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First Ministers criticised over victims post U-turn

Tuesday, October 09, 2007

By Noel McAdam

Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness' U-turn decision over a new trawl for a Victims' Commissioner came under strong attack in the Assembly yesterday.

But the First Minister rejected Alliance leader David Ford's criticism that he and his Sinn Fein partner had treated both victims and MLAs with "absolute contempt".

The DUP leader and Mr McGuinness both denied they had disagreed over the appointment to the £65,000-a-year post, which is now to be readvertised.

But less than two weeks ago, the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers insisted there was no intention to launch a new hunt, with sources suggesting the new Commissioner would be in place by Christmas.

Mr Paisley also indicated yesterday that a new blueprint to deal with victims' issues is under consideration.

Replying to his North Antrim party member Mervyn Storey during Question Time, Mr Paisley said victims were a high priority for his department and the new Commissioner would play a "central role".

The intention was to bring forward a new strategy for victims to ensure resources are targeted at areas of greatest need

Revealing the plan, which will form part of the forthcoming programme of government, Mr Paisley said it would include services available to victims, practical help and dealing with the legacy of the past.

The SDLP's Alex Attwood was ruled out of order by Speaker William Hay when he said the fact that the First Ministers had announced their decision outside the Assembly was "totally inappropriate".

Criticising OFMDFM for failing to widely publish the Deloitte Touche report commissioned by Direct Rule ministers on the cost of divisions in the province, Mr Ford said the announcement also showed "absolute contempt" for those who had initially applied for the post.

But Mr Paisley challenged Mr Ford to prove that he had shown contempt for victims.

The UUP's Danny Kennedy, chair of the committee which monitors the OFMDFM, said it was pleased to see the appointment being taken forward.

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There was no further clarification on the U-turn from an OFMDFM spokeswoman last night.

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