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Parties accused of playing politics with victims issue

By William Graham Political Correspondent

02/04/08

The second stage of legislation empowering four victims commissioners was voted through the assembly yesterday despite angry exchanges as parties accused each other of playing politics with the issue.

Speaker William Hay had to call for order several times during a heated debate as politicians engaged in noisy interruptions.

Earlier this week the assembly divided (54 to 28) when asked to fast-track the Commission for Victims and

Survivors Bill, with the DUP and Sinn Fein in favour and the SDLP, Ulster Unionists and Alliance against.

Yesterday the assembly divided again on the second stage (49 to 15), but this time the SDLP voted in favour, saying it did not want to cause a delay to the four new commissioners getting down to work.

First Minister Ian Paisley and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness have said they recognise difficult issues surrounding the definition of a victim and will ask the proposed Victims Forum – being set up to assist the commissioners – to urgently bring forward proposals.

The Ulster Unionists, SDLP and Alliance questioned this approach, citing major differences in the assembly and society over the definition.

Mr Paisley said the issue of victims and survivors was not something to be kicked like a football to make cheap political points.

“This is about people’s lives, their future. This is for the healing process that Northern Ireland needs so badly.”

Significantly, he added: “There is a difference in this house upon who is a victim. That has to be dealt with and it has to be faced up to. And that is what we are attempting to do. We will not get away from this by burying it in the sand.”

Sinn Fein’s Francie Molloy asked for unanimous support for the bill from all the parties who he said had been crying out for the legislation.

“We need to try and make progress as quickly as possible instead of actually having party politicking. It is important that we get support for the victims so that they see the assembly is taking up the issues,” he said.

However, the legislation was described as “grubby” by Alliance leader David Ford.

“All the bluster does nothing to conceal the fact that the reason for this bill is to cover over the complete failure of the first minister and the deputy first minister to put victims first as they promised they would do on devolution,” he said.

The DUP’s Stephen Moutray claimed the interests of innocent victims were largely ignored when the Ulster Unionist Party was the largest party.

But the UUP’s Basil McCrea also described the legislation as shoddy and accused the DUP and Sinn Fein of putting their own relationship before the needs of victims by pushing the bill quickly through Stormont.

SDLP leader Mark Durkan said his party would support the bill for the sake of victims despite having major concerns about how it was being handled. He accused the DUP and Sinn Fein of operating a cosy alliance

which was denying victims' representatives a say on the proposals.

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