

Interview with the Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland

Pauline McCabe was appointed Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland on 1st September 2008, taking over the post from Brian Coulter who had previously resigned expressing concern about the independence of the office. Prior to taking up the post, Pauline McCabe was a business consultant and member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

- **Outline for us your view on the importance of having an independent ombudsman to investigate prisoner complaints?**

I think it's a very important role because it means prisoners have somewhere to go where they can rely on the fact that they can make a complaint and that what follows will be fair and impartial and just. That's extremely important to people who are in circumstances where their opportunity to have a voice is obviously restricted because of the fact that they are in prison and their contact with the outside world is limited. So I think the fact that they can come to us is very important indeed and we take that responsibility very, very seriously.

- **How do you ensure adequate prisoner knowledge of and access to the office?**

This has been a really big issue for us. When I took up post in September the complaints being received by the office were going steadily downwards and it was speculated that to some extent this might be as a result of recommendations being implemented and things improving. The research I have done, which includes doing road shows at each of the prisons and talking to a lot of prisoners individually and as groups, absolutely persuades me that there are a number of other reasons why complaints were going down.

The first is to do with concerns about our independence; the second was around the extent to which we could make a difference in terms of recommendations being implemented; and the third is that prisoners have to get through the internal complaints process before they can bring a complaint to me. That works in principle provided there is an internal complaints process that is working in the correct way but where there are difficulties with it, that can obviously impede prisoners being able to get complaints to me.

The ways that we've tried to address it are: firstly we've tried to make ourselves more accessible - prisoners can now simply pick up a phone, use our free phone number and we'll take the complaints over the telephone; the second thing is that we did road shows in each prison where I went out and met with groups of prisoners, introduced myself and talked to them; thirdly we introduced a translation service so that a prisoner who doesn't speak English can get anybody - another prisoner, a family member or a prison officer to call and say they want to make a complaint and we will send somebody out with a translator to actually take the complaint from them; and fourthly, we introduced a tracking system to make sure that recommendations are implemented. So that's what we've been doing to increase accessibility and visibility.

- **Are you aware of any repercussions for prisoners who do complain, and how can this be avoided?**

We've put a lot of thought into what we can do to help to make the internal complaints system work more effectively - one important thing is that it's due to go from three to two steps which we really welcome. Also, where a prisoner says to us that the reason that they can't bring a complaint is because of the operation of the internal complaints process, we are capturing that information now where we never have before.

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The reasons might include firstly time delays in the actual implementation of the process; second are problems where they think they've raised a complaint but it never seems to go anywhere; thirdly concerns about consequences in terms of impact on loss of privileges, e.g. going down the list for work or education or maybe visits or privileges being affected; and fourthly at its worst sometimes concerns about possible mistreatment if they progress the complaint and that occasionally includes concerns of possible physical mistreatment. So what we are doing is sharing and discussing a summary of that information with the Governors of each prison.

- **Related to that, where investigation of complaints by you reveals systemic problems and patterns, can or should you make recommendations in relation to this?**

I'm trying to put this into place because it seemed to me that a useful part I can play is to gather the evidence that hasn't been gathered before and go along and provide the feedback in-house without getting down to individual prisoner level - so I can share information and evidence of systemic problems with a view to learning from it and taking it forward.

- **Concern was expressed by the previous Prisoner Ombudsman on the need for the office to have a statutory basis - do you share this concern? Why do you think it is important?**

It is extremely important. What it would mean to me is that it would absolutely unequivocally establish my independence so it would deal to some extent with the anxiety of prisoners around whether or not the Northern Ireland Office or Prison Service is trying to influence me. It would also give me a greater authority which is really important and the independence to clearly deliver my Article 2 obligations without interference. Hugely importantly it would give me the ability to make sure my office is fit for purpose without having to work my way through set NIO policies and practices which can be restraining.

