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What a strange moment to unveil this new shambles

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By Susan McKay

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A bleak, bad joke. That's what the business of appointing a victims' commissioner has been. It all turns profoundly sad when you think about the people who were killed, the suffering of their families and the dark sea of misery that lies beneath the surface of this debacle.

It used to be that journalists from outside the bizarre little world of Norn Iron would be amazed by the way that our politicians would scowl and sulk and refuse to speak to each other in public, while privately they were, well, not exactly cordial but at least half civil.

Now we find that the reverse applies.

All smiles for the cameras but behind closed doors utterly unable to make a joint decision.

They deny it, of course.

But the decision to appoint four victims commissioners rather than one - as advertised - was clearly not taken for the reasons stated at Stormont yesterday by the first minister and deputy first minister. According to Paisley, it all changed when the shortlisted candidates did their star turn song-and-dance routine for him and McGuinness, after the formal interview process was over. Such dazzling talent! Look at that juggling! Wow - all those hoops at once! Let's have them all, Martin.

As Paisley spoke with a straight face about this yesterday, McGuinness nodded and smiled. Then he concentrated on reassuring us that the symbolism is all good. This is the wonderful way we do the business. There was never a moment of disagreement. Never! Never! Never!

So why do we have to change the legislation under which the original job was established? Why do we have to more than quadruple the bill for salaries and staff? Amazingly, all four commissioners are to receive the same top-of-the-range salary. There may well be legal costs ahead, too, because this was a bizarre appointments process and there are angry people out there.

Why was none of this thought through before the Chuckle Brothers took the embarrassing step of casting aside the earlier shortlist and readvertising for just one commissioner? Why up until the very last minute were candidates given to understand that there would be just one appointment?

Never mind our finance minister's stern warning a couple of months ago that he refused to stand idly by while public money was wasted on over-staffing.

So now we have a typical northern Irish matching set - the widow of a policeman murdered by republicans and the sister of an IRA man shot dead by the security forces. A journalist and a mediator have also been thrown in, to do a job which, as Brian Feeney pointed out in this paper a couple of weeks ago, is undefined and has no discernable powers. These are all able people. But what are they going to do all day?

McGuinness said yesterday that he and his best pal Ian are already considering a draft strategy on victims and that much of the work on this is already done. We've already had Bertha McDougall's report. The peculiar Eames and Bradley show has just finished its auditions and gone off to write its script on how to deal with the past. What a strange moment to unveil this new shambles.

Victims of the conflict always got a raw deal. It is hard to justify any of the deaths, for a start. Then the police completely failed to investigate many of them. The Good Friday Agreement had gracious words for victims but

no provision for how to deal with their needs. The appointment of a minister for security and victims was the first bad joke. There have been many since, including Peter Hain's botched appointment of the interim commissioner at the behest of the DUP. We now know, of course, that his mind was on other things.

There's something disturbing about this new term, the 'victims sector'. There are people who have been working for many years - mostly on no pay or on low pay - to try to help those most hurt by the conflict to heal. Many of these people are themselves victims. Much fine work has been done and some that is damaging.

There are some 60 victims' groups. Some want truth and justice and have been thwarted at every turn. Others provide counselling. Some want the conflict to start all over again. Some of them hate each other.

None were consulted about the decision on the commissioners. These appointments should not have been made.

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