



*Rapid  
Communications*

## **Police Institutional Racism, Labelling and Mixed Messages: Analysis of the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police's John Harris Memorial Lecture 2024**

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### **Abstract:**

Claims of institutional racism are made against law enforcement agencies in many jurisdictions. In 1999 the MacPherson Inquiry found the Metropolitan police to be institutionally racist. Nearly a quarter of a century later the Casey Review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police confirmed the ongoing existence of institution racism within the force. The current Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police has accepted the overall findings of the Casey Review and committed to tackling the issues raised but has refused to accede to the label of 'institutional racism'. This raises the important question of whether the refusal to accept the label has any instrumental impact on how he tackles the substance of institutional racism. Analysis of a recent Lecture given by the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner suggests that it does. While not doubting the Commissioner's integrity in relation to his stated commitment to meaningful reform this paper reveals how elements of the Lecture could fuel social division and arguably exhibit institutional racism. In doing so it highlights the dangers of mixed messaging and the importance of consistency in the 'tone from the top' as an aspect of embedding institutional change

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## **Introduction: Institutional Racism**

Claims of institutional racism are made against law enforcement agencies in many jurisdictions. In 1999 the MacPherson Inquiry found the Metropolitan Police to be institutionally racist.<sup>1</sup> Some twenty-four years later the Casey Review found the force to be institutionally racist, misogynist and homophobic.<sup>2</sup> The Casey Review adopted the definition of institutional racism provided by the MacPherson Inquiry:

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, *thoughtlessness* and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.<sup>3</sup> (emphasis added)<sup>4</sup>

Sir Mark Rowley the current Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police (the Commissioner) has accepted the overall findings of the Casey Review and committed to creating and instilling meaningful cultural change. He has however refused to accede to the labelling of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) as 'institutionally racist' stating that the term is 'confusing' and has become 'politicalised'.<sup>5</sup> What influences bear on his decision regarding this refusal remain undisclosed.

On 19<sup>th</sup> September 2024 the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner gave a joint John Harris Memorial Lecture hosted by the Police Foundation (the Lecture).<sup>6</sup> As outlined below, analysis of the lecture points to ongoing institutional racism which conflicts with the Commissioner's stated commitment to tackling the issues raised by Casey. Further, on the basis that one has to assume this was a carefully crafted oration that represents the Commissioner's understanding of the issues he raises, the analysis also suggests a degree of unconscious bias on his part. It therefore reveals a level of mixed messaging by the head of the largest police force in the England and Wales. This is problematic because inconsistencies between stated values and practically perceived institutional values can breed "cynicism and disengagement" which in turn impedes cultural change.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, while not doubting the Commissioner's integrity in terms of his stated commitment to addressing institutional racism this paper adds important and timely evidence of the potential impact of the refusal to accept the label of the MPS as 'institutionally Racist'. This has implications beyond policing in England and Wales in relation to the difficulties and dynamics of embedding institutional change, the dangers of mixed messaging and the importance of subjecting management 'tone from the top' to ongoing scrutiny.

## **Analysis of The Lecture**

The Lecture begins with the Commissioner setting out the challenges to policing brought about by new technologies, increases in public order offences, significant uplifts in reports of high-harm offences, and declining trust in institutions. He does not at this juncture acknowledge the multiple recent events that have impacted trust in the Metropolitan Police (and which resulted in the Casey Review). Instead, he alludes to this later in the Lecture where he states that no one has "been firmer on standards in policing" than him and that having talked about that 'a lot' he did not propose to say more in the Lecture. This bracketing out is problematic because a continuing recognition that the many failings identified in the Casey Review are a significant source of the declining trust in institutions to which he refers may have resulted in greater reflection on how the Lecture was constructed and how it might be interpreted.

Of the challenges the Metropolitan Police is facing the Commissioner highlights new pressures from "racial and religious disharmony" which he states was "demonstrated by the rioting that occurred around the country last month (i.e. August) and the tensions and protests in London related to the terror attack of 7 October last year and subsequent conflict." In circumstances where the violent disorder in August included "participants

attacking mosques and hotels housing asylum seekers” and that rioting “was promoted by known far right activists”<sup>8</sup>, it is not clear that the description of it as stemming from ‘racial and religious disharmony’ is entirely apt. Instead, the phrasing (which as noted above will or should have been carefully considered) substantially underplays the victimisation of racialised communities in that violence. In doing so it is insensitive to the heightened fear “that has gripped many communities” as a consequence of the disorder and of the psychological burden and instrumental impact of that fear.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the reference to “tensions and protests in London related to the terror attack of 7 October and subsequent conflict” is subtly put in a more negative context in the next section of the Lecture where Sir Rowley makes specific reference to the “Palestine protests”. Underscoring the difficult job officers do, the Commissioner points to 18 officers a day being “bitten, punched, racially abused and worse” and 2 per week being seriously injured. He gives examples of serious threats to officers’ lives and despairs “And how does society thank them? With insults”.

