

Kate Smith – Blogging from Boston



Demonstrators against the Zimmerman acquittal on the Trayvon Martin trial have been marching on Federal court houses in many American major cities, including here in Boston. Calling for 'Justice for Trayvon', feelings are running high about the murder of the seventeen-year old High School Student in 2012 yet the demonstrations are peaceful. The grieving yet dignified parents of Trayvon Martin articulate the issues and in doing so set the tone for the demonstrations. In Miami, his father Tracy Martin told the crowd that, following the acquittal, he had "come to realise George Zimmerman wasn't on trial – Trayvon was on trial." Martin's mother, Sybrina Fulton, stifled sobs as she told a crowd in Harlem: – "“Today it was my son. Tomorrow it might be yours...Not only I vow to do what I have to do for Trayvon Martin, I promise I'm going to work hard for your children as well.”"

The similarities with Stephen Lawrence's murder in 1993 are undeniable. The determination of the parents of eighteen year old A'level student Lawrence to seek justice, including bringing an unfunded private prosecution when murder charges against two of the five suspects were dropped, not only shone a light into the English justice system but eventually triggered an investigation into London policing. Almost twenty years after Lawrence's murder, following a cold case review and new forensic evidence coming to light, Gary Dobson and David Norris were convicted. Last month, in an interview with former undercover police officer Peter Francis The Guardian revealed that pressure had allegedly been brought to bear on Francis to smear the credibility of Lawrence's parents. In response Doreen Lawrence has called for an inquiry commenting: "I don't know what to believe any more".

Importantly there is also significant difference between the two cases, and not just the duration of time to bring suspects to trial. The political context. Civil rights discourse here points to the neoslavery of the early twentieth century and the 'New Jim Crow' of a caste-like system currently establishing in the US, taking its name from the bestseller by civil Rights lawyer Michelle Alexander. This weekend Reverend Al Sharpton has called for a civil rights case to be brought by the Department of Justice against George Zimmerman. When President Obama declared on Friday "[Trayvon Martin could have been me](#)", he ignited the ongoing debate about racial profiling and cultural assumptions of conflating race and crime.

Overall there seems to be consensus amongst the American media and commentariat on the significant political impact of Obama's briefing. [Slate.com](#) commented: "Obama spoke as President, an African-American, and as a former law professor. The task he set for himself, according to sources close to him, was to be a bridge builder: explaining the hurt and anguish so many African-Americans feel in the wake of the verdict to those who don't understand it or who might misunderstand it." As Obama called for national soul-searching and the media declared the need for a new consciousness and awareness, I thought of the UK. Of the unending struggle of Stephen Lawrence's parents for justice for their son, which confronted institutional racism and corruption. Trayvon's parents are probably only at the foothills of their colossal fight for justice and in the different political dynamics of the US it may lead to cultural change. But fighting for justice piecemeal through a legal, political and enforcement system shouldn't fall to parents beset by grief who have already lost everything. Like their lost sons, they should not be on trial, an ordeal which reproduces the discrimination. In the UK and the US equality is a legal right. Now it needs to be fact.

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University, Boston. She is Programme Leader for the BA Journalism in the School of Arts and Creative Industries at Edinburgh Napier University. Prior to joining the University Kate worked at Stirling and Sheffield Hallam Universities and was a freelance journalist and columnist writing regularly for The Scotsman, Scotland on Sunday, the Sunday Herald, the Herald, The Guardian and a wide range of magazines. Before that Kate ran her own international magazine publishing company with offices in Edinburgh and Moscow. Kate was nominated for a British Press award in 2008 for an article on the 2008 Global Food Crisis.