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Local & National

Lawyer in Wright probe quits

Thursday, June 05, 2008

By Chris Thornton

The Billy Wright Inquiry was hit yesterday by the unexplained resignation of its most senior lawyer.

Derek Batchelor QC, the lead counsel for the inquiry and the man primarily responsible for presenting evidence about the LVF leader's murder, stepped down on Tuesday night "with immediate effect".

Lord MacLean, chairman of the inquiry, announced the resignation yesterday "with regret".

The inquiry declined to give any details of the resignation, or Mr Batchelor's reasons for leaving. Attempts to contact the QC were unsuccessful.

Mr Batchelor had taken part in the inquiry on Tuesday, questioning witnesses several hours before his resignation. And at the end of Tuesday's evidence, Lord MacLean indicated that he expected the QC to continue questioning witnesses about the 1998 murder by INLA inmates in the Maze Prison.

But at the opening of yesterday's hearing, he told lawyers: "I have to announce, with regret, that senior counsel to the inquiry, Mr Derek Batchelor QC, resigned his post last night, with immediate effect."

The chairman vowed yesterday that the inquiry's investigation of Wright's death would continue uninterrupted, while a search for a new lead lawyer is carried out.

Lord MacLean indicated some witnesses would have to be rescheduled to the autumn as a result of the resignation, but said Mr Batchelor's junior counsel, Murdo McLeod, would take over the examination of witnesses for the near future.

A human rights organisation monitoring the case expressed concern about Mr Batchelor's resignation at such an advanced stage.

"We're quite concerned that this should happen now that the inquiry is getting to a very serious stage, when some important new information is emerging," said Mike Ritchie, director of the Committee on the Administration of Justice.

"We sincerely hope that the inquiry will be able to complete its work."

The inquiry, which has been troubled by delays and confronted by destroyed or missing evidence, now faces the difficult task of securing a top QC at short notice to take over the important role.

The lead counsel for the inquiry is a key position. That person is arguably better acquainted with the evidence than any other barrister taking part in the inquiry.

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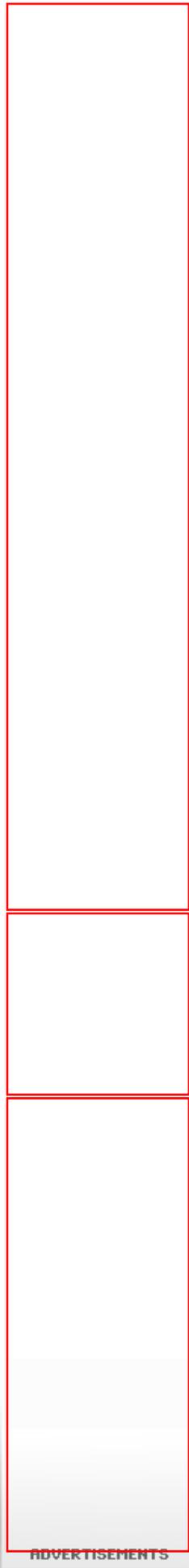


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