- **The prison service has come under a lot of criticism recently (not least after the Ombudsman's report into the death of Colin Bell) and it seems fairly clear that it is in need of an overhaul: what are your views on the main problems that need to be addressed; any ideas on how it can be done; and what, if any, is the role of the Ombudsman in contributing to this debate or ensuring that the learning from your investigations feeds into this?**

My take on it is that there are a great many people within the prison service who recognise for all sorts of reasons

that where we are now is not where we want to be. The challenge for everybody is how we get from where we are to where we need to be because that is quite a big task. There are clearly issues of representativeness not just in religious terms but in terms, for example, of women and foreign nationals.

Where I see us fitting in is that because of the expertise, knowledge and information we gather I think it is entirely appropriate that we inform the decision makers, and that includes political representatives, the Review Group that has been set up, and the Ministerial Safer Custody Forum, which we have agreed to take a seat on. So wherever we get an opportunity to influence then we absolutely will use it because we think that all of us who are concerned about what the prisons of the future should look like should be doing whatever we can to inform the agenda.

- **Do you think an opportunity exists through the devolution of criminal justice and policing powers to rethink both imprisonment and the prison service, and if so, what are your thoughts on this?**

One important aspect of devolution is that everybody will be competing for resources including health, education, policing etc and a lot of those issues are a lot more popular than prisons. I think it is very much incumbent upon those of us who are in this business of trying to keep prisons up the agenda, to try and ensure that there isn't a short-term approach which simply looks at cutting the cost per prisoner.

What I think we need is a longer term strategy and cost-benefit analysis that looks at how we can spend that money more effectively on things like education, vocational training, health and addiction problems and so on with a view to reducing re-offending.

- **Any final comments?**

What prisoners should know is that I will take every complaint seriously, I will do each complaint justice to the absolute best of my ability and that they will get a proper, fair, impartial investigation. I'll always come back to them and tell them what I've found whether they like it or not.

To me prison itself is the punishment and the challenge for us is to make sure that once people are in prison, we should be trying to create a purposeful environment that will impact upon what a prisoner does when he or she leaves prison. I believe that effective complaint handling has a role to play in achieving that.

Pat Conway
CAJ Chair

Human Rights and Detentions

On 20th March, CAJ issued a press statement on the extended detentions of persons following the murders in Antrim on 7th March of Sappers Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar and Craigavon on 9th March of Constable Stephen Carroll. On Wednesday 25th March an appeal from a judicial decision to allow an extension of the detention of Colin Duffy and others was allowed by the Lord Chief Justice Kerr. Following this appeal decision, Colin Duffy was re-arrested and subsequently charged with murder and a number of other offences. The other suspects, who had been granted anonymity, were released.

The High Court's intervention in this case is welcome. While the legal reason for the decision was somewhat technical, a strong signal has been sent to the police concerning the use of 28 day detention powers. It is worth noting that the length of detention is a matter of concern for the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (ECPT). In a recent report, the Committee re-stated that when any pre-charge detention goes beyond 14 days, a suspect should be transferred to a proper custodial site. In other words, their view is that a police holding cell is not a suitable place for extended detentions. Nor is it safe, from the point of view of preventing torture, for individuals to be in such lengthy unmediated contact with police. Even though the CPT's comments relate to detentions in London, these positions are relevant for local detentions in Antrim. While none of the recent arrests extended to 14 days, the clear emphasis is that holding cells are not appropriate for extended detention (as the Human Rights Commission clearly has also pointed out).

In the meantime, CAJ remains concerned, as the text of our press release issued on 20th March makes clear:

Length of detention

Even at the height of the conflict in Northern Ireland, 7 days was the maximum length of time which someone could be detained without charge, and that provision was controversial and contrary to international human rights law. It is deeply regrettable that in a period of peace and stability in Northern Ireland there has been a regression on this front. Human rights law standards, specifically Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights, makes clear that anyone who is arrested should be promptly informed of the charges against them and brought promptly before a judge. Arbitrary and prolonged detention for the purposes of information and intelligence gathering is simply unacceptable.

