

**Northern Ireland Assembly
Monday 28 January 2008**

Ministerial Statement

The Appointment of Commissioners Designate for Victims and Survivors

Sources: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/record/reports2007/080128.htm#2>

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that the First Minister wishes to make a statement on the outcome of the appointment of a commissioner for victims and survivors.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): We are glad to see, in the public gallery, a good number of those who represent victims and survivors. We hope that something that will be said today from the Benches will bring them some help and strength.

Before making the statement, the deputy First Minister and I wish to express our regret that its details were reported in the press on Friday. Our intention, as was made clear over the past few months, was that the first public announcement of our decision would be made to the Assembly. We all agree that it is regrettable that the press reports preceded today's statement.

The deputy First Minister and I have come to the House today to set out for Members, as we promised, how we intend to move forward on the issue of how we provide support and help for victims and survivors. These are some of the most vulnerable people in our Province. They have suffered great personal loss over the years, and we are determined that they should not be left behind.

The deputy First Minister and I have been working together intensely on the issue for many months, and believe that moving forward is pivotal. We have already demonstrated our commitment by delivering over £33 million in the Budget for that area of work over the next three years. Of that 33 million, £6 million is new money, as announced in the Assembly last week by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Our recognition today of the needs and concerns of victims and survivors moves on to the start of delivery for all those in Northern Ireland who suffered over decades of conflict, terror and strife. A key part of that relates to the issue of a commissioner for victims and survivors.

Members will be aware that the process for that appointment began under direct rule. They will, moreover, recall that on 8 October 2007, the deputy First Minister and I announced that we had decided to extend the appointment process. Some potential applicants might have been deterred from putting themselves forward under direct rule. We formed the view that by extending the appointment process, the post would be more firmly grounded in the new political environment and the person who was appointed would have broad support.

We are able to announce the outcome of that appointment process. The decision to extend the competition resulted in an additional 38 applicants coming forward. Following interviews, a combined list was drawn up of individuals who were deemed suitable for appointment by both the initial interview panel and by the extended process as announced on 8 October 2007.

As we were to get the best possible person for the job, each of the seven candidates was invited to give a short presentation to the deputy First Minister and myself.

The impact of the quality and delivery of those presentations, coupled with the candidates' drive and enthusiasm to make a real difference, had a profound effect on our thinking and our

approach to this highly sensitive and complex issue. Following the presentations, we came to the conclusion that we should take advantage of all the skills and experience that we could possibly bring together to chart the future for all those who have been neglected for so long.

Our firm belief is that a team of four commissioners working together — in essence, a victims' commission — is the best way forward. Given the significant backlog of urgent work and the range of difficult challenges that face us in this area, these four people will have much more capacity to engage directly with victims and survivors than a single commissioner. To put it simply, they will be much more personally available to victims and survivors than a single commissioner.

For example, a single commissioner would, inevitably, have had to delegate many activities, including consultation and liaison, to a secretariat. It would also have been inevitable that many specific projects would have had to be undertaken by consultants. The four commissioners will be expected to undertake these and other important tasks themselves — although, obviously, administrative support will be provided for them.

Accordingly, I am pleased to announce that, in response to an invitation, four of the candidates on the list of those considered suitable for the post of commissioner have indicated their willingness to act in a joint capacity as commissioners designate in a new victims' and survivors' commission. The four people who will make up the new commission are Brendan McAllister, Patricia MacBride, Bertha McDougall and Michael Nesbitt.

We anticipate that the commission will have the same functions as the post of Victims' Commissioner described in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. It is our intention to make formal appointments in due course, but we must first introduce the necessary legislation to create the victims' and survivors' commission that I have described today. A Bill to provide for the establishment of the commission will be introduced as soon as possible. Subject, of course, to the decision of the Assembly, we will wish to proceed with the formal appointments as soon as possible thereafter.

