

**The development and role of a Black Police Association in the wider  
police modernisation agenda**

By

Superintendent Paul Wilson  
Metropolitan Police, London, England

September 2006

(For the Conference on Rank-And-File participation in Police Reform -  
University of California, Berkeley, CA, 12-13 October 2006)

## **The Metropolitan Black Police Association (BPA)**

### **Understanding the context**

To understand why a group of black<sup>1</sup> police and non-sworn police employees decided to meet in 1993 and discuss whether there was a requirement for a distinctly identifiable black platform to articulate their views and concerns in the world's oldest and probably most renowned police force, it is necessary to place that historical development in the wider and hugely relevant context of police and black community relations.

Many may not be aware of the fact that up until the mid 1960's black people were not welcome in the Metropolitan Police Service<sup>2</sup> (MPS) and probably most other UK forces. Despite public utterances of the then Commissioner and successive Home Secretaries – black applicants were not going to be recruited. One of the reasons for the opposition by senior police officers would appear to have been concern over the reaction of the police federation (police union) and its members. These concerns would appear to have been justified if we consider the overtly racist treatment some of the early black constables had to endure<sup>3</sup>. This fact is relevant because the opportunity to recruit high quality black candidates was lost

---

<sup>1</sup> Black is used in this context to emphasise the common experiences of people of African, African-Caribbean and Asian origins.

<sup>2</sup> Although never formally acknowledged by the Metropolitan Police, a 'colour bar' did undoubtedly exist and in 1962, when asked about taking 'coloured recruits' the Assistant Commissioner in charge of personnel reportedly replied: "...felt it would, at present, be unfair to the coloured man in a predominantly white country" On 28 March 1967 Norwell Lionel Roberts became the first black applicant to be accepted by the Metropolitan Police. Roberts became a celebrity overnight and when he married eighteen months later, articles appeared in the national press. On 1 January 1968 the first black policewoman, Sislin Fay Allen, joined the Metropolitan Police and she too received widespread publicity and abusive letters.

<sup>3</sup> The Bristol Seminars research revealed that some Black officers had experienced racist language, graffiti on personal lockers, personal lockers broken into, uniform ripped and personal vehicles damaged.

and also because when black recruitment became a real issue, black people were blamed for not wanting to join or for falling below the required standards.

On the weekend of the 10-12 April 1981 hundreds of mostly black youths rioted in Brixton, South London. Police were attacked with stones, bricks, iron bars and petrol bombs - this was the first time petrol bombs had been used in mainland Britain. The worst incidences occurred in the evening of Saturday 11 April when 279 policemen and at least 45 members of the public were injured. Widespread looting took place, 28 buildings were damaged or destroyed by fire as well as police cars and other vehicles. In 1981 Brixton was in economic and social decline. It had a housing shortage despite a falling population, many low income households, one-parent families and high incidences of disability and mental illness.

At a time of national recession, unemployment in Brixton stood at 13% and 25.4% for ethnic minorities. Unemployment among black youths was estimated at 55%. Brixton was not alone and street riots occurred in other impoverished inner-city areas of Britain that summer such as Toxteth in Liverpool and Moss Side in Manchester. Lord Scarman was appointed by then Home Secretary William Whitelaw to hold a 'local inquiry'. Its terms of reference were "to inquire urgently into the serious disorder in Brixton on 10-12 April 1981 and to report, with the power to make recommendations". Lord Scarman's report concluded that "complex political, social and economic factors" created a "disposition towards violent protest".

He found the disorders were not planned but a spontaneous outburst of built-up resentment sparked by particular incidents. He found loss of confidence and

mistrust in the police and their methods of policing. Liaison arrangements between police, community and local authority had already collapsed before the disturbances. He recommended concerted efforts to recruit more ethnic minorities into the police force, and changes in training and law enforcement. The problems of racial disadvantage and inner-city decline were highlighted and a more concerted and co-ordinated approach to tackling them was seen as essential.