Conditions of detention

While there has been improvement in relation to conditions of detention as regards access to a lawyer and audio and

video recording of interrogations, it is still far from satisfactory that a 17 year old boy in particular is essentially being held in a cell with no access to recreation or other facilities as recently occurred. Adherence to International standards is necessary to maintain the humanity and dignity of those in detention. These conditions will inevitably have an adverse psychological impact on detainees, calling into question the reliability of any information gathered during the detention.

The privacy of those detained

It is unfortunate that the names and details of those in detention has become common knowledge in the wider public. The concept of innocent until proven guilty is a cornerstone of our criminal justice and common law system and this risks being jeopardised in relation to those being current detained given the inevitable creation of suspicion which can now be directly linked to named individuals. It also places these individuals and their families at risk in the wider community, and we would remind the authorities of their obligations under Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights to protect the safety and lives of individuals.

General concerns

These general concerns are particularly acute in relation to the minor who is being detained. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the particular vulnerability of children and young people under the age of 18, and in relation to detention in particular states that this should be "as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time."

CAJ also calls into question the role of the intelligence services in these investigations, who have recently issued an appeal for information in relation to the shootings. We particularly question the extent to which the security services are subject to the accountability and oversight mechanisms that the PSNI must adhere to, and caution that any attempt to escape the rigours of these mechanisms by passing responsibility for the investigation to the security services will be a major step backwards for policing in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, CAJ's Director Mike Ritchie said: "CAJ has always been opposed to the use of violence and shares the revulsion that has been expressed in relation to these killings. However, it is exactly at times of crisis that it is even more important to uphold and protect human rights, if the confidence in the rule of law and respect for human rights that is slowly being rebuilt here since the Agreement is not to be undermined."

Inquiries Update

The Billy Wright Inquiry

This Inquiry was due to resume oral hearings on 26th January 2009 after a Christmas recess; however hearings were delayed until Monday 2nd of February. The Inquiry was expected to hear two further weeks of oral hearings after Christmas but instead witness testimony has continued into March and is expected to resume again on Monday 27th April for one week.

On 2nd February, the Inquiry heard evidence from witness HAG (Head of the security service Assessment Group) for the second time. HAG told the Inquiry how he had facilitated a meeting between Special Branch and the then Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Prison Service, Alan Shannon, the purpose of which was to discuss the possibility of 'mounting an eavesdropping operation' against Billy Wright. The Inquiry also heard evidence from the Reverend William McCrea, a Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) Member of the Legislative Assembly for Northern Ireland (MLA). Rev. McCrea told the Inquiry that he had received documents and an anonymous phone call in early December 1997 warning that both he and Billy Wright were going to be murdered.

Notable witnesses in March were former Chief Constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan, and former Assistant Chief Constable (ACC) in charge of PSNI's crime operations department, Mr Sam Kincaid. The evidence of a number of other security service witnesses was heard in camera. Such sessions are closed in that only the legal representatives of the witness, the Inquiry Panel and the witness themselves are present and no transcript of proceedings is released.

Two members of the Steven's Inquiry Team, Mr Taylor and Mr McFadden, gave evidence on Thursday 5th February which was followed by evidence from PSNI Assistant Chief Constable Finlay on 6th February. The Inquiry has decided not to release transcripts for these dates which resulted in an application for judicial review challenging this position being lodged on behalf of David Wright on 26th March.

Unfortunately the Inquiry Chairman, Lord McLean, issued a restriction order on 26th March under section 19 of the Inquiries Act 2005 which prohibits publication of any evidence provided on 5th and 6th February. In addition, restriction orders were issued in relation to the evidence of witness ZBS which was heard on 23rd and 24th March 2009.

The Rosemary Nelson Inquiry

Hearings at the Rosemary Nelson Inquiry continued from 8th February until 5th March. Former ACC Sam Kincaid also gave evidence to this Inquiry during February. In addition, the Inquiry heard evidence from the Chief

Constable of Avon and Somerset, Colin Port, who headed an investigation into Rosemary Nelson's murder in 1999. Another important witness during February was former Acting Chief Constable for Kent, Robert Ayling. Mr Ayling headed a group of officers commissioned by the Inquiry to prepare a report on whether the RUC investigated Rosemary Nelson's murder with due diligence.

