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Note to self – add pic of sunak attack ad

Institutional failure: policing in permacrisis Karim Murji

Systemic and structural failings can only be addressed by systemic and structural change

Permacrisis was the word of year in 2022 for the Collins dictionary, mainly to account for the chaos and confusion of a post-Brexit and post-pandemic Britain. As 2023 began it was a word that still resonated, but this time as a way of grasping the sense of leaping from one seemingly unprecedented crisis to another that characterises the state of London's Metropolitan Police force. A review of culture and standards in the force led by Baroness Louise Casey, published in March 2023, was the front page story of almost every newspaper and news website in the UK.¹ A common refrain across both right-wing and more liberal media was that this was the worst day for the Met since the last worst day, often taken to be the publication of the Macpherson report in 1999, making this a permacrisis stretched over a long period of time.

Another common view across newspaper editorials was that real reform must happen this time - this could be the 'last chance saloon' for the Met: unless something was done, it was in danger of being broken up as an organisation. The familiarity of these and other recurring tropes is part of what makes for a wearisome sense of déjà vu. In adding here to the commentary on the Met, I want to bring in a perspective that is less evident, namely that the Met is not the only institutional problem in this story. A bland mediascape that reports on these recurring failures, and, more seriously, a failing political culture at once ossified and addicted to the 'sugar rush' of immediate - and immediately forgotten - political news, also contribute to what is a three-pronged case of institutional failure, of which the Met is just one part.² This is a permacrisis rooted in but extending well beyond the police. My argument in this article is that this crisis reflects a failure on the part of all three institutions to recognise and seek to address institutional racism. It is also a failure to go beyond the facile assumption - in the face of decades of evidence to the contrary - that deeply embedded structural problems can be solved through the fix of culture change programmes or the appointment of a heroic new leader. All three institutions are implicated in a politics of law and order that is linked to an increasing authoritarianism, and to a zombie politics that seeks to manage dissent through producing first shock and then amnesia.

Extending the i-word

The main headline from the Casey review was the extent and persistence of deep-seated racism, sexism, misogyny and homophobia in the Met. For anyone aware of the many long-standing and extensive critiques of 'cop culture' this hardly came as a surprise. Except that this culture is always supposed to be a relic of the bad old days before the Met saw the light. But when were bad old days and when did they end, if they did? Continuities seem a lot easier to find than any radical break - whether it is the corruption scandal of the 1960s; the shocking racism exposed in research by the Policy Studies Institute in the 1970s; the public order battles of the 1980s; the ongoing over-policing of black people from the Windrush generation onwards; the under-protection of people from ethnic minorities as victims of racist crime; Macpherson in the 1990s; the BBC's *Secret Policeman* in the early 2000s; the

racialised thinking behind the Met's gang matrix in the past decade ... and this list only scratches the surface.

Of course, it is not supposed to be like this. The bad old days belong to the past ... don't they? Didn't they end with Robert Mark's war on corruption in the Met in the 1970s? Or was it with the community engagement reforms recommend by Scarman, alongside the legislative framework of the 1984 Police and Criminal Evidence Act? Or did they end as a result of the codes of ethics that keep being revived, alongside the continuing attempts to professionalise policing, now overseen by the College of Policing, and a new framework for graduate entry in the form of the Police Entry Qualifications Framework? Or was public confidence brought about by the succession of bodies trying to get a satisfactory grasp on police complaints - the Police Complaints Authority (1985-2004), replaced by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (2004-2018), and then the current independent Office for Police Complaints? (Even insider groups such as the Black Police Association think that these measures focus too much on the police investigating their own.) Another favoured remedy across more than four decades has been to thoroughly managerialise the police through the putting in place an audit culture, with the result that management through key performance indicators has become the essence of policing. And there have also been the heavy-handed reforms of police governance through the creation of Police and Crime Commissioners. Surely all these reforms have had an impact|?

