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Opinion

Viewpoint: Walking a tightrope over past

Tuesday, January 29, 2008

It was always optimistic to think that the First and Deputy First Ministers could agree on a single Victims Commissioner, representing both communities, so two would have been an understandable compromise. But the appointment of four commissioners only indicates the difficulties of consensus at the top of our political system on difficult decisions.

Clearly they should offer an even more detailed explanation as to why they have gone outside the terms of the post that was advertised - for a second time - last October. The Victims and Survivors (NI) Order, passed in November 2006, provides for Stormont's co-equal heads of government, "acting jointly", to appoint a commissioner whose principal aim is "to promote the interests of victims and survivors".

The law has to be altered, to accommodate the new appointments, and then it will be up to the four commissioners to prove themselves. The public must be told how the job is to be split between them, to define who is or is not a victim, and to decide what assistance, financial or otherwise, can be given to claimants.

They must know that because of the inability of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness to agree on a single commissioner, they will be seen as representatives of one or other community, whether this is the reality or not. Hopefully, they will be able to agree on most issues - such as the removal of offensive murals or monuments - but they will be walking a tightrope. When they speak, it must be with one voice.

The quadrupling of the salaries budget, when Finance Minister Peter Robinson has declared war on "overstaffing", is just one unfortunate consequence of the appointments. They will be seen as evidence of a two-party carve-up, with the DUP and Sinn Fein agreeing to share the spoils of office, without regard for the wider public interest.

At the same time, power-sharing was never going to be easy and most people would accept that if the appointment of four commissioners avoids a potentially serious split, it may be worthwhile. The four nominees, like those who appointed them, will be judged by results.

The sensitivity of victims' issues is underlined by the demand of some victims and survivors of the IRA's La Mon atrocity that Ian Paisley should not attend the 30th anniversary commemoration. Their resentment of power-sharing with Sinn Fein is indicative of the lack of trust in both communities - showing why agreement on one commissioner was virtually impossible.

The Provisionals may have decommissioned arms and Sinn Fein has declared its support for the PSNI, but the dissident threat remains. That a member of the 32-County Sovereignty Committee, linked to the Real and Continuity IRA, should call on militant forces to unite is a warning to all democrats, like the interception of alleged gun-runners in Lithuania. The hard-won peace must be defended.

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