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Chief constable admits police display institutional racism

By Vikram Dodd

A senior police officer has admitted that institutional racism played a part in the Metropolitan Police's failures to carry out a proper investigation into the murder of Stephen Lawrence.

John Newing, chief constable of Derbyshire and chairman of a new race relations task force set up by the Association of Chief Police Officers told The Observer that racism at least partly explained the string of police errors.

His views are in direct contradiction to the Met, which has vigorously denied racism during the public inquiry into the hunt for Lawrence's killers. He also said police racism led to black people being treated unequally and getting an inferior service to whites.

Newing, who will become the ACPO president in October, said of the Lawrence case: "I would find it difficult to think institutional racism was not taking place. Unless people start understanding these issues, it's bound to affect how people approach problems."

Last week it was revealed that an adviser to the Metropolitan Police on race, Dr Robin Oakley, had told Sir William MacPherson's inquiry that police prejudice played a part in the investigation.

A spokeswoman for the Metropolitan force said: "The Met accepts there might have been a perception of racism or unintentional racism, but the Met does not accept that institutional racism played a part."

The Observer understands that Macpherson has concluded that institutional racism marred the investigation.

Figures revealed recently show police in some forces were eight times more likely to stop and search black people than whites. Newing said: "We pick on people because they appear to be different and officers have a stereotype of them."

He wondered if enough was being done to eradicate racism within the ranks: "Unless there is good leadership and management, policy initiatives will not be translated into action on the streets." He added that the Lawrence case had led to the setting up of the ACPO task force he will chair.

Paul Wilson, chair of the Black Police Association, said: "I have never heard a senior police officer saying this before. It's quite refreshing. The concept of institutional racism has hit the Met's leadership for six. I don't understand why the Met denies that institutional racism played a part in the Lawrence case."

The Met has launched policy initiatives on race to try to limit the damage to its reputation. One initiative is a Racial and Violent Crime Taskforce, whose director, John Grieve, began work last week.

A senior source said it would investigate police handling of the death of Asian teenager Lakhvinder 'Ricky' Reel after an alleged racial incident.

The Met said Reel's death last October was accidental drowning. His family say the 20-year-old died after he and two Asian friends were racially abused and attacked by a white gang, and detectives had failed to investigate this properly. The Police Complaints Authority is investigating.

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