The Casey review was set up by the Met in response to the public's shock when a serving officer, PC Wayne Couzens, was charged with kidnapping, raping and murdering Sarah Everard in 2021. Hardly cementing their reputation for protecting women's safety, the Met then turned their attention to breaking up a March 2022 vigil organised by Reclaim These Streets to pay tribute to Sarah Everard. Worse was to follow in early 2023, when another police officer, David Carrick, pleaded guilty to 24 counts of rape and 9 sexual assaults against 12 women. Both men had previously been suspected of sexual offences while serving as police officers but allowed to remain in post.

In response to these high-profile cases, Zoe Billingham, a former member of the Police Inspectorate, called for a public inquiry into institutional misogyny in the police, while many protestors about women's safety following the Couzens case pointed to institutional sexism. Once linked only or mainly to racism, this was a notable acknowledgement of the power of the i-word to capture systemic problems within the police. But while this recognition creates new dynamics around reform, only repackaged versions of the same old remedies have been evident as a response.

In 2021 another kind of 'institutional' issue - institutional corruption - was identified. It made the headlines when it became a key term in the 1200-page report on the Met's handling of the murder of Daniel Morgan, produced by an independent panel and chaired by Baroness Nuala O'Loan (a former Police Ombudsman in Northern Ireland).³ The panel was commissioned by the UK Home Secretary to investigate why numerous police investigations into Morgan's murder had produced no suspects. In its report, institutional corruption refers to an organisation that places the protection of its reputation above fidelity to the truth.

While a claim that a problem is institutional is harder to dismiss in light of these cases, the Met has plenty of form in denialism, particularly when it is a question of institutional racism. The term was coined in 1967 by the Black Power movement. Applied to policing it encapsulates a view that the longstanding and multiple cases and complaints about their

treatment of black people cannot be placed at the door of a few prejudiced officers. Thinking of racism as more than individual - as woven into the culture and structure of the police organisation - was rejected in Lord Scarman's 1981 inquiry into the Brixton riots, but the 1999 Macpherson inquiry decided it could find no other way to account for the police's failures in the murder of Stephen Lawrence. Yet dealing with institutional racism - or even acknowledging its existence - has been a recurring problem for the Met.

In prefixing 'corruption' with 'institutional', O'Loan was clearly aware of the echoes it would carry. Institutional racism has formed a critical lens through which to understand police practice and policy for a long time, all the way through to the recent Black Lives Matters protests. And it was the institutional connection that was precisely what was picked up in the national press in 2021, which saw the O'Loan report as the worst reflection on the police since Macpherson. Until the same things were said on the publication of the Casey review.

Connecting racism and corruption is more than an incidental link, even though Daniel Morgan was white. Corruption was, allegedly, a key reason for the police failure to properly investigate the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. The Morgan family and campaigners have long indicated that it was corrupt police officers who protected the main suspects in that murder case. The police's lack of resolve in investigating Stephen's murder involved much more than a lack of awareness and cultural sensitivity - which was how Macpherson thought of institutional racism.

The purpose of adding 'institutional' before 'racism' or 'sexism' or 'corruption' is to signal something systemic and deep-rooted. Racism and race inequalities persist despite anti-discrimination policies and rhetoric in any society where formal legal and political equality is little more than a screen. For decades - during a period when explicitly racist ideologies and attitudes were becoming more or less marginalised - institutional racism was understood as resulting from something that came to be called 'unconscious bias', or seen as a failure to recognise 'white privilege'. But this view now looks somewhat facile, in a time when quite explicit racism has become mainstream and normalised, from the corridors of power to the voices of social media. The idea of institutional racism has been routinely circumvented by refusing to understand or acknowledge that racism is not just an individual attribute.⁴

Every Commissioner of the Met since Macpherson has been asked if institutional racism does apply to the force, and each has either rejected it or fudged the answer by pointing to changes made to the organisation to make it more diverse and fairer. The latest in this long line is the current Commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley, who in March 2023, when pressed in interviews, said he did not accept the term as it had become too 'ambiguous' and 'politicised'. He was, however, willing to say the issues were 'systemic', which reveals something about the pain - for the Met - of its history of admitting to institutional racism. In its editorial on the Casey Report, the (London) Evening Standard called this denial 'a mistake', adding: 'It suggests that Scotland Yard's senior leadership may still not have fully come to terms with the extent of the crisis'.⁵