It is unfortunate that the example given of the insults are taken from his personal scroll of posts about the “Palestine protests” in the previous week, in respect to which he continues:

“it happens every time we police mass gathering - a riot of noise about injustice or bias. The police are “useless”, “biased”, “pathetic”, even “shameful”. I’ll tell you what’s shameful: the abuse of our officers and the silence of many in authority”

It is anticipated that considerably more provocative and potentially abusive comments are made about the police on-line in relation to other aspects of policing. It is therefore noteworthy that the ‘Palestine protests’ were selected for attention. Further, it is unclear whether the abuse to which the Commissioner is referring is the biting, racial abuse and serious violence noted in the previous paragraph or the allegations of ‘bias’, ‘uselessness’ etc. that form part of the online ‘riot of noise about injustice...’. However, a stark (if unintended) inference is that the Palestine protest resulted in inappropriate and ill-founded ‘insults’ to officers by people who are disrespectful of the difficult job they do. This type of sentiment coming as it has from the Commissioner of the Metropolitan police will do nothing to abate the voices on the far right that were fanning the flames of disorder in the summer of 2024.

Moreover, it is evident that the Commissioner was interpreting an allegation of bias as an insult. This does not sit well with his acceptance in all but label of the findings of the Casey Review and invites further reflection on his bracketing out (noted above) of the Metropolitan Police’s most recent catalogue of high-profile misconduct and systemic failings. Ongoing sensitivity to the valid concerns of racialised communities regarding institutional racism in the Metropolitan police would have resulted in more careful thought regarding this part of the speech. If people are afraid of being demonised for alleging bias, how can institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia be overcome.

The impact of multiple protests on police time is currently recognised as part of larger concerns regarding the law on protest and the Commissioner’s calls for more funding etc are valid.<sup>10</sup> On this basis the analysis above may be criticised as overly sensitive and exacting.

However, the second section of the Lecture delivered by Deputy Commissioner Dame Owens supports the contention that overall, the Lecture exhibits significant bias. In a section, which in the official transcript is under the subtitle ‘Policing by Consent’ Dame Owens states

We committed in A New Met for London to putting more officers locally in neighbourhoods .....[], but our efforts have been hampered – as the police inspectorate recognised last month – by the huge amount of police time that is now spent policing protests and events. The Israel-Gaza protests, Just Stop Oil and Notting Hill Carnival alone have taken nearly 70,000 shifts over the last year.

Again, the vast amount of police time spent dealing with far-right organised riot and affray is not mentioned. Instead protests involving Israelis and Palestinians (and their supporters), and some environmentalists are singled out. In addition, and significantly, there are many ‘events’ in London which may be interpreted as taking policing resources from other activities.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore noteworthy and arguably socially divisive that policing of the

Notting Hill Carnival<sup>12</sup> is singled out as hampering police efforts at neighbourhood policing rather than being seen as an aspect of community policing for that community. Furthermore, its divisiveness is underscored in the following line.

Just think. 70,000 shifts. That's the equivalent of over half a million officer hours, often taken from visible policing on our streets, which is so valued by our communities.

This implicitly indicates a view that the attendees of Notting Hill Carnival are not part of the London Community as the Commissioner and Deputy see it. Instead in this line senior management in the Metropolitan Police are amplifying racial and religious division by demonising Black and other racialised groups (albeit alongside some environmentalists) for taking visible policing away from 'communities'. The clear implication is that the communities the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner are referring to are white.<sup>13</sup> In this context the Deputy Commissioner's reference five paragraphs later the work the Metropolitan Police is doing with London's diverse communities, and the National Race Action plan reads as additional othering.

