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Secret-inquest bill opposed by nationalists

By Barry McCaffrey and Shannon Tweed

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Nationalists last night warned the British government that they will oppose any attempt to introduce 'draconian' new laws allowing a secretary of state to order that inquests must be held in secret.

Last month the Counter-Terrorism Bill 2008 passed its second reading in the House of Commons.

Among the more controversial pieces of legislation included is the proposal to allow a secretary of state to stop

inquests from being held in public.

Under the new laws, a secretary of state would be allowed to dismiss both juries and coroners from inquests if it is judged to be in the public interest, against state security or would damage relationships with another country.

While the government insists that the inquest powers would not be used in Northern Ireland, there are concerns that it could be used to block a series of controversial 'shoot to kill' inquests which are due to open in the north next year.

In 2005 the government rushed through legislation allowing it to withhold sensitive material from an inquiry set up to investigate allegations of collusion in the 1989 murder of solicitor Pat Finucane.

Since then the act has been extended to restrict evidence being heard by inquiries into the killings of Robert Hamill and Billy Wright.

The government-appointed Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Lord Carlile, is known to have met with political parties at Stormont last week to discuss concerns that the inquest laws will be extended to Northern Ireland.

Rejecting government assurances that the new powers would not be extended to Northern Ireland, SDLP leader Mark Durkan said: "There is a completely new provision in this legislation.

"It's not confined to terrorist cases, whereby the secretary of state will be able to appoint a special coroner to hold a secret inquest in relation to any death where they think that's in the public interest.


"If they get it through in this bill, they will very quickly then extend it to Northern Ireland.

"That has huge implications for the outstanding cases in Northern Ireland in which there have never been inquests held."

Warning that his party would oppose any attempt to block inquests, Sinn Fein assembly member Alex Maskey said: "It has been shown time and time again that the British government will use anything in its powers to block public inquiries and inquests from getting to the truth.

"I have no doubt that the British government will try to use this draconian legislation to help cover-up the collusion that has gone on in the north for the last 40 years."

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