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Sunday, 2 November 2008

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Images from The Royal Irish Regiment's homecoming parade in Belfast, Sunday, November 2, 2008.

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A tense armed forces homecoming parade passed off [pictures](#) without incident in Belfast on Sunday where police mounted a huge security operation to keep apart thousands of loyalist supporters and republican protesters.

At one stage the two sides came within 50 yards of each other and riot police had to move quickly to prevent violence erupting on the route of the march as loyalists charged their lines.

Bottles and fireworks were thrown but the parade of 250 service personnel, which took minutes to pass, was free of any trouble - much to the relief of security chiefs and public representatives who feared massive disorder.

Ahead of the event, thousands of loyalists waving Union flags and singing pro-British songs, had massed behind barriers just yards from where a planned Sinn Fein protest was due to arrive from the west of the city.

Some climbed scaffolding on a church building to gain a better vantage point.

And when the republicans moved into position minutes before the parade was due to pass the situation came dangerously close to boiling over.

A number of loyalists surged toward the demonstrators, prompting riot police to swoop in armoured Land Rovers.

While loyalists and officers were involved in some minor scuffles a direct clash with republicans was averted.

The situation remained extremely tense for around ten minutes with loyalists chanting at the protesters, most of whom stood in silence holding placards accusing the army of involvement in the killings of Catholic civilians during the Troubles.

Senior republicans such as Sinn Fein Stormont Junior minister Gerry Kelly and former IRA leader Bobby Storey were among the demonstrators while loyalist paramilitaries, including Ulster Defence Association chief Jackie McDonald, were on the other side of the barriers.

The flashpoint was near the start of the parade route and once the troops had passed by they continued on through the city where they were greeted by tens of thousands of supporters in front of City Hall.

After the parade they made their way to the city's Waterfront Hall for a civic reception.

Earlier around 200 dissident republicans attended a protest march from west Belfast which was stopped by police near the Westlink junction with Divis Street.

Among the Eirigi crowd were Brendan McKenna and Colin Duffy from Craigavon, Co Armagh.

Socialist supporters held a banner calling for Britain's "war machine" to be put out of Ireland.

They were addressed by Brenda Downes, whose husband John was killed by a security force plastic bullet in 1984, and Eirigi chairman Brian Leeson, a former Sinn Fein national organiser.

He claimed one of their number had been arrested today on his way to the procession, which was marshalled.

At least 11 landrovers barred their path to the city centre and police in riot gear and bearing plastic shields warned demonstrators they risked arrest.

Republicans of all shades were opposed to the parade, which marked the return of troops from recent deployments in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo.

They said it was inappropriate given British army involvement in the Troubles.

On Friday both the army and Sinn Fein made concessions in a bid to reduce tensions surrounding the event.

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The mainstream republicans changed the route of their protest march in an attempt to avoid confrontation with loyalists entering the city from the north west.

Their move followed a decision by the army's General Officer Commanding (GOC) in Northern Ireland Major General Chris Brown to cancel a planned RAF flypast.

After today's event, Major General Brown said the soldiers, airmen and sailors on parade had put their lives on the line for peace and freedom overseas.

"Implicit in that peace and freedom is the right to peaceful and legitimate protest," he said.

"I think it's a huge testimony that what we have seen today is peaceful and legitimate protest that surely says that the political process has moved on."

Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) superintendent Nigel Grimshaw said:

"At the end of the day those who wished to protest were able to protest and those who wished to support the parade were able to do that.

"Clearly tensions were quite high but I am satisfied that nobody was seriously hurt."

Minister Gerry Kelly said protesters had shown restraint despite enormous provocation from loyalists.

"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," said the North Belfast Assembly member.

"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.

"The onus is now on those public figures who called people out onto the streets in opposition to our protest to account for the unbridled sectarian behaviour witnessed in Belfast today."

However, Democratic Unionist Junior Minister Jeffrey Donaldson said the protesters had set out to seek confrontation.

"I am delighted with the huge turn out to welcome our soldiers home and it completely overshadowed the protests that were held," said the Lagan Valley representative.

"The soldiers now know that the vast majority of decent people in Northern Ireland appreciate the service they have given to their country.

