

PRESS RELEASE

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INQUEST WELCOMES GOVERNMENT CLIMBDOWN ON 'SECRET INQUEST' PROPOSALS IN COUNTER TERRORISM BILL

Today the government signalled its intention to remove clauses 77, 78, 79 & 81 of the Counter Terrorism Bill that would have given the Secretary of State power to intervene in inquests where sensitive information is involved. It was proposed that such inquests would take place without juries, partly in private, with government-appointed coroners and counsel overseeing the evidence. This would have excluded bereaved families, their legal representatives and the public at large from the investigation process in breach of article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

INQUEST has campaigned vigorously on this issue since it was announced without any prior consultation or debate in January 2008 and last week held a cross-party parliamentary briefing meeting on the proposals.

Deaths in custody and those involving issues of national security raise important issues of state power and accountability and should be subject to particularly close public scrutiny in a free and democratic society. We urge the government to ensure that a Coroners Bill is included in the Queen's Speech to enable the necessary root and branch reform of the inquest system to take place.

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Notes to editors:

1) Lord West of Spithead, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Security and Counter-terrorism) and Government Spokesperson, Home Office added his name to the amendments already tabled to say " *the above-named Lords give notice of their intention to oppose the Question that Clause 77 (78, 79 & 81) stand part of the Bill.* "

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldbills/065/amend/ml065-iiic.htm>

2) 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.

3) INQUEST is campaigning to ensure that the Coroners Bill is included in the Queen's Speech in December. Without fundamental reform the inquest system will continue to be hampered by delay, inconsistency of approach and lack of resources and be unable to fulfil its vital function of preventing unnecessary deaths.

Inquest

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.