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Call for inquiry into fingerprint crisis

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THE Scottish Criminal Records Office is facing calls for an immediate public inquiry after the first successful challenge to fingerprint identification in a century.

MSP Mike Russell has written to the Lord Hardie, Lord Advocate, asking him to investigate the case of former Strathclyde detective Shirley McKie, who was acquitted of perjury last year when the jury believed a positively identified thumb print left at a crime scene was not hers. Dozens of high-profile criminal convictions based on fingerprint evidence may now have to be re-examined.

"There's a precipice here which the Lord Advocate is now looking into," said Russell, who is launching a parliamentary campaign for the inquiry into the case and the SCRO.

Senior police fingerprint scientists have also told the Sunday Herald they would welcome the inquiry as the verdict risked bringing both the science and the many convictions based on prints into disrepute. One senior officer said: "We have lost what was a stone-wall certainty and we all have grave doubts about the identification. How can we say our system is infallible when this hangs over our heads?"

McKie was a young detective constable when she became involved in a murder investigation in Kilmarnock in January 1997. The body of Marion Ross, 51, had been found stabbed in the bathroom of her home. David Asbury, who had done work on the house, was subsequently convicted of the murder.

In the course of the investigation both McKie and her sergeant had visited Asbury's home and opened a tin containing £1800. In order to eliminate them from the inquiry, their fingerprints were compared with those given when they had joined the force. Several days later McKie was told her print had been identified, not from the tin but from a door frame at the murder scene. "I couldn't believe it," says McKie. "I had never been inside the house." However, three SCRO experts as well as a prosecution scientist were to testify that the print was hers.

McKie, who has since left the police, testified in Asbury's trial in June 1997. Days later she was arrested, accused of lying in the trial and charged with perjury. Unable to understand how the SCRO had mis-identified her print, McKie found independent experts who proved the print on the door was not hers. This has subsequently been confirmed by five other independent experts.

A senior fingerprint scientist said: "In still denying there has been an error the SCRO are digging themselves in deeper."

Detective Chief Superintendent Harry Bell, SCRO director, says he remains satisfied the identification of the fingerprint was correct.

GRAPHIC: Despite the fingerprint evidence, former police officer Shirley McKie was determined to prove her innocence Photograph: Christopher Furlong

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