"Institutional racism" did not exist, he said, pointing instead to "racial disadvantage" and "racial discrimination". His warning was stark: "Urgent action" was needed to prevent racial disadvantage becoming an "endemic, ineradicable disease threatening the very survival of our society". Positive discrimination to tackle racial disadvantage was "a price worth paying". ([www.bbc.co.uk/news](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news))

In 1983 the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) conducted a survey of Metropolitan Police Officers as part of their 'Police and People in London' report. The subsequent publication of that report caused some newspapers to brand the police as "racist, sexist and drunken bullies". While it was offensive to stereotype the whole of the Metropolitan Police on the basis of this research – those offended would do well to consider and reflect upon the way in which police colleagues described Black people as reported in the PSI report:

"I call them niggers myself but I don't mean it"

"Whilst not being very intelligent, they have this low animal cunning"

"Well they're used to running around in the jungle, plucking what they want from trees and off the floor...."

One particularly important issue highlighted by the PSI researchers was the inability of supervisors to influence officers under their command. In 1984 a serving Inspector (Hope, 1984) conducted research into the experiences of Black & Asian Police officers, comparing a sample of 36 Black & Asian Officers with 36 White officers. These were his conclusions;

1. Negative interaction with supervisors was a particular concern to all police officers
2. Black (African and African Caribbean) officers in particular were adversely affected by racism.
3. There was no support for victims of racism (neither management nor the Police Federation (Police Union))
4. White officers had no sympathy for, or understanding of Black & Asian police officers' 'problems'.
5. There was a perception that standards were lowered for Black & Asian police officers.
6. Black officers themselves felt they were seen to be tokens.

It was against this background that the recruitment of black people continued throughout the 1980's, then in 1990 the Metropolitan Police concerned at the disproportionately high premature resignation rate among black police officers, organized a series of seminars whereby all black police officers in the Metropolitan Police were ordered to attend. The seminars, held over 100 miles from London at Bristol University, were considered somewhat controversial at the time given the compulsory nature of attendance based on the officers' ethnic origin. Nevertheless the Bristol Seminars, as they popularly became known,

unearthed a wealth of hitherto hidden and unspoken experiences from the 350 officers that did attend. Some of the issues arising from Bristol:-

- A feeling of isolation/lack of support
- The failure of supervisors to tackle inappropriate humour and behaviour
- Officers who complained were branded as trouble makers
- The perception that career opportunities were restricted – particularly into the Criminal Investigation Department (CID).
- Black officers were not being used effectively to represent the Service.

Research into the voluntary resignation of officers from the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) can be summarised as follows:

“There is racism in the Metropolitan Police Service. It does have an impact on black police officers. It does contribute significantly to their decision to resign.”  
(French, 1993)

Research conducted for the UK government (Home Office) makes a number of points. (Holdaway, 1993) The following are of particular interest; Holdaway referred to previous research in 1991 in which he found that Assistant Chief Constables in charge of personnel policy and practice “greatly underestimated the extent to which Black & Asian officers were troubled by racist language and associated behaviour”. Holiday also found that the Assistant Chief Constables

and recruiting staff were “apprehensive about anything approaching positive action, equating it with positive discrimination.....”

In examining issues around the police occupational culture Holdaway discusses the fact that much of the research conducted shows that “the primary team is constructed around the values of the occupational culture rather than those stated in policy or professional ethics”, he goes on to say it “pervades the world of the lower ranks” and that “dissent from the values and practices of the occupational culture requires an oppositional stance”

It is against this backdrop that black officers throughout the seventies, eighties and nineties were expected to compete on equal terms, thrive, develop and become leaders of tomorrow’s police service. The following excerpt from the PSI research summarises the difficulties faced by black officers in the MPS;

“.....we also found it necessary to recuperate from time to time to restore the sense of our identity (the norms of the working group are so powerful that they soon begin to impose themselves on the researchers as well as the official in the group”

It should be remembered that black officers did not have the luxury of recuperation.

