

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Assessment of situation in Portadown in the run-up to 'Drumcree 6'

I met with a number of contacts in Portadown on 26 June to discuss the situation on the ground prior to Drumcree. While the Parades Commission determination on the 2nd July march was awaited with interest by those I spoke to, there appeared to be no fear or expectation that it would rule in favour of a march down the Garvaghy Road (as expected, it re-routed the parade away from the Road - the determination for the main Drumcree march on 9th July is to be announced on Monday next). After two years without a march, there is an expectation among the local residents that this year will be no different - i.e. a re-routed march, a possible standoff and the security forces securing the area against the marchers and protestors. However, a question-mark hangs over the attitude and possible actions of certain loyalist factions and this is giving rise to genuine fears.

Local clergy

A member of the Jesuit community, **Fr Michael Bingham** has been here for the past two years and has experienced both the serious disturbances of 1998 and the relatively peaceful situation last year. He noted that local people are going about their business as best they can and are optimistic that a march will not be forced down the road. That said, there are a large number of parades and protests this year and that will certainly add to the tensions. People living in the centre of the Garvaghy Road area will be relatively safe and well-catered for (e.g. shops will stay open, unlike in the town-centre). Those at the interfaces and living along the parade routes will be hemmed in by the security operation and will be anxious about loyalist attacks. He thought that people will adopt a low-key approach and wait till it all passes.

He commented that, if he were an Orangeman, he would be desperately trying to find a way to get the District Lodge off this hook of their own making. At this stage, there is no real prospect of a march taking place, particularly in the absence of dialogue, and the Orange side must realise that themselves. The question is: how do they get themselves out of this corner without losing face. He has been thinking about this for some time and can't really see how it can be done, although the Currin process holds some potential. He enquired whether MacCionnaith and the Residents Coalition were actively engaging with Brian Currin. I noted that they have spoken in very positive terms about this initiative and he was encouraged by this. He noted that, ultimately, dialogue is the only way forward but it is up to the Orange side to grasp this fundamental point. Until they do, he could see no resolution to this depressing, annual dispute.

Fr Seán Larkin echoed these sentiments. He spoke of the game being up for the Orange side. In this context, the Nationalist community must not humiliate the Orange side but should allow them their dignity as they are encouraged and enticed into dialogue and engagement. Noting that "a wounded animal can be very dangerous", he warned against triumphalism or gloating on the part of local residents. Such a posture would reap a bitter harvest and put back the vital work of building up community relations for years. Without

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doubt, the local community continued to be opposed to a march and wanted the next few weeks to pass as quickly and as peacefully as possible.

Larkin believed that the District Lodge had severely damaged its cause by the antics at the recent inter-community concert which was attended, *inter alia*, by the Secretary of State and Trimble. This was a wonderful occasion which was attended by people from both communities in the town. Many of those from the Protestant side were on the receiving end of abuse from the Orange protestors and witnessed the ugly face of Orangeism at first hand, perhaps for the first time in their lives. This was hardly the way to "win friends and influence people".

Fr Larkin was at pains to point out the good work being done in the community and he bemoaned the lack of coverage in the media of this aspect of life in Portadown. That inter-community concert was one such example, yet the media emphasis was on the protest. Personally, he thought it was amazing to see Gary McMichael (UDP) waiting in the same queue with MacCionnaith and Joe Duffy. That we had reached this stage was a genuine miracle and this was the real story which should give us hope. In addition, inter-faith work is developing slowly and, while not drawing the numbers, it is taking place and that in itself is a positive development. From all these various roots, Portadown may yet be able to rise above the current mess.

Breandán MacCionnaith (GRRC)

Speaking just before the determination was released, MacCionnaith appeared reasonably relaxed about it, believing that the Commission could not allow a march in the current circumstances. He also expected the determination for the main Drumcree march to follow the same lines. Pointing to the protest parade on Saturday, 24 June - which failed to muster more than a few hundred supporters despite an advertising campaign in the regional newspapers - he took the view that the Orange Order could not rely on the large support of previous years. While some members of the Order are beginning to realise that they cannot force their way down the Road, others such as David Jones have made extremely worrying comments about welcoming support from all quarters (that particular comment was made in reply to a question about possible paramilitary support for the Lodge). This 'flirting' with loyalist paramilitaries may also be a contributory factor in the loss of support, as it would keep more moderate Protestant elements away.

He insisted the local residents are as determined as before that there will be no march without dialogue. The events of the past five years (including the murders of Robert Hamill and Rosemary Nelson) have hardened opposition to the Orange side. He noted that many observers were coming to the Garvaghy Road and would stay with families in the area, as in previous years. The local community was heartened by their presence. However, they are fearful about loyalist attacks and he stressed the importance of the security forces protecting nationalist areas in the weeks ahead. In this regard, he was unhappy that work had stopped on securing a number of potential flashpoints, following the trouble which flared up at the old bridge near Craigwell Avenue last Friday. This work needed to be completed rapidly.

