

**Northern Ireland assembly
Monday 10 December 2007**

Oral Answers to Questions

**Office of the first Minister and deputy First minister
Single Equality Bill
Public Appointments**

Sources: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/record/reports2007/071210.htm>

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm that all public appointments should be based on the principle of merit.

(AQO 1258/08)

The First Minister: Ministerial appointments to public bodies are, where appropriate, made in accordance with the code of practice published by the independent Commissioner for Public Appointments. The code of practice sets out appointment procedures, which are founded on the principles of selection based on merit, independent scrutiny in the selection process, equality of opportunity and a process that is open and transparent. The code of practice also requires Departments to comply with their statutory duty under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 when making ministerial appointments to public bodies.

Mr Burns: Can the First Minister assure the House that that will be the case in respect of the appointment of the Victims Commissioner? Will the Minister give an update on the appointment process?

The First Minister: On 8 October 2007, the deputy First Minister and I announced our intention to extend the appointments process for the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. That process is almost complete, and we hope to announce the appointment before the end of the year.

Mr Lunn: If the First Minister accepts the principle of merit as pre-eminent in public appointments, does his Office's insistence in reopening the process of appointing a Victim's Commissioner not constitute political interference, given that the persons who made the shortlist under the previous selection process were all deemed — in his own words — to be:

“appointable and of high calibre and commitment”?

The First Minister: My office is dedicated to the defence of victims, and we believe that, having seen a change in the political background of our country, the people who would not have put forward their names under the last regime of direct rule, will do so now, and they have done so. Everyone should co-operate with that fact, and everyone is entitled to put his or her name forward. I believe in merit, and I regret that the beginning of the process did not stick to merit. If it had stuck to merit, the facts that have been given by an honourable Member today for investigation would not be before the House.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The First Minister has answered part of my question; nevertheless, I shall ask it. Will he explain how appointments are made to the central appointments unit in OFMDFM, how many officials are involved in the unit, how they are recruited, to whom they are answerable, what audits have been carried out on their performance in the past five years, and whether those audits are made public?

The First Minister: I will be happy to write to the honourable Member and give him all the facts that he wants. We have nothing to hide. In fact, I have not yet met some of the officials that I am supposed to be dealing with. When there are over 500 of them, that cannot be done in a day.

2.45 pm