I want to make it clear that, in the interim, there is much important work for the four commissioners designate to carry out. We want them to sit down together and get to grips with setting out an agreed work programme for the new commission. That will be a crucial first step as we move towards a better service for those touched by the events of our troubled past. It is envisaged that the work plan will cover all the issues that impact on victims and survivors, including a review of support services, legislation, and the setting up of a victims' and survivors' forum.

The deputy First Minister and I will continue to take a close interest in this work. We pledge our full support for the four people who are taking on one of the most important tasks facing our society. I want them to know that we will be available to them when they need us as we all seek to move forward together. For us, they will be the primary authority on victims and survivors.

12.15 pm

In commending this announcement to the House, I ask Members to give it careful consideration, not least because of the importance of the work that we are asking the new victims' and survivors' commission to do. Remember also that this announcement is really for those who have been largely without a voice. Today, we are giving them a voice — a real voice. It is a voice that will reach the heart of Government and will be heard and listened to for the very first time. May God speed this work with His blessing.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr **Kennedy**): Mr Speaker, I understand that questions will be answered by the deputy First Minister; is that correct?

Mr Speaker: That is correct.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the First Minister for his statement and I acknowledge the appointment of the new commissioners designate. I wish them well in the difficult and complex work with which they have been charged.

However, I register concern at the manner through which the announcement of their appointments was brought into the public domain. It was unsatisfactory that the announcement was leaked to the press, and that has proved unhelpful to us as we come to terms with the decisions that have been made.

Will the appointments be to full-time posts? Given that the original and subsequent advertisements announcing the job of Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors indicated that there would be a singular rather than a plural outcome, will the deputy First Minister tell the House when the decision to increase the number of commissioners was taken? Will he also tell us how that decision was taken, who was consulted, and was legal advice sought to justify increasing the number of appointments?

There may be concerns arising; for example, more people may have applied had they known that there was to be a panel of commissioners. Will the deputy First Minister assure me that the legislation, when it is brought to the House, will confirm the independent status of the proposed victims' and survivors' commission? The statement said that commissioners will be the primary authority on victims and survivors, but will they be the independent primary authority on victims and survivors?

On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I ask the deputy First Minister to advise us on the status of the report of the Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, Mrs McDougall, given that she has been appointed as one of the new commissioners designate.

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for his contribution. The First Minister and I share his concern about the leaking of the information and on how unhelpful that was to all of us.

I confirm that the posts will be on a full-time basis. Regarding the question about appointing one commissioner, we took the decision to appoint more than one commissioner following the presentations from the shortlisted candidates, and it is already in the public domain that those presentations were completed just before Christmas. Having reflected on the matter, we concluded that the interests of victims and survivors would be better served by drawing on the broad range of skills and knowledge exhibited by the candidates.

After the presentations, the First Minister and I decided that we would meet shortly after Christmas — we interrupted our Christmas break and met in Stormont Castle on either the Thursday or Friday following Christmas Day. We then deliberated on the presentations and on the reflections that we had had during the Christmas break.

It was at that stage that we decided that the appointment of a number of commissioners was the sensible way to proceed. We took legal advice on the matter, and that confirmed our view that we were within our rights to do so. We also, in the course of our deliberations, consulted Felicity Huston at the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, and she declared herself content with our approach. Therefore, a sensible decision was taken to reflect, over the Christmas period, on the candidates' presentations — they were all important and powerful. As a result of those presentations and our reflection on the matter, we came to the decision that we did. That began the business of trying to process that decision.

With regard to the recommendations in Bertha McDougall's report, we are considering a draft strategy that will signal a major step forward in the work with victims and survivors. That strategy will be built on work that has already been done, and when it is published for consultation, it will be clear that we have learned from the valuable work that Mrs McDougall carried out. We must improve the quality of life for those people whose lives were changed forever by what happened to them. With a new strategy and the creation of the commission, we believe that the key building blocks will be in place to achieve that.

The important decision has been taken, and the four commissioners designate have been appointed. The people who have been charged with this responsibility deserve the support of every Member of this House. Their work will be onerous: there are tender feelings and raw emotions out there, and different views about how to proceed. We, on behalf of the Executive, have acted decisively.

