


The Orgreave public inquiry: Background and significance

23 July 2025  Stephanie McGarry

The recently announced [Orgreave public inquiry](#), expected to launch this autumn, is the latest in a long list of inquiries and high-profile investigations instigated by the Labour government.

The decision to launch the Orgreave inquiry, after years of resistance from successive governments, signals a potential shift in the official stance towards revisiting contentious historical events.

For many years, campaigners faced government reluctance, with concerns cited about cost, political sensitivity, and the potential to reopen old wounds. The eventual announcement of the inquiry may reflect a growing recognition of the need for transparency and restorative justice, particularly in cases where public trust in institutions has been severely eroded.

Similarly, the [establishment and resourcing of inquiries](#) into child sexual abuse and the investigation into maternity services indicate an acknowledgement - albeit sometimes belated - of the scale and seriousness of institutional failings.

These inquiries have often followed intense public pressure, media scrutiny, and advocacy from victims and their families, suggesting that government appetite for inquiries is frequently reactive rather than proactive.

Calls for the inquiry

The Orgreave inquiry will investigate the events of 18 June 1984, during the UK miners' strike. On that day, violent clashes erupted between striking miners and police at the Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire. The incident, widely televised and reported, became emblematic of the fraught relationship between the state and organised labour during the Thatcher era.

For decades, campaigners, former miners, and civil society groups have called for a full public inquiry into the policing of Orgreave. Allegations of police brutality, fabrication of evidence, and subsequent miscarriages of justice have persisted, with critics arguing that the events at Orgreave were not only a local tragedy but also a national scandal with far-reaching implications for policing, civil liberties, and state accountability.

Significance of the inquiry

The announcement of the Orgreave inquiry is significant for several reasons. It represents a long-awaited opportunity for those affected to have their voices heard and for the public to gain a clearer understanding of the events and their aftermath.

The inquiry is expected to scrutinise the conduct of the police, the role of government, and the integrity of the criminal justice process.

The Orgreave inquiry may set important precedents for how the UK addresses historical injustices, particularly those involving state actors.

Comparative insights: Orgreave, grooming, and maternity services inquiries and investigations

Despite their differing subject matter, these inquiries share several common themes:

- **Systemic failures:** Each inquiry or investigation will investigate deep-rooted systemic issues, whether in policing, child protection, or healthcare.
- **Institutional culture:** A recurring theme is the detrimental impact of closed, defensive, or hierarchical cultures that discourage whistleblowing and marginalise victims.
- **Delayed justice:** In all cases, there has been a significant time lag between the events in question and the establishment of an inquiry, often compounding the suffering of those affected.

The role, impact and challenges of public inquiries

Public inquiries serve several vital functions in democratic societies:

- **Truth-seeking:** They provide a forum for establishing an authoritative account of contested events.
- **Accountability:** Inquiries can hold individuals and institutions to account, even if criminal or civil liability is not established.
- **Learning and reform:** By identifying systemic failings, inquiries can drive policy and cultural change.

Challenges and limitations

Despite their value, public inquiries face significant challenges:

- **Delay and cost:** Inquiries are often lengthy and expensive, raising questions about efficiency and value for money.
- **Implementation gap:** There is frequently a gap between inquiry recommendations and their implementation, with reforms sometimes diluted or delayed.
- **Political sensitivity:** Inquiries into state actions, such as Orgreave, can be politically contentious, with governments sometimes reluctant to expose institutional failings.
- **Victim fatigue:** For survivors and families, the inquiry process can be re-traumatising, especially if outcomes fall short of expectations. The real test of an inquiry's value lies in the implementation of its recommendations and the willingness of institutions to embrace change.

The future of public inquiries

On the one hand, inquiries can reveal hard truths, offer survivors a voice, and propose sweeping reforms that aim to address structural failings. On the other hand, they can take years, cost millions, and risk generating recommendations that simply gather dust if political will is lacking.

Looking ahead, there is growing interest in more agile, participatory, and restorative models of inquiry that prioritise healing and learning over blame and re-traumatisation. Arguably this needs to happen to ensure and encourage engagement from the people who are best placed to provide first hand evidence to the Inquiry without fear of reprisals and recrimination. Striking the right balance between holding individuals to account and fostering a culture of openness, engagement and learning remains a central challenge.

Inquiry Chairs will be under pressure to deliver recommendations at speed to avoid mistakes of the past and to rebuild public confidence in key institutions.

Advances in technology offer new opportunities for transparency, public engagement, and evidence-gathering. With so many inquiries needing to investigate historical matters, record keeping, data storage and retention is likely to come under the spotlight, and the use of digitisation and technology to assist with documentary evidence will be crucial.

Yet even with these challenges, the UK's willingness to undertake inquiries like Orgreave - and to confront episodes of historical and institutional wrongdoing - demonstrates a societal commitment to inquiries as a means of exposing the truth and driving change.

While no inquiry can undo the tragedies of the past, they serve as a critical mirror into what went wrong and why, as well as a roadmap for preventing future repeated mistakes.

Contact

Stephanie McGarry

Partner

stephanie.mcgarry@brownejacobson.com

+44(0)115 908 4113

Related expertise

Public inquiries

Public law