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## Politics

### Just making lawyers rich?

Government told to explain doubling of NIO legal fees

Thursday, June 07, 2007

By Chris Thornton

NIO spending on legal fees has doubled in the past five years - raising questions about whether the Government is "just making lawyers rich" at the taxpayer's expense.

Legal spending has climbed from £5.5m in 2002 to nearly £11m in the financial year that ended in March.

The figures include fees paid out by the Public Prosecution Service, which is responsible for all criminal trials, but the tens of millions spent on the Bloody Sunday Inquiry are accounted separately.

The biggest annual increase in spending came in the last financial year, with a jump of £3.5m - a 48% rise in one year.

Secretary of State Peter Hain blamed the jump on the Omagh bombing trial - which had concluded hearings but is still awaiting a judgment - and the conviction of Portadown loyalist William James Fulton after a nine-month trial, the longest murder case in Northern Ireland's history.

"These two cases alone have accounted for an increase in legal expenditure of £2m," Mr Hain said. He also pointed at a rise in barrister's fees in April 2006, which he said was the "the first increase in a number of years".

But David Lidington, the Tory Shadow Secretary of State, said Mr Hain needs to give a fuller explanation for the jump.

"Peter Hain needs to explain in detail this extraordinary doubling of NIO legal fees," he said.

"Everyone well understands the importance of the PPS's work, but I hope this increased spending is getting results for the public in Northern Ireland, not just making lawyers rich."

The spending was undertaken by the central NIO and the Prosecution Service.

It does not include any legal fees by other agencies, quangos or the Government departments now under Assembly control. The PPS has assumed a bigger workload in recent years, including responsibility for the prosecution of low level crime that used to be conducted by police inspectors.

But the NIO has also become embroiled in a series of High Court cases over the past two years, including legal actions over the appointment of the Victims Commissioner, the makeup of the Parades Commission, planning for the John Lewis superstore at Sprucefield and the legal basis for the Billy Wright Inquiry.

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