

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release 14 October 2010

BEREAVED FAMILIES BETRAYED BY COALITION GOVERNMENT

INQUEST, the leading independent organisation working to reform the investigation of contentious deaths, today condemned the announcement by the Coalition government that the promised root and branch reform of the inquest system has been discarded and the post of Chief Coroner for England and Wales is to be abolished before it has even been established.

Deborah Coles, Co-Director of INQUEST, said:

Bereaved families have been betrayed as - once again - their needs and views have been ignored.

This announcement shows a failure of vision and courage by the Coalition government. The dysfunctional and flawed inquest system is in need of complete reform. It is dishonest to suggest today's proposals to tweak rules and regulations will deliver the fundamental change that is needed urgently. The new model agreed by Parliament in the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 is rendered completely hollow without the driving force and national leadership of a Chief Coroner.

During a consultation and parliamentary process which lasted over six years, bereaved families shared their painful experiences of the inquest system with policy-makers. They did so with the expectation that the system would be reformed and other families would not have to undergo the unnecessarily distressing process they were forced to endure.

She added:

Not only does this decision fail bereaved families but also society, which should have an inquest system fit for purpose in the 21st Century. The inquest is usually the only public forum in which contentious deaths such as accidents, deaths at work, deaths in custody or deaths of military personnel are subjected to public scrutiny. The current system is failing to perform its preventative function. Today's announcement by the Coalition government will frustrate the opportunity to create a system which saves lives. This is a false economy if there ever was one.

INQUEST is due to meet Jonathan Djanogly MP, the Minister with responsibility for coroner reform, on Monday 25 October 2010 and will issue a detailed statement in due course.

Further Information	www.inquest.org.uk
INQUEST	office 020 7263 1111
Anna Edmundson, Research and Policy Officer, INQUEST	office 020 7263 1111
Deborah Coles, Co-Director, INQUEST	office 020 7263 1111

Notes to editors:

1. The creation of the post of Chief Coroner for England and Wales was at the heart of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009. The role was designed to introduce national leadership of the coroner service and would be a crucial step toward tackling the unacceptable delays, inconsistent standards of service delivery and lack of accountability that plague the current system.
2. The Coroners and Justice Act 2009 received Royal Assent in November 2009 after receiving overwhelming cross-party support in both Houses of Parliament. The Act contains measures to: introduce national leadership through the appointment of a Chief Coroner and a Medical Adviser to the Chief Coroner; deliver an improved service for bereaved people, including the introduction of a Charter for Bereaved People, and a system of appeals against coroners' decisions; introduce national standards that coroners should meet, supported by training and guidance for all coroners, their officers and staff; and make investigations and inquests more effective.
3. Examples of the numerous reviews, parliamentary reports and inquiries have called for an overhaul of the system include:
 - the Independent Review of Coroner Services commissioned by the Home Office and chaired by Tom Luce *Death Certification and Investigation in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, 2003;
 - the Joint Committee on Human Rights *Deaths in Custody: Third Report of Session 2004-05*;
 - the Select Committee on Constitutional Affairs *Reform of the coroners' system and death certification: Eighth Report of Session 2005-06*.
4. Statistics published by the Ministry of Justice in May 2010 record that 31,000 inquests were opened into deaths in 2009. (www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/coroners-deaths-reported-2010.pdf)
5. INQUEST is the only organisation in England and Wales that provides a specialist, comprehensive advice service on contentious deaths and their investigation to bereaved people, lawyers, other advice and support agencies, the media, parliamentarians and the wider public. Its casework priorities are deaths in prison and in police custody, in immigration detention and in secure training centres. INQUEST develops policy proposals and undertakes research to campaign for changes to the inquest and investigation process, reduce the number of custodial deaths, and improve the treatment and care of those within the institutions where the deaths occur.
6. INQUEST is represented on the Ministerial Council on Deaths in Custody and the Ministry of Justice Coroner Service Stakeholder Forum.
7. Bereaved families and bereavement organisations such as INQUEST contributed time and effort to the lengthy consultation processes that led up to the enactment of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 including submitting written consultations, meeting with policy-makers and Ministers, organising and speaking at parliamentary meetings. For full details see: <http://inquest.org.uk/policy.html#reform>
8. *Unlocking the Truth : Families' Experiences of the Investigation of Deaths in Custody* by Helen Shaw and Deborah Coles, Co-Directors of INQUEST, describes the experiences of families bereaved by deaths in custody from the time of death to the conclusion of the investigation and inquest and situates them within the political, recent historical and legal context.

Thoroughly researched and extensively referenced, the report describes the issues that have emerged since the early 1980s which have shaped public, family and state perceptions about deaths in custody. It argues that the current investigation and inquest system is still insufficiently resourced and is failing

inquest

to perform its preventative function to reduce deaths in custody. Making 80 recommendations and two key proposals, Shaw and Coles argue for changes to improve accountability and learning



An executive summary is available [here](#). *Unlocking the Truth* can be ordered securely online from [the INQUEST website](#) for £10 + £2 postage and packing in the UK. The report was made possible by a grant from the Nuffield Foundation.