I have listened to commentary over the weekend that suggested that we came to that decision because we could not agree on one commissioner. Nothing could be further from the truth. At no stage of our deliberations did we have a situation in which the First Minister proposed someone and I proposed an alternative. That never happened. Some people might greet that with incredulity, but it is a symbol of the way in which he and I proceed with business. We are conscious of the need to take the right decision. Therefore, I can say, without fear of contradiction, that we were never in a position of disagreement on the way forward.

Mr Moutray: I welcome the statement by the First Minister. Many in society will be reassured that victims will not be forgotten as we move forward in this Province. Will the deputy First Minister give an indication of what the commissioners' workload will be and what resources will be made available to them in advance of legislation being passed in this House?

The deputy First Minister: As I said, there will clearly be a heavy workload. It is a matter that has been much neglected over many years. The people who have been appointed — and we have held initial discussions with them — have indicated that they are engaged in the process with good heart and a firm commitment to work together. Much of the work will have to be done by the commissioners themselves.

It is the intention that the commissioners designate represent the interests of victims and survivors and, specifically, develop a work programme and agree it with us. We envisage that the programme will cover issues such as examining all law and practice affecting victims and survivors, keeping under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services, and providing advice on the issues.

The job that has to be done will provide enough work for four commissioners. There are many people out there, many of whom have not come forward previously. However, in new circumstances, the opportunity is there for everyone to talk to people who will listen to them carefully and sympathetically.

Other commentary over the weekend stated that the First Minister and I appointed victims' commissioners designate who have particular appeal to one section of the community or the other. Again, nothing could be further from the truth. We expect the four victims' commissioners designate to engage with everyone in society and to lend a sympathetic ear to everyone who has been affected by the conflict. We do not wish to create a situation whereby people will have a particular view of the politics and allegiances of the victims' commissioners. We are moving forward on the basis that those four people must represent the interests of all victims and survivors without fear or favour.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the appointment of the four-person victims' commission. It is a major step forward for the victims, the survivors, the families and the loved ones who have suffered over the years. No two victims are the same, and one of

the benefits of having four victims' commissioners is that all the various backgrounds will be represented. However, the families, the victims and the survivors will be concerned about whether the finances and the gap funding exist to allow them to continue to do their work.

The deputy First Minister: As the First Minister said, over the next three years, we will commit more than £33 million to support programmes of work designed to make a real difference to the lives of victims and survivors. The money will go towards supporting individual victims and survivors and victims' groups who have carried out much valuable work over the years.

Some £5.2 million was allocated for each of the years 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08; £7.4 million will be allocated for 2008-09; £11.8 million for 2009-10; and £15 million for 2010-11. Those figures represent an increase of more than 100% over that invested in this area over the past three years.

We are working out the detail of a new strategy for victims and survivors. We will want to have discussions with all key stakeholders, including, of course, the new commissioners. The cost of the victims' commissioners is in addition to those figures. The discontinuation of support for victims' groups as a result of EU funds drying up represents a real challenge for all of us. Naturally, we want the tremendous work of all groups in the community to continue.

Mr Durkan: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for the statement and for the supplementary answers. As others have said, it is deeply regrettable that the news came out in the way in which it did, because it added to a lot of bemusement and concern in some quarters.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs of moving from an advertised vacancy for one commissioner to the appointment of four, we must all give the fullest possible support to the people who are now tasked with taking the work forward. They are very worthy people who will serve well. However, there is a danger that certain commissioners could be perceived as representing victims from particular constituencies. We need to work to dismantle that perception to ensure that those difficulties do not compound the challenge that they face. Will the deputy First Minister address that point?

The deputy First Minister said that "we" will be drawing up the strategy; I presume that, by "we", he means the Executive or the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. To what extent, therefore, will the victims' commission have a lead in shaping the strategy? Will it merely commentate on a strategy that has been prepared elsewhere in Government? How far will the victims' commissioners be involved in the proofing and approving of the £33 million that was delivered to victims in the draft Budget — and which the First Minister mentioned in his statement — and in tracking the difference between European funds and what happens in the future?

