



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

Widow of an RUC reservist murdered in 1981 to be new “victims’ commissioner”



Bertha McDougall.

Northern Ireland’s first victims’ commissioner has pledged to perform her new duties with an independent voice. Bertha McDougall, the widow of an RUC reservist murdered by the INLA in 1981, made the comments as she spoke for the first time about her post. The interim appointment has been welcomed by the DUP but Sinn Fein said it had concerns about her independence. However, Mrs McDougall said she would ensure everyone was treated in a “fair and equitable manner”.

She told a news conference she would be offering an “open door” to anyone who wanted to make representations to her. “I will be wanting to ensure that everyone is treated in a fair and equitable manner.” An ex-primary school teacher, Mrs. McDougall will be responsible for establishing a new forum for victims of the Troubles.

Peter Hain

Her appointment as victims’ commissioner was announced by Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Hain. “Her experience in working with victims and victims’ support groups will be vital in helping to address the needs of those who have suffered great personal loss,” he said. “The government believes that the needs of those who have suffered so much over the years must get greater recognition. They must not become the forgotten people.” Mr Hain also said legislation to establish a commissioner on a longer term basis would be introduced. The commissioner will look at key areas relating to services for victims, funding arrangements in relation to services and grants paid to victims’ and survivors’ groups and individual victims and survivors.

DUP

DUP leader Ian Paisley said Mrs. McDougall’s experiences “ideally equipped her to champion the needs of victims. I hope this appointment will start the process of putting the needs of victims at the top of the agenda,” he said. However, Sinn Fein assembly member Philip McGuigan said his party was not satisfied about the extent of Mrs. McDougall’s independence. He said the commissioner needed to have the support of all communities, but must not “reinforce the existing hierarchy of victims”. SDLP assembly member Patricia Lewsley said her party had called for a victims’ forum to represent diverse concerns, rather than a single commissioner. Anne Boal from the Disabled Police Officers’ Association also welcomed the appointment.