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HEADLINE: SFO chief denies Maxwell link to retirement plans

BODY:

THE director of the Serious Fraud Office, who announced his impending retirement yesterday, has insisted his decision is not related to the failed prosecution of Robert Maxwell's sons.

Mr George Staple will not seek renewal of his contract when it expires in 1997.

Yesterday, he said he had always planned to step down at the end of his contract despite the outcome of the Maxwell case.

Mr Kevin Maxwell, 36, son of the late media baron Robert Maxwell, was acquitted on Friday - along with his brother Ian, 39, and former company director Larry Trachtenberg - after a trial lasting 131 days. It was alleged the trio had fraudulently used L122m of pensioners' money.

The trial is estimated to have cost more than L20m.

Mr Staple, 55, yesterday told BBC Radio 4: "I was appointed in April 1992 for five years and it has always been my intention not to seek a renewal of my contract after April 1997.

"It is not linked to any particular case and particularly not to the Maxwell case."

There were calls for the SFO to be scrapped in the wake of the acquittals but the office has received the backing of the Government's chief law officer, Attorney General Sir Nicholas Lyell.

The SFO will announce in court on Friday whether it intends to proceed with further charges on the Maxwell indictments.

The roles of both the SFO and jury in major fraud trials are in question in the aftermath of the Maxwell trial.

Former chairman of the Bar Council, Mr Anthony Scrivener, said he believed the days of the Serious Fraud Office were numbered.

"The SFO, by the very nature of their office, make cases long," Mr Scrivener said. "They don't shorten cases and whenever they get their hands on a case it becomes of inordinate length."

Sir Nicholas defended the SFO, saying it would have to be invented if it did not exist.

However, he said the Government was considering replacing juries with a judge and a panel of experts.

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