

## **Pointing the finger at Scots justice; Forensic scientists hit out over McKie case debacle**

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MORE than 100 forensic scientists from across the world yesterday condemned the Scottish justice system.

They warned that the system will be further undermined unless Jim Wallace, the justice minister, takes swift action to restore the credibility of fingerprint evidence and the Scottish Criminal Records Office (SCRO) in particular.

It follows the debacle surrounding Shirley McKie, the former Strathclyde detective who lost her career after her fingerprints were wrongly identified at a crime scene.

In a strongly-worded letter to Mr Wallace, the experts from 13 countries ridicule the SCRO's defence that fingerprint evidence is only "an opinion".

Notable signatories include scientists serving with police forces and the United Nations chief of forensics involved in the harrowing task of identifying victims of the Kosovar conflict.

Their letter coincides with Mike Russell, the nationalist MSP for South of Scotland, securing a parliamentary debate on issues arising from Ms McKie making legal history. She was cleared of perjury after four fingerprint officers from the SCRO had alleged her fingerprints were found at a murder scene.

The Crown Office later announced that no legal proceedings would be taken against the officers whose evidence led to her arrest and trial.

However, 130 people among the world's foremost authorities in identification yesterday insisted that was not good enough.

They argued that "any qualified expert or even unqualified trainee" would have concluded a latent print of a left thumb did not come from Ms McKie. They also said a gross mistake was made.

Their letter continues: "We are deeply concerned fingerprint techniques that have proved dependable for so many years, and have served the judicial process so well in finding the truth for over a century, have now been badly tainted.

"We are also concerned that the victim was a police officer acting in the line of duty; that her accusers were expert witnesses working for the Crown Office, and that such an injustice could happen again."

The letter warns that unless the situation is corrected: "It will further undermine fingerprint evidence, the Scottish justice system, and the position and credibility of the SCRO.

"We appeal to you to use your authority and power to correct this mistake, stop injustice and prevent such a situation every arising again."

Allan Bayle, former New Scotland Yard fingerprint expert and now training lecturer at the Metropolitan Police's scientific support college, is among the signatories. Others include

David Schulz, chief of the UN forensic mission in Kosovo, and Andre Moenssens, a US-based professor who has written more than a dozen books on fingerprint techniques.

They have gone on record in protest at what they regard as "shameful fabrications" in the McKie case. They stressed not one examiner agreed with the "opinions" offered by the SCRO experts, and now "stand with mouths agape" at recent events.

First, a police inspectorate report criticised the SCRO as "not fully effective and efficient" - raising questions over fingerprint evidence. Second, a government inquiry led to changes to the verification system, with identification now being triple-checked.

However, the Crown Office said no action would be taken against the officers who said a fingerprint at a Kilmarnock murder scene was "definitely" Ms McKie's.

Mr Russell's debate will be heard on May 15, three years and one day after her acquittal. He said: "I want the damage done to the Scottish justice system addressed, and ensure it does not happen again. There have been blatant attempts to justify the unjustifiable. I hope Jim Wallace will finish this once and for all."

Iain McKie, Shirley's father, said: "We are grateful so many experts have stressed the SCRO got it badly wrong. We also welcome the debate in parliament."