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## Columnists

### Laurence White: How petty squabbles still hurt victims

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Saturday, April 12, 2008

The commission set up to help victims of our troubled past is fast becoming a joke. It was bad enough that Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness decided to appoint four victims' commissioners, when everyone thought the job was only for one.

But now legislation to kick-start the work of the commission, which had been given fast-track status to get it onto the statute books, has been halted in its tracks.

The halt came when the DUP and Sinn Fein couldn't agree on amendments to the Bill, including one which suggested that one of the four commissioners should be appointed to the position of chief commissioner.

Like most things the Alliance Party proposes, this is a sensible idea.

It gives the Victims' Commission a sense of structure, rather than the appearance of a body with four people, all probably having different agendas, never mind their own separate departments.

But some politicians feel the suggestion would lead to the creation of a hierarchy within the commission.

There are two obvious candidates among the four commissioners for the job of chief. One is Brendan McAllister, who has done much good work over the years with Mediation NI.

If anyone can weld the four into a good working team it is him.

The other candidate is Mike Nesbitt, who was the no-nonsense chair of many a political debate during his broadcasting career.

He would be able to ensure that each of his colleagues got a fair hearing at meetings of the commission.

Some politicians also object to an amendment that would allow the commission to work by a two third majority.

Sinn Fein feels that would be an attempt to sideline one of the commissioners, Patricia McBride, whose brother was an IRA man killed by the SAS.

Now attempts to pass the legislation have been postponed until next week. It is anyone's guess what will happen then.

The only certain thing is that vital work to aid people who suffered dreadfully due to the Troubles is being delayed.

The Northern Ireland Executive has earmarked £33m funding for victims and it is time that the four commissioners got down to work and began earning their £65,000 a year salaries.

It is not their fault they cannot do the job they were appointed to do, and they are probably as keen to tackle the issues as the victims are to receive some belated help.

But as well as the procrastinating up at Stormont, the commission also faces a legal challenge to its very existence.

It is a scandalous situation. The whole focus should be on helping victims, not rowing over who should or should not be delivering the aid.

Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness caused the problem by not agreeing on a single commissioner. While both

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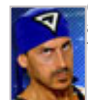
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are probably delighted at the appointments of Bertha McDougall and Patricia McBride respectively, putting four commissioners in post was crazy.

It really was playing politics in the most heartless and offensive way. I cannot believe that there was not a single applicant for the job who would have been acceptable to all political parties and, more importantly, would have been able to make a difference to the lives of victims.

That is not to criticise the calibre of the individual commissioners who were appointed. They may well bring great strength, expertise and compassion to the job.

It's just that all of them were not really needed and their very presence is causing controversy.

However, having appointed four commissioners, next week should signal the start of their work.

The Troubles have been over for more than a decade and we are still trying to tackle the issue of victims. It could only happen in Northern Ireland.

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