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Time to deliver to victims, Mr Hain

The row over the appointment of Bertha McDougall as Victims Commissioner is in danger of overshadowing the needs of victims themselves, says the Rev David Clements. The Methodist minister, who has been a member of victims' support group WAVE for the past 12 years, and who is himself a 'victim', says that whatever the outcome, it is clear that there is still not enough support for those who have suffered during the Troubles

05 December 2006

I have followed with some interest the case in the High Court concerning the appointment of the Interim Victims Commissioner, Mrs Bertha McDougall.

The facts have been very well reported in this newspaper by Chris Thornton and others, who have aptly summarised the 33 pages of judgment from Mr Justice Girvan.

I also had questions about the appointment of Mrs McDougall, and so I wrote to the Secretary of State on Nov 2, 2005. Here are some of the questions I asked:

- **I note that you believe Bertha McDougall is the most suitable person for the job. By what criteria did you judge her suitability?**
- **Who advised you on her appointment?**
- **Is it a concern to you that most people who have been in this field of work for years have never met her or heard of her? (Note that I speak as someone whose father was also a member of the RUC, murdered by republicans)**
- **Is it really necessary for another year to elapse while she works on a report for you before action is taken on important matters?**

More than 10 weeks later, I received a reply from Angela Smith, writing on behalf of the Secretary of State.

She wrote: "In terms of the appointment process for the Interim Commissioner, senior officials from the Northern Ireland Office and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister drew up a list of potential

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candidates for the post and measured against the criteria that the individual would:

- **have an established record in dealing with conflict situations either in Northern Ireland or elsewhere**
- **have the capacity and interpersonal skills to work with the diverse range of groups and organisations in the victims sector**
- **have the necessary analytical skills to organised and prepare a report on his or her findings; and be able to**
- **command cross community support.**

It was recommended to the Secretary of State that Mrs McDougall be appointed."

Comment

Some time later, in a meeting about victims' work, I happened to comment that I had written to the Secretary of State about the appointment of Mrs McDougall. A middle ranking civil servant (with whom I have no gripe at all) who works in the area indicated that he knew about the correspondence.

When I said that the reply had not really answered all my questions, he said with a smile: "Oh, it was a good letter then!"

Watching just one episode of Yes, Minister! is enough to show that, for Government and the Civil Service, telling the truth is important - but not necessarily the whole truth ...

Clearly, Mr Justice Girvan is not impressed with that approach.

Whatever the final outcome of the case and the investigation by the Attorney General - and I don't want to take sides on the matter - there is one issue of overriding concern that I fear will once again be eclipsed.

That issue is the work that still needs to be done with the victims of our long years of conflict. In defending himself on the appointment of the Interim Victims Commissioner, Mr Hain has reportedly said: "The cause and the interests of victims has been badly neglected for far too long. What we want to see is a fresh recognition and momentum for victims in Northern Ireland."

Farcical

Fine words Mr Hain, but your inability to deliver is matched only by the farcical failures of our own politicians.

The sad truth is that in spite of fairly high media profile, and occasional verbal platitudes like that quoted above, the work of supporting victims is well down the political agenda.

I can give ample illustration of the point. For more than 12 years I have been involved with WAVE, a victims' support group that has worked with thousands of people from all backgrounds, all over the province.

Over that time we have met with every Secretary of State (apart from Peter Hain - he has not yet found time to accept our invitation to visit. Though, to be fair, not many



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of his predecessors came to visit within the first year of their time in office.)

Paul Murphy came just before he left. He was greatly impressed with the work and spoke glowingly about it in the House of Commons. He recognised the need for a Victims Commissioner - someone who would have a clear, strong, articulate and independent voice; a champion for the causes of victims (all kinds of victims), as Sir Kenneth Bloomfield had recommended in his report more than eight years ago. That was in March 2005.

A year and a half later, the legislation is in place. What really bugs me is that when it is politically expedient, legislation can be done in a week.

Peter wants to make political fudge - no problem. Paul wants to support victims work - long finger.

Finally, to return to the judicial review, I have a grave concern. I am afraid the work of the interim commissioner will be undermined or negated altogether and another year will have been largely wasted.

I don't know what will be in Mrs McDougall's report; perhaps there will be bits I don't like. I know that she has listened carefully and widely and she seems to be an intelligent woman, so her report is bound to have some value.

I will be amazed if she does not find that the need for more work to support victims is pressing and that the resources available are still inadequate.

What the NIO and the Secretary of State will do with her recommendations will prompt the next set of questions.

The Rev David Clements is a Methodist minister in Dungannon and a member of the management committee for WAVE for the past 12 years. His father, Bill Clements, was a policeman, shot dead in December 1985. He is married to Niccy and they have four children

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