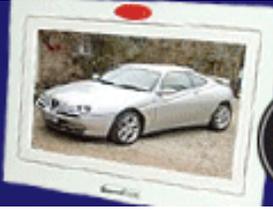


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Politics

The £200m inquiries bill

Friday, December 22, 2006

By Chris Thornton

The costs of Bloody Sunday and new collusion inquiries are skyrocketing towards £200m, in spite of Treasury warnings to rein in spending.

According to the latest Government figures, the Bloody Sunday inquiry has risen by £2m in the past four months - hitting £174m - even though it is no longer holding hearings.

And the inquiries into the murders of Rosemary Nelson, Billy Wright and Robert Hamill have reached a combined cost of more than £19.5m before their full hearings have even started.

Two of those inquiries - concerning collusion in the murders of Mrs Nelson and Robert Hamill - have already cost more than the full inquiry into the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence.

The latest cost figures were released just before the High Court in Belfast ruled Secretary of State Peter Hain had illegally applied a law which also allows him to cap payments to lawyers in the inquiries.

The ruling, on the Billy Wright inquiry, was not directly concerned with the costs, but it could have repercussions in that area. Mr Hain had already used the controversial Inquiries Act to cap payments to lawyers involved in the case, but the High Court ruled against the wider use of the Act - allowing a minister to terminate the inquiry at any point - in the Wright case yesterday.

The Secretary of State has also announced he intends to put the same cap on fees in place for the Robert Hamill inquiry.

Earlier this year, the Treasury complained to Mr Hain about the rising cost of the inquiries, saying there should be a limit of £50m. He said their combined cost is already almost £20m. The Rosemary Nelson

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inquiry has cost £8.1m pounds, including £1.8m in legal costs. Full hearings will begin next September.

Costs of the Robert Hamill inquiry have broken £7.4m, including £2.2m in legal costs. It has been postponed until a legal battle about the anonymity of police officers is concluded.

The Billy Wright inquiry has been the cheapest so far, with costs hitting £3.9m, including legal fees of £1.5m.

That inquiry had been scheduled to begin full hearings in the Spring, but yesterday's High Court ruling could delay it. The landmark inquiry into the Lawrence murder cost an estimated £4.2m.

The latest figures also show the cost of the Bloody Sunday inquiry rose by £2m over the past four months. At the end of August, the Government put the cost at £172m. This week Mr Hain said it has cost £174m.

The original cost estimate was £100m, and two years ago the Government thought the final costs would be £155m. The inquiry is no longer conducting hearings. Lord Saville, who heads the tribunal, has indicated it will be another year before he issues the inquiry's report.

Mr Hain revealed the latest figures in response to a written question for his parliamentary private secretary, Welsh MP Chris Ruane, who helps Mr Hain in his role as Welsh Secretary.

Mr Hain told his aide the Government has "worked with the inquiries to put in place a number of measures to ensure that, while they have the resources necessary to fulfil their task, costs are kept to a reasonable level".

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