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I back Omagh families' calls for public inquiry says Hoey

(Barry McCaffrey, [Irish News](#))

In his first interview, Sean Hoey tells Barry McCaffrey about being Northern Ireland's longest ever remand prisoner while awaiting trial accused of making the Omagh bomb

Sean Hoey last night (Wednesday) paid tribute to relatives of the Omagh bomb victims who had publicly voiced concerns over the prosecution case brought against him.

It is exactly two weeks since the south Armagh electrician was dramatically acquitted of making the Real IRA device which killed 29 people, including a woman pregnant with twins, in Omagh town centre on August 15 1998.

Clearing the 38-year-old, Mr Justice Weir voiced concerns over "deliberate and calculated deception" in the prosecution case, including police officers being coerced to "beef up" their statements.

In a damning indictment, the original police inquiry's arrangements for storing forensic evidence were branded "thoroughly disorganised" and a "complete mess".

Victims' families later criticised that initial investigation of the atrocity and called on the then chief constable, Sir Ronnie Flanagan, to resign from his current post inspecting all English and Welsh police forces.

Speaking for the first time since his acquittal, Mr Hoey said he "fully endorsed" the Omagh families' demands for a public inquiry.

"I lost four years of my life sitting in a jail cell charged with something I had absolutely nothing to do with," the father-of-two said.

"My sons were just six months and four years old when I was taken away from them. My youngest son only ever saw me sitting behind a prison table.

"It's hard to explain to your children that their daddy has done nothing wrong even though they have to visit him in a prison

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every week.

"When I telephoned to tell the boys I was coming home my youngest son asked if I would be coming in a police car – it was the only way he'd ever seen me travel.

"They've grown up without a father for four years.

"I know that's nothing to what the Omagh families have gone through.

"I could never begin to understand the tragedy that the Omagh families have gone through with the loss of their loved ones.

"The only thing I can say is that I had nothing to do with Omagh and that I support their calls for a public inquiry."

However, Mr Hoey remains angry that he was forced to stand trial for mass murder.

"The PSNI needed a scapegoat for Omagh and the fact that I'm a republican from south Armagh who is an electrician meant I fitted the bill," he said.

"They knew I had nothing to do with Omagh.

"A senior police officer even admitted to my solicitor during questioning that no-one would ever be charged with Omagh but in 2003 I suddenly found myself becoming the fall guy."

Mr Hoey said he only realised the enormity of the case against him when he first appeared in court charged with the Omagh murders.

"The worst day of my life was standing in the dock while the names of all the people killed in Omagh were read out," he said.

"I can just imagine what the Omagh families in the public gallery must have thought of me with the lies the PSNI had told them.

"I was made out to be something between Osama bin Laden and Klaus Barbie.

"I knew I was innocent and that I was being stitched up but all I could do was trust in my legal team who, through tireless work, exposed the prosecution case for the shambles that it was."

Mr Hoey said he now wants answers to the concerns expressed about the case against him.

"The PSNI, Public Prosecution Service and the Forensic Science Service deliberately tried to withhold vital evidence from my

defence," he said.

"If it hadn't been for my legal team, Peter Corrigan and Aidan Carlin, I would have been like the Birmingham Six or Guildford Four, being sent to jail for 16 years."

Mr Hoey said he would be "eternally grateful" to a number of the Omagh families who publicly expressed concerns about the case against him.

"I can't begin to understand how hard it must have been for them but at least they knew that it was wrong to send an innocent man to prison," he said.

"I want to try and repay them in some small way by supporting their campaign for a public inquiry into all the events surrounding the Omagh bomb.

"I want the inquiry to investigate how the police were allowed to falsify statements and why they were allowed to contaminate evidence which could have sent me to prison for life.

"I want to know why the police officers involved have never been suspended and are still serving.

"I want to know why the people who ordered them to falsify statements are still in senior positions within the PSNI.

"I want to know how many other people were wrongly imprisoned on their tainted evidence."

Mr Hoey revealed that he only learned the case against him was about to collapse from a prison officer leading him into court on the day of the judgment.

"When they were bringing me up to the court he turned round and told me I'd be walking out the back door of the courts a free man," he said.

"I asked him again to be sure I was hearing him right but I wouldn't believe it for sure until I heard it from the judge's own lips.

"Even after I was freed and was on my way home I was still in a state of shock.

"Now all I want to do is to be allowed to get on with my life and to try and rebuild my family.

"I will support the Omagh families in their campaign for a public inquiry for as long as it takes."

Mr Hoey's solicitor, Peter Corrigan, last night claimed that his client could have been wrongly convicted if the prosecution had successfully blocked defence requests for access to forensic evidence.

"But for the strong-minded Mr Justice Weir, who directed disclosure, Sean Hoey would be languishing in prison," he said.

"In light of the deliberate suppression of material evidence by the Forensic Science Service, the defence shall be making submissions to the chair of the Human Genetics Commission in the UK... and all other relevant parliamentary committees to ensure proper disclosure procedures are in place for future forensic cases."

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