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Defence seeks open trial for MI5 officer

By Stewart Tendler

The trial of Michael Bettaney, the MI5 officer facing 10 charges under the Official Secrets Act, may begin tomorrow in the Central Criminal Court with a fresh attempt by his defence counsel to open more of the proceedings to the public.

Earlier this year Lord Lane, the Lord Chief Justice, ruled at the end of a hearing in Chambers that almost the entire case should be heard in camera. He has ruled that when the trial begins tomorrow the public and press will be allowed to be present for the first third of the prosecution's opening speech and will then be excluded until the jury comes back with verdicts.

The restrictions are believed to be unprecedented in peacetime. Mr Larry Grant, Mr Bettaney's solicitor, has said that a fresh application to open more of the proceedings could be made when the case opens in Court No 1. Mr Michael Mansfield, for the defence, may ask the Lord Chief Justice, who will be presiding, to reconsider his decision.

Mr Bettaney, aged 34, of Coulsdon, Surrey, has also complained from prison at the vetting of the jury for the trial. Sir Michael Havers, QC, Attorney General, has given an assurance that vetting will not include questions on political views or industrial activity.

Sir Michael will be leading the prosecution in a case expected to last seven or eight working days. Court No 1 will be closed today. That is unusual but it is understood to be in preparation for the trial. Mr Bettaney faces six charges under section 1 of the Official Secrets Act and four under section 7.



Sir Michael Havers: No political queries

The charges involve allegations that he offered to give a Russian official information, that he passed information, set up arrangements for passing information using "dead letter boxes", and gathered information preparatory to passing it over.

The charges cover a period ranging from December, 1982, until September 19 last year.