

Letter from the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland to the Editor, The Times, London.

11 October 2006

Sir,

The Government's defeat in the Lords (on Tuesday 10 October) over its proposal to merge the Prisons Inspectorate into a unified Justice and Community Safety Inspectorate is a powerful confirmation of the importance the public rightly attaches to independent inspection of our prisons. I am proud to work with HMI Prisons on the inspection of prisons in Northern Ireland. To put the record straight, my remit embraces the Northern Ireland Prison Service, and HMI inspects under my auspices in Northern Ireland.

But there is a point that has been understated in this debate. The Prisons Inspectorate inspects the prisons from the point of view of the prisoner – which is essential. But prisons also need to be inspected as part of the criminal justice system, to see whether they are effective partners with the other agencies to reduce re-offending and protect the public. It is not 'either, or': both are essential, and both need to be done by the same Inspectorate.

The unified Justice Inspectorate may or may not be the answer. But if not, the remit of the Prisons Inspectorate needs to be broadened to include the management of the Prison Service so that it can play its full part with the other Inspectorates in raising the performance of the system as a whole.

It may not be as glamorous, but the prisons need to be inspected from a managerial, as well as from a human rights perspective.

Kit Chivers

Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland.