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By David Gordon
Monday, 3 November 2008

Stormont has been taken to task over the “unacceptable” leaking of Victims Commissioner candidate names.

The strong criticism came from Northern Ireland’s public appointments watchdog Felicity Huston in her annual report for 2007/08.

Mrs Huston revealed that she had even been approached in an airport lounge and a shop by people predicting the names of successful candidates.

The First Ministers’ department announced in January that four Victims Commissioner posts were being created, rather than the expected one.

The process is currently being challenged in High Court judicial review proceedings.

Mrs Huston, the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern

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Ireland, conducted an audit of the competition for the post.

What are these?

Her annual report, published today, stated that publication of the audit study would be inappropriate while the court was considering the matter.

It continued: "I must however express my deep disappointment at the leaking of information about candidates throughout the process.

"Northern Ireland is a small place and rumours of 'who's getting what' abound.

"However, I understand that in this competition some candidates heard the outcome of their application directly from the press before the department had been in contact with them.

"I was approached in venues as diverse as my local supermarket and an airport lounge with the names of successful candidates, well before such names had been announced."

Mrs Huston added: "This is the only occasion since I became Commissioner in 2005 that individuals' details have been so comprehensively leaked and became the source of gossip and prolonged press speculation.

"In general, all departments guard such information with great care. This is perhaps why the Victims Commissioner(s) case is so remarkable.

"It is unacceptable for such leaks of personal information to occur. Individuals must be able to apply for a public appointment and know that they will be treated with dignity and confidentiality.

"One wonders how those who leaked would feel if similar information about their job applications etc was shared with all and sundry?

"My Code of Practice makes it clear that all applicants are entitled to confidentiality. Only at the time of appointment are names to be made public."

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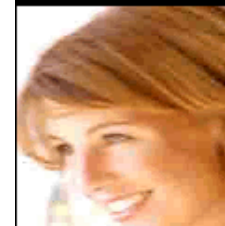
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