

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Pa Parades '97
(Bellaghy)

BELLAGHY CONCERNED RESIDENTS (February 1997)

INTRODUCTION:

The village of Bellaghy has a central location within N. Ireland. total population of 1,200 people, of which 1,080 are Nationalist. Bellaghy Concerned Residents was formed as a community response to the continual sectarian and offensive parades organised by Loyalists in a village which is over 90% nationalist and the disruption of the social- life of the village. Such parades ensure that the Nationalists Residents living in Bellaghy are subjected to sectarian dominance, especially on the occasion of the Mini-Twelfth when thousands of Loyalists from throughout the North swamp the village, under the guise of a fund-raising parade in aid of local band, Bruce's True Blues.

A petition was circulated to gauge the opinion of the local residents. The results of the petition indicated overwhelming support for a campaign against sectarian and offensive parades. Bellaghy Concerned Residents is representative of a wide cross-section of the local community and it voices the genuine feelings in the village towards sectarian and offensive parades.

Since 1995 the group has been running a dignified and peaceful campaign to highlight the sectarian and triumphalist nature of the Loyalist parades which are forced through the 90% Nationalist village each year. Opposition to Loyalist parades in Bellaghy has been a prevalent feature over the years. The opposition is a result of the views of the Nationalists residents being treated with contempt along with the sectarian nature of these parades.

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THE EFFECTS OF PARADES ON THE LOCAL COMMUNITY:

Over the years the Nationalist residents have had to endure the spectacle of triumphalist parades in the village. There has also been a sinister element associated with these parades over the years. In 1981 on the 12th of July morning members of the Orange Order were blatantly sectarian as they gloated over the deaths of the hunger strikers. They also painted the village with loyal colours aided by the RUC and painted slogans on Nationalist cars. The hunger strikers graves have also been desecrated, along with other graves in the Catholic cemetery. These graves were desecrated by members of a band who were invited into the village for a Loyalist band parade.

Residents windows have also been broken by loyalists including those of pensioners during these parades. Youths attending the local GAA club have been physically attacked on their way home from football training by Loyalists who were at the band parade. A local businessman an ex- Unionist councillor who is a member of the Loyal Institutions has on a number of occasions appeared on the street armed, and has confronted Nationalists youths in the centre of the village, in one occasion in full view of the police he fired two shots from a shotgun. He was taken to court and was given a small fine.

Between 1986 and 1994 there has been an increase of 45% in Loyalist parades throughout N. Ireland. In Bellaghy 1996 we had two major parades and eight minor parades. This means in effect there is an average of one parade per month in Bellaghy. When major parades such as the mini-twelfth take place in the village the Nationalist residents are put under a curfew, in reality they are placed under house arrest. Their movements are restricted from 4pm to 11 pm on the night of the parade.

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As a result of this curfew people are prevented from carrying out their normal routine. Residents coming home from work have to leave their cars outside the village as they are prevented from entering the village by the R.U.C.. Local residents are prevented from going to the shops, and people who regularly attend evening mass refrain from doing so fearing being attacked and verbally abused by walking through loyalist crowds.

Loyalist bands carrying UVF Flags dressed in paramilitary uniform continually stop at the top of Nationalist housing estates playing provocative tunes and shouting UVF slogans while taking part in the parade. These bands parade up to 11pm at night and the noise they create prevents young children from sleeping when they are put to bed. They also install tension and fear in the local community. Some people don't even sleep that night after the parades, as they fear that their homes maybe attacked.

On Sunday the 11th of August 1996 the Royal Black Preceptory had a church parade to their church at the bottom of the village. However they planed to begin this parade at the top end of the village which is totally Nationalist. The Nationalist Residents had no problems with them parading from the Orange Hall which stands in the middle of the village, see Map (Appendix 1). But we could not see any justification for them parading from the top end of the village. As a result a 19 hour stand-off took place, before they agreed to parade back to their Hall and disperse. They agreed to have negotiations concerning all future parades in the village.

