become more tolerant.

You can hope that the world you leave your children will be a better one.

You can hope that recruiting more black people into the police service will tackle institutional racism.

But hope is never enough on its own

And hoping that racism will just quietly fade away - in these more enlightened days - is just fanciful.

To really understand the threat that racism poses we have to accept that the problem lies not so much with the individual as with the institutions within our society. I am not just talking about the Metropolitan Police or indeed the police service but all of the major institutions.

Remember this; how many other organisations also need to make the changes we need to make in the police?

Take the church for example; I was brought up actually believing that our Lord Jesus Christ had long golden hair and pale skin. Throughout my religious education it was never once even suggested that black people played any role whatsoever....

Given the importance of RI these were extremely powerful messages and ones which I'm sure helped to shape the negativity that traditionally surrounds African people and helps promote the systemic disadvantage experienced by black people today.

London and indeed Britain is a country boasting a multi ethnic population However the entire police force still conforms to the mores of a white culture.

The clearest illustration of this came in the Stephen Lawrence Murder Inquiry.

The insensitivity, the ignorance, the plain apathy to issues of race and ethnicity were all a picture of a Metropolitan Police Service that has deep problems.

Some within senior management and indeed society are still clinging to the more easily-digested notion that if you can just weed out the few racists in the ranks, the problem will leave with them. This, interestingly was a view espoused by none other than Ken Livingstone when we shared a platform a few months ago.

And yet the facts themselves give the lie to the notion.

When we take into account:

the differential treatment by the police of the minority ethnic public; stop and search is but one example but then there are the police

employment statistics which indicate that if you're black in the police service you will have a markedly different career experience to your white colleagues.

And I'm not suggesting conscious racism, just as I'm not suggesting the religious material I experienced in my formative years was consciously designed to promote a message of white superiority

But, ladies and gentlemen, we have to conclude that if the few-bad-apples fallacy were true, those few racist police officers would have to be the most active and productive in all the annals of policing.

There is a 'fairness' culture today, and there is no doubt that it has produced a more open, self-critical police service.

However the view that still holds sway is one of a white dominated mono-cultural police service.

At best, that tells us that the police cannot yet appreciate the value of a multi-cultural organisation.

Yes, the police service has made very public commitments – to equal opportunities, to recruiting, retaining and developing officers from minority ethnic groups.

But that of itself will not deal with institutional racism.

The Police must provide as effective a service to minority ethnic communities as it does to the majority group.

We have heard the words loudly enough, but the deeds are taking some time to follow.

I say this, recognising that the police force I joined is not the police force we have today.

But what we have seen so far will not be enough to tackle institutional racism.

Practices, structures and systems must all change. The negative aspects of the police occupational culture must change.....

And that calls for many different steps.

The canteen culture.....let me put to bed the myth

The culture of an organisation may be defined as a system of underlying values, beliefs, shared meanings, norms, and traditions that serve as a foundation for an organisation's management. Virgin Atlantic, IBM, Marks & Spencer is no different, they of course have occupational cultures. So, where does this police culture come from...why is it so different to say, Marks and Spencer.....?

.....well, we have to look at the history of the police as an organisation, What it was established to do, how it is generally perceived by wider society, its interaction with society, the types of people generally attracted and recruited, class, religion, politics of those individuals etc and the organisational dynamics this then throws up. What you then get is a

culture unique to the police service. A type of culture that is replicated in the United States, Holland and Canada. I know this to be a fact as I have visited these places and spent time with their police officers.

The policing culture provides the police service with a lens of normality through which everything is considered.

So, although organisational practices and traditions are perceived as being neutral and objective, they can often have differential impacts on organisational members because of their race and gender identity.

(Home Office example) Black officers are likely to take longer to get promoted. Is this to do with the selection process that may for example be Euro centric and therefore not take into account the differing speech patterns or body language of some minority candidates or could it be the police culture that provides a less than supportive working environment for many minority officers. Research has shown that constantly working in a non-supportive environment produces an array of psychological responses e.g. lack of confidence, lack of self-esteem, can cause you to internalise racism, call into question belief in your own ability.

