

Blair government refuses public inquiry into deaths in police custody

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British Home Secretary Jack Straw has announced that he will not be holding a public inquiry into deaths in police custody. He had promised to consider such an inquiry earlier this year. A Home Office spokesman said that instead "the department preferred to focus on improved training, safer facilities, more monitoring and better understanding of drug and alcohol problems".

Straw has also been challenged for not publishing a report critical of the way such cases are investigated. The report by the European Committee on the Prevention of Torture had investigated a number of important cases of deaths in custody in Britain and had called for changes to the police complaints procedure. Straw has set a precedent by not publishing the report. The Committee, which oversees the European anti-torture conventions, said that the previous Conservative Government published nearly all its reports.

Last year saw the highest number of deaths in police custody—more than one person a week. Sixty-five people were found dead last year, as opposed to fifty-three in the previous year, an increase of 41 percent over the past four years.

Since taking office, the Blair Labour Government has been hostile to any major changes in the way the police are investigated. It has allowed the police to continue carrying out all investigating themselves through the internal Police Complaints Authority (PCA) and sought to prevent public disclosure of evidence relating to a death in custody.

The European Committee on the Prevention of Torture report centres on three cases:

Richard O'Brien died after being arrested for being drunk and disorderly in 1994. At the inquest into his death, he was said to have been "unlawfully killed". The CPS decided on two occasions not to prosecute three Metropolitan (London) policemen. The family

went to judicial review, but the officers were acquitted

Nigerian asylum-seeker Shiji Lapite died in 1994 after a struggle with police in which his larynx was crushed and his head was battered. An inquest jury found he had been "unlawfully killed". No trial was held, even after an inquiry into why the CPS did not prosecute. At the inquest, one police officer said he had kicked Mr. Lapite in the head. Forty-five separate injuries were found on his body and he had died of suffocation.

Derek Treadaway was forced to confess to a robbery by having a bag placed over his head. Having been jailed for 15 years in 1982, his conviction was overturned in 1996. He sued the West Midlands police for £50,000. Dame Barbara Miles, the former Director of Public Prosecution (DPP), set up an inquiry into the handling of the case by the CPS, but cited lack of evidence as the reason why no prosecution was made.



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