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March won't celebrate war, it will honour armed forces

By Michael Copeland Tuesday, 28 October 2008

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The event is actually a Combined or TriService parade organised by the Ministry of Defence through Headquarters Northern Ireland in response to an invitation extended by Belfast City Council. The event will see members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and others assemble and parade in the vicinity of Belfast City Hall

In an entirely reprehensible way, Sinn Fein has organised a counter demonstration in the same area on the same date and at a similar time. Incidentally, this tactic was adopted by supporters of Ian Paisley on November 30, 1968, when they attempted to thwart a civil rights march in Armagh City. Of even more concern are the intentions of so-called dissident republicans who are inviting people from all over the island of Ireland to a protest at Divis flats. Since they haven't notified the Parades Commission, they are pretty much free to do what they like in terms of the parading legislation.

Those who have set our society on this collision course would do well to examine the history of service given by the men and women of this island to the British Armed Forces and services over many centuries.

The Royal Irish is the last Irish infantry regiment of the line serving in the British Army, and is therefore the inheritor of traditions going back as far as 1688. In common with all its predecessors, it is unashamedly Irish in its traditions, uniform, music and mascot; it has as its motto the phrase Faugh a Ballagh from the Irish Fag an Bealach.

According to tradition, this was first used on March 5, 1811, at the battle of Barossa when a British attack against the French had faltered. The Coldstream Guards, who were in front of the 2nd Batt, 87th Regiment of Foot (forerunners of the Royal Irish) were not displaying much stomach to press the attack, but the Irish-speaking soldiers of the 87th roared 'Fag an Bealach' (clear the way), successfully attacking the French through the Coldstream lines. During the same engagement, Ensign Keogh lost his life attempting to take a French Eagle, their equivalent of a Regimental Colour. The Eagle however, was captured shortly afterwards by Sgt Patrick Masterson with the immortal words 'be jabbers, boys, oi have the cuckoo'

During the First World War almost 300,000 Irish men and women volunteered for service in the British Forces with almost 50,000 giving their lives. This story, forgotten for almost 100 years, is now the subject of much welcome research in the Irish Republic.

For me, one of the most poignant stories from that time relates to an incident in 1917 when elements of the 36th Ulster Division were to be withdrawn from the line to rest before a planned attack. They were replaced by soldiers of the 16th Irish Division. During the handover inspection, the two respective Commanding Officers visited a sandbagged bastion. The Northern Colonel said: "My men have built this place and called it Derry's walls; I daresay your men will change its name." With much emotion and handshaking, the Southern Officer declared that the men of Leinster "would hold Derry's walls on behalf of their northern comrades".

The end of the Great War saw an event that has, perhaps, the most relevance to that proposed for November 2, when several Irish Battalions of the British Army accompanied by their Bands

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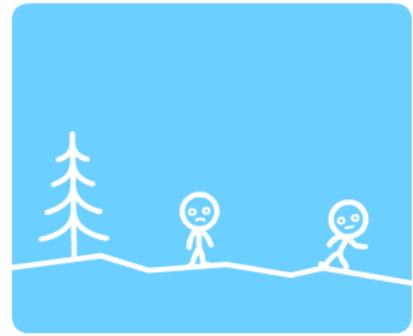
paraded in the Falls Road district of Belfast to attend a Mass at St Peter's Cathedral to celebrate their safe return from that conflict.

The parade on November 2 cannot be taken as a celebration of war and can only be properly viewed as an appropriate recognition of those 'who must conduct the business of war when the business of politics fails'.

When we live in a democracy and accept the notions of freedom of speech and freedom of expression, we should not be surprised when we hear and see things with which we disagree. However, we must never forget that these freedoms were won and are guarded by the young men and women of the Armed Forces. No matter how much the organisers of these counter demonstrations attempt to disguise their motives, their actions will be judged as nasty, shallow, spiteful, indefensible and inappropriate.

Without doubt, republicans do have a right to fly in the face of the history of this island, if they so choose. Without doubt they have the right to seek permission to hold a protest on November 2. The question is whether they are morally correct to exercise such rights on this occasion.

Michael Copeland is an Ulster Unionist councillor and former member of the UDR



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