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Past holding back new victims appointment

(Patrick Murphy, [Irish News](#))

Either it is still 2007 or Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness have landed themselves in another embarrassing mess. On October 8 they declared that they would appoint a new victims commissioner before the end of the year.

But since Santa did not apparently bring them one, we are still awaiting that same victims commissioner which they promised us by July last year. This suggests that while the *tiocfaidh ár lá* brothers have shown remarkable success in self-congratulatory grinning, they are not very good at actually doing anything.

The difficulty is that both ministers can best rationalise their present political positions by rewriting the past.

Thus Paisley would hope for a commissioner keen to highlight victims of the IRA violence undertaken by his deputy's colleagues.

McGuinness would benefit from a commissioner leaning more towards victims of state violence, including actions by loyalist paramilitaries, among whom his present boss had supporters, followers and friends.

(The only thing they had in common in our violent past was their joint opposition to the civil rights movement: Paisley because he believed it was a threat to the state and McGuinness because he thought it was no threat to the state.)

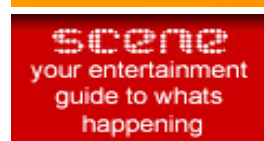
Thus the challenge is to find someone who can serve the political needs of the two men and their supporters.

It would also help if the new commissioner could tread lightly around the contribution which both minister's political beliefs made to the Troubles.

The successful candidate will be aware of these requirements. Our two leaders decided that the final stage of the appointments process would involve a presentation to them by all candidates deemed appointable.

Does either man have formal training in appointments procedures, interview techniques or analysing presentational skills? If not, would it be reasonable to ask how they intend to

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make the appointment?

(They made up the word appointable but if you are hoping to invent some history, why not create some new words to go with it?)

Therein lies the danger in what we call dealing with the past: if it justifies the present, it must inevitably distort the past. For example, where there are victims, there must be perpetrators.

But if the new commissioner adopts a "no-blame" approach to our violent past, its victims will fall into the same category as the victims of earthquakes and other natural disasters. No-one will be responsible. Instead of description, analysis and explanation, we will be treated to phrases like "dark days" and "sad times".

Paisley and McGuinness are not the only ones keen to see the past portrayed in a helpful manner.

The British government already has a team in action to lay the groundwork for its account of what happened.

It has appointed a consultative group headed by Lord Eames and Denis Bradley to advise on, you have guessed it, how to handle the past.

Although the members of the panel are of impeccable integrity, it is not clear how or why they were appointed.

If the group is meant to be representative, it fails miserably. Neither the Dublin government nor the Catholic Church appear to have been invited to join.

If it is not meant to be representative, how was it chosen?

The only way to handle the past is not to sanitise it but to face it. And that raises an additional tension between the two ministers. McGuinness claims the past is over but Paisley thinks it has not gone away, you know. He said as much this week when indicating that it is still too early to devolve policing and justice powers to the assembly.

He appears to have one eye on the outcome of the Paul Quinn murder inquiry. Whether the new commissioner considers Quinn a victim of political violence or a fuel smuggler will tell us if it is Paisley's blind eye.

There is a view within the DUP which suggests that it is not worth bringing down Stormont for the murder of a Catholic in south Armagh. It is a sentiment which has been echoed by the SDLP.

In politics indignation always comes easier than principle.

If history is but a fable agreed upon, the delay in the appointment of a victims commissioner merely indicates that the Brothers Grimm have not yet agreed on the fable.

So in an effort to help them, if you are all sitting comfortably, we shall begin: "Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess called Northern Ireland who was fairest in all the UK. But she also had a dark side..." (To be continued in the assembly in mid-January).

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