"There was no need for the protests to take place and I think that the thousands of people who have turned out on the streets was best the answer to those who struggle to appreciate the rights of people in Northern to welcome the soldiers home.

"I am thankful the day's passed off without incident and those who sought to create conflict didn't get their way."

The parade took place amid deadlock between the DUP and Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland's powersharing government.

The Stormont Executive has not met for over four months, with the two main parties at loggerheads on a timetable for the devolution of policing powers from Westminster.

SDLP North Belfast Assembly Member Alban Maginness MLA said events surrounding the parade and protest had seen old political divides resurface.

"Unfortunately we have seen the reactivation of old divisions which will have political consequences, in particular poisoning the political atmosphere," he said.

"We have seen the re-introduction of street politics and I have said before politics should be conducted inside City Hall not outside.

"Now we need to see conflict resolution not conflict substitution."

Northern Ireland Secretary Shaun Woodward said the peaceful completion of the parade proved how far



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Northern Ireland had come in recent times.

"Today offered an opportunity to see the way politics has changed Northern Ireland," he said.

"This was a great example of mutual respect, sensitivity and to find a way forward on what historically would have been a very, very difficult parade.

"It was a wonderful sign that we can make progress in completing devolution. Politics is winning in Northern Ireland - that's what I see today and that's why I am hopeful that the political leaders can continue to work together and complete devolution.

"This was a very symbolic moment in the story of the peace process in Northern Ireland."

The Chairman of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, Sir Des Rea, and the head of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Dr Donald Patton, also publicly welcomed the fact there was no major trouble at the event.

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UNFECKINBELIEVABLE!!! Ive just spent the last hour or so reading the posts on here. Im still in Afghanistan at the minute and due home next week, I worked with some of the RIR in some bad and unpleasant places facing extreme danger. Im saddened to see that ill be coming home to some morons who live in the past! Its 2008 and time to grow up and get on with your lives. Well done the RIR you deserved your Parade and i wish i was there myself. Well done and thank you to all the decent people who welcomed the lads home. To the rest of the biggots on either side you dont make me proud to be British, The lads in the armed forces and the decent people of Northern Ireland do!

Posted by *al, Nad ali, Afghanistan* | 05.11.08, 06:49 GMT

Ian, great response to me earlier "Wrong Steven, Britain consists of England, Scotland and Wales. Great Britain is England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland makes Britain Great!"

Very funny! At least I think you meant it as a bit of craic!

As a UK citizen, I see my British culture as something very different to George; I see the English language, (Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Burns, Byron), British literature (Austen, Bronte, Orwell, Lewis) world sports including football, golf, tennis, boxing, snooker, badminton, cricket, rugby, music (the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Bowie, Sex Pistols, Led Zeplin, the Who, Pink Floyd, Van Morrison), BBC TV & Radio, James Bond, Art, Architecture, science and innovation (Newton, Darwin), jet engines, computers, penicillin, the World Wide Web, fish 'n' chips, Sunday roast, whiskey, the National Health Service, Oxford, Cambridge, Queens & St Andrews Universities, WW1 & WW2.

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The Queen just doesn't do it for me I'm afraid!

Posted by Steven | 04.11.08, 20:36 GMT

To: Britische Kultur. British Culture to many people here is apparently: marching around with bowler hats, setting fire to old tyres at bonfires where everyone gets blind drunk, painting curbs red, white and blue, throwing bottles and stones at the police who are on patrol at a parade for British soldiers, supporting 'loyal' paramilitaries involved in drugs and racketeering... and loving the Queen. With the exception of the last one I very much doubt the rest of the UK identifies with this 'British culture' but perhaps someone in Great Britain could clarify. - Regards, George (proud Northern IRISHman, in Belfast, in the UK.)

Posted by George | 04.11.08, 19:22 GMT

Paedar said: "In Northern Ireland we tend to be divided into 2 cultures one of which is British. We do not need desperation to hang on to our cultural identity. There are parts of London that don't have any British culture at all."

Not being funny - but can someone explain to what 'British culture' is exactly?

