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'No disagreement' over appointments

By staff reporter

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Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness yesterday rejected claims that the four new victims' commissioners were appointed because he and First Minister Ian Paisley could not agree on a single person.

He told the assembly "nothing could be further from the truth".

"We never at any stage of our deliberation had a situation where the first minister proposed someone and I proposed someone as an alternative, it never happened," he said.

"I know some people may greet this with incredulity but I think it's a symbol of how he and I do the business in terms of moving forward."

Mr Paisley said they wanted to bring together the talents and skills of candidates who applied for the position to form a panel.

"Our belief is that a team of four commissioners working together - in essence a victims' commission - is the best way forward," said the DUP leader.

"Given the significant backlog of urgent work and the range of difficult challenges that face us in this area, these four people will have much more capacity to engage with victims and survivors than a single commissioner."

Before the appointments can be ratified the assembly will have to pass a bill creating a victims' and survivors' commission.

However, Mr Paisley said that he wanted the four commissioners-designate to sit down together in the meantime and agree a work plan.

Included in a £33 million allocation for victims is £6 million of new money announced by finance minister Peter Robinson last week in the final draft of the executive's budget.

Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness were watched from the assembly's public gallery by a variety of people representing different perspectives on the victims issue.

Fair (Families Acting for Innocent Relatives) campaigner and vociferous republican critic Willie Frazer, and Mark Thompson, a spokesman for Relatives for Justice, which works primarily with people affected by loyalist and state violence, were forced to sit side by side.

Mr Frazer later said the idea of a commission was something his group had been calling for.

"But we have concerns about the make up of the commission. Does the definition of victim mean the perpetrator as much as the child blown up in the car, or the man and woman coming out of church?"

Mr Thompson insisted the commission would ensure that victims from all political backgrounds would be represented.

"[The appointment] is a clear attempt aimed at addressing all of the existing concerns by all of the varying constituencies or people bereaved or injured, which is always going to be difficult.

"The composition of the commission is therefore broadly inclusive and will contribute to building trust."

On the floor of the chamber, Ulster Unionist MLA David Burnside accused Mr McGuinness of being a hypocrite, saying the IRA's refusal to cooperate with historic investigations of unsolved murders was

prolonging the pain of many victims.

Mr McGuinness said he would not be drawn into an attempt to politicise the debate.

Alliance Party deputy leader Naomi Long asked whether the increased funding needed to employ three additional commissioners would take re-sources from other services.

Mr McGuinness said this would not be the case as less work would have to put out to consultants.

"We actually believe savings could be made," he said.