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## True cost of commissioners cancelling each other out

### Eye of Newt...

By Newton Emerson

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Many people have an opinion on the wording of the Omagh bomb memorial and how the families have been treated but Northern Ireland's four new victims commissioners are not among them.

Omagh council referred the memorial issue to an independent panel which has recommended downplaying the term "dissident republican car bomb". The families were not invited to a meeting to reveal the proposed wording but when The Irish News asked the victims commissioners for a comment, commissioner and former

journalist Mike Nesbitt said: "Whatever terms of reference (the panel members) have in place are between them and the council. If we had been asked to be involved from the beginning we would make a comment but we didn't exist then."

Just think about this statement for a moment. It sets a precedent which precludes the commissioners from commenting on the inquiries into the deaths of Pat Finucane, Rosemary Nelson, Robert Hamill and Billy Wright.

Their relatives also object to the terms of reference of those inquiries. But the terms were set before the victims commissioners were appointed so apparently they will have nothing to add.

Presumably the Bloody Sunday Inquiry also falls outside their remit, along with any review, inquiry or investigation into any death, injury or attack set up before January 28 this year.

There is no legislative reason why the

victims commissioners should restrict themselves in this manner – and not just because the relevant legislation has yet to be enacted.

The Victims and Survivors (Northern

Ireland) Order 2006, currently undergoing a hasty re-write to replace every occurrence of "commissioner" with "commissioners", states that: "The Commissioner may make representations or recommendations to any body or person concerning the interests of victims and survivors."

There is no requirement for such bodies to post-date the commissioners' existence, let alone for the commissioners to be "asked to be involved from the beginning".

It appears that the victims commissioners simply concocted an excuse to keep their distance from the Omagh dispute. Despite the scale of the atrocity, the phrase "don't bite the hand that feeds you" has already won the day.

If our latest quango was any more obedient we could enter it at Crufts and the obedience task its four members have clearly been set is to cancel each other out.

The appointment of a nominee from each of the four main parties means that this is hardly a surprise.

Most attention on the commissioners has focused on Bertha McDougall, who lost her RUC husband to the INLA, and Patricia McBride, who lost her IRA brother to the SAS. But I feel that Brendan McAllister's appointment is also very telling.

Mr McAllister left the SDLP in 1982 to work in mediation, eventually becoming director of Mediation Northern Ireland. In the

“values” section of its mission statement, Mediation Northern Ireland says that

“situations of conflict or division” require “the expression of a truth that is wider than any one perspective”.

So there you have our four new victims commissioners – an RUC widow, an IRA man’s sister, a newsreader who won’t

comment on the news and a man who may well view everyone as guilty and innocent of everything. No wonder Ian Paisley and

Martin McGuinness were always in stitches.

Considering how utterly pointless the commissioners have immediately revealed themselves to be it is worth noting that they do not just cancel each other out. The average employee in Northern Ireland pays £4,000 a year in income tax.

Therefore, it requires 65 working people to pay the salaries of the victims commissioners, not including their pensions plus the salaries and pensions of the staff of the new victims commission.

If existing quangos are any guide, the victims commission will cost around £2 million a year, representing the contribution of 500 taxpayers.

This equals the average employed population of a community of 1,100 people, such as Bushmills, Greysteel, Fivemiletown or Lisbellaw.

Perhaps you are familiar with one of these villages. Picture it in your mind’s eye, with its main street, shops, small firms and commuter developments.

Imagine the effort and industry of all its inhabitants. The entire income tax contribution from this village is cancelled out so that four victims commissioners can cancel each other out.

This is ludicrous, scandalous, pathetic and unconscionable. It is an insult to the living and the dead.

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