

Prison Governors Association

Representing: The Prison Governors of the United Kingdom since 1987



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PRESS RELEASE – Discrimination of PGA Official

The Prison Governors' Association (PGA) took legal action against the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) for discriminating against one of its officials, who had been subjected to threats and bullying. Gary Alcock, the Chair of the Northern Ireland PGA, was told by a NIPS Director, if he can't separate prison business from union business then he will be removed from his post. This was, in effect, a gagging order and an unambiguous threat that he would probably have got away with if the meeting had not been covertly recorded. The chances of getting this case into a court without the recording would have been slim as it would have simply been one person's word against another. The threat to move the Chair of the PGA (NI) was actually carried out after five months of continuing discriminatory treatment and following a poor inspection report into the prison.

When the Criminal Justice Inspection of Northern Ireland published its report into the prison, NIPS Senior Management blamed local managers and, to quote the Chair of the Northern Ireland Committee for Justice, "Threw the governor under the bus." The publication of the report gave NIPS what it saw as a win-win – divert responsibility for the failures away from headquarters which had starved the prison of resources and the smashing of a union with its Chair being transferred to a job outside of the prison service, limiting his access to members and information.

The Prison Governors' Association has never brought a case of this kind before, which reflects two things – just how serious this issue was and how bad things are in prisons. The industrial tribunal finished hearing the case yesterday and its decision will be announced in the weeks ahead. Whatever the result the PGA is committed to protecting its officials and its members. This was a victory for trade unionism and demonstrated that prison governors, who are under enormous pressure, will stand up for what is right. What the tribunal evidenced was that there were no recorded performance issues with the Governor or Deputy Governor and NIPS struggled to justify its earlier comments that performance was being managed. It also appeared a Senior Manager in NIPS had deliberately misled the Stormont Committee for Justice because it would have been "selling out" the Deputy Governor at that time, something he was happy to do a few months later. How the Justice Committee will respond to this when it reconvenes remains to be seen but misleading parliament undermines the fabric of democracy and should not be treated lightly.

The catalyst for the threats to the PGA was a letter the Chair had written raising concerns about threats to prison governors. The response to that legitimate concern was wholly disproportionate, extraordinary in the circumstances and, in the PGA's view, unlawful and we will not hesitate to take further legal action if any official of our union is attacked.

Note for editors:

The Prison Governors Association was founded in October 1987 to represent the higher operational managers in the Prison Service in England and Wales. The PGA was placed on the register of Trade Unions on 6 November 1987 (No. 639T). On 28 July 1988 the Certification Officer under the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974 issued the Prison Governors Association with a Certificate of Independence. The status of the Prison Governors Association is that of an independent registered Trade Union.

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