

11/7/98

Should black people join the police?

Dear Paul Wilson,

Doreen Lawrence, mother of the murdered black teenager Stephen Lawrence, raised a legitimate issue in a newspaper interview this week. She asked whether black people, by joining the police, can make a useful contribution to the safety and security of other black people, or to the transformation of the force. Her conclusion was no and I agree with her.

Anyone attending the Lawrence inquiry with an open mind would have been shocked at the catalogue of police failures, including gross incompetence and racism. If, over generations, black people have failed a Tebbit test, surely now is the time to recognise that the police force has continually failed the Lawrence test. That is, failure to treat black people as equals both when alive and, in Stephen's case, and after their death.

Mike Bennett, the chairman of the Police Federation, has understood the implication of the Lawrence inquiry and called it "the greatest test in our history". However, he has already urged the Home Secretary to reject the final report.

The Metropolitan Police Commissioner was forced to make his unprecedented apology to the Lawrence family, not simply because of the flawed nature of the police investigation, but because he could not believe the response of his officers under cross-examination. Officers lost their cool. They seemed not to believe or understand the line of questioning, and some continue to assert that Stephen's murder was not racially motivated, despite such clear and resounding evidence.

What does that tell you about your colleagues, Paul?

The police response to Stephen's murder cannot be explained by the few rotten apples theory. There are a large number of discrimination cases brought by black officers and overwhelming evidence of the continued coercion (stop and search, deaths in custody) and underprotection (against racist attacks and ordinary crime) of black people.

Yours sincerely,
Suresh Grover,
Co-ordinator,
Stephen Lawrence Campaign

Dear Suresh Grover,

Can black people make a useful contribution to the police service? Yes, we can. The Black Police Association was formed, nearly five years ago, to improve the working environment of police and civil staff of African, African-Caribbean or Asian origin in the Metropolitan Police.

Often over the years the BPA has said that institutional racism is a fundamental issue that must be recognised and challenged by the police if we are to move forward and provide an acceptable service to an increasingly diverse population.

I have no difficulty with the issues you raise over the few rotten apples theory. But I would take this opportunity to disassociate myself from the views of our resident dinosaur, Mike Bennett. His uninformed comments do not reflect the views of the rank and file or the Police Federation.

We strongly take issue with the legitimacy of the issue of black people joining the police. To suggest that black people should not join an organisation because of concerns about that organisation's ability to provide a fair service to members of minority communities is an unprecedented and dangerous path.

The BPA recognises that we cannot make a difference alone, but in partnership with the black community and with support from the Home Office and other agencies, we can make a difference.

Inspector Paul Wilson,
Chairman,
Black Police Association,
Metropolitan Police

Yes

Paul Wilson
Chairman
Black Police
Association



No

Suresh Grover
Stephen
Lawrence
Campaign



Black experience ... can it change policing from within?

Dear Paul,

Surely Mike Bennett cannot be the only dinosaur in the Met's Jurassic Park. He is an elected representative and a spokesman for the rank and file officers. A cursory glance at the Police Review magazine reveals the sympathy for the Bennett view within the force.

If you agree that it is not simply an issue of a few rotten racist apples you must think that the problem is widespread. How widespread, Paul? And what actions have you proposed to deal with the problem?

The notion of partnership with the black community is old hat. And it does not exist in reality. It has not worked and is unlikely to, unless you begin to address some fundamentals.

The mechanisms of accountability for police actions remain

inadequate and individual police officers continue to evade prosecution for serious wrongdoing. The complaints system has little credibility and police authorities are obsessed with questions of technical efficiency.

They give black people little opportunity to voice concerns about policing or gain redress when things go wrong. Black people are socially and economically disadvantaged. Even among the social groups state policing is done to, not for.

The strength of the Lawrences has been in their honesty, integrity and commitment to resolving a serious problem. Qualities which were lacking in police officers, both junior and senior, giving evidence at the inquiry. How do you survive in such circumstances?

Yours truly,
Suresh

Dear Suresh,

Mike Bennett is chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation. Whether or not his comments in Police Review represent the views of the various federation executives needs clarification. Perhaps our recent letter to the Federation's general secretary will provide the answer.

Overt, individual, racism can be dealt with by legislation and the police discipline code, but the underlying problem is institutional racism and its impact on our service to the community. The BPA will shortly present our views and recommendations to those conducting the Stephen Lawrence inquiry.

In a recent meeting with the Home Secretary, the BPA was able to express our concerns about the current status quo within the service. We were given the opportunity to make recommendations. The BPA has also expressed concerns to the Association of Chief Police Officers and is working alongside the Home Office to help redress these issues.

Suresh, if you believe that black people should not become police officers, how do you propose that we, as black people, address these issues?

Yours,
Paul

Dear Paul,

The success of our struggles against racism can only be measured if we can prove that our lives have changed for the better.

Black people in uniform will change nothing. The social divisions of apartheid could not have been maintained without black police officers. What is important is the position of the police in British society and how the force is held accountable for its actions. Apart from the army, the police is the only force in civil society which can use force legitimately. If this abuse is not checked it has a disastrous impact.

I am disappointed that you have not used this opportunity to express your support for the Lawrence family and condemn the manner in which police officers have conducted themselves over the past five years. Can your failure to answer some key issues be explained by your loyalty to the Met, which means you must hide your black experience?

It is not for me to say whether you should be a police officer. But you give the impression of defending your colleagues because of your position within the force, rather than being convinced by their commitment or sincerity.

Yours,
Suresh

Dear Suresh,

The BPA fully supports the inquiry and the Lawrence family's fight for justice. The BPA gave support well before the inquiry began, and proudly displays in its office a thankyou card sent by Doreen and Neville Lawrence.

Suresh, it would be useful to remember the key issue is whether black people should consider the police as a career. In common with other black colleagues in the criminal justice system, by forming representative bodies we have used black experience positively and productively.

If we are to follow your logic, black people should be advised to avoid the criminal justice system. Why stop there? Recently we heard from Trevor Phillips and Trevor McDonald about the serious underrepresentation of black people in the media. Perhaps we should avoid this area, too? How can we change things if we disassociate ourselves from the professions?

Suresh, perhaps you could draw up a list of professions where you feel black people are effective and treated equitably.

Yours,
Paul