To understand why the i-word is so difficult for the Met we need to go back to the template set up in the evidence to Macpherson by then Commissioner Paul Condon. He pleaded with the inquiry not to conclude that the police force was institutionally racist, because, he argued, that would lead the public to think that every individual officer was a racist. While the more-than-individual character of institutional racism is central to the concept, the police (and

many commentators in the media at the time and since) resolutely refuse to see this, aware of the shock it caused in the rank and file when Macpherson came out, as well as the resistance to it in all the race awareness training that followed.

Splitting individual from systemic racism has provided a convenient way to avoid addressing the issue - even while, paradoxically, many policy changes have been instituted. Thinking of structural racism as something more than an either/or concept has not cut through in policy or practice. Although racism and sexism have different valences, an institutional and intersectional perspective could help get beyond the impasse, if there was any real commitment to dealing with them.

The idea of institutional corruption does not have the same longevity as institutional racism, and only one Commissioner has been asked to answer to it. When the O'Loan report came out, then Commissioner Dick denied the Morgan case was tainted by institutional corruption, even though the report had specifically named her as someone who had been less than fully cooperative. Yet questioning from the media somehow failed to drill down into the fact that she was herself a senior officer in the Met at the time of a previous investigation into the killing of Morgan.

The shining knight who will change the culture

Almost as familiar as the number and frequency of police scandals is the recurrence of the knight in shining armour who rides in to reform the Met. As they usually acquire the knighthood in office, only to leave a few years later in some degree of ignominy, the image of a knight riding off into the sunset of the House of Lords might be more appropriate.

Rowley is the latest embodiment of the saviour role, but we have been here many times before, and two examples in particular stand out. When in 1993 Condon became the youngest ever Commissioner of the Met he was greeted with favourable news coverage about how he was going to reform the organisation - he was 'a man once seen as the very epitome of a new model police chief'.⁶ Yet by 1998 Condon was mired in the Met's head-in-the sand attitude to Macpherson, and by the time his period in office ended, in 1999, the media coverage was a tale of failure. Ian Blair is the second high-profile figure welcomed as a progressive, reforming commissioner, in 2005 - indeed he was even described as Britain's 'most politically correct police officer' - but he ended his tenure as the 'Commissioner of controversy'.⁷

For both men, race was crucial in their downfall: for Condon it was as a result of the fallout from Macpherson; for Blair it was due to several internal battles with senior Muslim officers and the Met's Black Police Association - which led then London mayor Boris Johnson to declare he had no confidence in him, giving him no option other than to resign. In the stunted mediascape there is little awareness of this habit of lionising new leaders followed by coverage of their demise.

The question of what these failures say about the police in general, the Metropolitan Police more specifically, and British society more widely, is rarely discussed in the media. The ignominious departures of the two most liberal and progressive reforming commissioners of recent years - both of whom strongly proclaimed their support for better representation of black and minority officers and better treatment of London's black communities - are stories that the media tends not to delve into when it acclaims Rowley as the new leader. Meanwhile, following Blair's departure, Johnson's offering to the Met's Black Police Association was an

inquiry into race and faith matters in the organisation - one that joins the pile of the many previous reports now gathering dust.

When the same scenario of declaring no confidence in the leader of the Met played out between Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan and Commissioner Cressida Dick in 2022, sections of the press, conservative MPs and some London Assembly members were critical of Khan for political interference. This labelling of the same act as good if done by our side but bad if done by the other is part of the bread and butter of political game-playing, but it hardly inspires trust that there are any principles at stake for those involved, which is particularly concerning in a high-stakes issue such as policing.