## Discussion

The definition of institutional racism includes 'thoughtlessness'. The analysis above demonstrates that the John Harris memorial Lecture exhibited thoughtlessness in relation to the potential of the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner's words to fuel social division and for the tone of the lecture overall to 'other' racialised groups. Evidence to the MacPherson Inquiry on the nature of institutional racism included reference to how "systemic tendencies" may "unconsciously influence police performance generally".<sup>14</sup> This thoughtlessness (in a carefully crafted public speech) exhibits just such a systemic tendency and has the capacity to influence officers' thoughts and conduct and thereby undermine work done to address the issues raised by Casey. Further, that the Commissioner has committed to tackling institutional racism is of little assistance in such circumstances because as noted above mixed messaging of this nature is also not conducive to cultural change.<sup>15</sup>

While adopting the MacPherson definition of institutional racism and finding institutional racism, homophobia and misogyny Casey noted that the Review had also seen and set out evidence of

- overt acts of homophobia, misogyny and racism by serving officers and staff in the Met
- systems that have bias and are discriminatory in the outcomes they deliver
- bias in the policing of London, including under-protection and over-policing of Black communities and under-protection of women and girls
- *a culture of denial with leadership and systemic failures to root out racist behaviours and address discrimination.* (emphasis added)

She concluded that the "new leadership of the Met must accept and address these issues in order to move forwards."<sup>16</sup> The concern raised by the analysis here is that the refusal to accept the label institutional racism does nothing to abate and arguably evidences an ongoing 'culture of denial' regarding institutional failings. Further high-profile public lectures that demonstrate the thoughtlessness that is core to some aspects of institutional racism compound this denial and provide a layer of mixed messaging.

## Conclusion

Just as a fish is not aware of the water, so one of the most insidious things about institutional racism is that those most embedded in the institution are least likely to recognise it. It is contended that acceptance that racism in the Metropolitan Police is indeed institutional (and all the implications of that) would have resulted in the content of the Lecture being carefully reviewed for potential bias before it was given. This was clearly not done. The analysis above suggests that the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner need to reflect further on the refusal of the Metropolitan Police to accept the label institutional racism and seek further support concerning their own unconscious bias. It also highlights

the importance of continued scrutiny of public lectures of this nature by senior policing figures.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> William Macpherson, *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry*, (London: Home Office. Cm4262-1 4262.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk) 1999), at paragraph 6.34.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Casey, *Baroness Casey Review Final report: An independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the metropolitan Police Service*, ([Baroness Casey Review Final Report \(met.police.uk\)](#) 2023), <https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/met/about-us/baroness-casey-review/update-march-2023/baroness-casey-review-march-2023a.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Macpherson, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Macpherson, 1999, para 6.34.

<sup>5</sup> Vikram Dodd and Jamie Greison, *Khan Criticises Rowley's refusal to describe Met as institutionally biased*, (The Guardian Newspaper 21 March 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Transcript of John Harris Memorial Lecture 19 September 2024 [John Harris Memorial Lecture 2024 - a speech by Cmsr Sir Mark Rowley and Dep Cmsr Dame Lynne Owens | Metropolitan Police](#)

<sup>7</sup> Chip Chapman. *An Independent Review of the Police Disciplinary System in England and Wales*, (publishing.service.gov.uk 2014), pp. 16.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cf830e5274a2af0ae293e/An\\_Independent\\_Review\\_of\\_the\\_Police\\_Disciplinary\\_System\\_-\\_Report\\_-\\_Final....pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7cf830e5274a2af0ae293e/An_Independent_Review_of_the_Police_Disciplinary_System_-_Report_-_Final....pdf).

<sup>8</sup> William Downs, *Policing Response to the 2024 summer Riots*, (House of Commons Library 2024), [Policing response to the 2024 summer riots \(parliament.uk\)](#).

<sup>9</sup> Harbi Jamma. *The Impact of Far-Right Riots on Londoners*, (The London Community Foundation 2024), [London Community Foundation | The Impact of Far-Right Riots on... \(londoncf.org.uk\)](#).

<sup>10</sup> John Woodcock, (Lord Walney). *Protecting our Democracy from Coercion* Home Office, 2024, [Protecting our Democracy from Coercion \(accessible\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#).

<sup>11</sup> See for example [BST Hyde Park | Home \(bst-hydepark.com\)](#).

<sup>12</sup> The Notting Hill Carnival holds significance as a site of resistance to racism and oppression been instrumental in "laying a cultural heritage foundation for people of African Caribbean origin and their descendants in Britain". See Ernest Taylor, and Kneafsey Moya. *The place of urban cultural heritage festivals: The case of London's Notting Hill Carnival*. Cultural Heritage in a Changing World, (Springer International Publishing, 2016), pp. 188.

<sup>13</sup>The degree of division was advanced further when in questions afterwards a journalist asked whether protests were depleting resources to the point where it was impacting the Metropolitan police's ability to keep people safe, to which the Commissioner answered 'Yes'. Author's own notes.

<sup>14</sup>Macpherson, 1999, para 6.5.

<sup>15</sup> Chapman, 2014, pp. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Casey, 2023.