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Thursday, June 07, 2007

One group of people who will be sad to see Tony Blair step down are the members of the legal profession of the UK in general and Northern Ireland in particular. As the legal legacy of the Troubles is acted out, many have taken advantage of the large fees available in trials and inquiries, which are partly responsible for the doubling of legal costs to the taxpayer from £5m in 2002 to nearly £11m last year.

The biggest annual increase was a 48% rise in 2005-6, largely attributed by Peter Hain to the Omagh bomb trial, still awaiting judgment, and the conviction of a Portadown loyalist, after Northern Ireland's longest murder trial. There was an increase in barrister's fees last year, but the figures do not include the Bloody Sunday inquiry, which ended two years ago, or the full implications of three inquiries, the first of which, into Billy Wright's murder, began last week.

As the Tory spokesman, David Livingston, commented, everyone understands the importance of the Public Prosecution Service, which has taken over responsibility from police inspectors, but they need to know the increased spending is not "just making lawyers rich". The sums do not include fees paid by agencies or departments now under Assembly control, so the bills are bound to increase.

The Bloody Sunday inquiry, still deliberating on its verdict after hearing 900 witnesses over five years, has been easily the richest source of taxpayers' money. By 2004, fees for barristers and solicitors had amounted to more than half of the £127m cost, with two barristers having earned £3m each and junior counsel £1m-plus. It was estimated that the cost was £6.64 for every UK household - and, since then, the total is climbing towards £200m.






Irish Senator, Dr Maurice Hayes, in his Tip O'Neill peace lecture in Londonderry, is only the latest to say the money spent on this and other inquiries could have been better spent elsewhere, doubting that it will uncover the truth. Sir Hugh Orde, in January, said £18.5m had been spent on the three murder cases ordered by Judge Cory, describing the current way of dealing with the past as "a huge money-sucking venture".

The truth, in such inquiries, will always be elusive, since because of their make-up, they become adversarial rather than inquisitorial, inspiring attack and defence by the lawyers. The relatives are frustrated, the facts are often lost - or documents are unavailable - and the effect may be to destabilise the delicate political balance that has been established at Stormont.

The Assembly should be looking at the whole inquiry culture that has grown up, under a Prime Minister always looking for a deal. Trials must go ahead, especially if collusion is suspected, but historical inquiries may solve nothing, except to improve lawyers' bank balances.

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