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## Politics

# Victims' chief still not agreed

Friday, August 17, 2007

By Chris Thornton

Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness still haven't agreed the appointment of a new Victims' Commissioner - busting their own deadline for announcing the job.

Seven months after the job was advertised and five months after a shortlist was compiled, the two First Ministers still haven't announced a successful candidate.

In June, they told the Assembly they planned to announce the appointment before MLAs began their summer break on July 10.

The delay has raised speculation the leaders are in dispute over who should be appointed to the £65,000-a-year position.

Or they could hold concerns about the selection process - and may re-run it. However, they have already told the Assembly that the "complete process was overseen and certificated by the independent assessor".

Their office will only say Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness are still considering their decision.

"We are aiming to make a decision on the appointment process as soon as practicable," a spokesman said.

Forty-six people applied for the job after it was advertised in January. Thirteen people were interviewed in March.

A shortlist was handed to the ministers almost as soon as they took up office on May 8.

Reports say that shortlist includes former UTV presenter Mike Nesbitt and Marie Breen Smyth, a University of Wales lecturer who used to run the Institute of Conflict Studies in Belfast.

The Victims Commissioner's job was linked to controversy last year after a court case revealed that Bertha McDougall was given the job temporarily as a political favour to Mr Paisley.

A High Court judge declared her appointment illegal. The Northern Ireland Office, which appointed Mrs McDougall, is currently appealing that decision.

Lord Justice Gillen also ordered an investigation by the Attorney General into the possibility of an NIO cover-up of its actions in making the appointment.

In a report published last month, Peter Scott QC concluded that Government officials did not act illegally. He also reported that Mr Paisley had asked for the process to be kept secret.

Alliance deputy leader Naomi Long, who has questioned the First Ministers about the appointment, said it is "absolutely imperative" that they come to a decision soon.

"I don't think the delay is acceptable," she said. "We can't afford any further delay."

She said the failure to make an appointment is "a cause for concern".

If the statement about "a decision on the appointment process" implies that the process could be re-run, the East Belfast MLA said she would be worried about months more of delay.

"This should be a matter of urgency," she said. "We want the voice of victims heard. At the moment you hear a lot disparate voices, but you need someone to process it all, consider it and present it.

"At the same time, we don't want any shortcuts. Confidence of victims in the person appointed is essential. The process has to be open and transparent, so whoever is appointed enjoys the full confidence of the community they're serving.

"We wouldn't want anyone to undergo the traumatic situation Bertha McDougall found herself in, where she entered the job, did it very well and ended up under a cloud because of the actions of the NIO.

" There is already a commission set up by the NIO to look into past and the legacy of the Troubles. It's

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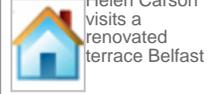
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important that victims are fully included in that, and the only way to ensure their views are properly heard is for a commissioner to represent them."

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