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Ex-RUC Role in Legacy Body Sparks Political Uproar

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A dispute has erupted in Northern Ireland after the head of the region's human rights watchdog declared that a senior investigator's position on a legacy commission was "untenable" because of his former police service. Unionist parties have denounced the comments as partisan and damaging to efforts aimed at addressing historical cases fairly.

Alyson Kilpatrick, Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), criticised the appointment of Peter Sheridan as lead investigator for the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR). Kilpatrick argued that Sheridan's past in the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) compromised the commission's ability to act impartially in examining unresolved incidents linked to the Troubles. She told the Irish News that his background effectively undermined public confidence, adding that she had wider concerns about the commission's governance and the role of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in shaping its mandate.

Unionist voices swiftly challenged her stance. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) called Kilpatrick's remarks unprofessional and lacking objectivity, accusing the NIHRC of undermining fair employment principles rather than defending them. The Ulster Unionist Party warned that if former RUC officers were excluded from legacy investigations, it would withdraw support from the ICRIR altogether.

Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) leader Jim Allister went further, branding the NIHRC a "deeply politicised body" intent on pushing an agenda hostile to any balanced approach to Northern Ireland's troubled past. He argued that denying experienced officers the opportunity to contribute risked turning the commission into another arena for political point-scoring rather than genuine reconciliation.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was established under the 1998 Belfast Agreement to hold government and public institutions accountable for protecting the rights of all communities. Yet Kilpatrick's intervention has sparked fresh allegations that the body has drifted away from neutrality.

Peter Sheridan, who once served as a senior officer in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, has not publicly responded to the criticism. Supporters of his appointment point to his decades of experience and knowledge of policing in Northern Ireland, arguing this background is an asset rather than a liability in uncovering the truth of unresolved cases.

With public confidence in legacy processes already fragile, this latest controversy risks further eroding trust and deepening divisions over how Northern Ireland should reckon with the past.