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Local & National

First Ministers stay silent on victims post candidates

Friday, December 28, 2007

By Chris thorton

First Ministers Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness have refused to reveal the sex and religious background of Victim's Commissioner candidates - even though Direct Rule ministers had already given the same type of information.

The ministers have also refused to reveal how many times they discussed the long-delayed appointment, in the seven months since they were handed a shortlist of six candidates.

In response to a Freedom of Information request by the Belfast Telegraph, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister said they could not reveal the "religious and gender make-up" of the shortlist.

They said the information "could complicate the process, or create unhelpful perceptions of lobbying which are disruptive or potentially disruptive to the proper administration of what is a sensitive matter, both for government and the candidates involved".

But former Northern Ireland Minister David Hanson was not bound by such constraints when he revealed the sex and religious background of the 13 people who were initially interviewed.

In March, Mr Hanson said six candidates were male and seven were female. Eight were Protestants, four were Catholics and there was one other.

In their response, the First Ministers' Office did reveal the first shortlist of candidates for the job was shown to Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness on May 8, the day they took up their ministerial posts.

They sat on that shortlist for five months, then announced in October that the process would be re-run to seek more candidates for the £65,000-a-year post. The two Ministers said they wanted a new process in case some potential candidates had been put off from applying because the NIO was initially fielding applications.

But they retained the shortlist of six candidates compiled under the first process. One person on that shortlist, former Alliance MLA Seamus Close, publicly withdrew from the competition, saying the job hunt had become "flawed and contaminated".

In September, before the new process was announced, the Belfast Telegraph submitted Freedom of Information questions about the shortlist.

The OFMDFM response was delayed three times, and took three months to complete. It confirmed six candidates out of the 13 interviewed were deemed "suitable for appointment".

But the response indicated that the interview panel's recommendations were never presented to Secretary of State Peter Hain. The First Ministers were shown the shortlist on May 8, but have refused to reveal how many times they discussed the appointment.

The FOI response indicated that to reveal information could cause "serious distractions".

"These distractions could result in real and unnecessary mischiefs to the pursuit of the best administration of this and other similar future processes," the response said.

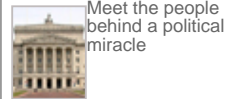
They also refused to disclose if they had taken legal advice about the appointment. The First Ministers said they intend to appoint a candidate before December 31.

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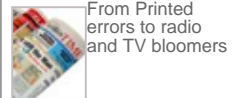
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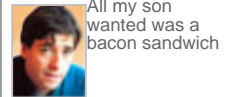
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