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## Politics

# Ministers escape MLAs grilling on victims post

Monday, October 15, 2007

By Chris Thornton

The announcement of a new hunt for a Victims' Commissioner meant Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness escaped a behind-closed-doors grilling on the problems they've had making the appointment.

The First Ministers' oversight committee in the Assembly was due to hear a private briefing from the men last Wednesday.

But the private hearing was cancelled when they declared that the £65,000-a-year job will be re-advertised.

Their office - which said in September that there was "no intention" of re-advertising - insisted the committee grilling was not a factor in the timing of last week's announcement.

However, leading members of the committee said they believed their scrutiny influenced the decision to widen the search.

On Monday, two days before they were due to appear before the committee, it was announced that the position would be re-advertised after a shortlist of candidates was considered for five months.

The ministers said they were concerned that some potential applicants may have been put off by the fact that direct rule ministers began the original search.

But their decision has been criticised, with one of the shortlisted candidates - former Lagan Valley MLA Seamus Close - withdrawing from the competition and describing the appointment process as "flawed".

The First Ministers have so far refused to take questions in the Assembly about the process.

But they say they intend to make the appointment by the end of the year.

UUP MLA Danny Kennedy, the chairman of the Committee on the Office of First and Deputy First Ministers, said: "The pressure that the committee was putting on to come and tell us what was happening helped concentrate minds within the department."

He added the committee was right to cancel the grilling: "This appointment is not the committee's appointment. It's our job to scrutinise things so we have to be careful we don't add to a difficult situation," he said.

"The statement had overtaken the need for the briefing. The committee, wisely in my view, thought it better to allow the process to continue.

A First Ministers' Office spokesman said the committee briefing was "not a factor" in the timing of their announcement. He referred to the Ministers' statement, in which they said they "have deliberated long and hard before jointly coming to what we ... believe to be the right decision for everyone".

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