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The Black Challenge

'You either take flight, or you fight.' The leader of London's black police on the Met and racism

By Tony Thompson

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'On the one hand you have Sir Paul Condon denying that any such thing as institutional racism exists in the police, but then you get something like this. 'It's outrageous. I showed this to people outside the organisation and they were horrified, they wanted to complain.'

Paul Wilson, chairman of the Black Police Association in the Metropolitan Police, is talking about a recent edition of the Met's staff newspaper, *The Job*, which carried a front-page story trumpeting the success of an operation targeting drug dealers in west London. To illustrate the story, more than half the page was given over to a picture of two officers escorting a handcuffed suspect away from the scene. Both police officers were white, the suspect was black.

'But,' says Wilson, 'when I showed it to some of my fellow black officers, they couldn't see anything wrong. They couldn't see how it reinforced the stereotypes we're fighting against. For them, it was just normal. That's what we're up against, that's the culture of the police today.'

For Wilson, the magazine is a graphic illustration of how even black officers within the Met have been sucked into a mindset that leaves them unable to understand racism and the subtle effects that it has.

'There's an expectation that if you're black you're always going to do the right thing, that you'll stop anything that seems wrong or unfair. But you don't. You go with the culture. So changing that is not just down to increasing the proportion of officers from ethnic minorities or introducing psychometric testing to ensure that racists don't get in - these things help, but they don't tackle the heart of the problem.'

'We may have tackled some of these issues when they appear in an overt way, but the subtleties remain.' A typical example emerged last April

when three black suspects in an armed robbery stole a car in north London to make their getaway. The detective chief inspector in charge of the incident arranged for a message to be transmitted to every divisional police control room in the Metropolitan Police area warning that, as a result, 'all vehicles containing IC3 (black) males should be approached with caution.'

The incident formed part of a report by the Black Police Association that was submitted to the Lawrence inquiry. The report, which accuses the police of failing to address the needs of a multiracial community, notes with disappointment that only one person - a member of the association - had challenged the issuing of the message about the car, and added that 'such is the stereotyping of black people, we can only assume that the majority of personnel considered it acceptable'.

Wilson accepts that there have been improvements since he joined and since the association was formed in 1993, but admits he has been as guilty as anyone of conforming to the canteen culture. 'When I started in the police in 1983, it was accepted that black people were called certain names, that black people were given a certain kind of treatment. That was the norm. There were times when I wanted to intervene, but what support would I have had? You have to do what is necessary to survive. It becomes acceptable because everyone is doing it. The culture takes hold. You take up the practices, the positions and the procedures. The last thing you do is put your head above the parapet.'

Few other officers in the police are willing to make such an admission. This week, immediately after the release of the Macpherson report into the Stephen Lawrence investigation, the Met's press relations machine will kick-start a damage-limitation campaign aimed at showing that many of the issues highlighted in the report have already been tackled.

A paper reviewing an anti-racism conference held last December will be published, as will a strategy document that is expected to pre-empt many of Macpherson's concerns. The Met is also hoping that, in the interests of balance, positive images of blacks working in the police will be portrayed.

This was the aim behind a large-scale press briefing at the training school in Hendon, north London, this month when dozens of journalists were encouraged to speak to long-serving and newly recruited black and Asian officers, all of whom denied they had experienced any problems because of their race.

An embargo was placed on the use of all the interviews until after publication of the Macpherson report. Wilson is impatient with black and Asian officers who claim they have never experienced racism in the police service, seeing this as further evidence of the power of police culture.

'We all experience it, but we all develop our own coping mechanisms. You either take flight, fight or acquiesce. Very few fight, at least not for very long, because it's too big a battle. Acquiesce? Well, it's easier, but personally it's uncomfortable; after all, you've got your principles, your culture and your pride.

'The culture of the police still reflects the white-oriented, homogeneous society that it was originally intended to police.

'We have failed to keep up with a changing environment. We need to dismantle the culture, to analyse all the components that are disadvantageous to certain sections of society. Only then shall we be able to provide a better and fairer service to the community.'

Wilson applauds the actions of Ian Blair, Chief Constable of Surrey, who this month called for a fundamental overhaul of the police working culture in order for it to fall into line with modern ways of thinking.

He also supports plans announced by Home Secretary Jack Straw last year to introduce ethnic recruitment targets for all police forces. In the Met, the plan is to have 20 per cent of the staff from ethnic minorities, reflecting the mix of Greater London itself. But Wilson is not convinced such a move will improve the standing of the police within the community.

'I'm not saying that it won't make any difference. I'm saying it won't make the difference that people are expecting. Police officers will continue to act the way they have always acted because that's the way they have always acted. Changing that is a mammoth task, but if we don't do something about it now, we will be facing the same problems in 20 years' time.

'If you need more proof, you only need look to the example of New York, where 25 per cent of the police force is made up of ethnic minorities. If you ask the black community in Harlem whether they are happy with the service they receive from the police, the answer is going to be no.

'It just hasn't made that much difference there and it won't here either. It's putting the onus on the community, saying it's down to the ethnic minorities to join the police and change things. But they shouldn't be expected to do anything their white colleagues wouldn't be expected to do. They shouldn't be there to wave the flag or fight the battles that management should be fighting.

'There just isn't any point in people joining because they want to change things from the inside,' Wilson says, his eyes suddenly reflecting his 15 years of service. 'At the end of the day, they can't, they just can't.'