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## KELLY ADDRESSES ASSEMBLY DURING VICTIMS COMMISSION DEBATE

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Addressing the Assembly during the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill today SDLP Equality Spokesperson Dolores Kelly MLA stated:

“The manner in which this Bill has been handled has been disappointing to say the least.

Despite the rhetoric, the additional appointments and the associated costs, the opportunity has not been taken to give this Commission the sort of powers it requires to be effective in its support for victims. This gives the lie to the self-righteous grand-standing in public.

The Minister went so far as to challenge my colleague Mark Durkan for not having sought to amend the Bill at Westminster. In fact there was no Bill at Westminster – the issue was dealt with by way of Order in Council, which, as the Minister well knows, cannot be amended. Not only that, but Mark Durkan did raise the issues of the Commission's authority at the Committee stage of that order on 1 November 2006. He stated:

“It is one thing for the commissioner to be able to give advice, but there are issues about whether the victims' commissioner will be able to get the quality of attention and response from Departments that the Commissioner for Children and Young People gets. We also need to address that in the future.”

More importantly, the Minister, speaking to proposed amendments last week, made the comparison between the Victims Commission and Equality and Human Rights Commission to defend his position on the number of Commissioners. This has served only to highlight other disparities that he does not wish to rectify. The onus is now on him to explain why the Victims Commission despite the enormously higher salary spend on Victims Commissioners over other Commissioners should have such restricted powers.

The powers we sought would have given the Commission a legal basis to pursue victims' interests with vigour and authority consistent with internationally defined standards. Without the inclusion of these principles, the commissioner's ability to make a difference is limited. I might have expected this from the DUP but it exposes a side to Sinn Féin that undermines their stated commitment to human rights and equality.

I would reiterate that it is my view victims' interests remain prejudiced by the lack of consensus and failure of leadership within OFMDFM.”

ENDS

13-05-08

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