### **The formation of the UK’s first Black Police Association**

The Bristol Seminars brought many Black officers together for the first time and many began to realize that their experiences were not unique and that they were not alone. The feelings of isolation diminished further as many kept in touch

through a series of “Bristol Reunion” social functions. Around this time a small number of Black junior and middle managers from the Metropolitan Police civil (unworn police employees) staff attended a management development course for ‘ethnic minorities’. They returned to work and developed an informal network, realizing that this was a way of reducing isolation, building upon friendships and offering mutual support. This network was subsequently invited to join with the Bristol Reunion network and following eighteen months of meetings to define the issues, aims, objective and a name for the Association, the launch of the Black Police Association at New Scotland Yard in September 1994 was, some would argue, an inevitable oppositional stance to the police occupational culture at that time by a group of Black policing professionals who both cared for their profession but strongly identified with the plight and frustration of London’s wider Black community.

The aim and objectives

Aim: To improve the working environment for Black personnel within the Metropolitan Police Service, with a view to enhancing the quality of service to the public”.

Underpinning this aim were six objectives:

- To provide a support network
- To work towards improving relationships between police and black people in London
- To work towards equality of opportunity
- To help to improve recruitment and to reduce wastage
- To assist policy development
- To provide a social network

## **The murder of black teenager, Stephen Lawrence.**

There is considerable consensus around the belief that the public inquiry<sup>4</sup> into the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence was a catalyst for change (reform) for the better in the Metropolitan Police and indeed across many public sector organizations. The public inquiry's labeling of the Metropolitan Police as "institutionally racist" caused reverberations throughout the UK establishment. What is perhaps not known outside of policing circles is the fact that the BPA played a pivotal role in ensuring that 'institutional racism' became a key consideration for the Inquiry. The BPA's written<sup>5</sup> and oral evidence to the Inquiry team is now recognized as being hugely influential in that "for the first time in history black police professionals appeared before a Public Inquiry and gave an account that was at odds with what the Metropolitan Police were saying".<sup>6</sup> The following is an excerpt from the inquiry report:

"The MPS Black Police Association's spokesmen, in their written submission to the Inquiry, para 3.2, said this:-

*".... institutional racism .... permeates the Metropolitan Police Service. This issue above all others is central to the attitudes, values and beliefs, which lead officers to act, albeit unconsciously and for the most part unintentionally, and treat others differently solely because of their ethnicity or culture"*

---

<sup>4</sup> The Public Inquiry, chaired by Sir William MacPherson was called as a result of the Metropolitan Police's inadequate response to the murder of Black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, stabbed to death by a racist gang in 1993.

<sup>5</sup>BPA report to The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry "Identifying and addressing the issues around the failure of the police occupational culture to embrace the importance and needs of a multi-racial community"

<sup>6</sup>Remarks made by Deputy Assistant John Grieve in the BPA film entitled 'A movement in time'.

The oral evidence of the three representatives of the MPS Black Police Association was illuminating. It should be read in full, but we highlight two passages from Inspector Paul Wilson's evidence:-

(Part 2, Day 2, p 209):

*"The term institutional racism should be understood to refer to the way the institution or the organisation may systematically or repeatedly treat, or tend to treat, people differentially because of their race. So, in effect, we are not talking about the individuals within the service who may be unconscious as to the nature of what they are doing, but it is the net effect of what they do".*

(Part 2, Day 2, p 211):

*"A second source of institutional racism is our culture, our culture within the police service. Much has been said about our culture, the canteen culture, the occupational culture. How and why does that impact on individuals, black individuals on the street? Well, we would say the occupational culture within the police service, given the fact that the majority of police officers are white, tends to be the white experience, the white beliefs, the white values.*

*Given the fact that these predominantly white officers only meet members of the black community in confrontational situations, they tend to stereotype black people in general. This can lead to all sorts of negative views and assumptions about black people, so we should not underestimate the occupational culture within the police service as being a*

*primary source of institutional racism in the way that we differentially treat black people.*

*Interestingly I say we because there is no marked difference between black and white in the force essentially. We are all consumed by this occupational culture. Some of us may think we rise above it on some occasions, but, generally speaking, we tend to conform to the norms of this occupational culture, which we say is all powerful in shaping our views and perceptions of a particular community".*

We believe that it is essential that the views of these officers should be closely heeded and respected." (MacPherson, 1999, p 25)

In the weeks before the Inquiry the BPA approached academic and community relations adviser, Dr Robin Oakley, to discuss ways in which the hitherto unrecognized and unaccepted issue of institutional racism might be introduced to the Inquiry. Oakley subsequently submitted a paper to the Inquiry which forcefully argued for an acceptance of the academic understanding of institutional racism in a policing context.

