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Viewpoint: Saville - the last of the big spenders

Thursday, 12 February 2009

Everything about the Saville Inquiry into events on Bloody Sunday is on a gigantic scale. To date it has cost a staggering £185m and last week it was revealed that legal fees have so far accounted for £98m of the total.

Now we learn that the IT costs of the inquiry are £33m.

Sophisticated computer systems were used during the hearings to create a virtual Bogside as it was on the January day in 1972 when 13 people were shot dead by paratroopers.

Another died more than four months later.

While accepting that the state-of-the-art equipment was vital to the probe, the bill gives critics of the inquiry more ammunition.

It is an inquiry which seems to have no end; it has now been going for 11 years with the last evidence given in 2005. All the time the costs continue to mount.

The sooner the final report is available the better for all concerned. It, hopefully, will bring closure on a shameful episode of the Northern Ireland Troubles.

The fact that a former Prime Minister, John Major, publicly admitted that those killed were innocent demonstrates that the highest level of Government now concedes that what happened that day was wrong.

Even the soldier who was second in command of the paratroopers later accepted that innocent people had been shot by the soldiers.

Mr Major's acceptance of the dead

people's innocence was also a tacit admission that the original Widgery inquiry in the 1970s was at best an incomplete investigation and, at worst, as its critics described it, a whitewash.

Had a proper inquiry been held at that time there would have been no need for the hyper-expensive Saville exercise.

For those who would argue that there was no need for Saville in any case, they should remember what marks out the events of Blood Sunday from practically every other atrocity during the Troubles.

In this instance it is the Army, an agency of the state, which is in the dock. Terrorism is expected from terrorists, but when the state is accused of acting unlawfully that is a completely different matter.

It is now evident that there will be no more large scale public inquiries in Northern Ireland into events of the Troubles apart from those currently on-going and, possibly, one into the death of solicitor Pat Finucane.

Quite simply, the Government will not bankroll such investigations.

One possible avenue of redress for those people who continue to seek the truth about how and why their loved ones died was proposed by the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past in its recent report.

The recommendation to establish a Legacy Commission which, among other things, could set up an information recovery process should be given serious consideration by the Government.

Of course, the process would only work if all those involved in the conflict, the loyalist and republican paramilitaries, the security forces and the intelligence services all agreed to take part and to tell their versions of events.

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The process would have one major benefit — it would be a streamlined and cost-effective method of inquiry — and might have just as much chance of uncovering the truth as tribunals like Saville.

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