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WEDNESDAY
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Victims' commissioner appointment a 'sop to DUP'

The appointment of a police widow as Northern Ireland's interim victims' commissioner was designed to placate the DUP, a report confirmed today.

An investigation by Lord Scott for the Attorney General said the choice of Bertha McDougall was intended to placate Ian Paisley`s party.

However he cleared the former Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain, who made the appointment, and his officials of attempting to mislead the courts over a Freedom of Information request for information about the recruitment competition.

Nationalists had criticised the Northern Ireland Office action as a political sop to unionists after the October 2005 appointment.

The dossier said: "In fact, Mrs McDougall had been nominated by the DUP and her appointment was intended to be a confidence building measure towards that party.

"In all the circumstances the appointment was indeed, as Justice Girvan found, politically motivated, though as he noted this in no way reflected on Mrs McDougall`s competence or integrity."

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Mr Justice Girvan oversaw a High Court review of the appointment after Brenda Downes, whose husband John was a police plastic bullet victim from west Belfast, challenged the appointments procedure.

He highlighted a misleading response to Mrs Downes` request for information from the Government and Lord Scott was brought in to investigate the matter.

Today`s paper said: "Neither the officials in the NIO nor those in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) acted in relation to the Freedom of Information Act response with the intention of obstructing or perverting the course of justice.

"The effect on the subsequent litigation was neither foreseen nor intended by those involved, nor was it appreciated during the early stages of the litigation."

Lord Scott found the misleading response from the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister was probably inspired by the "misguided" view of a senior civil servant that the department couldn`t reveal the political motivation and preferred to leave it to the NIO.

"The Secretary of State was not at the material times aware of the Fol request, nor was he involved in any way in dealing with it," he added.

Lord Scott ruled out any police inquiry into the court hearings.

Mr Hain said today: "Lord Scott`s conclusion that there was no intention on the part of any individuals to mislead or obstruct the court reaffirms what I have always known to be the case.

"At all times I and my officials acted with complete integrity in this matter and I am pleased that this thorough review has confirmed this."

The report made a series of recommendations about the handling of Fol requests in future, including improved communication.

Sinn Fein`s MLA and Public Accounts Committee chairman John O`Dowd said there must be greater transparency from government.

"The serious abuses of procedure which this case exposed raised very significant issues for Peter Hain and his department," he said.

"This case has exposed the fact that the appointment of Bertha McDougall was not just political but could never command the sort of cross-community support required.

Current Northern Ireland Secretary Shaun Woodward welcomed the "vindication" of officials.

"I am pleased that Lord Scott has concluded that there was no intention on the part of individuals to mislead or obstruct the court.

The integrity of all the officials concerned has been vindicated," he said.

The government would be studying the recommendations carefully, he added.

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STARRING: Keri Russell, Nathan Fillion, Adrienne Shelley, Jeremy Sisto.

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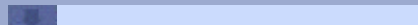
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