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Opinion

Viewpoint: Time to learn a lesson from inquiry costs

Tuesday, December 26, 2006

The Government got much more than it bargained for when it agreed to all the public inquiries into some controversial deaths during the troubles.

Instead of learning from the expense of the Bloody Sunday tribunal, which could top £200m, it locked itself into a process that has already incurred costs of £20m on three inquiries, before the full hearings begin.

Those who are closest to the deaths, in suspicious circumstances, would argue that expense should not be an issue.






But when the cost of holding such inquiries begins to impact on Treasury spending on Northern Ireland, taxpayers have a right to be concerned, as they are.

There was a further development last week, when a High Court judge ruled that Peter Hain was wrongly advised when he changed the nature of the inquiry into the murder of Billy Wright so that the state could terminate it at any time and keep evidence secret. The Treasury wants to limit the cost of the inquiries to £50m, but that may not be possible.

At a time when every department of government is short of funds, criticism of the Government for allowing this inquiry free-for-all is fully deserved.

The lessons of the Bloody Sunday tribunal, which has been a goldmine for lawyers, should have been learned and a more careful evaluation should have been made of the murders, to give some cases the priority they deserve.

The chances are that at the end of the day - and after the expenditure of vast sums of public money on legal representation - no one will be satisfied.

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As long as the inquiries last, hoping to provide closure for families but also re-opening old wounds, it will be difficult for the communities involved to move on.

Northern Ireland has changed enormously for the better, since the darkest days of the troubles, but it is still in the interests of a small number of extremists to keep old enmities alive.

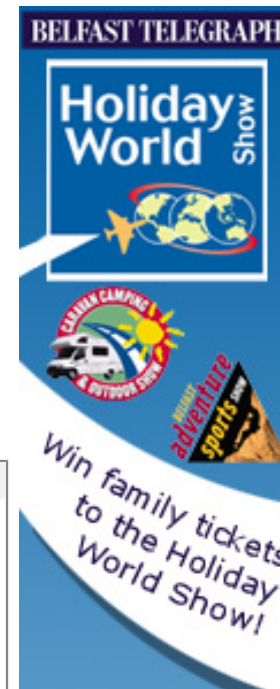
In the right circumstances, public inquiries have been a valuable tool for seeking out the truth, and exposing lies for what they are. The Scarman Tribunal, into the origins and outcome of the 1969 riots, was a case in point - conducted by a respected judge with a time-limited brief.

But as the nature of the conflict here has become more complex, the ability of inquiries to cut through the web of cover-up and collusion has been reduced, as is the public's interest in their conclusions.

Atrocities were committed, on which everyone has an opinion, and even the most thorough inquiry will have little effect on what people believe.

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