12.30 pm

When will the required legislation be introduced? Will it look at broadening the scope of the four victims' commissioners beyond the role that was envisaged for a single commissioner in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006?

The deputy First Minister: The four victims' commissioners designate will be expected to work together as equals. They will agree with us a detailed work programme that will deal with issues of individual roles, responsibilities and methods of joint working. We will respect the independence of the victims' commission. It is important that victims' groups know that they have advocates who have authority, and, in moving forward, it is important that we respect the independence of the group.

The First Minister and I expect to be in a position to discuss the detail of the draft strategy with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister at the beginning of the

consultative process. We will also want to discuss our intentions regarding the strategy with the victims' commissioners designate.

We will have to consider the funding situation as we move forward, because the funding streams that have supported victims' groups for some years are drying up. That must be recognised. We anticipate that the funding arrangements in place in relation to the memorial funding, the core funding and the development grant schemes for victims' and survivors' groups operated on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will continue during the financial year 2008-09.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will work closely with the memorial fund, the Community Relations Council (CRC), the victims' commission and the victims' and survivors' forum to manage the transition to new funding arrangements, which will be set out in the new strategy for victims and survivors.

In liaison with the victims' commission, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will also take forward work with regard to identified areas of need, such as enhanced support for victims' and survivors' groups to provide befriending services for victims and survivors, provision for respite care, and support for general practitioners in dealing with trauma. Other areas of emerging need may be examined by the new victims' commission.

Mr Durkan's first point was important. If the victims' commission is to work, it is vital that it appeals to the whole community as it moves forward, and not be seen merely as individuals who will only deal with the views expressed by people who are perceived to be from their community. That would be a huge mistake. One of the most moving experiences that I had since becoming the deputy First Minister occurred a short time after I assumed the office. I received a request to meet with a disabled member of the RUC who was badly wounded by the IRA during the conflict. That person came into the room and put out his hand; he shook my hand and wished me the best for the future.

That is the direction in which the victims' commission must go. Our political circumstances have changed, and we have a brilliant future — if it is managed properly. People must be sympathetic to each other and recognise the tremendous hurt and pain that has been inflicted on all sides. There is an onerous task facing the victims' commission. We have chosen four people who are up to that challenge; they will not allow themselves to be categorised as commissioners for a particular group. The four individuals recognise that their appeal must be broad.

Mrs Long: I welcome the additional resources that have been set aside for those who suffered during the conflict in Northern Ireland. The people who suffered most were least considered as we tried to resolve that conflict, so this is an important step in trying to address that.

Announcing the change in policy from a commissioner to a commission at the same time as placing the names of those who were appointed in the public domain makes it difficult to consider the proposal objectively without subsequent comments being characterised as criticism of those appointed individuals. For the record, before asking my question, any criticisms of the process that I may express in no way reflect negatively on those four individuals who have agreed to take on what is a difficult and complex role. I have full confidence in their abilities to deliver on that role, and, in doing so, they have my full support.

However, there are issues. Does the deputy First Minister agree that, given the general funding reductions for such matters that are expected in the next few years, and by increasing salary and office costs by a factor of at least four, resources that might have addressed specific sector needs and those of the individuals who have suffered may, in the long term, be deflected from front-line services?

In addition, does the deputy First Minister agree that the requirement for new legislation and the inherent delay in creating and fine-tuning the structures of a commission will, in some ways, be a barrier to the hope that the commissioners designate will hit the ground running?

Finally, does he agree that it is inconsistent for an Administration that have been sabre rattling about public-service overstaffing to appoint four people to do a job that, as recently as October 2007, both he and the First Minister agreed was for an individual?

The deputy First Minister: The victims' and survivors' sector has long been neglected, there is a backlog of work, and we have no doubt that the commissioners designate will have a heavy workload.

On the subject of money, given that the commissioners designate will, themselves, undertake many key tasks, less money will be spent on delegating work and putting work out to consultants. Therefore, savings can be made, and the commissioners' direct involvement will benefit victims and survivors.

