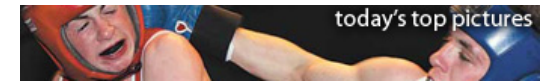


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Woodward praises 'mutual respect' of opposing sides

By Andrea McKernon

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SECRETARY of State Shaun Woodward hailed yesterday's RIR parade and counter demonstration by Sinn

Fein which passed off without major incident as the "hallmark of the new Northern Ireland".

Mr Woodward, who attended a thanksgiving service at St Anne's Cathedral yesterday afternoon with army personnel following their parade through Belfast, paid tribute to those on both sides who showed a "mutual respect to find a way forward on what potentially would have been a very, very difficult parade".

"We had two scenarios – one which would have reflected the old Northern Ireland and the new one which shows mutual respect of each other's position," he said.

His comments came as the Parades Commission, who passed the controversial applications for the march and counter demonstration, also commended both sides in what they described as one of the biggest security force operation in recent years.

"Both the MoD and Sinn Fein are to be commended for ensuring that today's RIR parade and associated parade and protest passed off peacefully," chairman Roger Poole said.

Major General Chris Brown, the British army's general officer commanding in Northern Ireland, said the parade was a "fitting tribute".

"It's been an entirely appropriate welcome home for the troops after an arduous tour in Afghanistan and, for some of them, in Iraq," he said.

"Thanks very much to the efforts of Belfast city council and also what a turn out from the city of Belfast and thanks to all the support that we had to do this."

Sinn Fein meanwhile commended republicans for acting in an "appropriate way" despite "enormous provocation" from some who claimed to be on the streets to welcome home the RIR.

Assembly member Gerry Kelly said they had delivered the solemn, peaceful and dignified protest rally they had intended.

"We have always made it clear that the singular focus of our protest was the British military parade and highlighting the plight of those families bereaved as a result of collusion and state violence," he said.

"The British state policy of collusion is an issue that the British government and their armed apparatus cannot hide from and the massive demonstration held today highlights this fact.

"I want to commend all of those who took part in our rally and who acted in such an appropriate and dignified way, despite enormous provocation.

"The conduct of our families and protesters stands in marked contrast to the sectarian and violent reaction of those who claimed to be on the streets today to welcome home the British army."

However, SDLP West Belfast assembly member Alex Attwood said that the controversy over yesterday's parade and protest was a "clear demonstration of the catastrophic failure of leadership from Sinn Fein and the DUP".

"Belfast went pretty close to a tipping point in the last few days no thanks to Sinn Fein and the DUP," he said.

"Both of them, including some of their most prominent people, poured fuel on a fire that could have burned very seriously."

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