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Local & National

Victims' Commissioner post 'a lawsuit waiting to happen'

Friday, December 14, 2007

By Chris Thornton

The Victims' Commissioner's appointment has become "a lawsuit waiting to happen", an MLA claimed after First Minister Ian Paisley appeared to cast doubt over the first phase of recruitment.

Alliance deputy leader Naomi Long, who sits on the committee overseeing the First Ministers' office, has called on Mr Paisley to clarify comments in the Assembly on Monday, when he said the delayed appointment, which has so far taken nearly a year, "did not stick to merit" at the beginning of the process.

The £65,000-a-year job has long been mired in controversy. A court case last year disclosed that the interim appointee to the job, Bertha McDougall, had been given her post by then Secretary of State Peter Hain as a political favour to Mr Paisley.

After her appointment was declared illegal, Mr Hain's officials advertised for a permanent successor in January of this year.

Applicants were interviewed and a shortlist was handed to Mr Paisley and Martin McGuinness when they took up the First and Deputy First Ministers posts in May.

They sat on the appointment for five months, then announced in October that they were seeking fresh applications.

But they also said the candidates on the first shortlist would still be considered.

They say they hope to announce the appointment in the next 19 days.

Mr Paisley was questioned about the appointment in the Assembly on Monday.

He said they decided to re-advertise the job because "the people who would not have put forward their names under the last regime of direct rule will do so now and they have done so.

"I believe in merit and I regret that the beginning of the process did not stick to merit," he added. "If it had stuck to merit, the facts that have been given by an honourable member today for investigation would not be before the House."

Ms Long found his comments to be "... potentially deeply damaging to the important process of appointing a Victim's Commissioner".

She added: "By suggesting that the start of the process was anything other than merit-based, he has publicly undermined the credibility of those originally shortlisted and who remain in the pool of appointable candidates.

"If the process was so flawed, then why was it not abandoned and restarted? His comments also raise serious questions about previous briefings and answers given by him and his department which went to great lengths to assure people that the process prior to devolution was not flawed - a position he has now completely contradicted.

"This is an extremely serious matter. Not content with delaying the appointment in the first place, he has now potentially undermined the entire process," she added.

An OFMDFM spokesman said: "We are in the middle of an appointments process and will not be commenting further."

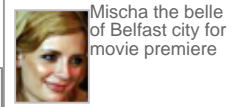
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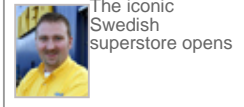
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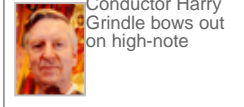
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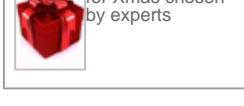
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