



Dillon Bryder

'When a racist killing takes place it's also directed against you'

Inspector Paul Wilson, chairman of the Black Police Association, deeply cares about the force. That's why he's prepared to criticise it

whose face was white, could not understand the testimony of a man whose face was black, even though he was a fellow officer. It is the kind of misunderstanding that perhaps explains why Wilson has another job, as chairman of the Black Police Association, a body whose very existence rebukes both the Federation and the Met.

"You see," says Wilson when I meet him at the BPA's office, "I consider myself extremely loyal to the organisation. If I didn't give a damn about it, why would I bother putting myself through all this pain? I would keep my head down, keep quiet and direct my energies into promotion or whatever. It is only because I am loyal to the Metropolitan Police and I'm deeply concerned about its inability to see what black people, both inside and externally, experience that I do what I do. At the moment it's a jumbo not flying with all its engines. The engine that's not working is the minority community which is not giving it its support." But saying this won't win him police popularity contests? "Quite the reverse, possibly. There are possibly people with voodoo dolls sticking pins into me at this moment. But, at the end of the day, I want my son, who is 12

months old, in 18 years' time to say: 'Dad, I want to be a police officer.' And I want to be able to say: 'Yes, great career, supportive organisation, the confidence of all the communities it serves...'"

Wilson is immediately confidence-inspiring himself, his appearance misleading you in various complimentary ways. He looks younger than 39, taller than 6ft 2in, lighter

Vauxhall cop shop. It is Spartan but wallpapered with letters of support, including a thank-you card from Doreen and Neville Lawrence. If there is a pride of place, however, it is occupied by a photograph of the first black officer to join the Met, Norwell Roberts. Coincidentally, it was taken 30 years ago in the yard outside. By historical irony, standing next to Roberts is another recruit, Paul Condon.

When Condon became Commissioner in 1993 — the year Stephen was killed — he said his priority was to get race policies right. But he hasn't. "Well, evidently not," says Wilson, "or we wouldn't be in the position we are in today. Having said that, and I can't be political, you have to ask the question: did the previous government attach the same importance to an inclusive multicultural society?"

The low point to which the Lawrence affair has brought us is occupied by a debate not over how to recruit more black police, but whether black people should ever enrol. Wilson maintains boycotts are defeatist, but respects those who disagree, among them Mrs Lawrence. It is not a new dilemma.

"I was," he says, "like most young black kids. I was distrustful of the

police. Whenever I saw a black police officer I was bewildered. I remember seeing a black policeman in the Seventies in London and thinking: 'What's she doing? How can she?' At that time, you must remember, the sus law was very prevalent and often black people were at the end of it."

He was brought up in Boston, Lincolnshire. His father is black, an American serviceman who married a white woman and split up from her when Paul was still very young. The family was "incredibly" poor and his mother, a disciplinarian who died three years ago, took ill-paid factory jobs. She was proud when he became a sergeant, "very proud", but could not quite see why he wanted the grief: she had lived through days when even holding her husband's hand in the street could provoke fisticuffs. Although his father was not "that supportive" of the family, Paul and he remain in touch. He works for the railways in New York. "Deep down he wishes I'd chosen a quieter life too."

Wilson's brother joined the RAF. Most of his friends got jobs locally. A few went to the bad. "Anyone who says they never thought at any time in their childhood they would go off the rails is lying. But my ultimate aim was to get out of Lincolnshire and I knew I couldn't do that with a

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THE ANDREW BILLEN INTERVIEW

than 15 stone. His voice is light, unthreatening, almost effeminate in the way civilised young men's voices are these days, and he uses that calming, middle-management jargon that is everywhere: the police are a "service", an "organisation", never a "force". He is married to a police officer, Sonia, who is also black, and, as well as the baby, they have a three-year-old daughter.

He comes to this office, a single room borrowed from police admin in Pimlico, after he finishes work at

AT THE end of the long first leg of the inquiry into the non-inquiry into the killing of the teenager Stephen Lawrence, Newsnight held its own inquest. Stephen's father was there, as was a black head teacher, a spokesman for the Lawrence Campaign, the chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation and a police inspector from south London. It was a round table discussion but somehow the round table grew sides. On one of them was Mike Bennett of the Police Federation, on the other, everyone else. But of all the force's critics, it was his colleague, Inspector Paul Wilson, who riled Bennett most. After Wilson had tried to define the slippery term "institutional racism", Bennett declared he hadn't understood a word. "It sounded like a script," he said. And there was the problem. Once again, a well-meaning, experienced London bobby,