

PRESS RELEASE

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INQUEST AND LIBERTY HOLD PARLIAMENTARY MEETING ON GOVERNMENT PLANS FOR SECRET INQUESTS

INQUEST and Liberty held a parliamentary meeting today on the secret inquest provisions of the Coroners and Justice Bill. Chaired by Frank Dobson MP, parliamentarians were addressed by Susan Alexander, bereaved mother of Azelle Rodney who was shot dead by the Metropolitan Police in 2005, Helen Shaw, Co-Director of INQUEST and Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty.

Politicians from across the political spectrum heard that despite last minute amendments, the government's proposals would gravely limit transparency and increase executive control over the inquest process and could exclude bereaved families, their legal representatives and the public at large from the investigation process. This could include inquests into highly contentious deaths such as deaths in custody or of individuals where issues of the state's broader conduct are raised.

Susan Alexander said:

The secret inquest provisions in the Bill are not significantly different from the clauses that the government withdrew last year from the Counter-Terrorism Bill, at least from my point of view. They would still prevent a coroner, a jury and me from seeing key evidence and having it properly tested in court.

If sensitive material is central to explaining what happened on 30 April 2005 then it has to be part of the inquest into my son's death and I have to see it. The public interest about keeping witnesses safe or intercept methods secret can be protected through anonymity orders, screening, jury vetting, confidentiality agreements and criminal offences relating to unauthorised disclosures, as well as holding some of the inquest behind closed doors (but in the presence of bereaved families).

The inquest into Azelle's death will not undermine the work of the police in protecting the public from serious crime, but the public interest will be badly damaged if the truth of what happened is obscured and all the lessons of this case cannot be learned.

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Helen Shaw, Co-Director of INQUEST, said:

INQUEST remains fundamentally opposed to these proposals. They amount to a fundamental attack on the independence and transparency of the coronial system in England and Wales; are fundamentally flawed; unsupported by evidence; disconnected from legal principles and have come about without any consultation with stakeholders. The proposals will completely undermine the stated aim of government to put bereaved families at the centre of the reformed inquest system and will damage public confidence in the coroner service as a whole.

Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty, said:

What happened to all that rhetoric about rebalancing justice in favour of victims? This flawed policy forgets that the only point of an inquest is providing answers for bereaved families and the wider public. It is perfectly possible to protect sensitive material within an open jury system. Everything else is just politics.

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Notes to editors

1. The title of INQUEST and Liberty's parliamentary meeting was inspired by the following speech given by the Lord High Chancellor, Rt Hon Jack Straw MP on 28 October 2008 "But what about victims? The government as a whole has worked very hard to give a central voice and priority to victims, but we hear far less often from these lobbies about the needs of the victim. I think that they sometimes forget who the victim is, so lost do they become in a fog of platitudes...."
2. The Coroners and Justice Bill will reach its Commons Report stage on Monday 23 March.
3. INQUEST is the only non-governmental organisation in England and Wales that works directly with the families of those who die in custody. It provides an independent free legal and advice service to bereaved people on inquest procedures and their rights in the coroner's courts and conducts policy work on the issues arising.
4. INQUEST is campaigning to ensure that the Coroners and Justice Bill 2009 results in fundamental reform of an inquest system currently hampered by delay, inconsistency of approach and lack of resources and unable to fulfil its vital function of preventing unnecessary deaths.
5. The government must also make changes to ensure that bereaved families can participate effectively in inquest hearings by having equal access, alongside the police and Prison Service, to non means-tested public funding for their legal representation. [INQUEST's briefing on the Coroners & Justice Bill](#)

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