So when we hear about discriminatory practices

within the police service, I believe it must be placed in this context. Of course there are incidents of overt racism but that does not produce the systemic disadvantage traditionally suffered by black police personnel. I say personnel because there is overwhelming evidence that the black

civilian support staff experience strikingly similar patterns of systemic racism.

From all that I have said today, you might imagine that I am bitter or discouraged.

I am neither.

The police service has been placed under tremendous scrutiny during the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry.

The results have been difficult to deal with.

But I believe that some good can come from this, if we are prepared to make the changes.

And we need to remind ourselves of this: what would we find if we held other public bodies and organisations up to such scrutiny?

Can we really imagine that the only organisation in Britain with these problems of institutional racism is the police service....what about the Law Society, the Bar Council, the CPS ?

So let's not bog ourselves down in apportioning blame.

Far better that we look for the answers.

For the police, it means organisational change WHICH WILL EFFECT THE OCCUPATIONAL CULTURE.

What do I mean by organisational change?

I don't know if any of you heard the recent Radio 4 programme which looked at the experiences of West Yorkshire police. West Yorkshire as you know is home to a significant Muslim population of Pakistani origin. In an effort to better understand their community, West Yorkshire police sent a delegation over to Pakistan to observe policing within Muslim communities. And, shock horror...what did they discover? Muslim women, contrary to the beliefs of some within my organisation, do join the police service as constables. However, many tend to work within 'women only' police stations, complying with the Muslim traditions of 'gender separation'. Interestingly, the service provided meets the cultural needs of Muslims on two fronts, Muslim women are not only able to join the police service but Muslim females who are victims of crime are able to attend police stations and report the offence. Research in this country indicates a reluctance on the part of Muslim females to report a crime.

Does this mean I'm advocating female only police stations, does this mean I'm advocating separate conditions of service for Muslim female officers?

None of these. However, what I am advocating is a need to change policing practices, structures and traditions to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population. If as a Chief Constable I police a substantial Muslim population and wish to embrace and celebrate

the ethnic diversity of my community, what are the options available? Ensure my officers get the latest two day Community and Race Relations Training, discipline staff if they are proved to be racist, recruit more Muslim officers, particularly females, yes this is the traditional response. Having successfully ticked all the correct boxes expected of me by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, I can now relax. However, I find that my Muslim officers, particularly the females are resigning at an alarming rate and there remains unresolved issues around Muslim females reporting crimes to my officers. I am it seems continuing to provide a less than satisfactory police service to a substantial section of my community. Why, because I can't take off these 'glasses of normality' that digest the information and provide me with responses to every situation based on what is considered acceptable within the policing culture.

In other organisations, in other workplaces, responses to institutional racism may mean something else.

But in all of them we should be starting from the same premise:

you can't make a rainbow with just one colour.

I need to say something about wider society and indeed the position elsewhere in the world;

President Clinton said 'I still believe that race is the single most defining issue in American society. And the gap of understanding between the races remains the single greatest threat to the safety and welfare of our cities and our nation.'

There must be those, particularly in light of recent events, who feel that the issues facing America are reflected here in Gt Britain.

Our greatest challenge as we head into the 21st century is: how can Britain become a truly great multicultural society?

In terms of demographics, we have always been a country of many cultures, peoples and languages.

On paper and in words, Britain has always espoused a philosophy of equality and respect for all its citizens. It is the actions and practices of our institutions, our businesses and some of our people, however, that too often belie Britain's declarations of equality.

By the year 2010, for example, many of the what are now termed as ethnic minorities in London will in fact be the ethnic majorities.

As our society becomes increasingly more diverse, our understanding of race relations must go beyond black/white issues. The Britain of the 21st Century will come in every shade of brown and Black.

In his second Inaugural Address, President Clinton so clearly articulated the great unfulfilled promise of America: I think it is of particular relevance in Britain today:

"The challenge of our past remains the challenge of our future. Will we be one nation, one people, with one common destiny, or not? Will we all come together, or come apart?"

And I conclude with my favourite quote of the moment... with apologies to the author whose name I have lost:-

“Changing the colour of your police will not change the police culture, however, changing the police culture may well effect the colour of your policing”

Paul Wilson
Chair
National Black Police Association

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