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**Peter Robinson is more used to fielding questions from the floor of the Assembly than from barristers in a court room. Matthew McCreary watched his performance**

Wednesday, February 06, 2008

Courtrooms are characteristically austere places, but even by such standards the atmosphere at the Billy Wright inquiry today was reasonably stiff, if only for the air of expectation which pervaded.

The proceedings were always going to be unmissable as Northern Ireland's Finance Minister Peter Robinson took to the stand to give evidence.

And indeed the East Belfast MP faced many questions about concerns which had been raised to him by Billy Wright about Wright's safety in prison.

These ranged from what Wright's motives might have been for seeking a transfer from the prison to whether he was concerned that conversations between them might have been listened into.

The questions, although never veering towards the aggressive or excessively harsh, were nonetheless copious and thorough.

But if there's one thing a career of decades in politics has taught Mr Robinson it is how to field probing questions.

Although his body language was characteristically stiff, Mr Robinson - impeccably turned out in a pin-stripe suit and tie - showed no sign of debilitating nerves as he dealt with around a hour-and-a-half of questioning this morning.

His face also remained largely fixed in the stern, almost headmasterly, expression familiar to those who may have encountered him across debating tables in Parliament or on television.

His evidence this morning was delivered in front of phalanx of legal representatives, and in light of their job to examine in detail the circumstances of Wright's death, Mr Robinson delivered a firm and businesslike testimony to the inquiry.

There were moments of relative levity however. Mr Robinson, and those in the courtroom, could not help but laugh when it was asked if Wright might have been considered to have a "higher profile" than Ian Paisley.

"I don't think anybody has a higher profile than Dr Paisley," replied Mr Robinson, as the first of a handful of smiles broke his face during questioning.

Mr Robinson's testimony is of course just one part of the jigsaw which makes up this lengthy and complex inquiry.

But whatever results from this process, it is certain that this will be one of the more notable days of the proceedings, if only for the familiarity of the face which took to the witness stand.

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