So, pace Casey, another cycle of reform begins, with the Met's 2023-2025 Turnaround Plan - based on three headline pledges: more trust, less crime and high standards.⁸ And once again a largely supportive media and cross-party consensus back the man at the top to succeed where so many have failed. A puff piece in the Spectator by former BBC home affairs reporter Danny Shaw is typical.⁹ Rowley, we are told, has 'extraordinary drive', is not 'afraid of confrontation or delivering difficult messages', does not do what 'convention and common-sense dictate - even if that sometimes risks creating trouble', and is 'so impatient... for change' that staff have to run behind him to keep up.

In the wake of the Couzens and Carrick cases, Rowley has warned that two or three officers could be on trial every week for crimes of violence and, acknowledging that there are hundreds of officers who should not be serving in the Met, he seeks more powers to remove them speedily.¹⁰ Rowley's wish to countermand the police tribunals process has support from the current Home Secretary although Mayor Khan has already accused her of delaying the process.¹¹ This sums up the national/city political divide the Met can be caught up in. Meanwhile, Rowley's denial of institutional racism creates an unusual moment where the head of the Police Federation accepts it and says that many of his members welcome culture change. It remains to be seen what that means, but Rowley's pathway to success is by no means clear when he appears to be more of a stumbling block on race than his staff.

If discussion of these potential difficulties is one gap in the mainstream mediascape, another is that little attention is paid to his role as the head of specialist operations in the Met from 2011-18 - a division in which both Couzens and Carrick served as police officers. The past is forgotten, and, as with almost every new Commissioner, a bright new dawn is heralded. Rowley promises 'root and branch' reform - but this begs the issue of why all the previous reforms have been inadequate. Despite the Met's reluctance to talk about 'bad apples' - because it leads others to suggest the orchard is rotten - this new appeal to arboreal metaphors is a telling sign that crises have become routine not exceptional. Meanwhile, there is no shortage of commentary on what needs to be done to reform the police. The two main suggestions are for more independent oversight and for culture change.

Independent oversight and involvement already exist in many forms, but none of the forms it takes is a panacea. After Macpherson, the police set up a whole array of independent advisory groups, yet information about their membership, their terms of reference or their role is rarely publicly scrutinised. There are independent members on Police Misconduct Boards, but there is a feeling that they are subservient to the legally qualified chair of each panel. National reforms of police governance, first put forward by David Cameron in 2010, to replace police authorities with elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs), have reduced the role of independent members. PCCs were imagined by Cameron as equivalents to US-style elected

sheriffs - having a public profile to hold the local chief of police to account - but the role has come to be dominated by party politicians. In the first elections in 2012, 12 out of 41 PCCs were independent; by 2016 there were only three independents; and in the most recent elections, in 2021, the number fell to zero.

Being independent does not of course mean the same thing as being progressive, and several mavericks have cropped up in the role. Kevin Hurley, a former Chief Superintendent in the Met who was the PCC for Surrey from 2014 to 2018, reminds us of some of the problems of bringing about culture change. As a police officer he had worked in the time of the Macpherson report, with all the training and culture change that followed. As a police commander in a highly multicultural London borough, he had been responsible for community engagement, anti-racism and diversity. Yet, while being interviewed on Sky news, Hurley's answer to problems of knife crime was to suggest that there were too many women single parents in the African-Caribbean community, and that Black Lives Matter was destabilising Britain.¹²

While accounts from former Black and Asian police officers speak powerfully about the culture of racism and sexism, the remedies they propose have a familiar ring. Appeals to and recommendations for cultural change in the police are almost as common as police scandals. As a mediating level or force between the individual and the institutional, culture is seen as a kind of black box: it offers clues for explaining what cannot be explained. But seeing the problems as 'just' cultural gives little acknowledgement of how culture, structure and the environment of policing interact. Instead, as the same old solutions are rolled out yet again, there is a forgetting of the extent to which such remedies have been tried already: there is no assessment of what did and did not work in the past, and no-one confronts the basic question of why anything should be different this time. Calls for a public inquiry into institutional sexism or misogyny fall into the same trap, but so too do many other proposals.

