

BLOODY SUNDAY- UNJUSTIFIED AND UNJUSTIFIABLE BUT £4,000,000+ TO DEFEND ONE MASS MURDERER?

State Impunity in the Northern Ireland Conflict

Impunity has long been one of the most enduring and destabilising legacies of the Northern Ireland conflict. [Bitter Legacy](#), a report produced by an International Expert Panel convened by the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights at the University of Oslo at the request of the Pat Finucane Centre (PFC) and the Committee on the Administration of Justice concluded that state impunity in Northern Ireland is not a relic of the past but an ongoing reality: it “is” widespread, systematic, and systemic. The present tense is deliberate, because there is a continuation of impunity even as the State has the resources and institutional capacity to meet its Article 2 and 3 ECHR obligations in cases involving suspected police and military violations. The Panel stressed in the report that responsibility does not lie with “a few bad apples,” but reflects profound institutional failure. Authorities have repeatedly withheld information, delayed investigations, and obstructed meaningful participation, deepening victims’ anguish and denying truth, reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence. This entrenched impunity has corroded public trust, fuelled enduring suspicions of collusion and unlawful killings, and damaged the rule of law across communities. In short, the evidence points to an extraordinary pattern of State failure, spanning decades and multiple agencies, producing a system in which accountability has been persistently evaded.

Who is Soldier F?

On 30 January 1972, British paratroopers opened fire on unarmed civil rights marchers in Derry, Northern Ireland, killing 13 civilians on the day and wounding others, one of whom died later. The massacre, known as Bloody Sunday, became one of the most infamous incidents of the Northern Ireland conflict (1969-1998). “Soldier F” is a former Lance Corporal in the British Army’s Parachute Regiment and the only military veteran ever prosecuted in connection with Bloody Sunday.

An initial 1972 inquiry, the Widgery Tribunal, largely exonerated the soldiers. That conclusion was overturned much later by the Saville Inquiry (1998-2010), which [reported](#) in 2010 that none of those killed or wounded on Bloody Sunday was posing a threat or doing anything that could justify being shot. The Inquiry’s findings prompted a formal [apology](#) from the then British Prime Minister David Cameron, who publicly stated that the soldiers actions were “unjustified and unjustifiable”.

The Saville Inquiry [concluded](#) that it was “more likely than not” that either Lance Corporal F or Private H fired the shot that mortally wounded William McKinney. It identified Corporal E, Lance Corporal F,

Private G, and Private H as the soldiers who entered Glenfada Park North and, between them, killed William McKinney and Jim Wray and wounded several others. Contrary to the soldiers' claims, the Inquiry found that none of them fired in the belief that they had identified anyone in possession of, or about to use bombs or firearms.

Soldier F admitted during the Saville inquiry that he shot four people dead on Bloody Sunday.

In March 2019, after decades of campaigns by victims' families, Northern Ireland's Public Prosecution Service (PPS) charged Soldier F with two counts of murder (for the deaths of James Wray and William McKinney) and five counts of attempted murder related to Bloody Sunday. He pleaded not guilty on all counts, and a court granted him anonymity, citing safety reasons (he remained identified only as "Soldier F"). From the outset, the British Government pledged full support to the ex-paratrooper as he faced prosecution. The UK Defence Secretary at the time, Gavin Williamson, [announced](#) that the Ministry of Defence (MoD) "would fund all the accused man's legal costs" and provide "full legal and pastoral support" to Soldier F throughout the proceedings.

The case was dropped and then reinstated in 2022 following a successful judicial review brought by the McKinney family.

What happened in court?

The trial began on September 15, 2025. Soldier "F" sat behind a curtain, listening to the proceedings while shielded from public view. After a five-week trial at Belfast Crown Court, heard by a judge sitting without a jury, Soldier F was acquitted of all charges in October 2025.

Judge Patrick Lynch [ruled](#) that while members of the Parachute Regiment had shot unarmed civilians fleeing the scene and had "totally lost all sense of military discipline," the evidence against Soldier F personally fell short of the standard required for conviction.

The main evidence against Soldier F came from the statements of two fellow paratroopers, Soldiers G and H. Judge Lynch [found](#) that these statements could not be properly tested and that the passage of time had "seriously hampered the capacity of the defence to test the veracity and accuracy" of the evidence.

The judge was explicit that innocent civilians had been killed and that the conduct of the soldiers was wrong, stating that those responsible should "hang their heads in shame." But he concluded that, given

the gaps in evidence created by delay, individual criminal liability could not be proved beyond reasonable doubt.

For the families, the verdict was devastating but not meaningless. Relatives said they were proud to have reached a courtroom after more than 50 years of campaigning, even as justice remained out of reach. Speaking outside court, Mickey McKinney, the brother of William McKinney, [said](#) the families did not blame the trial judge, but a British state complicit in murder and cover-up. Soldier F, he said, had been discharged from the criminal dock, “but it is one million miles away from being an honourable discharge.”

Funding for Soldier F’s Defence

In late 2025, it was [revealed](#) (in response to a question posed by MP Colum Eastwood) that the UK Government had spent £4.3 million (approximately U.S. \$ 5.85 million) on Soldier F’s defence up to that point. That figure, covering the period from March 2019 through to the close of trial, is expected to rise slightly once final invoices are processed. The government stated:

“The legal fees associated with these proceedings (including associated judicial reviews) amount to £4.3 million, which may rise marginally once final bills are received. These costs cover the period from when Soldier F was initially charged in March 2019. This includes costs associated with the Judicial Review leading to the PPS recommending proceedings in 2022.

