

# Judicial Communications Office

Wednesday 30 March 2011

## **COURT SETS MINIMUM TERM OF 17 YEARS IMPRISONMENT TO BE SERVED BY RYAN LESLIE**

### Summary of Judgment

Mr Justice Stephens, sitting today in Belfast Crown Court, set a minimum term of 17 years imprisonment to be served by Ryan Leslie for the murder of his 14 week old son Cameron.

During a six week trial the Court heard how Leslie's relationship with Cameron's mother, Sheree Black, had broken down in August 2008 and she had returned to live with her mother. Leslie remained in the flat they had shared and Ms Black, recognising the importance of Cameron maintaining a relationship with his father, made arrangements for Leslie to have direct unsupervised contact with his baby son.

It was during the first overnight contact on 29 August that Leslie squeezed Cameron's ribcage so hard that he fractured 14 of his ribs. He returned the baby to his mother the following day commenting that he (the baby) was "... crying and crying his heart out". Ms Black had no knowledge of why her baby son appeared to be upset after his visit to his father and subsequently agreed to further overnight contacts.

Cameron's next stay with Leslie was arranged for Tuesday 2 September. He remained with his father until he left in an ambulance on the morning of Thursday 4 September. He was admitted to Antrim Area Hospital but transferred to the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children the same day. Cameron was grievously ill. He was pronounced dead on Saturday 6 September. He had 14 fractured ribs, massive brain damage, bilateral and extensive retinal haemorrhages as well as bruising to many areas of his body.

A unanimous jury found Leslie guilty of the baby's murder and of causing him grievous bodily harm.

In deciding the minimum term to be imposed the judge set out the mitigating and aggravating factors in the case.

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He considered the following the features to be aggravating factors:

- The 14 rib fractures inflicted on Cameron by Leslie;
- The breach of trust that Leslie had as Cameron's father and which was fundamental to that relationship;
- The fact that Leslie took Cameron into his care knowing that he (Leslie) was emotionally unstable;
- Leslie's failure to seek medical assistance for Cameron despite knowing that he had inflicted injuries on him and knowing of his very serious condition; and
- Leslie's failure to assist the medical investigation by giving a truthful account to the treating doctors.

In considering the mitigating factors relating to Cameron's death Mr Justice Stephens took into account the facts that:

- Leslie intended to cause grievous bodily harm to the baby rather than to kill him;
- The offence was not planned but rather it was committed spontaneously in response to the stress of Cameron crying;
- Leslie had a degree of emotional and mental instability; and
- Leslie's relatively clear record.

The judge said that Leslie had shown no insight or remorse for his actions and had shown himself to be a violent individual unable to control his temper. He also considered that the lies Leslie told the police in his attempts to avoid detection were "preposterous and farcical" and described him as a "dishonest and deeply manipulative individual".

"There is a spectrum in relation to a loss of control by a parent. At one end of the spectrum there is a parent who himself or herself faces many problems in life including for instance mental illness, low levels of intellectual functioning, lack of family supports, social deprivation, financial hardship, poor housing conditions, social isolation, social exclusion, extremes of physical and mental tiredness. Such afflictions or hardships either individually depending on their degree or in combination can create enormous pressures when combined with the persistent demands and perpetual crying of a young baby. Unfortunately in such circumstances a parent can lose control and physical and emotional injuries can be sustained by the baby followed by deep regret and deep remorse on the part of the parent. At the other end of the spectrum is an angry individual who cannot control his or her temper, who appreciates that he or she has problems with anger management and yet does not avail of assistance by going on an

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anger management course. A person who has family supports available to him or her together with the support of friends who is not socially isolated and has appropriate housing conditions. Furthermore a person who inflicts horrendous and fatal injuries without remorse. I consider that you fall towards the latter end of that spectrum but I recognise that you had a degree of emotional and mental instability. You had lost your job. You had attempted to commit suicide.”

Mr Justice Stephens said he had read comprehensive statements from both Sheree Black and Margaret Black, Cameron’s maternal grandmother. He said that no judge could fail to be moved by the sensitivity and eloquence of their words and it was clear that the consequences of Leslie’s actions, for them, are of a marked and enduring character.

The judge set a minimum term of 17 years imprisonment to be served for the murder of Cameron Leslie. He also imposed a life sentence in relation to a second count of causing Cameron grievous bodily harm with intent with a concurrent minimum term of 4 years imprisonment.

## NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. This summary should be read together with the judgment and should not be read in isolation. Nothing said in this summary adds to or amends the judgment. The full judgment will be available on the Court Service website ([www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk)).
2. The minimum term is the term that an offender must serve before becoming eligible to have his or her case referred to the Parole Commission for them to consider whether, and if so when, he or she can be released on licence. Unlike determinate sentences, the minimum term does not attract remission. If the offender is released on licence they will, for the remainder of their life, be liable to be recalled to prison if at any time they do not comply with the terms of that licence. The guidance is set out in the case of R v McCandless & Others [2004] NI 269.
3. A Practice Statement, [2002] 3 All ER 417, sets out the approach to be adopted by the court when fixing the minimum term to be served before a person convicted of murder can be considered for release by the Parole Commissioners. It also sets out two starting points. The lower point is 12 years, and the higher starting point is 15/16 years imprisonment. The minimum term is the period that the court considers appropriate to satisfy the requirements of retribution and deterrence having regard to the seriousness of the offence. This

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sentencing exercise involves the judge determining the appropriate starting point in accordance with sentencing guidance and then varying the starting point upwards or downwards to take account of aggravating or mitigating factors which relate to either the offence or the offender in the particular case.

**ENDS**

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