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The work starts now, says new Victims Commission

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Tuesday, January 29, 2008

By David Young

Northern Ireland's new victims commissioners yesterday urged the public to judge them on their work and not the controversial process by which they were appointed.

The four commissioners were speaking after First Minister Ian Paisley confirmed their selection and the allocation of £33m for the victims' sector over the next three years.

Mr Paisley and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness were forced to justify in the Assembly the appointment of the four-strong panel - and insisted that it was not as a result of any deadlock between them over the original plan for a single commissioner.

As they faced the cameras for the first time, the four commissioners - former interim commissioner and RUC widow Bertha McDougal; Patricia MacBride, whose brother was an IRA man shot dead by the SAS; former TV anchorman Mike Nesbitt; and Brendan McAllister, the director of Mediation Northern Ireland - said it was time to concentrate on victims' issues and not the selection process.

Mr McAllister said: "We hope we can all now move forward and switch the focus away from the appointment process and return where it belongs - on the victims and survivors - the people who have paid, and continue to pay, the greatest price."

Mr McAllister also tried to address concerns raised by SDLP leader Mark Durkan that the individual commissioners might become pigeon-holed as representing one particular tradition.

"We emphasise none of us intends to limit our involvement to any group or sector or geographical area," he said.

Earlier, the Deputy First Minister said he was confident that the commissioners would not allow themselves to be categorised.

"These are people who recognise that their appeal has to be very, very broad indeed," said Mr McGuinness.

The Sinn Fein MLA also dismissed claims that four commissioners were appointed because he could not agree on a single appointment with Mr Paisley.

"Nothing could be further from the truth," he said.

"We never at any stage of our deliberation had a situation where the First Minister proposed someone and I proposed someone as an alternative, it never happened.

"I know some people may greet this with incredulity but I think it's a symbol of how he and I do the business in terms of moving forward."

Mr Paisley said they wanted to bring together the talents and skills of candidates who applied for the position to form a panel of commissioners.

"Our belief is that a team of four commissioners working together - in essence a Victims Commission - is the best way forward," said the First Minister.

"Given the significant backlog of urgent work and the range of difficult challenges that face us, these four people will have much more capacity to engage with victims and survivors than a single commissioner."

Before the appointments can be ratified, the Assembly will have to pass a Bill creating a Victims and Survivors Commission.

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Mr Paisley, however, said he wanted the four commissioners-designate to sit down together and agree a work plan.

Mr McGuinness said legal advice confirmed they were within their rights to appoint a commission instead of a single commissioner and they had also sought the approval of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Northern Ireland, Felicity Huston, before acting.


Included in the £33m allocation for victims is £6m of new money announced by Finance Minister Peter Robinson in the final draft of the budget.


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