

PRESS RELEASE

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INQUEST WELCOMES GOVERNMENT CLIMBDOWN ON 'SECRET INQUESTS'

INQUEST is delighted that the Justice Secretary, Jack Straw MP, has responded to our concerns and those of the families and lawyers with whom we work as well as those of Liberty, JUSTICE and Human Rights Watch. Today's announcement means that clauses 11 & 12 of the Coroners and Justice Bill will be removed, which sees the end of provisions that would have given the Secretary of State power to certify inquests where sensitive information is involved so that they would take place without juries, partly in private - excluding bereaved families, their legal representatives and the public at large from crucial parts of the investigation process.

We now hope that the needs of bereaved people are at the forefront of parliamentarians' minds as the Lords debate the Second Reading of the Bill. The Bill needs to be strengthened so that it will:

- tackle delays in the inquest system;
- provide non-means-tested public funding for bereaved families' legal representation where a public authority is involved;
- ensure consistency of approach across England and Wales by introducing a national centrally-funded service;
- provide better information about the process to bereaved people;
- record and monitor inquest findings;
- make recommendations to relevant statutory bodies following inquest findings, and ensure action is taken to prevent future deaths;
- amend RIPA to allow inquests to receive intercept evidence when absolutely necessary.

We remain committed to ensuring that the inquest into the death of Azelle Rodney, that gave rise to the secret inquest proposals, takes place expeditiously. We therefore urge the Justice Secretary to introduce a simple amendment to RIPA to allow intercept evidence to be used at inquests in exceptional cases, so that Susan Alexander can ask the coroner to resume that inquest. A secret inquiry is no solution to that case.

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Notes to editors:

- 1) [INQUEST's Briefing on the Second Reading in the House of Lords of the Coroners and Justice Bill](#); for more briefing papers on the Bill and other issues see <http://www.inquest.org.uk/publications.html> and <http://www.inquest.org.uk/policy.html>
- 2) [Statement by Justice Secretary](#)
- 3) The proposals for secret inquests arose from legal challenges brought on behalf of the family of Azelle Rodney over admissibility of intelligence evidence. Azelle Rodney died in April 2005 after a police operation in north London in which he was shot seven times. After his death, the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) conducted an investigation and a file was passed to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and in July 2006 the CPS announced that there was "insufficient evidence to disclose a realistic prospect of conviction against any officer for any offence in relation to the fatal shooting". After the CPS decision the family was told by the coroner that the full inquest could not be held because large portions of the police officers' statements had been redacted under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) 2000, which covers information obtained from covert surveillance devices such as telephone taps or bugs. Azelle was shot seven times after the car he was in was ordered to halt in a 'hard stop' after being under police surveillance for over three hours in Edgware, north London. Two men were later convicted for firearms offences but there was no evidence that Azelle was armed at the time of the shooting.
- 4) 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.