The government’s support was not limited to paying lawyers. Ministers confirmed that *“Soldier F has received legal and welfare support throughout his legal proceedings at public expense.”* This included covering incidental needs such as travel and accommodation for court appearances, and “pastoral care” for the soldier. All such ancillary costs were met from a central MoD budget and handled by staff, though the government stated these could not be readily quantified.

Unusually, Soldier F was represented by two law firms (one London-based and one in Belfast) working in tandem, with two senior barristers (King’s Counsel) and two junior barristers acting on his behalf – effectively a double-sized defence team. Legal observers [noted](#) this was a “unique and unheard of” arrangement for a criminal trial, likely contributing to a defence bill far higher than a typical single-defendant case. The MoD’s [answer](#) to Parliament highlighted that the same *“experienced legal team [that had represented Soldier F] since the Saville Inquiry”* was retained for the trial, now *“supplemented by leading solicitors and barristers, including King’s Counsel, based in Northern Ireland.”*

The PPS, by contrast, [spent](#) £362,552 on barrister fees over the course of the entire prosecution. This figure includes the criminal trial and associated judicial review proceedings.

The families of those killed or injured on Bloody Sunday were represented by Madden & Finucane Solicitors, who acted pro bono on behalf of most families for over 15 years, from the aftermath of the Saville Inquiry through the judicial reviews and criminal proceedings. Director Ciarán Shiels [confirmed](#) that “Madden & Finucane made not a penny out of this Soldier F trial”. Two of the three judicial review applications brought by the families were similarly undertaken without payment, with relatives bearing the risk of legal costs being found against them.

No travel or accommodation support was provided to the families attending trial. Many of them, now elderly, took early morning buses from Derry to Belfast each day, a journey of over two hours each way. Local communities in Belfast arranged lunches and support.

The contrast between what the State paid to victims’ families and what it spent on defending Soldier F is striking. The Ministry of Defence offered the family of Kevin Heatley, a 12-year-old child shot dead by British soldiers, just £750, dismissing it as “the acceptable rate for a minor.” In the case of Christopher Quinn, a father of five, the MOD internally valued his life at £10,000, yet paid only £500. These figures are not merely inadequate; they reflect a longstanding institutional dehumanisation and the systematic undervaluing of victims’ lives. The £4.3 million reportedly spent on Soldier F’s defence approaches the total amount of compensation ever paid to victims’ families.

Reactions

Mickey McKinney, brother of William McKinney, [said](#) he found it “very insulting”.

“That money flies in the face of David Cameron’s apology, it was really hurtful”

Tony Doherty, son of Paddy Doherty, [said](#) news of the legal fees has caused quite “a lot of anger and disgust among the families”.

“It has angered not only the families, but I would argue the whole of the city of Derry, the people of Derry. I’m a taxpayer, it’s ironic to think my taxes have gone in some way to sustaining this man’s defence at the high court.”

He added that it was a “scandalous misuse of public funds”

Colum Eastwood, Member of Parliament, [said](#):

"We have to remember during this whole trial the families had to make their own way to Belfast. They had no support at all from the government. But this guy, who's been a protected species for 53 years, is getting millions of our money spent on him."

"Everybody has the same problem if they are charged with a significant and serious crime, they have to find the money to defend themselves. If he [Soldier F] was entitled to legal aid he could have applied for legal aid, but the point is our taxpayers' money is being spent to protect somebody who, in my view and the taxpayers of Derry, shouldn't be protected by the British government."

He [described](#) the costs as "sick".

Ciarán Shiels of Madden & Finucane Solicitors said:

"This is an obscene amount of public money being used to defend a multiple murderer and attempted murderer and to ensure that he never would face justice for his criminality."

Comparative International Practice

In the United States, the Department of Defense imposes strict limits on the public funding of legal representation for military personnel. [Regulations](#) specify that only one partner and one associate may be paid for, and any additional legal support must be explicitly justified. Billing is tightly scrutinised and vague time entries are prohibited. Hourly rates are capped according to DoD schedules, with only rare exceptions. By contrast, Soldier F had two law firms, two junior counsel, and two King's Counsel, with no visible limit on team size or structure.

In Australia, legal support for current and former ADF personnel under the [Afghanistan Inquiry Legal Assistance Scheme](#) is similarly capped. Strict hourly rate limits apply. In some recent war crimes [cases](#), legal costs for SAS soldiers have had to be covered by private fundraising campaigns, not government resources.

In Germany, State-funded legal assistance is conditional and proportionate. Funding may be withdrawn once personal criminal liability is engaged. There is no open-ended state defence in cases of alleged unlawful killing.



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In the Netherlands, legal support is linked to acts performed in the course of duty. It is strictly limited, reviewable, and subject to reassessment. Serious criminal allegations trigger personal responsibility.

Argentina has taken a different course. As part of a friendly settlement in the Kaplun case, the Argentine State committed to halting the use of public funds for the defence of security officials accused of serious human rights abuses. Resolution No. 477/2023 barred institutional legal departments of federal forces from representing officials formally charged with crimes such as homicide, torture, enforced disappearance, and sexual violence. Legal defence was required to cease after indictment confirmation, with oversight and reporting mechanisms introduced. Though this resolution was repealed in 2024, the repeal has created a vacuum, as new internal rules have yet to be implemented across the federal forces.

The approach taken by the UK in funding the defence of Soldier F (with no justification and no limits on the total amount spent, hourly rates, and size of legal team) remains a stark outlier.