As legislation progresses, the Committee to which the Member is the Deputy Chairperson will have an important scrutinising role — as will every Member of the Assembly. Such scrutiny must be undertaken sensibly, and, in the meantime, the commissioners designate must get on with their business because, as I said, that sector has been neglected for far too long. We now have four people who are absolutely dedicated to doing that work and beginning as quickly as possible, and all Members must give them every possible support.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the First Minister's statement. It is good that victims, who have been without a voice for so long, now have a body through which to express that voice.

Will the First Minister assure Members that the four victims' commissioners will work to their individual strengths and as a team? In addition, will he also assure us that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will work alongside the victims' commissioners, the commission and the victims in order to shape the commission's policy and strategy?

The deputy First Minister: There is a tremendous amount of work to be done. At the end of last week, the meeting that the First Minister and I held with the four commissioners designate clearly indicated that we were dealing with four people of the highest calibre who were conscious of their responsibility to advance one of the most sensitive areas of work to be undertaken.

The relationship between the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and, indeed, the Assembly must be to work in a spirit of co-operation. We want the commissioners designate to feel part of that process, and, at the end of the day, we want to put legislation forward that will generate the greatest possible amount of support in the Assembly.

Four commissioners designate have been appointed, all of whom have accepted that they will be expected to work together as equals. They will agree a detailed work programme with us, which will deal with issues such as individual roles and responsibilities, and methods of joint working. I believe that we have appointed people who are well capable of undertaking those tasks.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the appointments that have been made, and this very important statement. Bearing in mind the need for all victims of the conflict to be treated equally, and for recognition that there is no hierarchy of victims, does the appointment process reflect the diversity of experiences suffered variously by victims and survivors of the conflict? I wish to seek assurance that the appointments process was based on openness, transparency and, ultimately, the principle of merit.

The deputy First Minister: It is absolutely essential, moving forward, that we give the four commissioners designate their place. All of that which the Member has mentioned is work that they will have to undertake. As far as openness, transparency and the principle of merit are concerned, it is clear to me that the whole appointments process, including the initial stage that was conducted under direct rule, was overseen and certified by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, whom the First Minister and I have met on a number of occasions. We are very satisfied with the process and its outcome. We believe that we have arrived at an approach that will make best use of the skills and experience of four people that we consider to be very capable individuals.

Mr Spratt: I welcome today's announcement. Folk to whom I talked to over the weekend gave a broad welcome to the appointment of the four commissioners, or a commission. It is sad to hear some people trying to politicise the whole thing. I hope that everyone will work together to assist these folks in their very difficult task.

I assume that the four commissioners will sit down to work out their terms of reference and an agreed work programme with a blank sheet. Will the work already done on behalf of victims be taken into consideration by those four people? Will the groups that represent victims be fully consulted, and will the process of agreeing the terms of reference and the work programme be time-limited, so that the important work of engaging with victims and survivors can start as soon as possible?

The deputy First Minister: It is clear that the criteria for the terms of reference set out in The Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 are the basis on which we are proceeding, and on which all decisions were taken in respect of these appointments. The work that has already been completed by Bertha McDougall, as I have already said, will form an important part of the considerations of both our Office and the commissioners, as we move forward.

I am also very conscious that there are many groups with strong opinions on these matters. That is going to be a tall order for the four commissioners designate to deal with. When we sit back and reflect on the challenge that that would have represented for one victims' commissioner, it is clear that the task to be undertaken can only be carried forward by a group of very talented and dedicated people who are committed to the process of ensuring that victims and survivors are treated with the respect that they deserve.

Mr Elliott: First, does the deputy First Minister share my concern for those victims of the troubles who were members of the Orange Institution in Northern Ireland, an organisation that probably suffered some of society's largest losses, with more than 330 of its members murdered and many more seriously injured?

Does the deputy First Minister also share my concerns about the terminology used to describe victims? Will that terminology be handed down from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, or will the victims' commissioners make up their own minds about the terminology to be used? What does the deputy First Minister understand by the word "victim"? Does he believe that terrorists who died during the Troubles as a result of their own actions should be classified as victims?

