

UK teenage killer named publicly and sentenced to 20 years

Julie Hyland

8 November 2014

Mr. Justice Coulson, the High Court judge who sentenced 16-year old William Cornick to indefinite imprisonment for the murder of his teacher, Ann Maguire, and then lifted his anonymity, has defended his decision.

Cornick stabbed Spanish teacher Ann Maguire to death at Corpus Christi Catholic college in Leeds last April, when he was 15. Maguire, 61 years old, was a popular teacher of 40 years standing. But Cornick harboured a longstanding resentment against her for barring him from a school trip.

The teenager had expressed his hatred for Maguire on Facebook more than a year ago, speaking of “brutally killing” her and spending his life in jail. The school was aware of his dislike of Maguire, after he refused to sit in a meeting with her. On the day of the killing, he had shown other pupils the knives he had brought into school and told them what he intended to do.

As the class began, Cornick came behind Maguire as she talked to another pupil and stabbed her repeatedly in the back and neck in full view of a horrified class. Immediately after the attack, he shouted cheerfully to class mates, “Good times.”

The court heard he had also intended to attack two other teachers, including a pregnant woman.

Coulson described the murder as a “monumental act of cowardice and evil”. This, combined with the teenager’s lack of remorse, he said, justified almost doubling the usual minimum tariff for under-18s who murder, from 12 in detention to 20 years. But Coulson warned that the day of his release “may never come.”

Academically gifted, Cornick was, for all intents and purposes, a model pupil and son. He is described as coming from a middle class family. While his parents were divorced, they had provided a loving and supportive environment for their children.

Behind the scenes, however, there were signs of distress, including several incidents of self-harm. Diagnosed several years ago with diabetes, the teenager was upset that he would not be able to join the army. He was apparently also concerned he would fail his exams. His anxieties and

insecurities appear to have been projected against teachers and Maguire in particular, to murderous ends.

Cornick told psychiatrists, “I wanted to get caught. That’s why I did it in school. I wanted to be in jail.

“It’s kill or be killed. I did not have a choice. It was kill her or suicide.”

The 16-year-old is the first child to be imprisoned for killing a teacher in school and one of only a few under-18s to receive a 20-year minimum tariff. Under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, to which the UK is a signatory, all those aged 18 and under must be treated as juveniles.

Media outlets had applied for the overturning of Cornick’s anonymity. In opposition, the defence had argued under Article Two of the European Convention on Human Rights that Cornick’s anonymity should be preserved due to the immediate threat to his life. The teenager was at risk of attack by other convicts, the court was told, and was in solitary confinement in a cell with a glass door. The defence also cited article 8 of the convention, on the right to privacy and a family life.

The judge argued that this had to be balanced against Article 10 of the convention on freedom of expression and ruled that this outweighed Cornick’s rights.

Penelope Gibbs, chair of the Standing Committee for Youth Justice (SCYJ), criticised the decision, saying, “I don’t think a child—and he was a child—should get a life sentence because they are young, their brain is not mature and a life sentence is indeterminate, it could last forever. I think no other western European country would impose a life sentence on a teenager.”

“Do we want him to be rehabilitated? Do we want him to leave prison with the lowest risk possible of causing more harm to others? Yes. How long do we need to achieve that, rather than how long do we need to punish him for?”

In his written statement responding to such criticisms, Coulson dismissed “ill-informed commentators,” stating, “Those of us involved in the criminal justice system know that deterrence will almost always be a factor in the naming

of those involved in offences such as this.”

The court heard that Cornick has “an adjustment disorder with psychopathic tendencies,” but was told that this “does not reduce his culpability” because he knew what he intended was wrong. He will not be eligible for parole until he is 36 and a successful attempt to reduce his tariff is dependent on Cornick showing “clear evidence of exceptional and unforeseen progress.”

In reality, the ruling means it is unlikely that he will ever get access to the treatment necessary to make such progress. According to reports, Cornick has already been moved from the Wetherby Young Offender Institution in Yorkshire, “for his own safety” after his identity was disclosed. Now isolated from others, he is on 24-hour suicide watch.

The decision to identify him has also impacted on family and friends. A girlfriend, who broke up with him just days before the killing has had to move schools. One can only imagine the impact on his parents and older brother, who have also been publicly identified, along with their jobs and locations.

Cornick’s sentencing and his public “naming and shaming” is part of an ever more punitive stance adopted by Britain’s legal system against minors. The age of criminal responsibility is just ten in England and Wales, and eight in Scotland. The UK imprisons more children (1,282) than anywhere in Europe, outside Turkey.

It was Labour’s Tony Blair who led the charge on “law and order” against minors, seizing on the horrific killing of two-year-old Jamie Bulger by 10-year old boys, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, in Liverpool in 1993. Then the Labour opposition’s shadow home secretary, Blair used the murder to stake out his party’s position on the right of the Conservatives, claiming it was proof of a moral breakdown of society.

Thompson and Venables were tried as adults, and stripped of anonymity.

Found guilty, they were sentenced to be detained until they had reached adulthood. Their disadvantaged and dysfunctional upbringing led to hysterical claims by the media and politicians of a feral underclass that was out of control. Thompson and Venables have had to be provided with fake identities on their release.

Media coverage of the Cornick case has been just as foul. Having successfully petitioned for the overturning of his anonymity on public interest grounds, much of the media have used the case as an occasion for prurient coverage and demands for retribution.

Writing in the *Daily Mail*, Sarah Vine cruelly drew on the devastation Cornick’s family must also be feeling, along with the Maguires, as a result of their son’s action, under the headline, “The unbearable horror of being the mother of a

hate-filled killer.”

In an imagined monologue, she wrote, “To know that my baby, that warm bundle of humanity I brought into the world, had become a twisted, sadistic monster. That all the hope and happiness had withered and rotted, leaving behind just a soul of pure hatred. Better, almost, that the child had died in infancy and innocence.”

Cornick is one of 15 under-18s imprisoned for murder in England and Wales. According to the Howard League for Penal Reform, such crimes are synonymous with dysfunctional backgrounds and a history of mental illness. It is the very fact that Cornick does not fit the mould that is the source of the opprobrium.

Vine continued, “All of us, as parents, believe that if we love our children, teach them well and nurture them, they will grow into good human beings. This case makes a mockery of all that. If only Cornick had come from a troubled background. If only there were something dark about his past. Something—anything—to help us rationalise his actions.

“But there is nothing. No obvious excuse for us to cling to. Nothing to explain the horror. Which leaves only one, terrifying, alternative: the existence of a darkness we can neither fathom nor control. Evil. Pure, unadulterated, evil.”

Vine’s comment typifies much of the media coverage. What happens when all the parental love and support in the world cannot protect against the disappointments, setbacks, “failures”, young people confront? What happens when these problems, multiplied hundreds times over by the conditions of capitalist crisis, take on pathological dimensions? Just how many others are “out there”, primed to explode?

The judge, too, cited the fact that Cornick could not “be dismissed as the product of a hopeless background or a dysfunctional family”, as grounds for his naming to provide a “deterrent to others.”

“There are wider issues at stake, such as the safety of teachers, the possibility of American-style security measures in schools, and the dangers of ‘internet loners’ concocting violent fantasies on the internet,” he said. In other words, faced with the possibility of “American-style” school ground killings, the British state must consider adopting “American-style” security.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)