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Ministers accused of stalling victims' post

(Barry McCaffrey, [Irish News](#))

Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness were last night accused of dithering over the appointment of a victims' commissioner. Last year Belfast High Court ruled that then secretary of state Peter Hain's decision to appoint Bertha McDougall as an interim victims' commissioner had been "improper and politically motivated".

The attorney general subsequently appointed barrister Peter Scott QC to investigate the circumstances surrounding Mrs McDougall's appointment.

Mr Scott found there had been no intention to mislead or obstruct the courts.

However, he found that there had been "serious shortcomings" in the government's failure to properly disclose evidence to solicitors acting for Brenda Downes, who had taken the original judicial review challenging Mrs McDougall's appointment.

The post for a new victims' commissioner was advertised in January, with 46 people applying for the £65,000 job.

The position was expected to have been filled by June but remains vacant.

Earlier this summer First Minister Ian Paisley insisted that both he and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness were committed to filling the post as quickly as possible.

However, SDLP assembly member Dolores Kelly last night accused Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness of stalling on the appointment of a new commissioner.

"The appointment of a victims' commissioner was meant to spearhead the campaign for dealing with the past and I am outraged that the first and deputy first ministers have sat on this issue for so long," she said.

"Do they not think people have waited long enough, have suffered long enough?"

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"I am calling on the first and deputy first ministers to give an explanation for their dithering on appointing a victims commissioner.

"They must announce the appointment as soon as possible so we can start to effectively deal with issues of the past."

However, a spokesman for the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister last night denied that it was stalling on the appointment of a victims' commissioner, claiming that "political point scoring" was "unhelpful" and "inappropriate".

"We had hoped to make an appointment before the recess but this did not prove possible," he said.

"Victims and survivors needs are a high priority for us and we want to get the decision on an appointment right.

"We will take the necessary time to do this.

"Political point scoring on this issue is both unhelpful and entirely inappropriate, not least to those who have suffered so much during the Troubles.

"We would ask everyone to be patient; the appointment of a victims' commissioner is under active, detailed and careful consideration and we hope to make an early decision on this important appointment."

Mark Thompson of victims' group Relatives for Justice said it welcomed the decision and said the post was "too important to get wrong".

"It's a mature decision," he said.

"It's only through working with community and victims' groups that all issues can be addressed.

"If that is rushed we run into problems, as with the previous appointment."

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