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**Calls for transparency on \$500k in fees**

# LEGAL BILLS MYSTERY

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# Mystery of integrity legal fees

## Demand to come clean on MPs' costs

David Killick

The state government has shelled out more than \$200,000 so far this year to cover legal costs run up by a minister or ministers - but won't say who or what for.

The most recent payments include amounts of up to \$68,000, \$21,416 and \$12,000 paid on a single day in June.

Several smaller amounts have been paid on behalf of a government backbencher.

Independent MPs have demanded the government come clean with Tasmanians about whose legal bills they are covering - \$900,000 worth since 2021.

"It's inappropriate to provide any commentary on the matter," a government spokesman said in response to a series of questions on Friday.

Premier Jeremy Rockliff was asked about the payments during Budget Estimates hearings.

"I'm not commenting on Integrity Commission matters," he replied.

The commission's latest annual report notes "a significant investigation and an Integrity Tribunal were delayed by protracted legal proceedings".

The Mercury has been unable to find any record of the proceedings in legal databases or in the published decisions of Tasmanian courts or tribunals and the Integrity Commission was unable to elaborate.

"As these matters are ongoing, we are unable to comment any further," a spokeswoman said.

The commission has two



Tasmanian Integrity Commission chief commissioner Greg Melick.

long-running investigations into state MPs, both dating back to 2022.

Investigation Loyseza is examining "a number of allegations that an elected representative failed to declare and manage a conflict of interest".

Investigation Okegas is looking into claims that a grants program improperly used public funds to pursue electoral goals and that conflicts of interest were not properly declared.

The Integrity Commission on Friday confirmed both investigations were ongoing.

Integrity Commission chief commissioner Greg Melick SC noted "legislative and resourcing constraints" in his annual report released this week.

"We are the most underfunded integrity body in the country," he wrote.

"At the time of writing, the CEO's position remains vacant, and we have been without in-house legal counsel for eight years - nearly as long as we have been waiting for much-needed amendments to the Integrity Commission Act. We

are not deaf to the growing public sentiment that the commission is not fit for purpose.

"If we are to fulfil our statutory obligations and meet community expectations, our resourcing needs cannot be neglected."

Greens MLC Casey O'Connor said the Premier needed to explain why Liberal MPs were having their legal bills paid.

"When we questioned him over these payments, the Premier strongly implied they were related to Integrity Commission investigations," she said.

"If that were to be the case, under the law, he can't say which government minister or backbencher had their legal costs covered as it would confirm they're the subject of a misconduct investigation.

"It is legitimate, however, for him to explain the policy behind forking out hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars in legal fees for Liberal MPs."

Independent MLC Meg Webb also wants more details.

"In the interest of transparency, the Premier must detail which of the taxpayer-funded legal costs relate to Integrity Commission investigations into ministers.

"This can be done in a de-identified way, without breaking any laws."

The Integrity Commission issues confidentiality notices to those who are the subject of an investigation, the heads of relevant agencies and other responsible public officers.

Breaching a notice can result in fines of up to \$390,000.

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