"Police work unlike most other professional activities has the capacity to bring officers into contact with a skewed cross-section of society, with the well-recognised potential for producing negative perceptions of particular groups. The specific issues that might arise from this continual interaction are challenges that potentially affect all police officers. Failure to address behaviours that manifest is liable to result in a generalized tendency, particularly where any element of discretion is involved, whereby minorities may receive different and less favourable treatment than the majority. Such differential treatment need be neither conscious nor intentional, and it may be practiced routinely by officers

whose professionalism is exemplary in all other respects. For these reasons, such tendencies may be difficult to detect in the individual case. By comparison, the overt acts of racism by bigoted individuals are relatively easy to identify and respond to at this level.” (Oakley, 1998)

The conclusions of the MacPherson Inquiry were damning. Institutional racism had never before been acknowledged by a UK government or by any official inquiry. However, Macpherson was unequivocal: the Metropolitan police force was institutionally racist as were other institutions in society. The whole criminal justice system had to look to its institutional racism; ways had to be found to police racist crimes more effectively. The restoration of the black community's confidence in the police depended on real commitment. (Sivanandan, 2000)

### **The Morris Inquiry**

The Morris inquiry into the MPS's 'professional standards' was established in 2004 after the Black Police Association announced a boycott of the force recruitment initiatives, claiming its members were being disproportionately targeted for disciplinary investigations. The Metropolitan Police had spent millions of pounds investigating two leading BPA activists, Superintendent Ali Dizaei, who was twice cleared of corruption at the Central Criminal Court, and wrongly accused Chief Inspector Leroy Logan, chairman of the Metropolitan BPA, of dishonesty. The Inquiry lasted a year. 1400 documents were reviewed, oral evidence was collected from 109 people, visits and open forum were undertaken and the report runs to approximately 130,000 words.

In a written submission the Commissioner, Sir John Stevens said his officers were so afraid of being accused of racism when dealing with ethnic minority colleagues that they found it hard to admit it when they made mistakes "for fear

that by owning up to shortcomings they may themselves become the subject of allegation".

"There is a particular nervousness about dealing with issues raised by or about black and minority ethnic staff and officers," he said.

The inquiry heard that middle managers were so fearful of race they botched tackling minor indiscretions by ethnic minority staff. These officers were then hampered by a "failure to administer tough love" at an early stage.

(<http://society.guardian.co.uk> 2004)

Morris concluded that: "There is no common understanding of diversity within the organisation and that it is not embedded in the culture of the MPS. We fear it remains at worst a source of fear and anxiety and at best a process of ticking boxes. We fear that some of the efforts the MPS has made to promote the message of diversity across the organisation have been counter productive and the organisation may now be seeing the beginnings of a backlash. We have received evidence that managers lack confidence in managing other issues of difference whether gender disability sexual orientation or faith. The evidence also shows that insufficient priority had been given to differences other than race. Urgent work must be undertaken to build the confidence of managers in managing all aspects of difference" (Brown, 2005) In summing up the feelings of the BPA, the Chairman, George Rhoden, said, "From our perspective, it is a further endorsement of our Association and the efforts that we have made to enforce positive change within the MPS. The report demonstrates that whilst the MPS has made significant positive contributions, to its professional standards, there is still a significant amount of work to complete, especially in relation to our black personnel. It is clear that institutional racism exists in the MPS" Furthermore, the BPA expressed disappointment at the Inquiry's apparent

disregard for the plight of black women in the MPS, pointing out that from a pool of over four hundred black female officers only 6 hold a rank above that of sergeant.

