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Opinion

Victims: will four heads be any better than one?

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Victims issues have always proven difficult for government and greater accessibility alone is no panacea, Political Correspondent Noel McAdam argues

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Tuesday, January 29, 2008

And so the voice of victims from the Troubles will be listened to at the heart of government "for the very first time", First Minister Ian Paisley has pledged.

He and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness also explained their appointment of four Victims Commissioners rather than one as being based on providing the 'personal touch'.

One commissioner, it was argued, would have had to delegate much work and rack up consultants' fees.

"To put it simply," Mr Paisley said, the quartet of Commissioners, will "be much more personally available to victims and survivors than a single Commissioner."

While they have answered many questions, not least confirming that their decision will require yet more legislation, the First Ministers - who also described the entire raft of sensitive and complex issues surrounding victims and survivors as "pivotal" to them - remained silent about others.

Will a quartet carry the same weight as a single victims champion? Will the commissioners come to develop different areas of expertise or deal mainly with one section of the victims' constituency? Precisely how will they engage with other public bodies?

The fact is that victims constitute an issue which has long been dogged by doubt, dispute and suspicion. For years the standard Northern Ireland Office view was that there was no consensus among victims' groups on how they should be dealt with.

Which in practice turned out to be an argument for doing nothing.

Old ground was re-trodden many times. There has been little other than praise for Bertha McDougal, who shifts from being an 'interim' victims commissioner along with her colleagues Brendan McAllister, Patricia MacBride and Mike Nesbitt - to "designate" status.

But her appointment two years ago overlapped with a lot of the work of former Victims Commissioner Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, completed in under a year and delivered in 1998, on vexed matters such as criminal injuries compensation levels.

And some of her tasks, the long drawn-out controversy over the need for a victims and survivors forum, for example, will now be taken up by the latest Commission.

So it is not only recently - in the high profile High Court case brought against former Secretary of State Peter Hain - that victims have proven an area of considerable controversy.

For months it has been evident to many observers outside the Office of First and Deputy First Minister that Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness were unable to agree on a single appointment. Thus for example, while the Office was publicly denying there would be a second trawl, the two top men had already discussed the option with civil servants.

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Officials, nevertheless, have still been citing the shift to four from one as evidence that Mr Paisley and Mr McGuinness have not been at loggerheads, as the latter again insisted yesterday.

Should there be a further court case from someone who argues, for example, that they would have applied had they known they would form part of a Commission rather than a solo role (and OFMDFM says it sought all necessary legal advice) more of the multi-level background to all this may emerge.

In the meantime, there must be a broad welcome for at least the possibility that four Commissioners, together representing a broad cross-section of a still divided society, can begin to get to grips at last with the real nitty-gritty. It will be no easy task.

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