



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Hon Paul Boateng M.P.  
Minister of State,  
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State,  
50, Queen Anne's Gate,  
LONDON SW1H 9AT

2 February 1999

Dear Paul,

RE : THE DEATH OF ROGER SYLVESTER

Thank you for your recent letter about the death of Roger Sylvester. I have sent a copy of this to the family's solicitor, and I have no doubt that it will be appreciated that, for once, a Government Minister has showed concern about the death in custody of a black man without being prompted.

I write in particular to enclose a copy of a letter which I have received from Mr & Mrs Sylvester, Roger's parents, expressing concern about the conduct of the pathologist after the inquest was adjourned on Tuesday 26th January. I had in fact already been told about this, and I do find it extra-ordinary behaviour. I have learned since receiving the family's letter that Dr Patel has been removed from the case by the Coroner - but all the same damage has been done, and this situation should not be allowed to happen again.

I did already have some concerns of a similar nature. The local Police, headed by Chief Superintendent James of the Tottenham Police, has clearly been extremely anxious to avoid blame for this incident, and has engaged in what can only be described as very heavy briefing of my own office as well as community representatives. He held two private briefing meetings, the latter on Friday 22nd January, at the premises of the Haringey Police Consultative Group, and was attended by my secretary.

At that meeting Ch Supt James appeared buoyant. He told the meeting that he had the preliminary results of the (uncompleted) post mortem, and that there were no significant injuries to Mr Sylvester, and no evidence that his death had been caused by excessive violence. He stated further, when pressed, that the source of his information was the Police Federation pathologist who had attended the post mortem. (The ethics of this I do not quite understand. I had been under the impression that the Police Federation





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pathologist would represent the individual officers potentially involved in this case, and would not be relaying information back to the employer. Should there really be such an identity of interests between the employer and the employees in a situation of this kind?) Moreover, he told us that it had been arranged that the Coroner would read out these preliminary findings at the opening of the inquest on the following Tuesday. This leaves open the question of who was talking to, and presumably hoping to influence, the Coroner.

I did in fact have a previous concern, relating to the telephone briefings to my office, and I understand to other community representatives, whilst Roger was in the Intensive Care Unit at the Whittington Hospital. The Police seemed to have very detailed knowledge about Roger's medical condition, and certainly at one stage they seemed to know more than the family about the inevitability of his eventual death. How they obtained this information is of some concern in itself, I feel, and the fact that they were willing to disseminate it to community representatives, presumably to prepare the ground for the news of Roger's death, is worrying, and distasteful.

If one takes all these things together it could appear that the Police have exploited their access to information from various sources, and used it relentlessly in the defence of their own position in this matter. I do not know, and at this stage no-one knows, the cause of Mr Sylvester's death, since neither the post mortem, or the inquest are yet completed. In this situation, the Police, as a possible guilty party in this matter, ought not to be pro-actively embarking on an information counter-offensive, talking to medical personnel, pathologists, and even the coroner it would appear, and using this information to defensively brief community representatives.

Finally, I enclose a copy of an article which appeared in The Times of 30th January 1999. This article could not have been written without the co-operation of a source within the Police. Is this too part of the propaganda campaign? I really do think that an investigation ought to be launched into the source of this material.

All this only serves to accentuate the family's sense of injustice. Not only have they lost a loved one, but they are at a huge disadvantage in trying to find out what happened to him. On the one hand they are expected to await the outcome of post mortems and enquiries. On the other hand they are faced with a Police force which seems to be able to obtain and manipulate information at will.

I am pleased to say that contrary to the impression given in the Times article, there is not a high degree of tension on the streets of Tottenham at the present time. There is though a deep concern that yet another young black man had died whilst in custody, and a quiet determination to get to the truth about what happened. However, if it is the





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intention of the Police to secure the trust of the community here, then they are making a pretty bad job of it so far.

I would appreciate your comments on both the family's complaint about the behaviour of the pathologist, as well as upon my own observations of the Police handling of this matter. I would especially like to know who within the Police is masterminding the news management of this case, and precisely what guidelines, if any, they are following.

Yours sincerely,

Dear Paul,

RE: THE DEATH OF ROGER SYLVESTER

BERNIE GRANT M.P.

SMG/sylv2/C