Posted by Britische Kultur? | 04.11.08, 19:15 GMT

Fed up with this nonsense. Stormont is in a mess. The political parties have realised they are completely incompetent. They have realised that intelligent people, intelligent voters are catching on to their scam. But they want to hang on to their cushy little jobs - so they will stir things up - in the hope that voters will be scared and return to their old sectarian views - and forget that their leaders are crap and vote them in again. Don't you people get this? It is a scam. STOP FALLING FOR IT. On this site there is a gallery - nightlife. Its full of young people out enjoying themselves. Take a look at it. Most of them weren't alive during the Troubles. They don't care. These people are our future. You sad old people can continue your same tired old arguments but it is pointless. It is over. Finished. Move on. There are more important things - rising fuel costs, rapes, recession, blind people being attacked. Waste your energy on sorting that out - not squabbling online. Saddos.

Posted by TheOwl | 04.11.08, 19:09 GMT

Chris Taylor - my cousin who lives in Shetland is no longer British then? - dont even start me on the Falklands. Point of history - British have been in Ireland for at least 900 years. Many aspects of British culture exist across the island. In Northern Ireland we tend to be divided into 2 cultures one of which is British. We do not need desperation to hang on to our cultural identity. There are parts of London that don't have any British culture at all. Perhaps you should take a look in your own backyard before making very silly uneducated comments.

Posted by Paedar | 04.11.08, 16:26 GMT

To Steve from Oz. You are completely correct. Belfast is in the British Isles. But so is Dublin. All of Ireland is in the British Isles. Does that make Dublin, Cork and Galway - British cities? There are many other islands also in the British Isles. However Northern Ireland is NOT in Great Britain. Northern Ireland is in the UK. Look at a UK passport. It clearly states: Great Britain AND Northern Ireland. I suppose people in Belfast can claim they are British but only in the same way that a person in Dublin can. At the end of the day the facts are that the people here are Northern Irish or as much of the world sees us - just Irish. We currently part of the UK. These are the facts.

Posted by FactHunt | 04.11.08, 16:16 GMT

To Chris Taylor from England, Belfast is in Northern Ireland which is on the island of Ireland , this is basic geography. The island of Ireland is in the British Isles, thats a fact . The British Isles and the island of Ireland being part of that is not Unionist or Loyalist propaganda , its geography. The UK is made up of Great Britian and Northern Ireland. Belfast is in the British Isles , thats a fact.

Posted by Steve from Oz | 04.11.08, 15:15 GMT

Just to tie up a few loose ends - Northern Ireland does not feature in Great Britain - it is the United Kingdom of Great Britain & Northern Ireland & as rightly said, the whole island of Ireland is included in the British Isles. Take a long time to move forward from the historical conflict here but slowly but surely we have to understand each other.

Posted by Stephen | 04.11.08, 14:54 GMT

To Chris Taylor from London.

You come across as such a pompous idiot - and talk about Northern Ireland being a provincial backwater. Sounds like you are speaking for the masses on the mainland and want rid of Northern Ireland - Maybe you should confer with Gordon Brown to give us "provincial backwater" people a refund of all our taxes that we have all paid since we started work. Mmm, that sounds good. I'd be up for that. Just a thought.....

So, as suggested on another post, get a life and get back in your box.....

P.S. Never forget the volunteers from "then" Ireland who aided the British in WW1, not to mention WW2. Could you have done it without them? I think not.

Posted by Lullabelle | 04.11.08, 14:33 GMT



This whole discussion has the feel of the Belfast Telegraph of 50 years ago. Enough already, I agree with the person who said that nothing new has been said. I almost get an impression that, in some sick way, there is an air of disappointment that there was no violence, nothing new to fuel the fire of bigotry on both sides!
By continuing to promote this story you are only showing to the WHOLE WORLD this cancer that is still present in N. Ireland's society. I could understand why corporations might not want to invest in this part of the world with this antagonism still alive!