12.45 pm

The deputy First Minister: My sympathy goes out to everybody who suffered as a result of the conflict, and that includes those people from the Orange Order, who also suffered.

We must give the commission its place. For example, we want the commissioners designate to take forward work on the establishment of a victims' and survivors' forum, and the arrangements for the setting up of such a forum will essentially be a matter for them. That will be a very

important element of their work, and we expect that the forum will play a crucial role in helping to inform the commission as to the needs of all victims and survivors.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP welcomes the appointment of the victims' commissioners, albeit that it is somewhat confused by how the appointments came about. As a party that had no role to play in the creation of victims, it must point out certain truths. The deputy First Minister said in an earlier response that loss and pain were inflicted on all sides, but I must point out to him that they were not inflicted by all.

When exactly will the victims' and survivors' forum be established? Will it be established by designate commissioners, or will they have to wait for the introduction of legislation to create the victims' commission before they can establish the forum? When will that legislation be brought to this House? What control will the victims' commissioners have over the £33 million that has been allocated in the Budget, or will that money be given to each of the different Departments? How will the relationship between the Executive and the victims' commission be established?

The deputy First Minister: I will not respond to the political point-scoring. Given the day that is in it, it is a pity that some people are attempting to undermine today's announcement.

The commissioners designate will make the decision on the establishment of the victims' forum. We very much see that as being their work, and we expect the forum to play an important role in helping to inform the commission about the needs of victims and survivors. It is essentially for the commissioners designate to decide when that forum will be established.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I thank the First Minister for his statement. Can the deputy First Minister tell us whether we now have a commission that reflects the diversity, concerns and needs across society? Can he assure us that the needs of all the various victims and survivors will be responded to and will be reflected in the work of the four commissioners?

The deputy First Minister: It is my view that the membership of the commission — which is, in essence, what it will be — will have a very wide appeal in the community. It would be very wrong of me, or any Member, to even attempt to begin to categorise the individual people concerned and their viewpoints on many different matters. The commissioners must now engage in the important work of achieving as much support as possible, given the disparate views that people hold on the issue of victims and survivors. They must try to gain as much respect and support as possible from the bulk of people who have been affected by the conflict. It is not my job, nor is it the job of the Executive or the Assembly, to categorise the four individuals. Our challenge to them is to ask them to work towards having broad appeal in every section of the community and to be very sympathetic to everyone whom they meet.

As the commissioners make progress and report individually, or as a commission, it is important that they are able to say that they have consistently reached out their hands in support to every section of the community. I do not want to hear an individual commissioner say that he or she specialises in a particular section of the community. That would be a sign of failure, because the commissioners must have a broad appeal. After speaking to them at the end of last week, I am totally satisfied that they recognise, and are up for, the challenge.

Mrs I Robinson: I add my voice to the welcome for today's announcement of a victims' commission. However, I too am disappointed that the news was leaked to the public before a statement had been made to the House.

Will the deputy First Minister tell the House when legislation will be introduced and how long the term of the commission will be? Does he agree that it is vital that the genuinely innocent victims

of violence regard the commissioners as four people to whom they can relate their experiences? Will he assure me that the House will be updated on the work programme for victims?

The deputy First Minister: Legislation is in the hands of the powers that be in the Assembly. The First Minister and I are determined that the work be completed as quickly as possible. Our office and the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, chaired by Danny Kennedy, will work together to that end.

The legislation will set out a four-year term for the commission, and I commit to updating the Assembly, and, most importantly, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as work on those important matters progresses.

Mr Irwin: I also welcome today's announcement of a victims' commission, because the workload is simply too great to be handled by a sole commissioner. When does the deputy First Minister expect to see the benefits of the commission's work? Will he describe the type of programme that will be offered to assist the victims?