The majority of recent hearings have been screened as the witness has been granted anonymity or hearings have been held in closed session.

An application for judicial review was made on behalf of the PSNI to the High Court on 11 February which challenged a decision by the Inquiry not to make findings of fact 'as to whether or not RUC officers made derogatory and threatening remarks about Rosemary Nelson while questioning her clients'. PSNI representatives argued that such a decision conflicts with a list of issues which the Inquiry identified as needing consideration 'in order to discharge the task conferred upon it by the Secretary of State' and supported their argument further with reference to other decisions made by the Inquiry as well as a previous application for judicial review on behalf of the PSNI being refused in December 2008.

The Inquiry timetable is running to schedule and oral evidence from witnesses completed on Thursday 5th March. Final oral submissions by Inquiry participants are due to commence on 27th April 2009 when the Inquiry resumes.

The Robert Hamill Inquiry

After oral hearings commenced in January 2009, the Inquiry heard evidence from both state and Inquiry appointed medical experts which found Robert Hamill had severe head injuries comparable to those caused in a car accident.

Whilst the Inquiry has not issued a list of issues which they find pertinent to fulfilling their task, witness hearings have been grouped in such a way as to allow these issues to be revealed before the first witness in each group has been called.

Hearings of medical staff finished in January and the Inquiry then moved to the next group of witnesses who were in the vicinity of Portadown town centre when Robert Hamill was attacked. In turn this rather large group of witnesses has been divided into subcategories. The first subcategory were witnesses who were in or coming from Thomas Street (where Robert Hamill was coming from) or Woodhouse Street which are side streets feeding into the town centre. The second subgroup relates to persons making their way towards the scene after being dropped-

off by a bus at the bottom of Market Street, which includes a number of people who were key witnesses and suspects in the murder investigation.

After the murder of two soldiers and a police officer recently in Northern Ireland, the Inquiry took the decision on 10th March to provide all police officers giving evidence with temporary anonymity until a threat assessment regarding their safety has been carried out by the security forces. As a result, the Inquiry has heard the evidence of police officers since mid March in closed sessions but has been releasing the transcripts for such hearings.

On 25th March the Inquiry released a press statement referring to the failure of a witness to attend the Inquiry to the High Court. Ms. Tracey Clarke has failed to comply with a notice issued in January under section 21 of the Inquiries Act 2005 to compel her to attend the Inquiry on 28th January 2009. Ms. Clarke has still not attended over eight weeks later and has not produced evidence of an alleged medical condition which is preventing her from attending the Inquiry. Ms Clarke was a highly significant witness in the investigation into Robert Hamill's murder in 1997.

Key Issues Developing Around the Inquiries

Some operational practices and trends arising with the Public Inquiries give rise to concern. Firstly, a substantial number of hearings have taken place in camera which raises issues as to the transparency of an Inquiry's work. Such hearings substantially increased for the Nelson Inquiry in December 2008 and January 2009. Similarly, the Wright Inquiry held a number of in camera sessions in March 2008.

However, the Wright Inquiry has indicated that it will release a public summary of these closed hearings and it was initially thought that such summaries would be released for each in camera hearing. Instead it seems that the Inquiry will release a composite summary of all recent in camera sessions but has not yet done this. The substance and effectiveness of these summaries at improving transparency remains to be seen. Furthermore, it will be important to see if they strike an effective balance between the Inquiry's task to uncover the truth and obligations which the Inquiry has to ensure that its work does not breach Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, or release information detrimental to public interests and/or national security. This is perhaps one practice which other public Inquiries should adopt, in particular the Rosemary Nelson Inquiry as the Inquiry will not produce transcripts or indicated that summaries will be available for in camera sessions which it holds.

