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Victims' commissioners 'may have to get tough'

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“ People would ask what foot does she dig with, so four may have been needed for balance ”

Monday, January 28, 2008

By Noel McAdam

A former Victims Commissioner has warned the four new appointees against becoming a pipeline to disperse cash to victims groups.

Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, who produced a defining report on victims issues 10 years ago, told the four new victims commissioners that they "will need to champion the needs of victims and speak frankly to government, publicly on occasions".

The former head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service said he was glad to see action "on the victims front" at last and urged the new commissioners to examine the economic and financial position of victims.

Sir Ken, who remains a member of the Independent Commission on the Disappeared, said his 1998 report had recommended the establishment of a champion for victims but it remained unclear how the new commissioners will work.

"Unhappily we live in a community where if there was a commissioner people would ask what community does he represent, what foot does she dig with, so four may have been necessary for balance" he said.

Sir Ken also praised the decision to include interim commissioner Bertha McDougall as one of the four appointed by First Ministers Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness and said she had done a "very good job".

The First Ministers were due to spell out how the commissioners quartet will operate and confirm each will have the salary advertised — £65,000.

MLAs also expected to hear the names of the commissioners. They are Mrs McDougall, whose police reservist husband Lindsay was shot dead by the INLA in Belfast in 1981.

Another commissioner will be Patricia MacBride, whose brother Tony was one of two IRA members killed along with a member of the SAS near the Co Fer managh border in 1984, and whose father Frank also died nearly 18 months after being shot by loyalists in Belfast in 1972.

The third commissioner is Brendan McAllister of Mediation Northern Ireland, and the fourth is former TV anchorman Mike Nesbitt, who is a PR consultant.

MEP Jim Allister said the appointments could lead to compromise over the definition of 'victimhood'. He said: "It is imperative that the unionist majority in the Assembly insists that the definition does not equate innocent victims with the perpetrators of terror. This will be a litmus test for the DUP."

But former party colleague Jeffrey Donaldson, said: "We will not let the case of victims be forgotten."

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