The deputy First Minister: The vast majority of victims, who were mobilised on this issue and are keen to see progress, will be pleased by the important and decisive announcement — at long last — of the establishment of a group of highly talented individuals. Many victims' issues were not dealt with previously, and people were not given their place in society. There is a realistic expectation that such matters will now be addressed because local people, who have the confidence of the Assembly, the Executive and, most importantly, the community, will take a hands-on approach that will expedite resolutions to the difficulties that have been created over many years.

The commissioners' work is vital, and people will take great encouragement from the decision that has been announced today. The commissioners understand that they have a responsibility to make swift progress on all issues.

Mr Beggs: I welcome today's announcement of additional funding for victims and survivors. The deputy First Minister told the House that he and the First Minister did not disagree on the appointment of a single victims' commissioner. In that case, why did they take so long to re-advertise for a single commissioner and then announce the appointment of four? That seems to be inconsistent. Given the increase from one to four commissioners, will he advise the House on the estimated cost of administration, salaries, accommodation and staff? Will he acknowledge that it would be better for the additional administrative funding to go directly to the victims and survivors?

The deputy First Minister: The post of victims' commissioner was advertised as attracting a salary of £65,000 a year. The commissioners designate will each be paid that amount. We believe that that is money well spent and that victims and survivors deserve that level of attention and that amount of support. There may be people who have a different view.

Under direct rule the post was initially advertised as a single post. When the post was re-advertised — on the basis of our taking ownership of the process — it was advertised as a single post. At the time of considering the issue of a victims' commissioner, we were dealing with many other vital issues, including trying to put together a draft Budget, a draft Programme for Government, a draft investment strategy and many other matters.

When reflecting on those matters, it is sensible that the Government have flexibility and are able to change their minds when they feel that something different has to be done. Effectively, the First Minister and I changed our minds. Our proposal was legally proofed and we consulted the Commissioner for Public Appointments, both of which vindicated our stance. I think that society will welcome that.

I know that some Members are gobsmacked that there was no disagreement between the First Minister and myself on the issue of a single commissioner. However, that is the truth of the matter. We reflected deeply on all of those matters, we worked on the issue just two days after Christmas, and we gave serious consideration as to how we could best meet the needs of victims and survivors. We have accomplished that with the announcement that has been made today.

Mrs Hanna: I certainly want the victims and survivors to have the loudest possible voice. My question will not imply any criticism of any of the four appointed individuals. Does the deputy First Minister believe that by Balkanising the process, they have failed to recognise the integrity and the oneness of the suffering of all of the victims, and, indeed, the healing process as envisaged in 'A Shared Future'?

The deputy First Minister: I am disappointed at the contribution that has just been made, which was the only attempt during this sitting to Balkanise the process. The Member has made a huge mistake and has done a great disservice to the four people who have been appointed to those onerous posts.

I remind Mrs Hanna that during the political process that we have all been involved in over recent years, there was a time when the SLDP was proactively encouraging the appointment of 10 commissioners to deal with individual departmental responsibilities. If that is not Balkanisation, I do not know what is.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the fact that — as the deputy First Minister said — “at long last” this announcement has been made. Does the deputy First Minister agree that there is widespread cynicism amongst the public about the reasons given for the appointment of four commissioners rather than one? Will the deputy First Minister assure Members that each of the four commissioners will have the full confidence of both himself and the First Minister?

The deputy First Minister: I do not share the Member's view that there is widespread cynicism. The announcement has just been made. Therefore, I do not know how he can make that judgement. Regardless of the speculation over the weekend, every single member of the victims' commission will have the full support of the First Minister and myself.

Mr Burnside: A lot of fine words, some sympathy and some welcome money for victims have been announced today. I will ask the deputy First Minister a straight question and I want a straight answer. He commanded the Provisional IRA in this Province, which was responsible for the murder of over 2,500 people. Others also committed murders, but he was a senior commander along with Gerry Adams and his colleagues.

How does he square today's kind words and sympathy with what he was responsible for, and with his refusal — and that of his fellow IRA commanders and members — to participate in any historical crime investigation? Many widows and orphans of RUC, UDR and Army members who died because of his campaign feel that he is a hypocrite.

