



[HOME](#)

[History](#)

[NewsoftheIrish](#)

[Book Reviews  
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[Search / Archive](#)

Back to 10/96

[Papers](#)

[Reference](#)

[About](#)

[Contact](#)

## No anonymity for former RUC men at Hamill inquiry

([Irish News](#))

An inquiry into police inaction in Northern Ireland will go ahead at the earliest opportunity, the panel said last night.

The Robert Hamill team won a House of Lords ruling yesterday (Tuesday) which could open the way for full hearings into the 1997 killing of Robert Hamill (25) by a loyalist mob.

The victim, from Portadown, Co Armagh, was beaten to death in the centre of the town as police allegedly watched and failed to intervene.

A total of 20 retired Royal Ulster Constabulary officers claimed they would be in fear of their lives if identified and have fought a decision by inquiry chairman Sir Edwin Jowitt's team that they appear unscreened.

The Lords said the Hamill tribunal had used the correct test in judging whether officers would be put at in-creased risk by appearing unshielded before the inquiry.

"Now that the approach taken by the Robert Hamill Inquiry has been approved by the House of Lords it looks forward to commencing the full oral hearings at the earliest opportunity," an inquiry spokesman said.

If a subsidiary point is pursued it will be dealt with under the special fast-track regime for Robert Hamill Inquiry litigation laid down by the Lord Chief Justice in Northern Ireland who has directed that the necessary steps in litigation be dealt with 'in days and not weeks'.

Lord Carswell and the rest of the law lords sent a separate legal dispute about whether the panel's decision was reasonable back to the High Court in Belfast.

The public inquiry was established to decide whether police committed any wrongful act or omission.

RUC members have denied witness claims that four officers in a vehicle saw what happened and failed to act.

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Hearings have been delayed for almost a year while the legal tussle over identification continues.

Jane Winter, director of lobby group British/Irish Rights Watch, said there could be significant time wasted.

"It means yet more delay for the tribunal because it can't start until this issue is decided," she said.

"We are going right back to square one to decide whether the tribunal has been irrational or not."

The independent inquiry was recommended by former Canadian judge Peter Cory to probe alleged security force collusion north and south of the border.

The inquiry panel was set up in December 2004 and members were originally scheduled to begin hearing evidence last September.

Robert's sister, Diane Hamill, said the family were adamant that the officers should appear unscreened.

"They need to stand up and answer questions as who they are," she said.

"They have done it for years, given evidence in person, and not hid themselves.

"This is an integral part of it. People need to stand up and answer for their actions and lack of action.

Sinn Féin assembly member for Upper Bann John O'Dowd said that there should be complete transparency during the inquiry.

"The origin of the delay is clearly a result of those former members of the RUC who cannot throw off the culture of concealment and cover-up which became a byword for the force in which they served," he said.

"This case is not about anonymity, these individuals have already appeared publicly in a court case associated with the murder of Robert Hamill."

A spokesman for the Inquiry later confirmed that March 2008 was the earliest date that formal hearings could begin.

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[BACK TO TOP](#)

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[About](#)

[Home](#)

[History](#)

[News of the Irish](#)

[Books](#)

[Bookstore](#)

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