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'Homecoming' hijacked for all the wrong reasons

Tom Kelly

By Tom Kelly

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TWO politicians run the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister; there are two junior ministers in the same office and four victims commissioners; perhaps we should be grateful we only got two parades on

Sunday.

The whole notion of a shared future gets more and more remote as the ridiculous nature of our governance takes root.

The so-called 'homecoming' parade was always going to be controversial; its sponsors intended it to be so.

Its purpose was another vain attempt by unionists to portray Belfast as British as Brighton.

They got the reaction they wanted when Sinn Fein fell hook, line and sinker by

responding with a counter protest march.

Whether one agrees with the war against terror or not is really irrelevant; especially when it comes to them exercising their right to parade on the streets of Belfast. There is no doubt that some of those who signed up for Territorial Service probably thought they would never see any more action than a weekend trekking in the Lake District let alone be deployed with the Regulars.

The history of the British army in Northern Ireland is not a reason against them marching in Belfast either.

Of course, the British army was responsible for many atrocities and for much of the management of our so-called 'dirty war' but so too were the IRA, many of whom regularly parade in Belfast at

militant republican events, rallies and

funerals and not always unarmed.

The Sinn Fein position on the Royal Irish 'homecoming' parade was schizophrenic and irrational.

Sinn Fein spent years claiming the streets of Belfast for the right of republicans to march.

Remember their campaign slogan 'It's our city too'?

Did they really mean that the streets of Belfast were only intended for the feet of republicans?

Naturally alongside the right to parade, is the right to protest.

This right underpins the basic principle of a democracy.

However, the exercise of the right to

parade and to protest within Northern

Ireland has usually the not so hidden agenda of undermining democracy rather than underpinning it.

...reclaiming the recent history of

the British army; like the PSNI, they are a legitimate and legally constituted force within Northern Ireland for as long as Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom.

Sometimes we can get confused on this issue because often the UDA, UVF and

indeed the IRA were often allowed to act as though they were legitimate and legal military organisations within Northern Ireland.

Indeed if NIO ministers Shaun Woodward and Paul Goggins had their way many members

of these infamous organisations would be receiving long service and good conduct medals as if they were former boy scouts or members of a Holy Family Confraternity.

But back to Northern Ireland still being Northern Ireland and devolved government being just that and not a national sovereign parliament. Now you can dress it up or talk it down but the basic premise of the Good Friday Agreement and latterly the St Andrews Agreement enshrines the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom until the majority of the citizens of Northern Ireland chose to end that link.

That's what nationalist representatives in Sinn Fein and indeed the SDLP signed up to.

One may call it transitional.

One may aspire for it to end.

One may even pretend it does not exist but it does.

Therefore for as long as Northern Ireland exists we will have this tussle over the right of the army or the PSNI to parade in Belfast or anywhere else.

Naturally there are those who still think that Northern Ireland is planet Orange and therefore can't resist taking advantage of opportunities such the return of the Royal Irish to hijack the symbols and traditions of British identity for party political and indeed sectarian reasons.

The army HQ was right to tone down any signs of triumphalism.

The Belfast leadership of Sinn Fein would have been better to have come up with

another form of objection other than street protest.

Ultimately, this 'homecoming' parade was hijacked by both sides for the wrong

reasons. It was sheer misguided political opportunism.

Sinn Fein's raison d'être may be to end British rule in Ireland but if their tactics of persuasion are to include continued street agitation it will take a lot more than attendance at the odd a rugby match or laying laurel wreaths at the cenotaph, to convince unionists of total parity in a new Ireland.

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