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Opinion

More questions than answers in botched job hunt

The search for a new victims' champion goes on. As the First Ministers decide they want more applicants, Chris Thornton reports on a job hunt that asks more questions than it answers.

Tuesday, October 09, 2007

True to form, members of the DUP and Sinn Fein were fully supportive of the First and Deputy First Ministers - who also happen to be senior figures in the DUP and Sinn Fein - when they announced that they are re-advertising the Victims' Commissioner's job.

Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness made what is becoming an increasingly rare joint appearance in front of the TV cameras yesterday to reveal that, after five months of consideration, they want to seek more applicants for the £65,000-a-year post.

They declined to take questions about the decision, either in the Assembly or in front of the cameras.

But Sinn Fein's Francie Molloy was among those to declare that the decision was all for the best.

"No-one needs reminding of the damage done by the appointment of the previous commissioner by Peter Hain and how it was seen by many to set this issue backwards," he said.

Ian Paisley certainly shouldn't need reminding. It was at the DUP leader's behest that Mr Hain rode overruled ordinary procedures to appoint RUC widow Bertha McDougall to a temporary version of the job in 2005.

It was also Ian Paisley's desire to keep things quiet that helped land the NIO in court over the appointment. Back then, the Government refused to answer direct questions about the appointment - even to their own legal team - because they said "Dr Paisley was keen for secrecy to be observed".

So the whole thing turned into a mess: a long legal battle ensued, one which is still continuing in the Court of Appeal.

A year ago, a High Court judge concluded that he had been misled by the NIO, and the Attorney General was forced to review the entire case. In the meantime, Mrs McDougall's appointment was declared illegal, although - thanks to the judge's sympathy towards her work - she was allowed to publish a report, ludicrously issued under her own name instead of under the commissioner's title.

Days later, the NIO advertised for her successor. Forty-six people applied for the job, and 13 were

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interviewed in February or March, depending on who you talk to. Applicants who did not make it to interview received rejection letters; those who were interviewed heard nothing official until yesterday's announcement.

Once devolution became a certainty in March, the NIO said the final appointment would be handed over to the First Ministers in May.

And so, while the remaining candidates got better acquainted with their postman, very little happened on the surface. In June, the First Ministers said they expected to make an announcement before the Assembly's holidays began on July 10. No announcement came.

Assembly members speculated that one of two things was happening: either the First Ministers were unhappy with the selection process and intended to re-run it, or they couldn't agree on a suitable candidate.

Yesterday, five months after getting the NIO's shortlist, Mr Paisley said the suggestion they couldn't agree "simply isn't true".

They had decided to re-advertise, 11 days after their office said they had "no intention" of doing that very thing.

Their reasoning is that some potential candidates may have been put off from applying because the NIO was initially running the process. The existing candidates were asked to keep their hats in the ring.

Ultimately, the First Ministers' statement begged more questions than it answered. Why, for example, did it take them five months to decide the selection process could be better?

What evidence do they have that people were put off from applying? And since the existing candidates may be good enough to appoint later this year, why isn't one of them good enough now?

All questions that deserve answers. Just don't expect any DUP and Sinn Fein Assembly members to be asking them in the Assembly.

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