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The GRRC is to meet with the local RUC commander in Portadown on 29 June, at the request of the RUC. He believes it may be in connection with the erection of an Orange Arch at the town end of Garvaghy Road. In their view, this arch should not be erected prior to the Parades Commission decision on the 9th July march and, in the event of a re-routing away from the Road, it should not be erected at all. This had led to a large security operation in previous years which had increased tensions in the area. The GRRC are also due to meet again with Brian Currin on 29 June to review progress to date.

Dolores Kelly (SDLP)

Dolores Kelly is a councillor and outgoing Mayor of Craigavon. She lives in Lurgan and works in the Edenderry Social Services Centre in a staunchly loyalist part of Portadown. Like the other contacts, she believes the sting has gone out of the parade and thought Saturday's protest march was 'pathetic'. She knows some Unionist colleagues on the Council and even some contacts on the loyalist side who, unlike previous years, will not be around for the Drumcree march but will be on holidays. She believes this is indicative of a serious fall-off in support for the District Lodge.

In her view, the restoration of the political institutions and the announcement that morning of the CBM would help 'lower the temperature' in the town. These were positive and tangible developments which provided a model for the future, whereas the Orange stance looked only to the past and all the failure that went with it. That being said, there is always the possibility of trouble from the fringes.

From her contacts on the unionist and loyalist sides, she was aware of efforts to set up community structures in the loyalist estates in the town. These areas suffer from many of the same problems and disadvantages as the Garvaghy Road community but were far less organised. People like Clifford Forbes (who certainly had and could possibly still have LVF links) are endeavouring to set up such community groups, but the local DUP were being extremely destructive and had sought to stymie such efforts. Kelly believes that such groups could build confidence in the loyalist community and this could allow a positive engagement with the Garvaghy Community on issues of mutual concern. She saw this fitting in very much with the proposed Civic Forum and she was anxious that this should be up and running as soon as possible after the marching season. She was keen that I meet with representatives from the loyalist community who were involved in these efforts and we agreed to arrange a meeting in early August, when they might feel more comfortable about such a meeting.

Kelly noted in passing that MacCionnaith had mellowed greatly over the past year or so and had matured from being a one-issue Councillor to becoming increasingly interested in social and economic issues. (Joe Duffy, on the other hand, being "an old Socialist Republican", had always taken a keen interest in 'bread-and-butter issues'). He would now approach SDLP colleagues to discuss matters and has had lengthy phone conversations with Brid Rodgers seeking her advice. She had also seen him having informal chats with some Unionist councillors and he had even accepted a lift home from a Unionist councillor. (Certainly in my contacts with MacCionnaith over the past few months, his interests have focused as much on economic issues, such as developing the Mayfair Business Centre, as on parades). Kelly

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felt that this 'opening', coupled with efforts in the loyalist community to get its act together in terms of community development, augured well for the town in the medium-to-long-term and would be something she would encourage and support all the way.

Dara O'Hagan (Sinn Féin)

O'Hagan's assessment did not differ in any substantive way from that of my other contacts. She mentioned that a Sinn Féin delegation had met the Parades Commission on 22 June to discuss Drumcree. It was difficult to gauge how the meeting had gone. In her presentation, O'Hagan had emphasised that nothing had changed in Portadown to justify a change in the Commission's position. While all the Commissioners were present, only the chairperson, Tony Holland, spoke. They seemed to be going through the motions of holding consultations with interested groups, which was hardly surprising as the positions of all the key actors in the dispute are well-known.

She was very worried about the comments on a recent *'Insight'* programme by the 'Orange Volunteers', threatening to beat their way down the road, while the UFF / LVF links were also of concern. She fears that someone will get hit, like Michael McGoldrick a few years back. Loyalists could either attack vulnerable Catholics, especially in mixed or interface areas, or they could go for a high-profile target (either a political figure or a member of a residents group). Sinn Féin had tightened security measures for its members.

Assessment:

Despite the impending marches, the atmosphere in the Garvaghy community is relatively calm. The experience of 1998 / 99, when the Parades Commission ruled in favour of the residents and the security forces demonstrated both an ability and a willingness to hold the line, has bred an expectation that this year will be broadly similar. This, coupled with a widely-held view that support for the Orange side has fallen off, has taken some of the edge off the situation.

The broad Nationalist community in Portadown would be genuinely surprised and horrified were the Commission to actually rule in favour of a march. After two years without a march, the sense of disillusionment would be all the greater were the Commission to allow a march or the security forces to force a march down the Road. It is clear that the opposition to a march going ahead in the absence of dialogue and agreement is as strong as ever. Any effort to force a march down the Road would be resisted strongly by the local residents and would have a radicalising effect on even moderate nationalist opinion in the town.

Finally, there seems a feeling, perhaps more a hope, that the Orange side cannot continue with this protest in vain year after year and that an engagement of sorts has to begin before too long. However, whether the Currin process turns out to be the right process at the right time remains to be seen.

Fergal Mythen
Security Section
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