At present, the Robert Hamill Inquiry had not held in camera sessions. Instead the Inquiry has had closed sessions for any witnesses granted anonymity and the Inquiry releases transcripts for these hearings. The reason that such evidence is heard in closed session is due to the

fact that the Inquiry does not currently have the facility to screen anonymous witnesses as to do so would see an increase in the Inquiry's costs. It is vital to recognise this consideration which the Hamill Inquiry has given to reducing operating costs in light of recent criticisms over the costs of public inquiries. We take the view, that this is only an acceptable situation in the event that heavy redaction of transcripts for closed hearings does not occur.

Another problematic trend developing around the Inquiries is that substantial delays in releasing transcripts for the Nelson and Wright Inquiries have occurred. For instance it was March 2009 before a number of transcripts from December 2008 (Days, 83, 85, 89 and 90) were released and delays in the releasing of transcripts from mid-February 2009 are still persisting. Transcripts which are currently outstanding from February cover high profile witnesses in the Nelson case such as Sam Kincaid and Robert Ayling. The Inquiry does not at present publicise reasons on its website nor has it released a statement to explain the reason or necessity behind such delays.

Transcripts for hearings which took place at the Billy Wright Inquiry this February are also not yet released and are the subject of controversy. Evidence from members of the Stevens Inquiry Team given on Thursday 5th February and serving Assistant Chief Constable Allister Finlay on 6th February have been withheld by the Inquiry. It has been learned that the Inquiry initially intended to redact information from these transcripts but that when such deletions were performed the transcripts became unreadable as they made no sense. A restriction order forbidding anyone from releasing any evidence given by these witnesses has been made by the chairman and is currently the subject of a judicial review (see Inquiries Update above). The Chairman has stated his justification for this action as being the potential threat to life and national security which could occur if this evidence were released. An in camera hearing regarding this application was heard in the High Court on Tuesday 31st March but was adjourned until Wednesday 22nd April.

Such a restriction on evidence given in an open hearing appears both ludicrous and suspect in light of the fact that the restriction order was released on the same date that legal representatives for David Wright lodged papers for a judicial review - some five weeks later. The Inquiry's delay in doing so is questionable considering it was a matter of hours before a blanket restriction order was released for witness ZBS on the same day of his hearing, 23rd March, and then replaced by amended version on 24th March and a transcript with redactions was released.

On the other hand, restriction orders relating to the evidence given by ZBS raise further problems as they do not contain any justifications to show that they were necessary which causes one to question the reasoning behind these orders.

Immigration Reforms: crossing the line?

The Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Bill has been progressing through Westminster and contains a number of worrying provisions from a human rights compliance perspective. The two areas the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has focused on are changes to the process for settlement and reforms to the Common Travel Area between the UK and Ireland.

Reforms to Settlement and British Citizenship

The section of the Bill on British citizenship does not introduce the full set of proposed reforms but does make significant changes to the process for migrants to move from temporary residence to settlement or naturalisation as a British citizen. The reforms make the journey to either status more complex by introducing additional criteria and lengthening time periods.

The Commission's primary concern is the intention for migrants to spend considerably longer periods as de facto temporary residents within a new 'probationary' phase prior to obtaining citizenship or settlement. The intention is to extend the present time period by an additional minimum of one to three years (if seeking British citizenship) and three to five years (if seeking permanent residence). As these extended time periods are effectively further temporary residence periods migrants will therefore continue to have no access to social protection (social security, housing assistance, etc.) and so will be more vulnerable for longer. Whilst this measure is set out by government as beneficial to public finance, it will clearly carry a considerable human cost. Concerns are further compounded by the inequality of the time period between those seeking permanent residence rather than British citizenship.

The measures constitute an attempt to move away from recognised human rights towards 'citizen's rights'. The only areas of human rights that depend on citizenship status are matters such as voting; other rights apply to everyone in the jurisdiction. Most rights are not absolute but restrictions cannot be discriminatory. For example, the UN Human Rights Committee interpreting ICERD has set out that differential treatment based on citizenship or immigration status will constitute discrimination if it is not proportional and pursuant to a legitimate Convention aim. Government has not attempted to set out a case in this regard but is attempting to introduce the concept that migrants should 'earn' these rights.

