



Tweet Crime and the zero tolerance society
by **Mark Iddon**

On Tuesday last week (27th March) 21 year old **Liam Stacey**, a student at Swansea University, was jailed for 'tweeting' comments that would be considered sick by most people's standards. Although in very poor taste, and you would hope that most people would either challenge or ignore such comments, he did not actually hurt anyone or cause any damage. He was jailed effectively for a thought crime or as Judge John Charles summed up for causing aggravation.

Although the panellists on **Question Time** this week seemed to be in agreement that the sentence was a bit harsh, there are also many people who think that a custodial sentence was correct in order to send out a message that such racist idiocy is not acceptable and to teach

them a lesson. Gary Lineker, the pundit allegedly tweeted a warning to think before you tweet.

Match of The Day

Stacey's remarks were made on **Twitter** when Bolton Wanderers Footballer **Fabrice Muamba** had a cardiac arrest on the pitch just before half time as Bolton played Tottenham in an FA Cup match at White Hart Lane on March 17th. The match was promptly abandoned and the behaviour and respect shown by both home and away fans was seen as testament to a turning of the tide in racial tolerance by those who expected the worst from football supporters.



Stacey's tweet was 'LOL. Fuck Muamba he's dead!!! #Haha', which is actually quite stupid and tasteless while Fabrice was in an intensive care unit fighting for his life. Stacey received in reply some equally obnoxious comments before he backtracked in denial that he was a racist. Stacey only had 300 followers on Twitter out of 140 million worldwide and so his remarks would have gone unnoticed but for the tendency by some outraged Twitter users to report offensive messages to the police. He was promptly tracked down, arrested and awarded a custodial sentence within days. Judge Charles said in his summary that he had done untold damage to his future prospects and within a short time there was a campaign to have Stacey removed from his course at Swansea University.

And so it seems that to express racist views meets with such universal disapproval and any attempt to defend the freedom of speech are deemed to be racist apologists. I should add at this point that I am a staunch defender of the virtues of both universal freedom and equality and consider them to be in no way mutually exclusive. In fact, real equality is not possible without unconditional freedom to express any view, even if it is considered by some to be offensive. I would suggest that the sentiment that says 'but you can't say that', is far more problematic for freedom and equality than the senseless remarks of one young man. If the freedom of speech is curtailed then not only can prejudiced views remain uncontested, the problem of who becomes the arbiter of acceptable speech comes into play.

The fact that racism is widely disapproved of, can be seen when football fans use racist tags to vilify either their opponents fans or players. At a recent Manchester United match against Liverpool (February 12th), the **Red Issue** fanzine had a cover depicting Liverpool FC as Klu Klux Klan supporters. This was a reference to Liverpool player Luis Suarez who returned to his side following his serving an 8 match ban for comments, made during a match earlier in the season, to the United captain Patrice Evra. Such is the censorious climate around the issue of race that the Police confiscated the fanzine prior to the match for fear that it would only stoke racial tensions on top of the rivalry that already exists between the clubs. This situation really does highlight the contempt which is shown to both football fans and the general public when they are seen as not to be trusted with handling issues such as this.

The problem of censorship and the restrictions of freedom of expression are pivotal to official anti-racist campaigns, and is why I do not support them. There is a perception that fighting racism means the eradication of all expressions of prejudice based on race. In actual fact verbal manifestations of racial prejudice are symptoms of racism rather than the causes of them. Campaigns such as **Kick Racism out of Football** seem to be more about moral posturing. Politicians and authority figures can declare their anti-racism credentials, whilst at the same time being in support of racist immigration controls which really are physical barriers to restrict the freedom of movement based on racial / nationality factors.

One aspect of the need to have codes of etiquette for acceptable speech is the presumption that if it was allowed to go unchallenged then it could ignite a contained tension that could result in an explosive outcome. This is quite a contemptuous view of society, in which there are those who are morally mature and able to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable language, and those who whose prejudices towards skin colour are too deep to reason with. The view of some is that there is a significant minority who are predisposed to racial intolerance. It is also a problem that there is so little confidence in being able to make a reasoned argument for equality, and that racism is a problem that can only be addressed by allowing the authorities to be the arbiter of acceptable speech.

If we really care about racial equality then we should campaign for freedom and celebrate our universal characteristics as human beings and our unique ability to reason and have rational discussions. The fact that this draconian sentencing received such scant coverage in the Sunday newspapers this weekend, is further evidence of the erosion of the virtue of freedom in our society today. I think we need to start a campaign to reclaim the aspirations of freedom and equality to build a free society fit for people in the 21st Century.