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NI parties criticised for 'failing victims'

Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party today faced calls to apologise to victims across Northern Ireland after a row between the parties led to another delay in the creation of a new commission to represent their interests.

Stormont's two main parties axed an Assembly debate on the Victims and Survivors Bill only minutes before it was set to go before the chamber after clashing over a proposal to appoint a chief commissioner to oversee the work of the body.

Having previously convinced MLAs of the need to fast-track the legislation, the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister was forced to announce that the bill's so-called accelerated passage had been postponed.

Members of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness's parties are at loggerheads over an Alliance party

amendment that would see one of the four newly appointed Victims' Commissioners elevated to a lead role.

Alliance deputy Naomi Long described the events at Stormont as outrageous and said both offices were failing to deliver for the victims' sector

"They could have appointed a single commissioner last May without the need for legislation," she said.

"But instead they decided to appoint four commissioners and now they've even proved themselves incapable of bringing that legislation forward.

"That is a massive indictment of their ability to do the job they were elected to do. They owe an explanation and apology not only to the Assembly but to the public and especially the victims.

Mrs Long said a chief commissioner directing the work of the whole commission would be more effective than all four commissioners having their own separate departments.

The DUP, SDLP and Ulster Unionists are in favour of the amendment but the proposal is opposed by Sinn Fein, which believes it will lead to the creation of a hierarchy within the commission.

Republicans have accused the DUP of backtracking on the terms of the original agreement between the First and Deputy First ministers at the end of last year.

Sinn Fein Assembly member Francie Molloy said the DUP had to stick to its pledges.

"That agreement was reached before Christmas on the lines that we would have equality of commissioners," he said.

"There can be no hierarchy of victims so there can be no hierarchy of commissioners. We had an agreement with the DUP and we need to stick to that agreement."

However the DUP's Sammy Wilson said it was right that sensible amendments should be considered.

"We're not stopping anybody," he said. "What we are doing is to ensure first of all we have a commission which is independent and where there can be a clear spokesperson for that commission, not four different ones, so victims will know there is some clarity."

Mr Wilson denied there had been a split on the issue. "The bill was pulled so we can find a way forward, it is important that the Victims' Commission is an institution which is durable and which will outlast this Assembly," he said.

The creation of the new commission has been mired in controversy and delay from the outset.

The First and Deputy First ministers had originally planned to appoint one commissioner, however, in January they announced that they had changed their mind and had opted to create a four-strong team.

This prompted claims that the two ministers had been unable to agree on one candidate.

Meanwhile, the decision to appoint Patricia McBride, the sister of an IRA man shot dead by the SAS, as one of the commissioners angered some unionist victims and the creation of the body is now subject to a legal challenge.

The other three commissioners are former TV broadcaster Mike Nesbitt, ex-interim victims' commissioner Bertha McDougall and Brendan McAllister of Mediation NI.

Each will be paid £65,000 a year with the entire commission costing £750,000 per annum.

PA

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