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Paterson Meets With Bell's Family and Sharpton

By [Sewell Chan](#)

Updated, 7:04 p.m. | Gov. [David A. Paterson](#) met Thursday afternoon with the parents and fiancée of [Sean Bell](#) and with the Rev. [Al Sharpton](#), saying afterward that he understood and respected the large-scale protests that occurred on Wednesday, resulting in 216 arrests, and also that he accepted a Queens judge's decision to acquit three New York City police detectives charged in Mr. Bell's shooting. Mr. Paterson said he would review proposals to require alcohol testing for police officers who fire their weapons and to review protocols governing undercover police work.

"I must commend the advocates, many of them, over 200 arrested, for participation in civil disobedience in a way that made their point without any excess activity," Mr. Paterson said at a news conference at his Midtown Manhattan office after meeting with the Bell family. He said the advocates on behalf of Mr. Bell's family had acted in "a completely professional way."

Mr. Paterson met with Sean Bell's parents, William and Valerie Bell, and his fiancée, Nicole Paultre-Bell. Earlier on Thursday, the Queens district attorney, Richard A. Brown, and members of the team that prosecuted the three detectives met with Mr. Bell's family. "The meeting was very cordial and, while there were expressions of frustration, Nicole Paultre-Bell and Mr. Bell's parents thanked the district attorney's office for their efforts in the case," Kevin R. Ryan, a spokesman for the district attorney's office, said in a statement.

Mr. Paterson, discussing the protests, stopped short of endorsing them:

The process of civil disobedience, by its definition and by its nature, inconveniences fellow residents, fellow citizens. That is the art of civil disobedience; it's a disruption. No public servant can condone civil disobedience, because we represent all the people and we do not like to see any members of our society inconvenienced. Therefore, we would rather that this group have not gone to the extent that they did to demonstrate their issues. However, from the point of view of advocacy, which was very well explained to me by Valerie and Nicole and by Reverend Sharpton, the reason that the civil disobedience occurred, from their point of view, is because the other redress opportunities of society had failed them. Legislation in the past, though it has in some respects set up new guidelines, did not stop that incident from occurring last year that claimed the life of Sean Bell. The meeting with different organizations, the protests in the past, the involvement of elected officials in the past, the calls for justice and peace by our clergy, could not stop

that incident from occurring. And so they felt that they had no other choice but to take the action that they took. I respect the decision that they made to take that action.

Mr. Paterson noted that federal authorities had begun a criminal investigation into whether the officers violated Mr. Bell's civil rights.

The governor expressed willingness to review and even adopt legislation governing undercover procedures. He said he understood that undercover officers may need to drink alcohol to protect their cover, but said he would look into proposals to require alcohol testing for officers who have fired their service weapons. "When a weapon is discharged and the victims of the attack were not carrying weapons, it would seem only right that we get a full understanding of what went on and test the police officers who discharged their weapons for alcohol," he said.

The confusion over whether the detectives in fact identified themselves as police officers may also point to the need to "look at the process of undercover law enforcement," Mr. Paterson said, adding that on the early morning of Nov. 25, 2006, "it must have been very confusing."

Mr. Paterson said: "We are a society of laws and not people. Because of that we accept the verdict that was rendered by the jury. We may not agree with it, but we accept it."

Mr. Sharpton, speaking on the Bell family's behalf afterward, said, "Though we did not expect and did not get the governor to endorse civil disobedience, we did expect and did get his understanding of the desperation people have" when they have exercised their legal options.

Mr. Sharpton noted that the protests were entirely peaceful: "Not one brick has been thrown, not one window pane broken."

Asked about the inconvenience experienced by drivers stuck in traffic as a result of the protests, Mr. Sharpton said: "We did not interfere with subways yesterday. We did it purposely on motorists because we wanted them to think as they were going home that all Sean Bell was doing that night was going home in a car."

Mr. Sharpton has promised more acts of civil disobedience, but he said he would not use the governor's office to announce such plans. "He has never violated my pulpit," Mr. Sharpton said. "I won't violate his governor's chamber."

The governor, who is known for his occasionally disarming candor, would not say what he thought should come out of the federal investigation. "I'm having enough trouble running the state," he said, declining to offer advice to the investigators.

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