

BILLY WRIGHT INQUIRY

Day 44: 6 March 2008

Witness: Mr John Steele, who was the Controller of Prisons in Northern Ireland between 1987 and 1992; the Undersecretary for Security in the Northern Ireland Office between 1992 and 1995; and the Director of Policing and Security in 1995 which was later titled Senior Director Belfast Policing and Security from 1996 onwards

Mr Steele's began by clarifying his role as Senior Director Belfast Policing and Security which was to advise Ministers on security issues and about the prevailing situation. This was facilitated through communication with the Security Service (MI5) regarding intelligence and this occasionally arose with his dealings with the police but Mr Steele noted that he would not have come across military intelligence in the course of his role unless it came up at the monthly security meeting chaired by the Secretary of State. Intelligence was typically strategic as opposed to operational. Mr Steele explained that he would have been advising the Minister on areas including public order, Orange Order marches and the continuance of paramilitary ceasefires.

Mr Steele then described what he considered was the disproportionate influence Billy Wright had on the political situation in Northern Ireland. Further questioning elicited the complexity of the political climate with events such as the stand-off at Drumcree occurring during the 1996 marching season and the surrounding tension with respect to both loyalist and republican paramilitaries maintaining their ceasefires.

Questioning then turned to Mr Steele's role as Controller of Prisoners for Northern Ireland between 1987 and 1992. Mr Steele explained his proactive approach during this time and his use of a "carrot and stick" approach for controlling the inmates with privilege schemes such as home leave. Further questioning also touched on staff training and morale within the Prison Service and efforts to improve such aspects. Mr Steele commented that he thought the Prison Service had a good degree of control over the H Blocks in 1992, when he left the role of Controller. The questioning also led to a description of how prisoners were self-disciplining and self-regulating under paramilitary leadership. Mr Steele clarified the extent of that control by stating that he regarded the Prison Service capable of exerting ultimate control within HMP Maze if the situation required but he alluded to several incidents which would not paint such a good picture of the prison. Mr Steele was asked about prison conditions, management and practices comparatively from the time he was in charge and those in 1997 when Billy Wright was in the Maze. Mr Steele was largely unwilling to comment as he was not in a position to comment as to the situation in 1997 but did offer comment where he was aware of an issue.

Mr Steele then confirmed that he was aware of the opposition towards the transfer of Billy Wright to HMP Maze from the loyalist paramilitaries, the Irish Government, UUP politician Ken Maginnis and the RUC. He also stated that

he was aware of PIRA threats to kill Billy Wright in 1997 but not of any threats from INLA.

The direction of questioning then progressed to cover the decision-making process which led to the transfer of Billy Wright to the Maze. Counsel referred to minutes which discussed concerns over possible disruption if Billy Wright were to be transferred, the creation of a new faction within the prison and the desire of Mr Steele to maintain Maghaberry as a non-segregated prison. The location of Billy Wright within H-Block 6 in the Maze was also raised. Mr Steele stated that he did not have knowledge of where Billy Wright was to be located but if he did then he would have spoken to Mr Shannon about resource needs because two different factions would be housed within H-Block 6. He considered the risks to be manageable.

A series of documents were put to Mr Steele. The first minute dated 24th March, which confirmed Sir John Wheeler's decision to transfer Billy Wright, was recognised by Mr Steele. Mr Steele then explained the very strong opposition from the PUP enunciated at a later meeting after the decision was taken. A note dated 11th April 1997 from the Secretary of State stated that no transfer of Billy Wright should take place without reference to him or Sir John Wheeler. Mr Steele's interpretation of that note was that the decision was to go to the Secretary of State through Sir John Wheeler. The next minute referred to was dated 22nd April 1997, which stated that the prison service intended to move Billy Wright on the following Thursday. A subsequent minute also dated 22nd April 1997 reversed the decision to transfer and Mr Steele opined that the Minister had been got at by politicians or police. Mr Steele could not confirm if the intelligence information that came to Sir John Wheeler was also received by him.

Mr Steele was then asked if he was aware on 22nd April 1997 of an INLA threat to Billy Wright's life. Mr Steele was then shown information that showed intelligence which noted that the INLA intended to kill Billy Wright on the first opportunity should he be transferred to the HMP Maze. The subsequent minute of 25th April 1997 was discussed which reversed the decision to stop the transfer of Billy Wright. Counsel then asked Mr Steele about the suggestion that some meetings were not minuted; Mr Steele found this to be an extraordinary suggestion given the bureaucratic nature of the NIO at the time. The cited reason for the transfer was that it would avoid further attacks on staff by the LVF.

Questions from another Counsel focused on the inter-block moves which were suggested to have occurred. Mr Steele said that he was not aware of it occurring in 1992 but that it could have done so. He further noted that it did occur in 1997 but it was officially sanctioned and recognised. Another barrister asked Mr Steele about his contact with the paramilitary leaders and prison practices when he was Controller such as lockdown, searches, the control exercised by paramilitary leaders, and informants. Intelligence information referring to a "strap level" emerged which essentially referred to intelligence which was shared but was orally communicated or read and then removed. Mr Steele considered that this could have happened but it was hypothetical.

Further questions related to the communication of intelligence between the Security Service and Police to the Prison Service. Mr Steele stated that he had no routine contact with RUC Special Branch and the Security Service would have come to him when he was Controller. He also described how an RUC liaison Superintendent would have communicated threats to the Prison Service or dealt with them operationally.

The presence of Mr Mogg at the pivotal meeting regarding Billy Wright's transfer was then addressed. Mr Steele was asked why he thought Mr Mogg was present and he opined that he must have been brought to convince the Minister and give assurances as to the ability of the Prison Service to look after Billy Wright at HMP Maze.

Mr Steele was asked by Professor Coyle (a member of the Inquiry Panel) about the disparity between instructions given to the Prison Service and those given by the Prison Service on the ground. Mr Steele stated that it some prisons officers may have viewed their role as simply to keep the prisoners in but there were many good prison officers. Mr Steele also replied to a question from the Right Reverend Oliver (another Panel member) by reiterating his opinion that HMP Maze was a suitable location where Billy Wright could have been protected within his accommodation.