Common Travel Area:

The government plans to remove the law that prevents journeys within the Common Travel Area being subject to routine immigration control. It intends to phase in (by 2014) passport control on air and sea routes between the UK and

Ireland, including the small number of flights and ferries between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

The Commission's main concern relates to the risk of racial discrimination from the introduction of 'ad hoc... risk and intelligence led' checks on vehicles on the land border. There are no plans for a return to fixed checkpoints, but there will be mobile checks which, on the main route will, in the words of the Minister:

"...target the odd bus, minibus or taxi, because our experience has shown that those are much more likely to be a threat."

The Home Office is yet to set out the powers that it intends to use to conduct these checks and whilst arguing that a routine control requirement would not be introduced on the land border, it notably rejected a Liberal Democrat amendment making this explicit. The Home Office has stated there will be no 'passport' or 'fixed' or 'specific' document requirement on the land border (at least for British and Irish citizens). This does not rule out a requirement to show 'a' document and this is de facto likely to be the case for anyone stopped by a patrol who will be expected to satisfy the UKBA officer they are a British/Irish citizen or face further investigation. The Home Office argues that checks will 'target non-CTA nationals'; the obvious question, in the context of our ethnic diversity, is how are those policing the land border going to be able to tell who is a British or Irish citizen and who is not? Who, on indicating that they are not carrying any documents (and may have no obligation to do so), will be allowed to proceed and who will be subject to further examination and even arrest and detention until their identity is verified?

Any practice of singling out persons visibly from a minority ethnic background is clearly not acceptable. The Commission is concerned the measures may seriously impact on minority ethnic persons crossing or even just living or working near the land border who may end up having to constantly carry identity papers or face frequent questioning and, potentially, detention. The House of Lords shared many of these concerns and on the 1 April voted by almost two to one at report stage to remove the CTA reforms from the Bill entirely. However, Government may well reintroduce the measures when the Bill moves to the Commons.

A reported proposal to introduce passport or national ID card checks on air and sea routes from Northern Ireland to Great Britain is not within the Bill. Notably however it now appears a document requirement via carriers may be introduced through other legislation.

Daniel Holder,
Policy Worker, NIHRC

Coroners and Justice Bill

The Coroners and Justice Bill is a muddled hodgepodge piece of legislation; the provisions of the Bill are unrelated and numerous and it would appear that significant debate will not be afforded to important issues such as data protection and information sharing. Having said that, very little of the Bill is in regards to Northern Ireland.

One relevant concern however is in relation to the obligation of the UK to uphold the right to life, as guaranteed by Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The Secretary of State may certify an inquest to be held without a jury if s/he believes that it involves a matter that should not be made public so as to protect national security or the relationship between the United Kingdom and another country; prevent or detect crime; or to protect the safety of a witness or other person.

In relation to inquests, the coroner already has the power to grant immunity from disclosure of information through public interest immunity certificates; such measures already permit information to be kept from the public domain. Additional legislation in this regard does not seem necessary.

That there exists the chance that the provisions of the Coroners and Justice Bill may allow for the family of the deceased to be prevented from participating in inquests or having access to important information relating to the death is of great concern. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission considers the 'inevitable outcome' of excluding a jury would be the subsequent exclusion of the next-of-kin. This opens up the possibility of a breach of the Right to Life, an interpretation of Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

The ECtHR has ruled that when an individual dies in custody or at the hands of the state there is an obligation on the state under Article 2 to thoroughly investigate the death. This is an issue of particular relevance in Northern Ireland where there are a number of inquests outstanding in cases relating to the past. Any decision to exclude a jury from the inquest process raises alarm bells. Public confidence in the justice system may be undermined, already a significant issue in Northern Ireland.

The European Court has acknowledged that 'there must be a sufficient element of public scrutiny of the investigation or its results to secure accountability in practice as well as in theory. The degree of public scrutiny required may well vary from case to case. In all cases, however, the next-of-kin of

the victim must be involved in the procedure to the extent necessary to safeguard his or her legitimate interests'.

