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Wednesday, October 22, 2008

# Omagh prosecutors paid over £1m

DAN KEENAN, Northern News Editor

THREE PROSECUTION lawyers in the Omagh bombing trial have been paid more than £1 million (around €1.5 million), prompting an outcry from the Democratic Unionists and the SDLP.

The trial of south Armagh electrician Seán Hoey ended last December when he was acquitted of all charges in relation to the 1998 bombing which killed 29 people, including a woman pregnant with twins.

Freeing him, trial judge Mr Justice Weir issued a damning criticism of the Omagh investigation and accused the police of "deliberate and calculated deception".

Omagh is among three significant cases which have failed to secure a conviction. The Robert McCartney murder trial and the £26.5 million Northern Bank robbery case have added to pressure on both the police and the prosecution service to secure convictions in high-profile cases.

Referring to the payout, DUP Assembly member Robin Newton said no-one could be satisfied with the situation other than barristers themselves.

"I fear that what is emerging in Northern Ireland is an extremely costly inquiries industry, where the only winners seem to be the well-heeled, well-paid barristers," he said. "There can be no quarter given or excuse made for those who are suspected of engaging in terrorism or criminality - they must be subjected to the full rigour of the law, even as in this case a not guilty verdict was returned.

"Nevertheless, the news that three barristers have been paid a total of £1.2 million in legal fees will be viewed by the Northern Ireland public as nothing short of scandalous . . ."

SDLP justice spokesman Alban Maginness said he was "very concerned at this large expenditure of public funds".

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He called for "some form of public explanation especially when the outcomes of the cases are considered".

He added: "At present there is no legal obligation for the Public Prosecution Service to do this, but at the very least there should be a moral requirement to explain how such fees are paid." He said the Omagh trial was exceptional with so many victims and many complicated legal arguments which may explain the cost in that case.

"While we have no control or input into the Public Prosecution Service, it will be difficult to introduce regulation. Yet it is clear we cannot have an unlimited market and we have got to be able to scrutinise the sort of fees being paid out of public funds."

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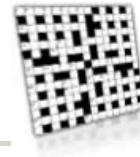


This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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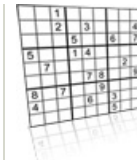
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