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Supreme Court warns on quality

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Judicial budget

One of the UK's most senior judges has warned that proposed cuts to the country's new Supreme Court - the highest court in the land - cannot be achieved "without serious prejudice" to the quality of service given to the public.

Lord Hope, the deputy president of the Supreme Court, said the court had already been told by the previous government to cut its current annual budget of £13.8m by £1m, in what he called "an astonishing demand" when it was "still finding its feet".

Speaking at Gresham College in London, he said: "Now we face the prospect of demands for even more cuts, the scale of which we will not know until the government's spending review in October.

"A cut of the magnitude that we are facing cannot be achieved without serious prejudice to the quality of the service that the Supreme Court provides to the public."

The Supreme Court took over from the House of Lords last October when it was opened in what was Middlesex Guildhall in Parliament Square.

The new court was intended to sweep away the centuries-old role of parliament at the apex of the judicial system and assert the independence of the country's top judges as well as making their work more open to public scrutiny.

The court employs 39 staff as opposed to the 23 employed by the House of Lords and now attracts 700-800 visitors a week, which Lord Hope says is "about 10 times as many as we might see during a good week in the House of Lords committee room".

Lord Hope said yesterday that the creation of the Supreme Court meant that "we have been moved from the unshakeable protection of parliament to a system which exposes us to demands for savings against which ministers may not wish to protect us. . . ."

He added that the issue of resources was "bound to be contentious" and "judges cannot expect to be immune from the need for cost-saving in the public interest".

But he said that the minimum level of costs should be determined by them, not by officials employed by the executive.

Lord Hope also warned that "depriving the judiciary of the resources which they need to do their job properly" could lead to the independence of judges being compromised.

The new government has already earmarked the closure of 103 magistrates' and 54 county courts that are underused to save £16.3m a year and £21.5m of maintenance costs.

It is also looking at making cuts to the £2bn annual legal aid bill.

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