It is also of concern that although decisions of a coroner and the Secretary of State are subject to judicial review, the Coroners and Justice Bill does not propose the safeguard of a dedicated appeals system to Northern Ireland, though it does for cases in England and Wales.

CAJ would like to engage our members and supporters in our work around a NI Bill of Rights, which we have been working on since the mid 1980's. There is an upcoming government consultation on the Bill of Rights advice handed over to the Secretary of State by the Human Rights Commission in December last year. This could be the last opportunity to get this Bill right and in light of major cutbacks and job losses be a major opportunity to protect social and economic rights.

An information session on the NI Bill of Rights debate will also be available to sign-up for on 19th May (details to follow). Signing up to the CAJ Bill of Rights email network will not be dependent on attending this session but will be useful for anyone wanting to get up to speed with the debate.

If you are interested in signing up to an easy, quick and simple email campaign supporting CAJ's position on a Bill of Rights, please register your interest by emailing fiona@caj.org.uk letting us know if you are also interested in attending the information session.

Civil Liberties Diary

3rd March

Statistics released by the Executive show that sectarian and racist crimes are falling in Northern Ireland. A 12% drop was recorded in racist crimes between 2006-07 and 2007-08 while the number of sectarian motivated crimes fell from 1,217 to 1,056 for the same period.

NI Children's Commissioner Patricia Lewsley announces that her office had no immediate plans to take her appeal against the controversial smacking law to the House of Lords. Judges ruled that Ms Lewsley's challenge could not go ahead because she cannot be classified as a victim under the Human Rights Act. In addition costs were awarded against her office.

Pamela McMullan, Head of Department at Royal School Dungannon, wins her sex discrimination case after her employer failed to explain why it was awarding a male colleague more money. The case had been supported by the Equality Commission.

4th March

Sir Desmond Rea, Chairman of the Policing Board, announces he is to step down.

The Historic Enquiries Team announces it is to investigate if former UVF member and Special Branch informer Mark Haddock was involved in the murders of David McIlwaine and Andrew Robb in Tandragee in 2000. This follows Stephen Brown's conviction for the same murder.

6th March

Northern Ireland's senior coroner John Leckey is to order the former police officer who allegedly shot dead an IRA member Pearse Jordan 16 years ago to attend his inquest. The retired RUC Sergeant who now lives outside the

jurisdiction can be served with a subpoena if he returns.

10th March

The Court of Appeal overturns a High Court ruling that British soldiers could be covered by human rights laws while on the battlefield. The original ruling had set out that sending soldiers out on patrol with defective equipment could amount to a breach of their human rights.

Report from the UN General Assembly condemns Britain for breaching basic human rights and "trying to conceal illegal acts" in the fight against terrorism. The report is particularly critical of Britain's role in the transfer of detainees to places where they will face torture.

12th March

Speaking at the Joint North-South Traveller Education Conference in Newry, Minister Caitriona Ruane calls on schools to provide the same educational opportunities to traveller children as to their settled peers.

13th March

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at Westminster announces that it is to examine the Eames/Bradley report into the legacy of the Troubles. The NI Secretary of State is expected to appear before it next month.

25th March

Evidence given by a former head of RUC Special Branch to the Billy Wright Inquiry will not be published if it is

announced. The Public Inquiries Act allows some evidence from witnesses to be withheld.

Chief Commissioner of NI Human Rights Commission Monica McWilliams raises concern at the

length of detention for questioning of the six persons being investigated for recent murders committed by dissident Republican groups.

26th March

Prison Reform Trust calls for the right to vote to be extended to prisoners in both Northern Ireland and Britain. The group announces it will also lodge a complaint with the Council of Europe regarding the British government's failure to comply with a ECHR judgment that a blanket ban was unlawful.

30th March

The homes of migrant workers and their families are attacked in the Village area of south Belfast following Northern Ireland's football match against Poland.

31st March

The Equality and Human Rights Commission calls on the British government to change parental leave arrangements and make sure that fathers and lower income parents take advantage of their rights. The body also called for longer time off for fathers.

Compiled by Mark Bassett from various newspaper

Just News

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