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A volatile mix on Belfast's streets

Friday, 31 October 2008

There is a long and inglorious tradition of parades and counter-demonstrations in Northern Ireland, dating from the Rev Ian Paisley's protests against the civil rights marches in the late 1960s through until this Sunday when demonstrators will take to the streets of Belfast to show their opposition to the homecoming celebrations for the armed forces.

If history has shown us one thing, it is that bringing people onto the streets in large numbers is fraught with danger, no matter how good the original intention.

Sinn Fein has been given permission to stage a demonstration at the same time as the servicemen and women parade past Belfast's City Hall. The two gatherings will be separated only by 40 yards of prime retail area. Sinn Fein leaders have said that their protest will be dignified and non-violent and that may well be the intent of the organisers. However, there will always be an element who attach themselves to any demonstration in the hope of confrontation and they can be extremely difficult to control.

If such an element were to cause trouble on Sunday, Sinn Fein cannot absolve itself from all responsibility. Having organised, and been given permission to stage a demonstration, it must adhere to the rules and accept blame if any trouble occurs. It cannot simply point the finger of blame at others. Of course, the party is perfectly entitled to protest and there are many in the nationalist community who feel they were treated badly by the Army during the Troubles. Their right to make their feelings known is accepted, but it must be done lawfully and peacefully.

There will be other dissenting voices in the city centre on Sunday. Dissident republicans are also to hold a

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protest rally and they will have twin targets for their derision — the parading soldiers and the Sinn Fein supporters. Sunday provides an opportunity for the dissidents to show that they have some community support and they, no doubt, will attempt to maximise that opportunity. Loyalist paramilitaries are also likely to be among the crowds watching the homecoming parade, adding to the volatile mix. It is easy to see how events could quickly escalate out of control.

The job of keeping the protesting factions and the supporters of the Royal Irish apart will fall to the PSNI. It is a task with which policemen in Northern Ireland are all too familiar and they know well the potential dangers. At a time when the force is under strain from lack of resources, the demand on its manpower and budget to cover Sunday's parade and counter-protests is one it could well have done without.

It might have been better merely to hold a religious service and civic reception for the homecoming troops, who richly deserve recognition after their tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, but that is a matter of hindsight. Ideally, all the protesters will make their point and disperse quietly and without confrontation. That is more of a hope than an expectation. However, no-one should be under any illusion as to what is at stake. Violence on the streets at the weekend will not only send out a poor image of the province, but it will add further strain to a faltering peace process which has seen Sinn Fein and the DUP deadlocked for months on the issue of justice and policing.

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