

Class, Football, and Blame in Britain: The Hillsborough Disaster Inquest

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“Many of the 96 died within feet of me. I survived, but, unable to move any part of my body from the neck down in the crush, I could do no more for these people than watch them die.” These words of helpless sorrow were penned by Adrian Tempany, describing the demise of people in the crush of the Hillsborough football disaster on April 15, 1989.[1]

Tempany’s description for *The Guardian* is filled with morbid and moving accounts about an event which took place 27 years ago at the neutral venue of Sheffield Wednesday, featuring an FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest. The Leppings Lane stand, accessible only via one of seven turnstiles, became a death trap for Liverpool fans.

Last week’s proceedings at Warrington, the offspring of the Hillsborough Independent Panel of 2012 which found that Liverpool fans were in no way responsible for the carnage, were witnessed by some 200 people, numbered among the survivors, the grieving, and activists.

They witnessed coronial proceedings that found that spectators at the match had died of compression asphyxia, a situation compounded by a catastrophically inadequate response from the South Yorkshire metropolitan ambulance service and police personnel.

The most vital of the questions to be submitted to the jury involved whether members were satisfied “that those who died in the disaster were unlawfully killed”. The answer was an affirming Yes.

The seventh question was also vital to proceedings. “Was there any behaviour on the part of football supporters which caused or contributed to the dangerous situation at the Leppings Lane turnstiles?” The answer to the coroner: No.

This was not the end of it. “Was there any behaviour on the part of supporters that may have caused or contributed to the dangerous situation at the Leppings Lane turnstiles?,” directed the coroner to the jury. “Is your answer No?” With some dread, supporters and activists waited. Then came the reassuring answer: “It is.”

The question was significant given suggestions, made at stages after the lethal event, that the deaths had been the consequence of the fans themselves, self-inflicted acts of suicidal, mob-directed horror. European football, and certainly English football, had developed a deep reputation for savage mob violence. It became the central point of reference for shoddy reaction on the part of authorities, an apologia for miscalculation, ineptitude and near criminal negligence.

Those who had made complaints to the unsympathetic police in the aftermath of the

disaster were treated with varying degrees of contempt. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, for one, always felt there were enough police on duty.



The papers waged a concerted campaign in describing the event as one inflicted by villains and sporting brigands who had stemmed from a doomed second class city. (Eight years prior, chancellor Geoffrey Howe had suggested to the PM on financing Liverpool that “the option of managed decline is one we should not forget altogether. We must not expend our limited resources in trying to make water flow uphill.”)[2]

Rupert Murdoch’s *The Sun* was, as was to be expected, the most colourful. The editor at the time, Kelvin MacKenzie, made it his personal mission to smear and condemn the supporters, claiming that hooligan Liverpoolians had urinated in glee on brave police, pilfered from the dead and obstructed those keen to resuscitate the dying.

With the bodies still warm, he juggled two options of headline: “You Scum” or “The Truth.” Eventually, he went for the latter, despite warnings within the paper about the potential inaccuracy of the message. “Drunken Liverpool fans,” went the story, “viciously attacked rescue workers as they tried to revive victims of the Hillsborough soccer disaster, it was revealed last night.” To this day, some shops boycott that intemperate rag.

The authorities also chipped in. A “pale and inarticulate” Chief Constable Peter Wright, to use a description of then home secretary Douglas Hurd, dug into the treasure trove of primordial themes – the fans at Hillsborough had been “animalistic” in their behaviour.

Sir Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher’s Press Secretary, went for the more conventional line in a 1996 letter to Liverpool fan Graham Skinner that “there would have been no Hillsborough disaster if tanked up yobs had not turned up in large numbers to force their way in the ground.”[3]

This manifest loathing of the yob of Liverpool, the primitive Scouse, persisted eight years later with the current mayor of London, Boris Johnson, who decided to weigh in with a few clumsy swipes when editor of the *Spectator*. “They see themselves whenever possible as victims, and resent their victim status; yet at the same time they wallow in it.”

On Hillsborough, Johnson could not resist noting that the deaths of 1989, while “a greater tragedy than any single death” did not “excuse Liverpool’s failure to acknowledge, even to this day, the part played in the disaster by drunken fans at the back of the crowd who mindlessly tried to fight their way into the ground that Saturday afternoon.” Rubbishing the Liverpoolian remained de rigeur.

This was class and attitude: the dead and the survivors were thugs who got what they deserved, and were irresponsibly shirking reality. Not even Johnson’s penitential journey to Liverpool, urged on by then Tory leader Michael Howard, could dispel that reality.

The inquest, however, found otherwise. It had taken years, a vale of tears, and the incessant presence of trauma, but the findings were indisputable. The next step, if it is to be taken, will occur in the criminal realm.

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Notes

- [1] <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2016/may/01/hillsborough-inquest-survivor-adrian-tempany>
- [2] <http://www.irishtimes.com/sport/hillsborough-inquest-verdict-liverpool-s-finest-hour-1.2629631>
- [3] <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/uk/bernard-ingham-who-called-liverpool-fans-tanked-up-yobs-still-refuses-to-apologise-to-hillsborough-families-despite-inquest-findings-34661783.html>

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