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## Local & National

### Victims' post 'flawed and contaminated'

Friday, October 12, 2007

By Chris Thornton

A former Assembly member who had been shortlisted for the Victims' Commissioner job withdrew his name yesterday - saying the hunt had become "flawed and contaminated".

Seamus Close said that Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness' decision to re-advertise the post nine months after the original tawl "is questionable and irregular".

"The people who are being treated like rag dolls and kicked about are the victims," he said. "There is now a huge cloud of suspicion over the whole process."

He said he is considering further action over the "shambles" but does not want to delay the appointment any further.

The former deputy leader of the Alliance Party was one of the original applicants for the £65,000-a-year job after it was advertised by the NIO in January, the same month he stepped down as an MLA.

This week - seven months after he was interviewed - he was officially notified for the first time that he had been shortlisted for the post.

The First Ministers' office said he has "impressive credentials and qualifications" and has "already successfully demonstrated all the competences" for the job.

That notification came as the First Ministers declared that they wanted to get more applicants for the job to "truly reflect the new political dispensation".

They denied that they had disagreed about the appointment and claimed some applicants may have been put off by the fact that the first advertisement was placed by direct rule ministers.

But they said the candidates who were currently shortlisted would still be considered.

Their office wrote to those applicants with "the ministers' personal congratulations" and asked if they are content for their name "to be carried forward to the final stage".

Mr Close refused. He wrote back: "I will not permit my name to be associated with, or appear to lend my support to, a process which I consider to be flawed and contaminated and in which I have no confidence."

Forty-six people applied for the post in February and 13 were interviewed in March.

Those who were interviewed did receive any response until this week.

A shortlist was handed to Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness shortly after they took up office on May 8.






They later indicated they would make a decision about the job by early July, but no announcement was made.

Mr Paisley was the driving force behind the nomination of the interim Victims' Commissioner by the NIO two years ago - a post that the High Court later declared an illegal political favour to the DUP.

Mr Close said Monday's statement by the First Ministers to announce the new process "poses more questions than answers".

"The ministers must really must know that they've had full ownership of this process since May 8," he said. "What in goodness have they been doing since then?"

"Are they only now realising now they have full executive powers? Or do they not accept the views of the

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independent panel which carried out the interviews? That's something which would have very serious implications."

He questioned the ministers' claim that "some potential applicants may have been deterred from putting themselves forward for the post during direct rule".

"Who told them that?" he asked. "Did those people not read the original ad? Did they miss the deadline?"

And he also attacked their desire to "bring forward a greater number of candidates".

"Is 46 not enough?" he asked. "Is it the number of applicants that matters rather than the ability or merit of those applicants?"

Mr Close said he is "actively considering other possible actions" but said he is "conscious that the outcome of that could be to delay the appointment of a commissioner and I don't want that to happen".

"I don't want to be part of any further procrastination," he said.

The new ad for the post says the successful candidate will have "the unwavering support" of the First Ministers.

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