

# Justice done, justice undone

A so-called efficiency trial at **Richard Barr's** new combined court turns out to be worse than Ted Heath's three-day week



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**T**he light went out again. It was winter and the little bulb hanging above my head provided barely enough illumination for me to read. It was late afternoon. There was never much light from the only window in the room, but what little there had been was gone.

The year was 1973. There were coalmines then, but the miners were on strike. The country was, at least according to Edward Heath (the dullest prime minister in living memory), being held to ransom. His response was to declare a three-day week that, as we shall see in a moment, was considerably better than the no-day week imposed on the people of Norfolk by the Court Service.

I had been qualified only for a couple of years and had been (in the manner of a convict being deported to Australia) sent to run the newly opened branch office which consisted of three

rooms, one above the other behind a building society and sandwiched between a tattoo parlour and a pet shop. There were just two of us: the office secretary Maureen, and me.

Memories of that grim period were revived last weekend in the latest series on BBC2 of *The Seventies*. We were only allowed to use electricity for part of each day. Yet we were not forbidden to use battery power. In a rare burst of ingenuity I brought some car batteries into the office, then strung wires through the office to provide faint illumination when the electricity was down.

Maureen found that she could control me by turning off my light. That immediately brought me creeping down the darkened stairs. The Health and Safety at Work Act was not to be passed until the following year, presumably after many office workers had taken a tumble during the three-day week. We also worked out a basic code to communicate such important messages as: "Do you want one lump or two in your tea?", "Your post is ready to sign" or "The mad client has come into the office again. Please come down and rescue me."

The three-day week passed, as did Edward Heath and so later did most of the mines.

Forty years on, you might think that things have improved. We have been through tough

times in the past few years, but my reading of the tealeaves suggests that it is all coming right again. Optimistic pundits are suggesting that we might be about to see the fastest economic growth in 15 years and that the economy is "poised for lift-off".

Alas nobody has informed the lord chancellor's department and legal aid is likely to remain in the doldrums for a long time to come. But at least the courts are there to provide a service for the public even if they have to do it themselves. Err, no.

At the fine purpose-built Combined Court Centre in Norwich there is a little problem. In its wisdom the Court "Service" (for want of a better word) has been trialing a pilot scheme to deny access to justice in Norfolk. At least I think that is the aim. For many weeks the court counters have been closed to the public, and the only way to gain access to the court staff is by telephone.



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Even for urgent issues, such as limitation dates, it is necessary to make an appointment. The government website says that the trial was to last until 30 September, but one of the many frustrated local solicitors was informed well into October (and after she had waited for 5 minutes and 41 seconds to get through to the "helpdesk") that the counters will remain closed.

This has meant that the increasing number of people who are forced to represent themselves have nowhere to go for help to fill in complex court forms. We also know that lawyers (present company included) are not perfect and sometimes make mistakes, so most of us have tended to show up at the court office to ensure that there is no delay in dealing with a time-critical matter.

With no end in sight to this lunatic trial, I am forced to beg that the courts might at least institute a three-day week. If they want to save on electricity, I will be happy to rig up a couple of batteries to provide a dim light to check forms by. I could even suggest some coded messages that could be conveyed to the counter staff in the blink of a light bulb. Reader suggestions for messages to the court staff will be welcome on the *Solicitors Journal* website. Come back from the dead Mr Heath, I will never call you dull again. **SJ**