

\$110,000 for gun fun as courts left short

TWENTY of the state's best prosecutors were learning how to shoot machine guns at a conference costing NSW taxpayers \$110,000, yet just two weeks later the courts were left unattended because of a lack of money and staff.

Attorney-General John Hatzistergos is so outraged by details of the conference he has ordered an inquiry and levelled a stunning attack on NSW chief prosecutor Nicholas Cowdery, claiming he is not capable of managing his \$100 million budget and 600 staff.

Mr Cowdery has rejected the claims.

Mr Hatzistergos has ordered an urgent inquiry into why the Director of Public Prosecutions failed to supply staff for court sittings in the Hunter and New England, citing a lack of money, so soon after allowing a quarter of his prosecutors to attend the conference.

The Brisbane conference of the Australian Association of Crown Prosecutors - at which participants were urged to "strip off those wigs and gowns and get ready to get some dirt under your fingernails" - also featured welcome drinks, a cocktail reception and a gala dinner.

As the director-general of the Attorney-General's Department, Laurie Glanfield, last week investigated the East Maitland and Armidale court fiasco, the relationship between Mr Hatzistergos and Mr Cowdery soured further when the Attorney-General refused him leave to attend a conference in Taipei. Mr Cowdery had been



booked on a Qantas flight on Wednesday morning, but withdrew from the conference on the seizure and confiscation of proceeds of crime at the last minute, sending a subordinate in his place.

Ironically, his performance in relation to proceeds-of-crime cases has been a sore point with Mr Hatzistergos, who says the value of property and cash seized from criminals has fallen despite Mr Cowdery being given a bigger budget.

Mr Hatzistergos said he might change prosecutors' leave arrangements to ensure courts were covered.

"I am concerned that the difficulties identified by the director in providing prosecutors for the August Armidale and East Maitland sittings may have been the result of poor rostering and excessive granting of leave," he said. "The attendance of 23 prosecutors/ad-

vocates at a recent Brisbane conference was not only expensive, but could have impacted on the ability to prepare cases at a difficult time. I don't usually object to people going to conferences, but I will leave it to others to judge the value of this one."

Mr Cowdery had blamed a lack of funds for the lack of prosecutors, Mr Hatzistergos said, but had failed to mention substantial leave had been granted during the law term. He had also failed to mention that the District Court had reduced its Sydney sittings "for the express purpose" of helping Mr Cowdery's office manage the extra country sittings.

"I am really concerned that he sees no contradiction in asking me for \$30,000 [extra] to cover the Armidale and East Maitland court sittings after he spent \$110,000 on this conference."

"I don't object to conferences - it's

important the organisation retains its professional development - I just query why 23 people have to go at that time when there are commitments to be kept to busy courts. What did they all learn that could not have subsequently been imparted to all of them by two or three going up?"

"The DPP has always argued it should be independent ... I think it is fundamental to that independence that they are able to manage their resources. I haven't had this problem with any other agency I have had to deal with where there are these constant demands for additional resources because 'We can't cope'."

Mr Hatzistergos called on Mr Cowdery to run important court cases himself. "Most of the DPPs - just about all of them - do appear in court," he said. "I think it sets good leadership. His predecessor did it and many of the judges themselves have told me they would like him to appear in court."

Mr Cowdery's spokeswoman said: "These matters [but more accurately and completely] were exactly addressed in a meeting the director had with the Attorney-General on Thursday, and/or have already been the subject of correspondence."

"Some of them are matters on which the [DPP's office] is supplying further information for the investigation and report still to be made by the director-general. "Proper and detailed responses, not pre-empting Mr Glanfield's report, will be made through those channels and not in the pages of a Sunday newspaper."

"The [DPP] staff, solicitors and the Crown prosecutors reject these kinds of attack. Fortunately for the people of NSW, the staff will be back in court [tomorrow] to prosecute the state's most deplorable crimes."

Jessica Marais getting cosy at a Packed party

PACKED To The Rafters' star Jessica Marais may have just started a relationship with James Stewart on-screen but it was the show's resident Greek God stud George Houvardas who caught the eye of the popular blonde at a staff party at the weekend. Marais was spotted getting close to her co-star at Darlinghurst hotspot Polo Lounge as the cast and other Seven stars partied the night away for fellow castmate Zoe Ventoura's 30th birthday on Friday night.

Marias, 24, and 27-year-old Houvardas, who are both single, seemed more than happy in each other's company on the night.

The cast of the successful family drama have quickly developed a close bond and other stars including Jessica McNamee, along with Ventoura's boyfriend and Bondi Vet star Dr Chris Brown, were among guests who let their hair down at the party after a long day on set.

Marais has become one of the most high-profile stars of the show, taking out two Logies for her role as the unlucky-in-love Rachel Rafter and recently signed with top Hollywood management United Talent Agency.

The series has also thrust Houvardas, who plays bachelor boy Nick "Carbo" Karandonis, into the spotlight. Sources maintained the pair are "just good friends" and suggested one party was not as interested as the other. Confidential was also interested to hear that most of the younger cast, including Hugh Sheridan, remain single. Meanwhile, birthday girl Ventoura and Brown moved on to Hamilton Island on the weekend for the Collette Dinnigan Resort Collection show at luxury resort Qualia.



Article from the Daily Telegraph

Article from the Sydney Morning Herald