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Robinson backs Ian Jnr over refusal to name whistle-blower

Saturday, 7 March 2009

First Minister Peter Robinson has given High Court evidence to support Democratic Unionist colleague Ian Paisley Jr's refusal to disclose the name of a prison officer who told him about an alleged file destruction policy.

Mr Paisley is facing a legal challenge by the inquiry into the murder of loyalist leader Billy Wright over his decision not to reveal the identity of his source.

Tribunal chairman Lord MacLean is seeking an order compelling him to co-operate with its request for the officer's name.

The North Antrim MLA and his MP father Ian Paisley were in court as Mr Robinson went into the witness box to claim society would suffer if politicians could not shield those who provide them with information.

The First Minister told Mr Justice Gillen: "Elected representatives, when it's peeled down, have very little other than their own reputation and their word.

"If they give their word that they will respect confidentiality and do not, they are unlikely to be given information in future by anyone else.

"I think society as a whole would lose out."

Mr Paisley has said he was told of an alleged policy within the Northern Ireland Prison Service to destroy a large number of files as an emergency due to data protection legislation.

It was claimed that up to 5,600 documents were destroyed shortly after Wright (37) was shot dead by republicans inside the Maze prison in December 1997.

Mr Paisley could be jailed if he refuses to comply with any High Court order to reveal the officer's identity.

With the Northern Ireland Assembly having passed a motion earlier this week calling for greater protection for elected representatives in his position, Mr Robinson told the court of his own experiences.

He said: "I have literally had hundreds of cases with people imparting information on issues occurring within departments — whether it's procurement or selection — where they wanted a challenge because of information they had."

The First Minister added that he could have faced the same dilemma as Mr Paisley if details he received in connection with the Wright Inquiry had been handed over face to face.

The hearing continues.

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