1.00 pm

The deputy First Minister: Again, I cannot see a question about the appointment of the victims' commissioners in what the Member has said. I will not fall into the trap of politicising the debate. Members have their own views about the history of this island: some people's views go back 30, 40 or 80 years, or even eight centuries. There is no point in our getting into that today. I will debate the history of this island with the Member in any place and at any time, but today a vital issue of concern to victims and survivors is being discussed.

There are victims and survivors in every section of our community, many of whom play very important and powerful roles in the new political situation. We want that work to continue, and we will continue to support it in the hope that the ownership that victims and survivors take of their

difficulties will not only help their own healing processes, but help the overall healing process that we all must undergo.

Mr A Maginness: To paraphrase Shakespeare, methinks the Minister doth protest too much. Although the deputy First Minister protests that there was no division between himself and the First Minister, there is a widely held suspicion among Members that there was a serious division, which this scheme has been created to disguise. The scheme may or may not work — those appointed have been generally recognised as good people. However, any mechanism for their coming to collective agreement must be extremely difficult. What mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that the four victims' commissioners designate speak with a collective voice for victims?

The deputy First Minister: As an experienced member of the legal profession, the Member knows that suspicion does not condemn anyone. The First Minister and I agreed to appoint four commissioners designate. That must be remembered — there is no point talking about suspicion. We have reached agreement on a subject of tremendous importance and relevance to the entire community.

The commissioners will work by consensus. When I met the commissioners designate, I cited the example that the First Minister and I have given since we took office — working positively and constructively together. Although there will be times when people do not agree, the trick is to find solutions to the problems faced. That is what the First Minister and I have attempted to do during our stewardship of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That message was not lost on the commissioners designate, and they will do a good job. Although the jury will be out on them for a short time, I have tremendous confidence in them.

Ms Lo: I welcome the announcement. However, does the deputy First Minister agree that it would have been more sensible to appoint one full-time chief commissioner, then setting up the commission and advertising for part-time commissioners, as happens in similar bodies such as the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission? There would have been someone to lead the commission, but the increase in administrative costs — let alone the risk of a legal challenge against the current multiple appointments — would have been avoided.

The deputy First Minister: We have appointed four people to lead the commission because we believe that there is enough work for them to do. They are eminently suited to the challenge that is before them and, whatever economic factors are brought to bear, their ability to work together and not, for example, depend on bringing in consultants will bring important savings.

We believe that the victims and survivors deserve the support of four strong voices working together on a basis of consensus, and that is what the commissioners are committed to doing. We will see what happens along the way, but the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will work positively and constructively with all of them against a backdrop of having listened to, and been affected by, their presentations and recognising that we have appointed four very talented people who have a wide appeal in society.

Mr Donaldson: I add my voice in welcoming the announcement this afternoon by the First Minister.

Does the deputy First Minister agree that some of the voices that we hear casting questions and doubts about the validity of the decision to appoint four commissioners were in Government themselves at one stage and did nothing to appoint any commission to help victims? The money that they provided for the victims sector during that period was a mere fraction of the amount that is proposed today.

Methinks that some others protest too loudly and are trying to cover their own inadequacy and failure to provide for the victims sector while, only months into the new Administration, we have the appointment of a commission on a par with the Equality Commission, which has 17

commissioners, the Human Rights Commission with 10, and the Parades Commission with seven. Why should the victims not have four commissioners? They are no longer —

Mr Speaker: Can the Member come to his question?

Mr Donaldson: Victims are no longer second-class citizens; does the deputy First Minister agree with that?

The deputy First Minister: The Member has outlined his view of our history. I will not be drawn into that debate, except to say that this is a different place with different political circumstances, a different political dispensation and tremendous hope and optimism for the future. Some people — perhaps even some in this House — do not like that, because they do not feel part of it. The challenge for us, as the major parties in the Assembly, is to make everyone feel part of it, and that is what we want to do.

We need to come together on the many issues that are of critical importance to our community. There are wounds to be healed and difficult situations to be dealt with. What we need is the best possible start, and today's announcement is the best start that we could have achieved in the circumstances.