

THE RICHARD WISE PRIZES

The Richard Wise Prize competition will be launched on 10 February 2023, the last date of entry is 31 March 2023. The name is a tribute to Richard Wise who worked at solicitors firms in Birmingham during the 1990s. He got hundreds of people out of prison who had been imprisoned for not paying the poll tax. Most of these people simply did not have the money. Richard then took many of these cases to the European Court of Human Rights to claim compensation from the British Government. These were some of the many thousands of people who had been imprisoned for not paying the poll tax, among the most vulnerable people in our society - the disabled, the ill, some who were very elderly, those who could not read and therefore did not understand letters from authorities, some who had no cash income of any kind. Richard was one of the very few people who knew this was happening and who cared.

He gained a reputation throughout the country as a lawyer who could get legal aid, who would help to get people released from prison on bail and then, with the help of his brother, the barrister Ian Wise KC, challenge the magistrates' decisions to commit to prison for poll-tax debt via judicial review. Those decisions were almost always quashed due to the magistrates' errors and lack of understanding of the law. In court the debtors were not represented - no legal aid was available then as owing poll-tax (or council tax) is a civil, not a criminal matter. Richard got compensation for these people from the European Court of Human Rights because imprisonment for debt without access to legal representation had been found to be a violation of Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees a fair trial (*Stephen Benham v UK*).

The work he started eventually led to a change in the law in Wales, where owing council tax cannot now be sanctioned by up to three months in prison. Melanie's story is told here

<http://appeal.org.uk/news/2017/1/19/no-longer-in-prison-melanies-sentence-is-quashed>

Following this the Welsh government held a consultation on whether imprisonment for council tax debt should be an option for magistrates. The government of Wales

then repealed the regulation permitting imprisonment for council tax debt. England is the only one of the four nations of the UK which still permits magistrates to commit people to prison because they owe council tax.

Sadly, in 2002 Richard died of cancer age 45.