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THE ROLE OF THE R.U.C.:

While these parades are taking place in our village the role of the R.U.C. can only be seen as nothing more than facilitating the Loyal Institutions to display their sectarian and triumphalist policies in our village. The R.U.C. cannot been seen as neutral arbiters, because they have the power to ban Loyalist parades in Nationalist areas, however over the years they have neglected the views and wishes of Nationalists residents concerning parades. How can a force that is majority Protestant and has connections with the Orange Order and who facilitate the dominance of the Loyal Orders in the area of public political expression be allowed to make the decisions about Loyalist parades in Nationalist areas.

While conducting peaceful protests the Nationalist residents in Bellaghy have had to endure the provocation and physical assaults by members of the R.U.C.. Local residents have been subjected physical assaults ranging from bruising around the throat, arms and legs, being kicked and punched, thrown at walls and having their fingers bent back, severe injuries caused by baton blows to the head, abdomen and legs and one young man required to stay in hospital as the result of a member of the R.U.C. jumping on his leg. A young girl was seriously assaulted by members of the R.U.C., which resulted in her sustaining severe facial injuries. As a result of these injuries she had to undergo major dental treatment at the R.V.H. Belfast.

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RESIDENTS CONCENT:

Over the years the Loyalist Institutions have never approached the Nationalist residents of Bellaghy to consult them about the parading issue. Throughout our campaign we have always called upon the local Loyal Institutions to discuss the parading issue with us. While it would appear to be obvious that a resolution to the parading issue involves dialogue between the parade organisers and the local residents. Unfortunately our appeals have been ignored until August 1996. As the result of the stand-off the Royal Black Pereceptory entered into dialogue with us. However it looks like we still have a long way to go before all the Loyal Institutions accept that they must seek the consent of the Nationalist Residents before they parade.

In Bellaghy we were able to reach an agreement with the Black Preceptory which goes to show what can happen when dialogue takes place, see (Appendix 2). However this agreement only dealt with one parade. If an overall agreement is to be achieved, all Loyalist parades in Nationalist areas must not be seen in isolation.

The history of recurring Loyalist parades only developed in the last 100 years when the absolute right of the Loyal Orders to parade, whenever and wherever they wanted was not questioned. Crucially, similar rights of expression were not afforded to the Nationalist community. The use of "traditional" as a pretext to parade in Nationalist areas should not be used as an legitimate justification for these parades taking place. In Bellaghy the excuse for a major parade is a band collection. However for this collection to take place it requires over 400 members of the R.U.C. and the influx of Loyalists from all over N. Ireland. There is no justification for a parade such as this to take place in Bellaghy.

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The principle of consent is central to the working of a democracy and yet, the Loyal Institutions who claim to be democratic, neglect this principle when they are parading through Nationalist areas. The Orange Institution is more than just symbolising triumphalism, it is and has been a part of the N. Ireland state which down the years has alienated the Catholic community. The connection between it and the Storment are well documented and undeniable.

With the number of Loyalist parades increasing each year, it is clear to see that by parading in Nationalist areas they are attempting to reassert territorial dominance. Therefore parades by the Loyal Institutions are not just symbolic of past oppression but a continuation of it.

We believe that dialogue is the only way forward and we feel that the Loyal Orders and Loyalist parade organisers need to accept that they should be seeking accommodation, not domination.

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CURRENT POSITION IN BELLAGHY

We had anticipated further meetings would have taken place with the Loyal Orders in Bellaghy following the agreement which was reached in August. At present no contact has taken place between us, even though we have being calling for dialogue with them since August.

The Royal Black Preceptory issued a statement claiming that they would find it difficult to have talks with us, as they claimed the Residents Group was a "front for IRA/Sinn Fein". However 7 months ago they had no difficulty in sitting down across a table with us to reach an agreement back in August 1996.

We believe that the Irish Government needs to take a more proactive role in upholding the rights of the Nationalist Residents.

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