Posted by Ed | 04.11.08, 14:09 GMT

Steven, why are people so intolerant? I too acknowledge that some people in Northern Ireland prefer to adopt the identity of those from the Irish Republic and indeed some refuse to acknowledge the very existence of the border. Whatever floats their boat I say. However, I think what hacks these people off is the very presence, or very essence of those who also share the "island of Ireland" and prefer to label themselves as British or Northern Irish. The very idea that to be "Irish" could in fact mean two differing cultures - that "Irishness" is split in to two very separate ideologies including those of British/Unionist/Protestant/Orange values...this is the crux of their bitter hatred and loathing. They have no desire to SHARE what it is to be Irish (diddle-diddle-fiddle music, GAA, rebel songs, irish dancing etc).

Until they do, this notion of an "Ireland of Equals", the notion of "parity of esteem" etc etc, their notion of a Unified Ireland - will ALWAYS be a pipedream.

Posted by mickey | 04.11.08, 11:02 GMT

Wrong Steven, Britain consists of England, Scotland and Wales. Great Britain is England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland makes Britain Great!

Posted by Ian | 04.11.08, 10:59 GMT

The post is starting to get really pedantic now, so it must be my turn! :)

The British Isles is made up of five countries; England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland & the Republic of Ireland.

The island of Ireland consists of Northern Ireland & the Republic of Ireland.

Great Britain consists of England, Scotland & Wales.

The United Kingdom is a sovereign state that is made up of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; the international title given to this sovereign state is often the UK, or sometimes it is referred to as Britain (due to all citizens of the UK being granted a British passport).

I don't mind people not wanting to be British (UK Citizen's), I have lots of friends in Northern Ireland who have opted to obtain a Republic of Ireland passport, that's not a problem, that's a political choice.

I am very proud to be Irish (Northern Ireland people are Irish), just as I am very proud to be British, but why do some people have a problem with that? Why so intolerant?

Posted by Steven | 04.11.08, 10:02 GMT

Thank you Chris Taylor for speaking on my behalf but really it wasn't necessary and I wouldn't have even said the same words so please be a gent and pop back in the box and gently shut the lid down.
When you comment please get the facts right. Ireland as an island is part of the British Isles but at the same time not part of Great Britain. So although Northern Ireland is politically part of the UK geographically it isn't part of Great Britain which is the largest island in the British Isles. When talking about the UK population it is correct and accepted terminology to use the word British. One can't be UKish. So it is perfectly correct for anyone over here to call themselves British, if that is their leaning because that's what they are.

Posted by soarer | 04.11.08, 09:36 GMT

Welcome home troops, like our forefathers you are heroes!

Very brave men doing a fantastic job!

Don't listen to any of the terrorist narrow minded idiots who can't see past an armalite.

Thanks again guys for serving and protecting us!!

Posted by Rab | 04.11.08, 09:11 GMT

Great to see the army on the streets of Belfast, for once without their riot shields and batons!!

The sooner we all get used to living together in peace, the better!

Posted by Andrew reid | 04.11.08, 08:40 GMT

I left Northern Ireland in 1977 and have been back periodically to reinforce the reasons why I continue to stay away. It is such a tiresome place filled with small minded but vicious people whose only claim to any sort of identity is to continually confront people who do not agree with their particular form of dictatorship. And the weather is not that good either!!

Posted by William | 04.11.08, 06:35 GMT

Well done to those who behaved. The families and friends of the RIR had every right to welcome the troops home - just as republicans had every right to protest. What is not allowed is for scumbag loyalists to throw bottles, stones, golfballs and fireworks at police and protestors. Thugs. Also I looked at the photos from the parade on this website and was disgusted to see loyalists carrying a banner with Eoghan Quigg's photograph on it saying: "Eoghan Quigg supports our troops". How pathetic. How dare they bring this child into this sectarian mess. I'm quite sure the child does not want to be associated with these people. Disgusting.

Posted by Jenkins | 04.11.08, 00:03 GMT

I think two nations can exist on the same island without being of the same nationality - England, Scotland and Wales share the same land mass but have separate identities - this OK with you Chris? Similarly New Zealand is made up of two Islands - this OK with you Chris? I think your opinions are a little trite. Enjoy your "Englishness" - your email speaks more about you than I can write here.

Posted by Jon, Edinburgh | 03.11.08, 23:40 GMT

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