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## NIO would be happy if past just went away

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By Brian Feeney

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No sign of a Victims Commissioner yet. Clearly the Chuckle Brothers can't agree on a name.

The real challenge for them is to agree on a name that would have complete support from their own supporters.

You will have spotted that this is a divided community. Each community therefore expects a different emphasis from a victims commissioner.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the DUP believed they had scored a penalty when our former and unlamented proconsul, the beautifully maintained Peter Hain, appointed someone the DUP approved of.

Now, if the Chuckle Brothers present someone who is not obviously DUP-approved, it will look like one-nil to

Sinn Fein.

Worse, it will look as if Sinn Fein has not only successfully declared the DUP's penalty null and void but scored one of their own.

And you wonder why it's taking so long? Let's look at the appointment another way.

Rather than arguing about who should be appointed and paid £65,000 a year, why not have another look at the point of the whole idea.

It arose as the NIO's attempt to pacify the growing clamour of victims groups which now number about 60, yes 60, most of whom are in receipt of public money.

Originally the response of the British administration here was to invent the role of victims' minister. They tagged it on to the duties of Adam Ingram, the security minister.

Were they being ironic?

Did the NIO know something about victims and the security forces here that we didn't?

Were they having a laugh?

The truth is they hadn't a clue what to do but clearly even the NIO couldn't sustain having their security minister responsible for victims. Would it not be better if the British administration washed their hands of them?

Why not appoint a victims' commissioner, independent, nothing to do with the government and completely powerless, unlike a minister who has to answer questions in the Commons?

Commissioners are all the rage with Labour. In fact David Blunkett, when home secretary, also proposed in March 2002 appointing a victims' commissioner to speak for victims of crime. Needless to say, this person would be, all together now, 'independent and must have teeth'.

Ever hear of this person again? No? Who is the person in charge of Victim Support NI? No idea?

Now you see the advantage from the NIO point of view of having a victims' commissioner?

Some time when you have nothing better to do, have a look at the powers of the proposed victims' commissioner laid out in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. It won't take long.

To save you the bother, the answer is that the victims' commissioner won't have any powers other than to look after the interests of victims and review best practice and award funds for research concerning the interests of victims, nothing that can't already be done and isn't already being done by an anonymous civil servant.

As you see, appointing a victims' commissioner is pointless unless you're in government.

If you are, you can say, if anyone asks what you're doing about victims of the Troubles, "Oh but we've appointed a victims' commissioner with a big expensive office and fat salary. "That's how seriously we take the issue."

making the clamour from the relatives of those killed and injured in the Troubles die down. You can see that because the NIO has moved on.

'Dealing with victims' is no longer enough to pacify relatives.

Letting victims groups do it themselves didn't work.

A mere commissioner to coordinate them won't do.

Therefore the appointment of the doomed Eames-Bradley commission to advise on 'how to handle the past' – the latest work in progress.

Would you be surprised if the NIO had already decided 'how to handle the past' and had appointed poor old Eames and Bradley to provide cover, a bit like the management consultants they're so fond of but not as expensive?

One thing is certain, there'll be no truth commission. What the NIO really wants is to find a way to make the past go away.