



# 18 YEARS ON: REFLECTIONS ON THE STEPHEN LAWRENCE VERDICT

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*“History will recognise that the indefatigable campaigning of Stephen Lawrence’s parents has done more to change this country than a mountain of race relations legislation”*  
*brap CEO, Joy Warmington, reflects on the lessons of the Stephen Lawrence murder<sup>1</sup>*

I like many others, waited with baited breath for the outcome of the Stephen Lawrence retrial – and felt a sense of immediate relief at the conviction of his killers. But now some of these immediate emotions have dissipated, I wanted to reflect on what this case has meant for the race equality movement and for wider issues of justice within our society.

Firstly, of course, we must be thankful that after longer than Stephen Lawrence himself lived, two of the teenager’s killers are now behind bars. But as Doreen Lawrence herself said, there’s no cause for celebration. It’s another reminder of the sorrow and anguish the Lawrence family lived with for over eighteen years – and will continue to live with.

Many in the media were desperate to make the case that Britain in 1993 was a world away from what it is today. The routine, unchallenged racism that was the order of the day then has been swept aside, they said, by the changes in policing, public services, education and the equality laws that were implemented following Macpherson’s inquiry into the murder and the Met’s investigation.

Sadly, I don’t share that optimistic view. Since 1991, according to research by the Institute for Race Relations, at least 96 people have been murdered in circumstances where racial hatred was either clear cut or suspected. At least fifteen of these cases remain unsolved. In fact, just days before the Stephen Lawrence retrial, Anuj Bidve, a 23-year old Indian student from Lancaster University was shot dead by a young man barely older than Stephen’s killers. The appalling fact is, the Lawrences’ pain and loss is the tip of an unimaginable iceberg of suffering.

In some respects, the Macpherson inquiry was ground-breaking. First, that it happened at all was extraordinary. This was almost entirely due to the Lawrences’ campaigning. And the changes that Macpherson set in motion – in the law, in race equality legislation, and especially in policing – were far-reaching. The report’s emphasis on the previously unrecognised concept of ‘institutional racism’, for example, had undoubted impact, and brought about changes to the Race Relations Act and the introduction of a duty on all public institutions to actively prevent

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the recent verdict in the Stephen Lawrence trial as an opportunity to reflect on what works in the promotion of equality, fairness, and cohesion.

discrimination from happening and to promote equality and good community relations.

But how quickly these wonderful aspirations degenerated into bureaucratic exercises – the endless paperwork of impact assessments and the box ticking of race equality schemes and audits. An industry sprang up claiming to tackle institutional racism with dubious ‘awareness’ training, quizzes and board games. Personally, I believe this emphasis on institutional racism had another negative effect too – it distanced all of us from a personal responsibility for addressing racism. It led us to think that racism could be regarded primarily as a problem of institutional culture rather than of personal attitudes, behaviour, values and actions.

There is now a growing recognition – even amongst some of those who were actually part of the Macpherson inquiry panel – that legislative changes alone have little lasting impact. One panel member, Dr Richard Stone, has said that despite improvements in the immediate aftermath of the inquiry it is clear that “something went wrong”. “When we talk about equalities now,” he told the Guardian, “I feel they have dropped off the agenda...the momentum has gone...” At the last election, he noted, not one of the three main political parties’ manifestos mentioned ‘racism’.

So, Macpherson’s recommendations may have changed how equality was ‘done’ in some of Britain’s key institutions, but did they really change British attitudes? Did they help bring about a fairer, less racist, more equal society?

Sadly, the answer is no. Those from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities remain amongst the poorest in the country. 70% live in the most deprived neighbourhoods. They experience higher unemployment, poorer health, more overcrowding, are more likely to be failed by the educational system, more likely to be failed by the criminal justice system, and more likely to be the victims of crime. They are five times more likely to be imprisoned, and eight to ten times more likely to be stopped-and-searched – an ‘over-representation’ that has almost doubled since the time of Stephen Lawrence’s death. People from BME communities are three to five times more heavily represented in the mental health system – in fact, ten times more in some ‘Black Other’ groups. Even more unfortunate than these statistics, is the fact that we have become very used to hearing them.

So let me get to the lessons I draw from these events. There are many, but I see four big lessons that I don’t believe can be ignored.

- First, there were recommendations in Macpherson which either didn’t go far enough or were not adequately pursued. One of the key areas where change is needed has to be education. While Macpherson recommended changes to the curriculum, these were left to the responsibility of each

school. There was little about how the education system as a whole would address disadvantage, under-achievement or discrimination and these failures in the educational system continue. Not only are new generations being lost to low aspirations and wasted potential, some are doubly lost as they also become willing new recruits to racism. Neither in its duty of care, its delivery, or its pastoral responsibilities has the educational system begun to make the contribution it can – and should – to fighting racism.

- Second, policy-makers – and sometimes us ordinary people too – get confused and think that new laws necessarily deliver social justice. But generally they can't and don't – the deeper problems that cause inequality are hardly touched by the law. In this respect, equality laws are a bit like the Highway Code. While the Highway Code is a good and necessary thing, all it does is describe legal road use. It doesn't and can't offer a solution to the deeper social and environmental problems caused by mass car ownership – pollution, traffic injuries and fatalities, poor planning that favours cars over pedestrians, or the decline of local high streets in favour of out-of-town shopping. Increasingly, I believe this is what race equality legislation does. It explains how the 'roads must be used' but is largely powerless to address deeper 'traffic problems'. For this we need fundamental social and political change.
- Third, Britain still doesn't know what kind of society it wants to be and I believe is deeply conflicted about its diversity. What I mean by this is that sometimes those from BME backgrounds simply don't seem to figure in the future that Britain imagines for itself. We're an after-thought, as if "BME" isn't actually a part of "British society" at all – we're the left out, marginalised "other" communities that can't be part of the aspirations British society has for "itself". Many might consider this "normal", the natural order of things, an attitude that's impossible to change – but I think it's a collective passivity we can't afford. The cost of the consequences is too high for any of us to bear.
- But the biggest lesson I take away from the Stephen Lawrence murder is this. That real change in favour of a less racially divided and unequal society will come about not through our politicians, law-makers and legislators but through collective social action that engages the hearts, minds and intellects of every one of us. And if we can participate in that struggle with the dignity, pride and honesty that Doreen and Neville Lawrence have shown then – and only then – can we claim to be creating a legacy truly worthy of Stephen Lawrence's name.

Speaking outside the court, Doreen Lawrence said, “The fact is that racism and racist attacks are still happening in this country and the police should not use my son’s name to say that we can move on.”

And she’s absolutely right; we can’t – not with such unfinished business before us.



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brap is transforming the way we think and do equality. We support organisations, communities, and cities with meaningful approaches to learning, change, research, and engagement. We are a partner and friend to anyone who believes in the rights and potential of all human beings.

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