### **The role of identity based representative organizations**

Since the inception of the Black Police Association in the MPS similar Associations have developed in many if not the majority of police forces in England and Wales, helped undoubtedly by the government's recognition that Black Police Associations are crucial in helping police foster and indeed improve its historically poor relationship with black and other minority ethnic communities. The government's endorsement of and support for Black Associations in the police service has helped the development of a national umbrella body, the National Black Police Association (NBPA) which today has offices and other resources provided by Her Majesty's Government. Recognising the success of the Black Police Association in getting the views of minorities represented in senior policy forums, other minority 'identity based organisations' have developed particularly within the MPS. These 'Staff Association' while not enjoying the political profile of the BPA, represent the views of emerging minorities within the MPS, e.g Greek Police Association, Hindu Police Association, Association of Muslim Police Officers and the Jewish Police Association.

The proliferation of Staff Associations in the MPS is arguably an inevitable consequence of the MPS's turbulent historical relationship with London's minority communities coupled with the widely researched and extensively documented treatment of black and minority officers. And at a time when approaching twenty five percent of Londoners are from minority ethnic backgrounds the MPS remains woefully unrepresentative of London's increasingly diverse population with only two black chief officers and one black Borough Commander across London's 32

Boroughs. Government targets introduced following the MacPherson Inquiry were designed to ensure that London's police service broadly represented London's diverse communities by the end of the decade. These targets are unlikely to be achieved for at least thirty years unless we see a change in equality legislation in the interim. Against this backdrop many minorities in the MPS see representative groups as the only means of achieving a voice in a wholly white, male dominated organization. The suggestion that the Police Federation, representing the rank and file, should represent the needs and concerns of all its members, regardless of gender and ethnicity is a well rehearsed argument, however, with a Police Federation that is largely, in ethnicity and gender terms, representative of the wider organization, such argument tends to bear little resonance with black and minority officers who will also point out that the scope and remit of the Federation is largely around representing and protecting the rights of its membership whereas the minority Staff Associations gain credibility and satisfaction in their work to improve police relationships with minority communities. This issue complements the government's objective of inspiring greater minority ethnic community confidence in the police service.

An excellent example of how identity based staff associations support and progress this agenda is the youth leadership programme for predominantly black inner city youths developed and led by the Metropolitan Black Police Association. The VOYAGE programme is a journey of empowerment, knowledge and capacity building, designed specifically for young people. VOYAGE endeavours to help young people navigate their way through the issues of Governance, Leadership, Community, Social Responsibility and Citizenship. A series of programmes created by the Metropolitan Black Police Association to ensure that the voices of young people are heard and listened to, and that they are seen as contributors to healthy and successful community life. The programme aims to create and nurture young leaders from local communities, who in turn will help local communities combat issues of crime, improve environments within schools, assist

the improvement of services from local public and private sector providers to the community.

There are two delivery formats for this programme:

**a) Residential:** This is a seven day intensive programme providing an atmosphere within which young leaders are developed and nurtured. The curriculum includes modules on leadership, power, governance, crime and media.

**b) Modular:** This is a three month programme delivered within local communities. The curriculum mirrors that of the Residential, however, the subject matter is explored in far greater detail.

In addition to the residential and modular formats there is also an International Youth Leadership Programme. This programme was developed by the Met BPA in 2004 in celebration of its ten year anniversary. The International programme involved some fifty young people coming from South Africa, Jamaica, USA and the United Kingdom. The programme was hosted in London. It is hoped that an international youth programme will be held each year in one of the participating countries. ([www.metbpa.com](http://www.metbpa.com))

## References

Brown, J., (2005) Academic commentary on the Morris report, Paper presented to a Bramshill Seminar 27: University of Surrey

French, P (1993) The Voluntary Resignation of Officers from the Metropolitan Police Service, MSc dissertation, Metropolitan Police

Holdaway, S., (1993) The Resignation of Black & Asian officers from the Police Service, Home Office

Hope, R., (1984) The experiences of Black & Asian police officers, MSc dissertation; Cranfield Institute

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/bbc\\_parliament/3631579.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/bbc_parliament/3631579.stm) - Scarman Inquiry

Morris Inquiry <http://society.guardian.co.uk/raceequality/story/0,,1151447,00.html> 2004

Oakley, R., (1998) Institutional Racism and Police Service delivery, Report to The Inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence

Sivanandan, A.,(2000)Speech given at the 'Reclaiming the struggle conference', London, 19 February