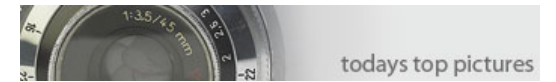


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## Devil can take the hindmost victims as battle a day begins

**Tom Kelly**

By Tom Kelly

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Last week in the assembly, the victims commissioners saga took centre stage looking more and more like a team of pantomime horses without a rider.

At one level there is a degree of sympathy for the 'would be' commissioners who obviously want to get on with

the job.

On the other hand this process and its outcome is a complete shambles.

The latest debacle surrounds the issue of a 'chair' or 'chief' commissioner.

A kind of 'prima inter pares'.

The DUP, SDLP, UUP and Alliance think this is a good idea. Sinn Fein thinks not.

To the latter the concept of a 'chair' does not resemble the agreement they had with Mr Paisley when the stew that became the Victims Commission was being prepared. The forlorn but fortunately well-paid foursome who make up the commission say they rotate the 'chair' when they meet. Quite, simplistic really but simplistic in the way that makes one nervous as the stewardship of public expenditure is not like taking the lead at an ecumenical prayer meeting.

But God love them they are trying. What most of the public want to know is – trying what?

Without enabling legislation they are about as useful as an ashtray on a motorbike.

A more pertinent question is why are they being paid a full salary when it appears they are not able to get on with the job to which they were appointed?

The Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) would have been better holding off on any appointments until there was enabling legislation and more importantly a definition about what constitutes a victim.

One would have imagined that our very own searchers for the 'truth' – 'Don Quixote' Eames and 'Sancho Panza' Bradley would have something to contribute to that definition? But who knows – they were appointed by the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and not the executive.

Just like the decommissioning body and the International Monitoring Committee – neither of whom seems able to define a breach of ceasefire – this another example of a useless carve-up of responsibilities by the NIO who by now must be running out of sticking plasters to contain the seepage from the St Andrews Agreement.

If the two senior partners in government cannot agree the format of their own proposals – how long will it take the assembly to agree and define a 'victim'?

Jeffrey Donaldson looks as though he has an unenviable task.

He has been given the job of concluding an agreement reached between Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness but an

agreement that now needs the imprimatur of the emperor-elect, Mr Robinson. Unfortunately for Sinn Fein, Mr Paisley's post-dated resignation appears to have neutered his ability to deliver and their problems are compounded by Mr Robinson who will be anxious to demonstrate to the DUP backbenches that the 'Chuckies' will have little to 'chuckle' about with him at the helm of OFMDFM.

With emperors-elect in both Dublin and Belfast, Sinn Fein will struggle to assert their dominant role.

Brian Cowen provided little succour to

Sinn Fein in the past Irish elections and unlike Bertie Ahern he will not be minded to 'baby-sit' Sinn Fein when the going gets tough in the executive.

While far from marginalised – Sinn Fein has become 'north-eastern-ised' and with Fianna Fail looking north, that's exactly where Mr Cowen will seek to contain Sinn Fein influence.

The DUP, unlike the UUP, is at ease with the Fianna Fail position.

For the SDLP, the change in the Fianna Fail leadership leaves the window of opportunity slightly ajar. The brave, the young and the bold will eventually go through it.

Ironically the raft of well-meaning celebrations for the architects of the Good Friday Agreement seems too late to be of any benefit to the successors of those who played leading roles back then.

It's now for historians to assess its significance and opportunities gained or lost over the past 10 years. No amount of self- congratulatory, back slapping will turn back the electoral clock.

Even the Civil Rights commemorations seem to be a case of too little, too late and recent press coverage of these 'get togethers' rather unfairly makes these one-time street agitators look a bit like a suburban book club.

Our reality is today and 100 rights from yesterday will not change that reality.

The much heralded 'battle-a-day' at Stormont is starting to materialise and it will soon turn our sense of hope into hopelessness. We already have pantomime horses. We don't need an ugly sisters routine too.

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