For some criminologists, periodic shocks are built into the structure of policing as the job involves 'dirty work', dealing with surplus populations that no one else is required to. But that view hardly deals with the crude sexism and racism that women and minority officers have been reporting from their colleagues for decades. For others, these are less general issues for the police and more specific problems for big city policing, and the structure and culture of the Metropolitan Police. As with the Macpherson recommendations, this can be an easy way for other forces to treat racism or sexism as a Met issue.

Theories of institutional change stress the role of exogenous shocks in bringing about change. In the case of the police there has been a barrage of major and smaller shocks, and the bigger ones have certainly driven a 'something must be done' mentality, often entailing considerable policy churn. Every shock is followed by the stock response that this will be a decisive moment of change, or that this cannot happen again, and this time we really mean it. Newspaper editorials like the Standard's 'change cannot wait' play to the same agenda. But without any follow-through the issue is forgotten until the next shock occurs and the whole cycle has to be revived. Superficiality is to be expected in the media but should be less common among the politicians whose job includes oversight of the police.

Zombie politics

A third level of institutional failure, extending well beyond problems of the police and the media, is the way issues of law and order play out in British political culture. Labour has

recently moved strongly on to what Stuart Hall called the terrain of law and order, traditionally seen as a Tory issue.¹³ Building on Sir Keir Starmer's tenure as the Director of Public Prosecutions, crime and law and order have become increasingly prominent campaign messages, as can be seen in frequency with which he raises it at Prime Minister's Questions in the Commons, and in his Port Vale speech after the Casey review.¹⁴ The question of whether anything proposed will be different from what has gone before is open to a large dose of doubt; while proposals for the criminalisation of ever increasing numbers of people seems likely to make things worse.

This campaigning reflects Labour's current confidence, as it enjoys a commanding lead in the polls, just as it refers back to an earlier time when the ruling Conservative Party was staggering from crisis to crisis, in the 1990s. Then Labour, under Tony Blair, famously promised to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. The reality turned out to involve far more of the former than the latter, as Labour governments from 1997 onwards passed ever more draconian legislation on crime, public order and counterterrorism. By 2023 the idea that Labour might be tough on the causes of crime could barely be glimpsed.

Instead, the electoral cycle means that Labour now promises to reverse cuts to police numbers under the Conservatives since 2010, and to recruit 13,000 more officers. There is also much reference to the role of community officers, but yet again the media fails to ask the critical questions, to which Labour has no answer: that is, why were previous neighbourhood policing initiatives rolled back, and why is it so easy for such officers, even when supposedly ring-fenced, to be pulled into other roles?

But this set of issues cannot be reduced to arguments over police numbers. In the real world, the long-term effects of austerity under successive Tory-led governments, added to the cost-of-living crisis, the intensification of inequalities, and a punitive welfare system, mean that any extra officers will have ever larger numbers of marginalised and criminalised people to deal with. Institutional failure is hardwired into the political system that urges the police to reform while making their job ever more difficult.

A case in point is Labour's recent attack ad implying that Sunak is soft on those who sexually assault children, and promising that that 'Labour will lock up dangerous child abusers' - an insidious turn within this political game. Leaving aside the question of basing your electoral appeal on the idea that you plan to lock up lots of people, a Labour poster featuring a very large image of a brown man with words about child sexual abuse is far from innocent, especially given that it appeared just a few days after the Home Secretary had made false statements about Pakistani grooming gangs in northern England. Law and order politics inexorably links itself to racism, and dog whistle follows dog whistle.¹⁵

It is also zombie politics - a politics filled with cynicism, as Henry Giroux sees it.¹⁶ Giroux analyses zombie politics as part of the new authoritarian right's fuelling of a friend/enemy divide, but a wider view of this kind of politics is that, existing as it does in the grip of big business, it seeks to turn voting into an empty ritual. It is indifferent to human suffering, or how to enhance freedom and agency. This ought to make the cheerleaders for Labour at least pause for thought.

