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I was sacked from Billy Wright probe

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Top QC breaks his silence to issue startling claim

Wednesday, June 11, 2008

By Chris Thornton

The QC who mysteriously left the Billy Wright Inquiry said today that he had been sacked.

Derek Batchelor QC, the inquiry's lead counsel until a week ago, released a statement early this morning contradicting last week's announcement that he had resigned.

Mr Batchelor (right) — the main lawyer responsible for questioning witnesses about the LVF chief's prison murder — says he is considering legal action over his departure.

Last Wednesday the chairman of the inquiry, senior Scottish judge Lord MacLean, unexpectedly told a hearing of the inquiry "with regret" that Mr Batchelor had "resigned his post last night with immediate effect".

No explanation was given for his departure, which came in the middle of a witness' testimony at Banbridge Courthouse, where the £21m inquiry has been hearing evidence since last year.

But now, after consulting other lawyers, Mr Batchelor says he was "dismissed" the previous day, during a meeting with the three-man tribunal examining Wright's 1997 murder in the Maze Prison.

"Last Tuesday afternoon, I was called to a meeting and was advised by the panel that complaints had been made over my handling of some staff matters," he said in a statement.

"There was no doubt in my mind on leaving this meeting that I had been dismissed from the inquiry.

"Contrary to subsequent reports, I have not resigned and I had no intention of leaving my post as the inquiry reaches critical stages.

"To avoid any doubt over my understanding of the situation, I have since offered to return to the inquiry but this has not been progressed."

An official for the inquiry indicated yesterday that Lord MacLean had no reason to alter his statement that Mr Batchelor resigned.

Mr Batchelor had been lead counsel for the inquiry for three years and had been involved in more than 60 days of hearings.

The QC is understood to have consulted lawyers about the circumstances of his departure after returning to Scotland, where he has worked as a prosecutor.

"I do not wish to disrupt the work of the inquiry," he said in his statement. "It is essential that the inquiry continues and reaches a satisfactory conclusion."

Lord MacLean indicated last week that the inquiry will begin to search for a new lead counsel, the lawyer who conducts the primary questioning of most witnesses.

Mr Batchelor said: "I am happy to offer assistance to any replacement counsel by sharing essential information, subject to certain limitations out of my control."

That is believed to refer to documents and material retained by the inquiry.

Mr Batchelor added: "It is regrettable that I now feel obliged to consider legal action.

"However, I believe it is important to ensure that the exact nature of my departure is known and understood

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by all involved in this important investigation."

Mr Batchelor's departure has caused the inquiry to reschedule witnesses and reconsider the order in which they will look at evidence.

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