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NIO McCord snub a new low in official contempt

(Newton Emerson, [Irish News](#))

There was never any chance of the NIO appointing Raymond McCord as Northern Ireland's first victims commissioner, for reasons too obvious to repeat.

But the reasons given for refusing to even grant him an interview set a new low in official contempt for the public.

According to the powers that be, the widely admired victims campaigner lacks "awareness of the conflict", "an ability to deal with the media" and "written presentational skills".

To tell a man who lost his son that he lacks awareness of the conflict is simply appalling. To tell this particular man that he lacks awareness of the conflict simply beggars belief.

Mr McCord was sufficiently aware of the conflict to lobby for a police ombudsman's inquiry which uncovered the biggest collusion scandal since Stakeknife. The NIO hardly lacks awareness of that, having spent three years stalling the investigation.

Admittedly Peter Hain did lose awareness for several minutes when he fell asleep during his first meeting with Mr McCord. Perhaps making journalists aware of this is what the NIO means by lacking an ability to deal with the media. It certainly can't mean anything else. Mr McCord kept a single-issue

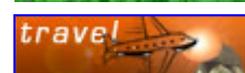
campaign in the press for almost 10 years. The NIO, by contrast, hires external PR firms for six-figure sums just to briefly push peace process vanity

projects. Spending £18 million on consultants for the water charge shows a lack of ability to deal with the media.

Campaigning successfully to expose your son's murderers does not.

Finally we have the reference to "written presentational skills", with its sneaking implication of uneducated ignorance and generally being a bit common.

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Yet Mr McCord's overall presentational skills were sufficient for the NIO to take him to the White House last month in an apparently token gesture towards bad spellers everywhere.

Just how academically taxing is a commissioner's job anyway? As an RTE editor in the 1980s, equality commissioner Bob Collins was responsible for some of the dumbest entertainment ever inflicted upon a supposedly literate people.

Human rights commissioner Monica McWilliams has a postgraduate degree in sociology, a subject that will be regarded a century hence in much the way we view phrenology today.

The smartest thing children's commissioner Patricia Lewsley ever seems to have done was to quit the SDLP for a £75k quango

non-job just before a disastrous election. But none of this really matters any more.

The entire NIO appointment process has now been so corrupted by nepotism, cynicism and short-term political expediency that the very concept of independent commissioners has been fatally discredited.

This is a timely and welcome development, which will hopefully silence self-serving calls for a women's commissioner and a pensioner's commissioner.

The prominence of commissioners in the peace process is based on the assumption that the people we actually vote for can't be trusted to respect our rights or uphold our equality before the law.

The courts, the secretary of state, the Northern Ireland ombudsman, the Northern Ireland affairs committee, the attorney general, the north-south ministerial council and the House of Lords are also apparently insufficient safeguards.

Instead we have local commissioners who see their role and number increasing rather than shrinking as devolution develops.

Sinn Féin and the DUP should take their noses out of the trough for a moment and realise what this minor extension of political patronage costs them in political credibility.

If the assembly can appoint ministers with cross-party chairs, negotiate a programme for government hedged about with reciprocal deals and otherwise behave in a grimly civilised

fashion then it can set up human rights, equality and victims committees and deal with these issues in an entirely democratic context.

As the appointment of every new commissioner requires approval from the first minister and the deputy first minister, the executive could easily devise and delegate its own agenda. After all, it does have 29,000 civil servants at its disposal. Ultimately, only democracy can legitimise the power that the commissioners currently seek.

As we have quite enough elected

representatives already, we should at least expect assembly members to work towards making the commissioners redundant.

It is surprising that assembly members don't seem to agree.

They might view the current arrangement as a harmless way to park contentious issues or employ failed former colleagues but the inevitable turf war between elected and unelected politicians will have to be resolved eventually.

Raymond McCord secured 4.4% of the vote in north Belfast last month. That's a better claim to influence than any NIO appointment.

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