Apart from the circularity of the repertoire of actions proposed after every crisis, there is only one other certainty in this zombie landscape: the next law and order crisis is a matter of when not if. The current or future leadership of the police will then promise decisive action, and, by

the time people come to ask the simple question ‘why didn’t that work?’, they will not have to answer because they will no longer be in post. Or a management consultant will say it’s just more and better inspirational leadership that is needed.¹⁷ This predictability makes the Met, too, a zombie institution, always facing the worst crisis until the next one comes along. Each one is followed by some smaller or larger apology and a claim that this issue will be a watershed. Yet so many good crises have already gone to waste that there seems very little cause for optimism.

Yet there is (there was?) another way being discussed quite recently. In late May 2020, thousands of Black Lives Matter protests took place in cities across the world, following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis. The shocking sight of a black man being asphyxiated as an officer’s knee pressed on his neck provoked a huge mobilisation of people; and those protests gave impetus to demands about defunding the police. The proposals in Alex Vitale’s *The End of Policing* - a more reformist and pragmatic text than its title suggests - transplanted into the UK, could be mobilised into a policy that, instead of allocating more money to the police, would invest public funds in preventive and alternative services, such as better drug treatment and mental health services.¹⁸ Building the conditions that undermine the causes of crime is a stepping stone of an abolitionist project. Better funding for social services rather than law enforcement was part of New Labour’s multi-agency and community safety plans, until they were lost in the law-and-order reflex. A social policy aimed a more peaceful society might make the job of policing less confrontational and less masculinist. If that happened, not only would the police be better off: all of us would.

Karim Murji teaches at the University of West London and is the co-editor of a new textbook, *An Introduction to Sociology* (Sage 2022).

Notes

¹ The Baroness Casey review: <https://www.met.police.uk/police-forces/metropolitan-police/areas/about-us/about-the-met/bcr/baroness-casey-review/>.

² ‘Sugar rush’ is a term used by Bill Schwarz in his editorial in *Soundings* 81, 2022: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/vol-2022-issue-81/article-9602/>.

³ [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/993982/_HC_11-I_-_](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/993982/_HC_11-I_-_The_Report_of_the_Daniel_Morgan_Independent_Panel__Volume_1_.pdf)

[_The_Report_of_the_Daniel_Morgan_Independent_Panel__Volume_1_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/993982/_HC_11-I_-_The_Report_of_the_Daniel_Morgan_Independent_Panel__Volume_1_.pdf)

⁴ A fuller discussion of the term and the Macpherson inquiry is contained in my book: *Racism, Policy, and Politics*, Policy Press 2017.

⁵ ‘Met failings laid bare, change cannot wait’, *Evening Standard*, 21 March 2023.

⁶ David Rose, ‘Right attitude, shame about the leadership’, *Independent*, 3 October 1998.

⁷ ‘New Met chief named’, *Evening Standard*, 27 October 2004; *Guardian*, 20 August 2008.

⁸ <https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/media/downloads/met/about-us/turnaround-plan.pdf>.

⁹ Danny Shaw, ‘“They call him the tunneller”: meet the new head of the Met police’, *Spectator*, 9 July 2022.

¹⁰ ‘Give me more power to sack officers - Met chief’: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-65203633>.

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/apr/09/dont-delay-moves-to-clean-up-met-police-sadiq-khan-tells-suella-braverman>.

¹² Reported in the Daily Mail, 26.6.20.

¹³ Hall saw the racialisation and political mobilisation of crime as crucial to the politics of Thatcherism: see Stuart Hall, 'Drifting into a Law and Order Society: The 1979 Cobden Trust Human Rights Day Lecture (1980)', *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, Duke University Press 2021, pp78-96.

¹⁴ <https://labour.org.uk/press/keir-starmer-unveils-mission-to-halve-serious-violent-crime-and-raise-confidence-in-the-police-and-criminal-justice-system-to-its-highest-levels/>

¹⁵ This was the view of Sayeeda Warsi , a Tory peer and former party chair on Twitter.

¹⁶ Henry A. Giroux, *Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism*, Peter Lang 2011.

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/18/toxic-culture-cbi-metropolitan-police>.

¹⁸ Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing*, Verso 2017.